



Fiction

Group 4

The Clouds of Huangshan

German Swiss International School, Huang, Yuhan – 14

The snow shone a powdery white. Bare, arching branches of plum blossom trees were embroidered into the bleak sky, illuminated by the slumbering sun that sojourned somewhere behind the mountains tethered in the distance. With each running step, the crunch of brittle ice under Fan's slippers was pitched off short in the vast dawn, as if there were no room amidst so many glittering sights for sound to intrude.

This is folly. Folly, folly, The girl thought, the words an anthem to her marching heart. The guards will hunt me down with the ferocity of a pack of wolves, their sharp spears glinting in their eyes, and what on earth will I do then— mustn't ever return, barely managed to sneak out as is! The Siheyuan's high walls and tiny windows do well at barricading outsiders from entering, but not so much for its inhabitants from exiting, – who would have anticipated that one of their own would leave— so easy to slip out—

A shout in the distance, taken up by another in rapid succession. Fan didn't need to look back to know that they had found her.

Perhaps if it were not for her rushing thoughts, or the clamouring of guards in the distance, Fan would have noticed the empty space breaking off from the steady incline of earth beneath her doggedly climbing feet, and doubled back, relieved to have lived to see another day. Alas, the deities had other plans for this highborn girl turned renegade.

As Fan toppled into the ravine, head over heels, and felt herself dropping headfirst into the unknown— she saw for one suspended moment the grotesquely shaped black peaks that jutted out like the topknots of immortals. The scarce breath that had been trapped in her lungs evaporated the instant Fan plunged through the clouds that blanketed the fringes of the peaks.

Fan never knew she would die so soon after this tantalising brush with freedom. She had still wanted to know what it felt like to see for herself the slums where a runaway girl could be a nobody, be irrevocably free. After a lifetime of being boarded up in her family's mansion, hidden away from the elements, was it too much for her to ask?

But Fan was not one to go screaming and kicking. If she should die, she might as well do so with honour and without fear. And in that suspended moment, with the mist tenderly combing through the gaps of her fingers, gently covering her eyes, as if shielding her from her new horrifying reality, Fan closed her eyes and went slack, allowing the winds to wash over her, her curtain of hair to whip at her cheeks.

"At least in death, I'll be free like never before," she told herself, voice quivering. Perhaps it was the wind manipulating her breath, determined to detract from the gravity of her last moments of defiance.

Somehow, her frozen limbs became even colder. It could have been the condensation from the mist seeping into her skin, or something else. Then for no discernable reason, Fan felt resplendent. It felt as though her body, up to that instant, was simply lazy, and all her earthly scrapes and aches were simply imagined. It happened in one glorious second: her lungs swelled with sweet air, cooling her pounding head, and she could feel the weight in her stomach buoyed up, up into the air.

Fan's eyes snapped open. She had broken through the cloud cover, and was hurtling towards a jagged tumbling outcropping of rocks.

Time passed oddly. Between one moment and the next, she had been safely deposited on a smooth surface with her limbs sprawled out underneath her. She only registered the other person's presence when a shadow crossed her face.

Fingers encircled her wrist and pulled her to a sitting position so quickly Fan experienced whiplash.

“Well, hello human,” the person said.

Fan was suddenly hyper aware of her precarious position perched on the mountainside. Behind her, the sun’s rays were draped over her back, for the first time in her life, although she would not know it at the time. Just below her was a yawning chasm. Fan could still feel its pull.

The woman was sitting in a graceful lotus position, meditating, that is, before Fan had crash-landed into her meditation space.

“The Gods have not sent someone to accompany me in a long time,” the woman continued, eyes sparkling. “You are quite young, aren’t you, girl, to already have thoughts of... departure?”

Fan gulped. There was something curiously refined about the woman looming over her, that made Fan instantly gravitate towards her. Her smooth, dryad-like features and her brisk, efficient movements contrasted with her abnormally piercing gaze. Before she knew it, the words were tumbling out of her mouth in a jargoned mess.

“Yes— well, no. You see, I have been locked away in a house for all my life, and I do not wish to ever return to my village. I barely escaped. If the guards found me, my head would be on the chopping block for desertion. Wait... do you mean departure as in... no, I don’t have a death wish— at least, I don’t think so? Although I must confess that it felt so *right* when I fell off a cliff—”

The woman chuckled. Fan tittered along deliriously— the residual ecstasy from her fall still swirling in her brain.

“My dear, you never fell. You *ascended*.”

Fan’s bowels turned into water. Now she knew why she had felt so weightless and happy. She wasn’t a human anymore. It was no secret that the sacred mountains were the bridge between the heavens and the mortal world, because of the peaks’ proximity to the sky and its heavy population of spirits. Fan somehow had gotten herself caught in the middle of this mess.

The woman— no, spirit— went on, indifferent to Fan’s horror, “In your last moments of life, you no longer felt the need to stay in your mortal world— in fact, your wish for inner freedom was greater than your wish for life. As a result, your heart became lighter. While most other mortals would have plunged to their deaths, you crossed the barrier into the spirit world. You now exist in limbo as neither spirit nor human. You are neither in the material world, nor in the spirits’ realm.”

Fan nodded. She picked her next words carefully. “O spirit, would you be so kind as to show me back to the realm where I hail from?”

The spirit’s kindly face turned sorrowful. “I am confused. Why would you wish to go back to the people below, who are so distanced from the heavens and spirits? They are sedentary and corrupt to their core. They are forever doomed to repeat the same mistakes of their ancestors, restricting the freedom of their own kind in their spite,” the spirit looked at Fan meaningfully at her last statement. “You might as well stay in the mountains, where you can experience what the Gods experience when you look down from the peaks. Where no one will be able to find you and entrap you in their backward ways. Where you are so close to the skies that if you just reach up, you will be able to access the knowledge of the heavens.”

Fan looked at the view beneath her and saw with her own eyes what the spirit meant. The splendor of the mountains was on full display. The sea of clouds was floating around as listlessly as ever, fanning in and out the peaks, teasing out strange shapes in the rock. The craggy cliffs were warming up, emanating a golden glow. The pines, a mosaic of jade and orange, peppered the crevices in soaring layers, rising and falling with the inhales and exhales of the wind. It was beautiful, serene, and isolated. It was everything Fan had always wanted.

Or was it? Could she really spend eternity here?

The spirit had started grinding away at an ink stone. The ink, enhanced by the sooty particles from the stone, welled up like blood. Fan cleared her throat. The woman looked up expectantly.

“Thank you for your offer. I have thought about the merits of staying in Huangshan, living as a hermit. All the same, my heart lies at the base of the mountains, not in them. I know of a place where freedom rings from the smallest molehill to the greatest forests, where I may live out the rest of my days happily. I am not the person who wishes to live forever. The beauty of life lies in its grand finity.”

The woman’s left eye twitched imperceptibly. Then she sighed. “I feared that it would be like this. Alas,”

Fan perked up, eager to ask her for the directions out of the mountains. Before she could say anything, the woman trained her piercing eyes onto Fan’s, brimming with emotion.

“I must confess that my lifestyle as a wandering nomad can become lonely at times.” The spirit whisked up a brush and dipped it lightly in the ink, drawing it out reverently, the brush tip hovering above the paper.

“But would you be so kind as to keep a lonely soul company? I would like to give you a painting as a parting gift, at least. I have wandered this Earth for ten thousand years, and have seen half as many mortals. But I paint every day.”

Fan looked upon this woman and nodded, heart brimming with sympathy for this restless spirit.

The woman grinned— a razor sharp thing. Then she painted a black streak on the paper. Fan watched in awe as the mountains materialised on the bone white paper. The woman splayed out the bristles of the brush and scraped it, creating splashes of rough cliff here and there in one, singular swipe, before finishing off with a meaningful flourish, a dip and a turn. The peaks were as sharp as knives, and despite the spirit’s simplistic brush strokes, the amount of detailed crevices were uncanny. The black of the land, and the pure white of the skies, contrasted with each other yet intertwined at the same time. The clouds were painted in the traditional swirling, rectangular pattern. She teased out strange details in the frolicking clouds, paying each one unwavering attention.

The spirit stroked her chin, gazing down at her drawing in faux consideration.

“What should I add to complete this? Oh— a cloud. I can never get enough of them!”

She looked at Fan strangely, as if analysing her features, then turned back to her canvas and drew a small lone cloud in the corner of the drawing. Fan gazed at it. It was... strangely lifelike.

After a while, Fan tore her gaze away from the painting to see that the spirit, with a graceful leg swung over a lap, had brewed a cup of ginseng tea. She proffered it to Fan.

Fan glanced down at the steaming china cup, its curling tracks of sweet aroma tickling the tip of her nose. It felt like she was holding in her clasped hands a warm, beating heart.

“Ginseng from Huangshan is a delicate contraption that was planted by the spirit of the mountains himself, to replenish the hungering souls of weary gods and godlings, even mortals. It took thousands of years for me to master the blend, to balance the sweet and sour, to maintain the right temperature so the ginseng is scorched just right. It was bitter going, but it makes the final product all the more sweeter, does it not?”

Fan did not drink.

“You have to understand, Fan. If you drink this, you will know the taste of true freedom. Freedom from your prison of your wretched humanity, the freedom to wander these mountains. It will make you into a being of mythical proportions— you will be forever the bridge between the Earth and the sky, the all-knowing. Just like me. You always had a thirst for knowledge, didn’t you?”

The woman was right. In the shelter of night's darkness, Fan would creep into the mansion's library and spend countless hours poring over columns of characters, memorizing each stroke until they were burned into her mind. She took pride in how worldly she was as a result, having discovered the nature of agricultural exports from Mukeng, how to navigate on a seafaring voyage, and the like. She watched the regal way that the spirit dipped her brush into the pot of water and flung a careless hand into the air, like life was an elaborate, unrestrained dance, so different from the demure way that the women in the mansion shuffled their bound feet back and forth and tucked their lily white hands into their sleeves.

Fan knocked back the tea.

The liquid *burned* her throat on the way in. Fan vaguely thought that she should have cooled the tea to a more reasonable temperature, but the thought was overshadowed by the sudden weightlessness she felt.

A wind picked up from the gorge below, whistling through the boughs of pines and openings in the peaks.

Trembling with trepidation, Fan set down the cup, and her heart sank into her stomach. Her fingertips were turning transparent. No... vaporizing. The wind whistled in her ears, and the distant yowling of the monkeys stopped. When she looked up, the spirit's eyes smouldered with what Fan now knew was cruel treachery.

"What did you do to me," Fan rasped. The clouds were closing in on all sides— she now could see that the strange shapes she had seen in the painting were not the trick of the mind, rather they were a sunken eyehole, a wailing mouth, dishevelled hair... faces of lost souls. Of the humans that had dared to play with a spirit. Fan blinked, and by then the spirits had drawn so close that she could make out what they looked like. If she reached out she would have grazed the cheek of a young plum faced boy, and felt the musty breath of an old woman.

The spirit laughed trilly. "You mortals disgust me. You dare enter a sacred place of spirits and taint it with your earthly sins?" The transparency was spreading past her wrists now. Gods, it was working *fast*. "To cleanse the heavens of the grime of mortals— that is my mission. That is why I resigned myself to these mountains so long ago. You would be an excellent addition to my collection. I have not seen someone with such hunger for life."

Tears began to well up in her eyes. The vapour from her dissolved arms were spiralling around her, clinging to her with the same wetness she had felt when she had plunged through the clouds, what seemed a lifetime ago. Fan knew with a terrifying conviction that she was turning into a cloud, forever doomed to stalk the ends of the earth, and circulate around the peaks in an infinite dance.

Suddenly, she looked at the tea, half drunk. If the tea had made her start to disappear... An idea formed in her mind— crazy, yet still worth a try.

She kicked at the cup, causing it to tip over and spill the tea onto the painting, which lay, forgotten on the ground. One look at the spirit's horror-stricken face, and she knew she had done the right thing.

The ink started bleeding together in the water, the beetle-black fading into a serene grey. The inky faces started emerging from the clouds— spirits, how had Fan not noticed them earlier— and the ink was trailing up the paper into the wash of pale grey that represented the heavens. Before her eyes, the ink rearranged themselves into the forms of human bodies. The little cloud was the last to be liberated— it clung to the paper, but morphed into a girl with a wide, expressive face. Instead of rising to the heavens, it remained where it was, on a cliff overlooking the mountains.

Whatever curse the spirit had placed on the paper had been broken up by the ginseng's healing qualities. The spirit screeched. All around them, the clouds were opening up, and fat raindrops, some as wide as Fan's arm, fell from the heavens. Some landed on Fan's skin, sizzling. Her colour returned.

"I rejected your offer, and I reject it once again. I now know that freedom cannot be achieved by merely drinking a cup of tea. It needs to be earned in good faith, with hard work. The final product becomes so much sweeter, *does it not?*"

The spirit growled.

“I hope you grow to realise that your mission of entrapping humans and neutralising them in an attempt to cleanse the world of our supposed filth, is not freedom. It is a product of you being enslaved by your desperate attempt to make innocent people share in your suffering.”

And with that, Fan, girl no more, human once again, started her trek down the cliff, off to make a better world.

The Embrace of the Sky

Good Hope School, Ng, Pollia – 15

Run. *Run*. The words pounded in my head, echoing with the rhythmic crunch of the gravel beneath my feet.

The tattered flag of red left dangling on an abandoned watchtower. The haze of smoke enshrouding the blur of figures darting. The defiant sky aflame with fumes and smog. All pointing to the signs of a failed rebellion.

The ominous thundering of many, but one grew louder and louder, as the looming words of *treason* threatened to envelop my whole existence.

My eyes searched frantically an escape. Until they landed on a fallen servant of the palace. Splayed on the ground, its blood stained the white marble of the sidewalk red. I stripped the body of its tethered rags and slipped in it, deserting the elaborate silk chest raqun hanfu. The rough linen scratched against my skin, but stirrings of a familiar nostalgia rouse.

Then I ran. And ran. Blending in with the rest of the servants fleeing the fallen palace. I drank in the sight of the open, thin plywood doors, the taste of freedom fresh on my tongue.

But a hard body rammed against me, my vision turned to the dark, hard earth as the sight of the open space disappeared. The metallic taste of blood invaded the depths of my mouth, completely drenching the promise of freedom away.

As the throbbing of my vision amplified, the world swirled with my arms swiveled around in a tight grip. I caught a glimpse of the soldier manhandling me, his eyes turned towards the ground as I threw an accusing glare to his direction.

“I see that you are once again a servant, princess.” The taunting voice of my cousin hissed, searching for a reaction, a flinch, a grimace, a wince. His lanky figure came into sight. The rich, thick Yellow Gold silk hung on his shoulders, making him to appear to be a child dressing up in his Grandmother’s garments. “Never could shake off who you really are, could you?”

I fixated my eyes on the red sun and kept mum, letting my red-hot rage simmer under the surface.

“You were always too weak to be like Empress Grandmother.” He let out a hollow laugh and turned to the army standing behind, masking what I knew to be a front for his insecurity and fear.

I cowered like a punished puppy, as my body heaved with painful sobs. Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted the soldier’s face softening. “Please...” I let my voice croak with desperation. “I’m just a girl.” I gently tilted my head towards him. The beads of tears balanced on my lashes, until they fell from my soft, pleading eyes and slid gracefully down my powdered cheeks. I felt the grip on my arms loosen.

“Treason!” My cousin declared. “For acting against Emperor LiZhou. Immediate execution!” My face fell. A stream of tears flowed freely to the earth, no longer an act. There is no out.

Looking up at the red sun, I silently begged Empress Grandmother for forgiveness on my humiliation. But a glint of gold caught my eye, flashing against the haze of the smoke and the backdrop of the scarlet sky. The glare grew bigger and bigger, until the faint outline of a giant bird emerged as a flaming fireball. Golden light enveloped the whole of the land. The glare so bright, that the army scattered in fear of it burning them. Upon the heavy beating of wings, the majestic form of the ZhuQue took shape.

Its fiery eyes beckoned me, drawing me so close that I seemed to be looking into its eyes; looking outside of its eyes. The wind swooping down my feathered back, combing down the stray hairs that arose in the course of my travels. The power that my beating wings delivered to the currents of the wind, sending particles coming my way in reverse. The cry released from my screeching throat, thundering for miles and miles. It sent a surge of cool breeze through my body, flooding my nerves with the burn of chill, until my fingertips become alive with the promise of magic and excitement.

The panicking yowls of my cousin woke me up from my trance-like state. I teared my eyes away from the magnetic pull of the ZhuQue. Sensing the weak grip and momentary lapse of shock of the soldier behind me, I forced a strength foreign to me and broke free of my arms. No one attempted to recapture me as I stumbled like mad towards the bird.

But in the blur of the next second, I felt my body fly on to a plane of soft feathers as the whizz of an arrow flew just inches away from my ear.

It knocked the breath out of me. My body rolled on to a warm, vast back and I held on for my dear life. Coming to a realization that I escaped, I put the uneasiness of mounting on a flying beast behind my mind and leaned to the direction of the ever shrinking faces beneath.

“I will take my place. Long Live Empress AnLe!” I cried with rigor. The scornful face of my cousin paled into a cold sweat and slowly faded into a small dot. A warm feeling enveloped my heart with the thought of becoming Empress Grandmother. I could finally prove my heritage as a strong princess.

The tear-streaked face, the dirty linen, and the thought of grandmother was forgotten as the ZhuQue soared in a smooth, sweeping flight across the sky. The fresh, brisk wind greeted me, tickling my face. And a foreign, shrill laugh burst out of my chest. I froze. The abrupt noise hung like a suspended note on the serene air. A far cry from the usual timid, sweet giggles that covered the silence like pasty sugar. A feminine weapon to coax people. I spread my arms open, welcoming the embrace of the limitless sky. Leaving behind the burdens of what the fiery, red sky signified.

The vast, beating wings of the ZhuQue sliced through the crisp sliver-lining of the clouds. It had a mind of their own, swerving and weaving its way through the blue dome. The flexing of the muscles beneath me served to remind me of the hidden strength the taut flesh subdued. Against the stretching swirling blue canvas, the swift dashes of the ZhuQue flicked popping, bright red splashes across, marking it as the reigning beast of the skies.

The vitality of the ZhuQue only did to solidify my young fantasies of magical creatures, pulling the flimsy threads of unreality together.

“—and it rose from the flames of the South and vanquished its foes with a fiery breath.” Aiyi’s hands curled to imitate talons and she pounced with a huff, fire dancing in her eyes. I relished the magic of the myth, transfixed on the surreal powers beyond this village.

“What else? What else?” I asked eagerly. “No more for today, child. It’s time for you to get back to dig out the crops.” I grumbled, not happy at the prospect of getting my hands in the dirt.

As I hiked back to the hut, I thirsted for the sweet, sweet escape of the magical realm.

The wind breathed a whisper—*whoosh* into my ear. And the most magnificent scene I would ever have the pleasure of setting my eyes upon came together right before my very eyes.

The jagged tips of rocks jutted out like spears, curving up towards the wispy mist, swirling softly, grazing the edge of the sky. The rich green enveloped the descent like a blanket, rustling with a restless abandon. The air vibrated with the screeches and howls of all things wild, thrumming with danger. My eyes widened in alarm as a brown, flimsy thing slammed right on my face. I choked up some loose fur. But I let my eyes linger in wonder as the monkey cackled away *flying*.

Yet, despite the primitive quality, a stillness enfolded the hearth of the mountain. Much like an inanimate landscape splashed on by the strokes of a dashing brush. It was hard, yet soft; gentle, yet unyielding; tranquil, yet *wild*.

But the glare of the sun glowered down, my face hardened with the reminder of my ultimate mission. *What would Empress Grandmother say? An embarrassment, I thought.* Forgetting my responsibilities and enjoying myself.

Grandmother would always say, “Remember. I was the one who saved you out of the hellhole you were in.” during my droughts of daydreaming in etiquette lessons. Saying the word “myth” was unspeakably forbidden.

Indeed she did. The moment she announced her decision to revoke my father of his title as Prince, I became a Princess, leaving behind my life as an irrelevant servant. I remember the whiff of the rich aromas in feasts, the heavenly feel of the silks, the vast space of the room I could call my own.

It was an honour, I always told myself. It is an honour.

The ZhuQue began its descent downwards. A gust of wind blew against my face. Landing on the plane of the mountain, the ground shook. My vision tilted back to normal.

With difficulty, I climbed down the back of the ZhuQue. Averting my eyes, I came up to the bird and bowed my head with respect. “Connections are everything. There will come a time when you need to use it, so keep your private distracting little thoughts away. “ The cold voice of my grandmother trailed after my ear. I contemplated the possibility of acquiring powerful allies, ones with such power and vigour as... the ZhuQue.

If such a creature as the ZhuQue exists, then others with must exist as well. With the revelation fresh on my mind, suddenly, my ears unfurled to the beck and bellows emerging from within the forest. The mist twisting and mangling in the air tingled with unfulfilled promise, veiling the strength of lurking beasts.

My eyes met with the ZhuQue’s. I scanned its form hungrily, gobbling up the razor-sharp beak and spiked talons.

“Where am I?” I asked the bird, attempting to elicit a spoken response.

“Buzhou Shan,” an alluring, deep voice replied. The air surrounding trembled with anticipation, waiting for the speaker to claim her words.

A beautiful figure emerged from the dark woods, clad in flowing silk, rippling and fluttering like a river of wind. She was glowing with youthful exuberance, flowing with a grace only a goddess could have. Her eyes peered out through an inky sheen, two shining spheres, capable of seeing beyond the barriers of the physical earth. Under her upper body, a thick, smooth, scaly tail slithered about. *Half-human, half-dragon.*

“Nuwa.” I gasped in wonder. *The original creator of human kind.*

“Child.” Her voice came out as a low, thrilling whisper, reverberating around the forest walls. “You have been through too much for a person to bear, let alone a child.”

“I am not a child! I am as capable as any adult like my grandmother or my cousin.” The exhaustion of the day caught up with me. My seething anger lashed out like a whip, but alas, the murmurs of my grandmother sealed my lips.

“For that, I would bestow upon you an honour. One that not one mortal should have ever received in the existence of the world.”

An honour? Would it be a legendary artifact? A mystical creature? Magical powers? I smiled, excited at the prospect of fulfilling Empress Grandmother’s legacy.

Her slender hands curved to form a circling gesture. And the darkness of the forest vanished. In its place, is the vast open sky, no barriers withholding the might of the wild. On the North, South, East and West, sang the autumn wind, sending the wispy mist on a dancing fanfair. I stood over the edge of the precipice, yet no fear washed over me.

The rocky cliff stretched out into a sea of pink blossoms, bursting with the bloom of spring. Tiny houses dotted the slope of the valley, basking in the glow of the afternoon sun. The villagers milled about, their faces animated with the words exchanged. No crowds. No screaming. No disdain. Just... quiet harmony. As though the valley was suspended in time, away from the petty squabbles of the world beyond the mountains.

“The Peach Blossom Spring.” Nuwa spoke of my thoughts. “A paradise for anyone who seeks refuge from the ravages of destruction.” The thoughts of stepping foot into the ethereal realm invaded my mind, weaving its way in and out. Waking up to the fresh scent of blossoms. Bathing in the warmth of the sun. Laughing along with the people. I could do with that.

But a glare of the sun temporarily blinded me, obstructing my view of the Peach Blossom Spring. Guilt flamed from the fuel of my fantasies. *What am I doing? Betraying Grandmother’s love. No. What I want is to become Empress.*

“Why are you showing me this?” I asked Nuwa accusingly.

"I thought you would like to settle down here. Wasn't it your dream back then?" She questioned curiously.

"I..." My head started spinning. *Grandmother. Magic. Grandmother. Magic. Grandmother. Magic.* "No! My dream is to become the Empress of China, just like my Grandmother." The doubt casted on my decision to pursue the throne vanished. I ignored the nagging feeling gnawing at my heart.

"There is no time for silly dreaming. Can you provide the means for me to conduct a second rebellion?" I asked, Nuwa looked unbothered. "Your Grace." I added.

"Is it your will to reign the earth, or your Grandmother's?"

I sputtered. "Why? Am I not capable to do so? Just because I was not born a princess, I am destined to suffer the mundane life of an ordinary peasant? No. I have royal blood coursing through my veins and I will claim the throne as my Grandmother did."

"But do you want to take over the Kingdom? Tell me: does your heart desire it?" A trace of a whisper called out from my heart. But I was in too deep to acknowledge it.

"After all Grandmother has done for me, I cannot fail her. I *will not* fail her." I intentionally cracked my voice. Fresh tears sprung from my eyes, framing the mask I put on of an emotionally broken girl.

"I see that your determination on the path to become Empress cannot be deterred. I can only leave you to find your own path. One piece of advice: remember the legends of Nuwa, the Queen of Wa; the creator of mankind; the repairer of the Heavens." Nuwa took off into the sky and faded into a golden speckle.

The repairer of Heavens. NuWa. Buzhou Shan. Her words ran through my head wildly. For a second, I abandoned the notion of conquering the throne and dug deep into my memories for an answer. *Come on. Come on.* An idea rushed to my head like a speeding carriage.

In olden times, the world fell into chaos. But taking pity on the suffering of humankind, Nuwa killed a giant turtle and used its legs as giant pillars to hold up the fallen sky. Legend dictates: Buzhou Shan to be a pillar can reach up into the Heavens.

The distance between the edge of Buzhou Shan and the tip of the mortal world remains ever so daunting, but the thought of Empress Grandmother propelled me to make a declaration loud and clear to the Heavens, in hopes that my interpretation of Nuwa's hint would prove to be correct.

"Tian Di. I, Princess AnLe seeks entrance to the heavenly gates of Tian. Please grant the destined Empress the honour of the Heavens, in hopes of claiming the throne with aid by her side."

For several seconds, silence hung on the whipping air, unmoving. A strange sense of relief began to overtake my senses. But suddenly, golden steps materialised in front of me, shaping into a twisting, curving staircase leading up to a point in the sky. I stepped on the first step, expecting some sort of applause or cheering to occur. *Would Grandmother look down from above and see what I've accomplished?* But the only answer I got is cold silence.

I ran. *The faster I reach the Heavens, the better.* Running up a few thousand steps, my lungs began to burn with an intense need to breath. Air. I need fresh air. But the fire ignited failed to erase the unrelenting question burning in my mind. *Tell me: does your heart desire it?*

Only a few hundred steps left until the Heavens, it should have been a godsend for me. But the thought of the complicated, drawn-out affairs I would have to deal with had me break down into painful sobs. I collapsed on the steps, heaving sobs racking through my throat. *I'm sorry Grandmother.*

A gentle breeze with all the aromas of spring blossoms caressed my tear-streaked face, dousing the fire burning through my lungs. And brought forth an answer to Nuwa's question.

No. My heart desires to live in this realm, where I can be whatever I want to be. Not a servant. Not a Princess. Not the Empress. Just... AnLe.

Wakened with a renewed vigour, I shouted with pure joy, "ZhuQue!" The dash of red streaking through the horizon made my heart tumble and jump. I mounted the ZhuQue's back, delving into its warmth. *Home. It feels like home.*

"Take me to the Peach Blossom Spring." And I welcomed the embrace of the limitless sky.

The Embrace of the Sky

Good Hope School, Ng, Pollia – 15

Run. *Run.* The words pounded in my head, echoing with the rhythmic crunch of the gravel beneath my feet.

The tattered flag of red left dangling on an abandoned watchtower. The haze of smoke enshrouding the blur of figures darting. The defiant sky aflame with fumes and smog. All pointing to the signs of a failed rebellion.

The ominous thundering of many, but one grew louder and louder, as the looming words of *treason* threatened to envelop my whole existence.

My eyes searched frantically an escape. Until they landed on a fallen servant of the palace. Splayed on the ground, its blood stained the white marble of the sidewalk red. I stripped the body of its tethered rags and slipped in it, deserting the elaborate silk chest raqun hanfu. The rough linen scratched against my skin, but stirrings of a familiar nostalgia rouse.

Then I ran. And ran. Blending in with the rest of the servants fleeing the fallen palace. I drank in the sight of the open, thin plywood doors, the taste of freedom fresh on my tongue.

But a hard body rammed against me, my vision turned to the dark, hard earth as the sight of the open space disappeared. The metallic taste of blood invaded the depths of my mouth, completely drenching the promise of freedom away.

As the throbbing of my vision amplified, the world swirled with my arms swiveled around in a tight grip. I caught a glimpse of the soldier manhandling me, his eyes turned towards the ground as I threw an accusing glare to his direction.

“I see that you are once again a servant, princess.” The taunting voice of my cousin hissed, searching for a reaction, a flinch, a grimace, a wince. His lanky figure came into sight. The rich, thick Yellow Gold silk hung on his shoulders, making him to appear to be a child dressing up in his Grandmother’s garments. “Never could shake off who you really are, could you?”

I fixated my eyes on the red sun and kept mum, letting my red-hot rage simmer under the surface.

“You were always too weak to be like Empress Grandmother.” He let out a hollow laugh and turned to the army standing behind, masking what I knew to be a front for his insecurity and fear.

I cowered like a punished puppy, as my body heaved with painful sobs. Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted the soldier’s face softening. “Please...” I let my voice croak with desperation. “I’m just a girl.” I gently tilted my head towards him. The beads of tears balanced on my lashes, until they fell from my soft, pleading eyes and slid gracefully down my powdered cheeks. I felt the grip on my arms loosen.

“Treason!” My cousin declared. “For acting against Emperor LiZhou. Immediate execution!” My face fell. A stream of tears flowed freely to the earth, no longer an act. There is no out.

Looking up at the red sun, I silently begged Empress Grandmother for forgiveness on my humiliation. But a glint of gold caught my eye, flashing against the haze of the smoke and the backdrop of the scarlet sky. The glare grew bigger and bigger, until the faint outline of a giant bird emerged as a flaming fireball. Golden light enveloped the whole of the land. The glare so bright, that the army scattered in fear of it burning them. Upon the heavy beating of wings, the majestic form of the ZhuQue took shape.

Its fiery eyes beckoned me, drawing me so close that I seemed to be looking into its eyes; looking outside of its eyes. The wind swooping down my feathered back, combing down the stray hairs that arose in the course of my travels. The power that my beating wings delivered to the currents of the wind, sending particles coming my way in reverse. The cry released from my screeching throat, thundering for miles and miles. It sent a surge of cool breeze through my body, flooding my nerves with the burn of chill, until my fingertips become alive with the promise of magic and excitement.

The panicking yowls of my cousin woke me up from my trance-like state. I teared my eyes away from the magnetic pull of the ZhuQue. Sensing the weak grip and momentary lapse of shock of the soldier behind me, I forced a strength foreign to me and broke free of my arms. No one attempted to recapture me as I stumbled like mad towards the bird.

But in the blur of the next second, I felt my body fly on to a plane of soft feathers as the whizz of an arrow flew just inches away from my ear.

It knocked the breath out of me. My body rolled on to a warm, vast back and I held on for my dear life. Coming to a realization that I escaped, I put the uneasiness of mounting on a flying beast behind my mind and leaned to the direction of the ever shrinking faces beneath.

“I will take my place. Long Live Empress AnLe!” I cried with rigor. The scornful face of my cousin paled into a cold sweat and slowly faded into a small dot. A warm feeling enveloped my heart with the thought of becoming Empress Grandmother. I could finally prove my heritage as a strong princess.

The tear-streaked face, the dirty linen, and the thought of grandmother was forgotten as the ZhuQue soared in a smooth, sweeping flight across the sky. The fresh, brisk wind greeted me, tickling my face. And a foreign, shrill laugh burst out of my chest. I froze. The abrupt noise hung like a suspended note on the serene air. A far cry from the usual timid, sweet giggles that covered the silence like pasty sugar. A feminine weapon to coax people. I spread my arms open, welcoming the embrace of the limitless sky. Leaving behind the burdens of what the fiery, red sky signified.

The vast, beating wings of the ZhuQue sliced through the crisp sliver-lining of the clouds. It had a mind of their own, swerving and weaving its way through the blue dome. The flexing of the muscles beneath me served to remind me of the hidden strength the taut flesh subdued. Against the stretching swirling blue canvas, the swift dashes of the ZhuQue flicked popping, bright red splashes across, marking it as the reigning beast of the skies.

The vitality of the ZhuQue only did to solidify my young fantasies of magical creatures, pulling the flimsy threads of unreality together.

“—and it rose from the flames of the South and vanquished its foes with a fiery breath.” Aiyi’s hands curled to imitate talons and she pounced with a huff, fire dancing in her eyes. I relished the magic of the myth, transfixed on the surreal powers beyond this village.

“What else? What else?” I asked eagerly. “No more for today, child. It’s time for you to get back to dig out the crops.” I grumbled, not happy at the prospect of getting my hands in the dirt.

As I hiked back to the hut, I thirsted for the sweet, sweet escape of the magical realm.

The wind breathed a whisper—*whoosh* into my ear. And the most magnificent scene I would ever have the pleasure of setting my eyes upon came together right before my very eyes.

The jagged tips of rocks jutted out like spears, curving up towards the wispy mist, swirling softly, grazing the edge of the sky. The rich green enveloped the descent like a blanket, rustling with a restless abandon. The air vibrated with the screeches and howls of all things wild, thrumming with danger. My eyes widened in alarm as a brown, flimsy thing slammed right on my face. I choked up some loose fur. But I let my eyes linger in wonder as the monkey cackled away *flying*.

Yet, despite the primitive quality, a stillness enfolded the hearth of the mountain. Much like an inanimate landscape splashed on by the strokes of a dashing brush. It was hard, yet soft; gentle, yet unyielding; tranquil, yet *wild*.

But the glare of the sun glowered down, my face hardened with the reminder of my ultimate mission. *What would Empress Grandmother say? An embarrassment, I thought.* Forgetting my responsibilities and enjoying myself.

Grandmother would always say, “Remember. I was the one who saved you out of the hellhole you were in.” during my droughts of daydreaming in etiquette lessons. Saying the word “myth” was unspeakably forbidden.

Indeed she did. The moment she announced her decision to revoke my father of his title as Prince, I became a Princess, leaving behind my life as an irrelevant servant. I remember the whiff of the rich aromas in feasts, the heavenly feel of the silks, the vast space of the room I could call my own.

It was an honour, I always told myself. It is an honour.

The ZhuQue began its descent downwards. A gust of wind blew against my face. Landing on the plane of the mountain, the ground shook. My vision tilted back to normal.

With difficulty, I climbed down the back of the ZhuQue. Averting my eyes, I came up to the bird and bowed my head with respect. “Connections are everything. There will come a time when you need to use it, so keep your private distracting little thoughts away. “ The cold voice of my grandmother trailed after my ear. I contemplated the possibility of acquiring powerful allies, ones with such power and vigour as... the ZhuQue.

If such a creature as the ZhuQue exists, then others with must exist as well. With the revelation fresh on my mind, suddenly, my ears unfurled to the beck and bellows emerging from within the forest. The mist twisting and mangling in the air tingled with unfulfilled promise, veiling the strength of lurking beasts.

My eyes met with the ZhuQue’s. I scanned its form hungrily, gobbling up the razor-sharp beak and spiked talons.

“Where am I?” I asked the bird, attempting to elicit a spoken response.

“Buzhou Shan,” an alluring, deep voice replied. The air surrounding trembled with anticipation, waiting for the speaker to claim her words.

A beautiful figure emerged from the dark woods, clad in flowing silk, rippling and fluttering like a river of wind. She was glowing with youthful exuberance, flowing with a grace only a goddess could have. Her eyes peered out through an inky sheen, two shining spheres, capable of seeing beyond the barriers of the physical earth. Under her upper body, a thick, smooth, scaly tail slithered about. *Half-human, half-dragon.*

“Nuwa.” I gasped in wonder. *The original creator of human kind.*

“Child.” Her voice came out as a low, thrilling whisper, reverberating around the forest walls. “You have been through too much for a person to bear, let alone a child.”

“I am not a child! I am as capable as any adult like my grandmother or my cousin.” The exhaustion of the day caught up with me. My seething anger lashed out like a whip, but alas, the murmurs of my grandmother sealed my lips.

“For that, I would bestow upon you an honour. One that not one mortal should have ever received in the existence of the world.”

An honour? Would it be a legendary artifact? A mystical creature? Magical powers? I smiled, excited at the prospect of fulfilling Empress Grandmother’s legacy.

Her slender hands curved to form a circling gesture. And the darkness of the forest vanished. In its place, is the vast open sky, no barriers withholding the might of the wild. On the North, South, East and West, sang the autumn wind, sending the wispy mist on a dancing fanfair. I stood over the edge of the precipice, yet no fear washed over me.

The rocky cliff stretched out into a sea of pink blossoms, bursting with the bloom of spring. Tiny houses dotted the slope of the valley, basking in the glow of the afternoon sun. The villagers milled about, their faces animated with the words exchanged. No crowds. No screaming. No disdain. Just... quiet harmony. As though the valley was suspended in time, away from the petty squabbles of the world beyond the mountains.

“The Peach Blossom Spring.” Nuwa spoke of my thoughts. “A paradise for anyone who seeks refuge from the ravages of destruction.” The thoughts of stepping foot into the ethereal realm invaded my mind, weaving its way in and out. Waking up to the fresh scent of blossoms. Bathing in the warmth of the sun. Laughing along with the people. I could do with that.

But a glare of the sun temporarily blinded me, obstructing my view of the Peach Blossom Spring. Guilt flamed from the fuel of my fantasies. *What am I doing? Betraying Grandmother’s love. No. What I want is to become Empress.*

“Why are you showing me this?” I asked Nuwa accusingly.

"I thought you would like to settle down here. Wasn't it your dream back then?" She questioned curiously.

"I..." My head started spinning. *Grandmother. Magic. Grandmother. Magic. Grandmother. Magic.* "No! My dream is to become the Empress of China, just like my Grandmother." The doubt casted on my decision to pursue the throne vanished. I ignored the nagging feeling gnawing at my heart.

"There is no time for silly dreaming. Can you provide the means for me to conduct a second rebellion?" I asked, Nuwa looked unbothered. "Your Grace." I added.

"Is it your will to reign the earth, or your Grandmother's?"

I sputtered. "Why? Am I not capable to do so? Just because I was not born a princess, I am destined to suffer the mundane life of an ordinary peasant? No. I have royal blood coursing through my veins and I will claim the throne as my Grandmother did."

"But do you want to take over the Kingdom? Tell me: does your heart desire it?" A trace of a whisper called out from my heart. But I was in too deep to acknowledge it.

"After all Grandmother has done for me, I cannot fail her. I *will not* fail her." I intentionally cracked my voice. Fresh tears sprung from my eyes, framing the mask I put on of an emotionally broken girl.

"I see that your determination on the path to become Empress cannot be deterred. I can only leave you to find your own path. One piece of advice: remember the legends of Nuwa, the Queen of Wa; the creator of mankind; the repairer of the Heavens." Nuwa took off into the sky and faded into a golden speckle.

The repairer of Heavens. NuWa. Buzhou Shan. Her words ran through my head wildly. For a second, I abandoned the notion of conquering the throne and dug deep into my memories for an answer. *Come on. Come on.* An idea rushed to my head like a speeding carriage.

In olden times, the world fell into chaos. But taking pity on the suffering of humankind, Nuwa killed a giant turtle and used its legs as giant pillars to hold up the fallen sky. Legend dictates: Buzhou Shan to be a pillar can reach up into the Heavens.

The distance between the edge of Buzhou Shan and the tip of the mortal world remains ever so daunting, but the thought of Empress Grandmother propelled me to make a declaration loud and clear to the Heavens, in hopes that my interpretation of Nuwa's hint would prove to be correct.

"Tian Di. I, Princess AnLe seeks entrance to the heavenly gates of Tian. Please grant the destined Empress the honour of the Heavens, in hopes of claiming the throne with aid by her side."

For several seconds, silence hung on the whipping air, unmoving. A strange sense of relief began to overtake my senses. But suddenly, golden steps materialised in front of me, shaping into a twisting, curving staircase leading up to a point in the sky. I stepped on the first step, expecting some sort of applause or cheering to occur. *Would Grandmother look down from above and see what I've accomplished?* But the only answer I got is cold silence.

I ran. *The faster I reach the Heavens, the better.* Running up a few thousand steps, my lungs began to burn with an intense need to breath. Air. I need fresh air. But the fire ignited failed to erase the unrelenting question burning in my mind. *Tell me: does your heart desire it?*

Only a few hundred steps left until the Heavens, it should have been a godsend for me. But the thought of the complicated, drawn-out affairs I would have to deal with had me break down into painful sobs. I collapsed on the steps, heaving sobs racking through my throat. *I'm sorry Grandmother.*

A gentle breeze with all the aromas of spring blossoms caressed my tear-streaked face, dousing the fire burning through my lungs. And brought forth an answer to Nuwa's question.

No. My heart desires to live in this realm, where I can be whatever I want to be. Not a servant. Not a Princess. Not the Empress. Just... AnLe.

Wakened with a renewed vigour, I shouted with pure joy, "ZhuQue!" The dash of red streaking through the horizon made my heart tumble and jump. I mounted the ZhuQue's back, delving into its warmth. *Home. It feels like home.*

"Take me to the Peach Blossom Spring." And I welcomed the embrace of the limitless sky.

The Traveller

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Chen, Ephraim – 15

I see a vast mountainous valley, with great towers of stone looming over the dense thicket that is a forest underneath. All I can hear is the downpour of the cascades, the water plunging down into the hefty fog, I never hear it land. What happens to everything that falls down? What would happen to me if I fell down? Either way, I have to press on.

I steadily tip toe my way across the rickety bridge, every board under me creaking at the pressure of my feet. The bridge is maybe 40, 50 metres long? It is long enough to make me worried. I hope that this isn't how I meet my end. Every step, I pray that the bridge doesn't lose its balance. Every step, I pray that it doesn't capsize, and I plunge straight into the fog.

At the end, I see the two enormous pivots hammered in, I'm not sure they can hold the weight of the entire bridge. At last, I am across. I breathe a huge sigh of relief as I now know I am on solid ground. The sky begins to dim, the sun is beginning to drop over the horizon, completely out of sight, and putting the world into total darkness.

I decide to set up camp, the plateau should have an ample supply of firewood to set up a campfire. The flame burns brightly, with sharp reds and oranges and yellows. It is the only light among the darkness, the only good among the evil. I set up some potent repellent, in a circle around the campfire. Then I lie down, staring up into the obsidian black sky. There isn't a single star. It is completely dark. Eventually, after about 15 minutes of laying there, I doze off to the noises of the crickets.

I wake to a slight shake in the ground, my eyes bolt open. It's the dead of night. Everything is pitch black. I wait, still lying there. 1 minute, 2 minutes, maybe, it was just a dream. My blinks start to slow, slower, and slower.

Then, another tremor.

I crawl around to the edge of the plateau. Another tremor. They're getting stronger. I can't see where the next plateau might be. I scramble up onto my feet, my only choice is to make a leap of faith. Another tremor, the strongest one yet. I dash across the plateau. I don't even know where the end is. How will I know when to jump? Just when I think that I'm about to run off the cliff, I make a mad leap for a nearby ledge – I could just be jumping straight off the platform. I stretch my arms out, and when they hit the cold, stone edge, I grip it as tightly as I can. I heave myself onto the solid ground, and hear the stone pillar I leapt from crumble to dust. I lie down, still panting, and quickly fall lightly asleep again.

I wake again, right as the sun rises, it's warm glow shining through onto every crevice. I stand. On one side there's a bridge, continuing the path that I was going to take, and behind me, to two wooden pivots with only small remains of rope left on them. It seems I jumped in the right direction. I grab my canteen and take a gulp. I continue along the bridged path. By the time I reached the final stone tower, the sun was setting. I drop to my knees. The orange gradient of the sun engulfs me, it's comforting warmth reassuring me that I'm finally safe. It smells of intensely fresh air. There is complete silence and peace. I spread my arms out in welcome, and a smile grows on my face as I begin to laugh.

Mountains

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Emmerson, Lorna – 15

The sun rose from behind the mountain, it's golden light washing over the rocks. She smiled as she felt the warmth hit her skin. Every morning she would wake up to watch the sunrise, and every time she was amazed at how wonderful it was. As she sat on the mountain she looked down at the clouds below her, drifting along, like leaves flowing along a river. The birds soared around her, their white feathers sparkling under the light of the sun, calling out to each other for a new day had begun. They were free, and so was she. Her mind wandered back to a time where her whole life had been planned out for her. Other people decided where she would live, what she would do, who she would marry. Everyone had an opinion on what she did and told her what she could and couldn't do and she hated it. But looking at the view in front of her she knew now, she knew that she had escaped. There were some things that she knew she could not run away from. She knew that she should have at least said goodbye, leaving her without an explanation was wrong. But she couldn't drag her into it, it wouldn't be fair.

She sighed while she lay her head back on the grass, thinking about what she could do. How could she escape this feeling? Going back was not an option, but she knew she owed her an explanation. She pondered these thoughts for a good while, listening to the sounds of the wind whistling through the leaves, until she decided what she was going to do. There was a post office about a couple days walk from the top of the mountain, it would be another tough journey but it would be worth it to give her an explanation to why she left. Looking down from the mountain again she packed up the few belongings she had and started her trek.

The post office was dark and isolated, about 5 miles from the nearest town. The rain pattered gently on the roof. She grabbed some paper and ink and started writing. She didn't know how to explain why she left without a word. She couldn't say anything that didn't make her sound selfish. "I suppose it was quite selfish of me" she wondered aloud. She at least deserved an explanation. The pen scratched along the surface of the paper as she wrote down what she was feeling and why she did it. When they were kids they always dreamed of going to the mountains, it hurt her that they weren't there together. A tear rolled down her cheek as she signed her name.

It had been a week since she sent that letter. She didn't expect a reply; she just wished there was some way to know she had received it. As she sat on the tallest mountain out of the ones around her she watched as the sky flashed from white to grey and smiled. She used to love the rain when she was younger, she used to love dancing in it and trying to catch the droplets on her tongue. But she never did that alone, it wasn't the same. She knew she was free now but that didn't mean she wasn't lonely. She decided to go and seek shelter, there should be somewhere on the way down the cliff, but she stood frozen when she heard a voice behind her.

"Hey." the voice sounded familiar, she gasped as she realised who it was.

"You came" she cried. She was filled with joy, and relief. She was relieved that she didn't hate her, and she was relieved to not be alone. The rain subsided and the sky glowed pink. The sun sank behind the mountain, it's yellow flame disappearing for the night.

Waiting, for you

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Liu, Cherry – 15

“Mount Huangshan has played a major role in Chinese history varying from famous art works to inspiring literature since the Tang Dynasty around the 8th century, bursting from when one of the most legendary person in the year 747 described the mountain as “the place of discovery of the long-sought elixir of immortality”....”

Cerise sat silently on the shivery stone steps, listening to her pre-recorded voice memo for the millionth time, beside a boy with tangly chocolate brown hair. The chilly steps finally became a little warmer after hours and hours of waiting.

“...And that is where the Mountain got it’s remarkable name. It has become a magnet like place to poets, artists and tourists from all over the world, with its numerous breath taking peaks. Why is it so appealing you may ask, well...” Recited Darcy sarcastically as he flashed her his lazy grin. In return, Cerise sent back a soft smile. Both their eyes struggled to stay open. It was November 12, and the freezing wind pierced through her skin. Her tired hazel eyes drifted towards the scenery before her. Although she had stared at the same view of mystical mountains emerging through the sea of fluffy white clouds, surrounded by perpetual rows of magical trees, it still seemed as if she could never get enough of it. It was a dream come true. Her, Darcy, and Mother Nature, all together welcoming the long awaited sunrise. Nothing holding her or pushing her down. And no amount of exhaustion can take that from her.

“Mommy look!” Cerise jerked awake, and so did Darcy with his head resting on her shoulder. “The sun! The sun!” The little girl 52 meters away from them screamed excitedly. Along with every other head in the crowd, Cerise and Darcy slowly turned towards the direction where the little girl was pointing. Indeed, like hundreds of fire flowers blooming into the deep blue sky, the sun beamed at them. With that, almost everyone, including Cerise, rose and rushed forward to get a spot for the perfect picture. It was almost as if the scenery was a once in a lifetime show, the massive audience below swarming over everyday, just to get a simple glance. Pulling Darcy along with her, she grabbed out her camera, squishing into the line of people, waiting to get their turn. Thank god, Cerise thought, if they’d stayed in the hotel bed for another minute, they would be at the back of the line. Just as Cerise was about to turn on her audio once again, they finally noticed an empty spot against the sturdy wooden fence. She leaned against it. Although ancient, it was somehow still strong enough to hold her back from the mysterious darkness full of secrets down below, where no one would ever find them, just as it held many other heroic and outstanding ancestors before her.

“Here, get me a picture! Quick!” Cerise pinched her cheeks and fixed her hair. All the drowsiness washed away and was replaced with enthusiasm. Darcy chuckled, as he took over the camera. The sun awakened, not only exposing every corner of the field of mountains, but also spreading its wings to protect everyone from the wind. After taking a few photos, Darcy stopped. His eyes widened. His hands shook. His heart pounded. Cerise jokingly stood in a silly pose. But that was not what he saw. He saw the golden, fairy dust-like lining surrounding Cerise’s body, heard the sparkle in her quiet laugh, and smelled the familiar assorted flower scent. He knew, at that moment, that she was the one. Darcy, without another thought, pulled her into his arms.

“I love you,” He confessed. Cerise was surprised, but thrilled. Knowing what was coming next, Darcy fell on one knee and pulled out a small, precious box. Cerise covered her mouth in amazement, unable to get any sound to escape from her. In that moment, she felt as if she was the sun, rising above the clouds by pink, heart shaped bubbles. She, the one being blissful, spreading not only warmth but also joy. Darcy carefully opened the obsidian box, revealing a delicate, gorgeous diamond ring. The wind blew against the trees behind them, just as a flock of birds flew above. As if already planned, it seemed as if the birds opened a curtain of tiny snowflakes, painted pink and red under the sunlight.

“Cerise Blossom Liu, will you marry me?”

Tears flooded Cerise's eyes as she nestled into her favourite chair. It was November 12, fifty years later.

"Grandma, are you crying? Is anything bothering you?" Cerise turned to find her seven year old grandson, Charles, brows twisted, staring up at her with confusion. She let out a laugh, ruffling his chocolate brown hair, still amazed how Charles had inherited the exact colour and frizziness.

"No, of course not, honey. It's just dust." Cerise quickly wiped her tears with the back of her hand. Charles hopped onto the armchair next to hers, with a book of Famous Mountains in his tiny hands. A white dove like bird perched on her windowsill. Cerise gave the bird a soft yet sad smile. The bird cocked its head and took off, its magnificent wings beating to her heart beat.

Her insides warmed at the thought of the memory. She closed her eyes, just to savour the glorious feeling one last time before it disappeared, and she did not know when it would come back next time...

Cerise suddenly felt a gust of wind blow towards her. She lifted higher and higher into the air. She looked up and saw rows and rows of white birds, all flying in harmony. Somehow, as she floated across millions of tiny houses, across everlasting oceans and lakes, across forests waiting to be explored, her wrinkles started to fade away, and her pink pleasant poncho turned to the same teal down-jacket she had worn on the most delightful and happiest day of her life. Her hair returned from silver to jet black, and her body went back into its fit self.

By some magnificent sorcery, she stood back in the mountains. HuangShan. At first, all she could see was the identical, peaceful sight she had seen so many times in her dreams.

But then, she saw him. Her whole body went numb as her eyes teared up. It was Darcy, on one knee, nervous yet with the familiar dedication and hopefulness in his eyes. Cerise blinked. It was as if nothing had happened, as if time had not moved forward, and as if no force had just returned him back to her.

"Yes," She cried. "I will. And I will say it again and again with no regret. Because I love you too, from the bottom of my heart."

Darcy shot up and buried her into his arms. Yes. This was the touch she had been waiting for all these years.

Just at that moment, she heard the sound of flapping. She gratefully looked up, and saw the same white bird, soaring high up in the air. As if understanding her thoughts, the bird jerked his head towards the sea of mountains, as if to say it was their doing.

Cerise turned towards the familiar view.

"Thank you," She whispered.

She could've sworn she heard a gentle laugh in the mist of winds.

Home

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Pabaru, Rachel – 14

It was peaceful and tranquil, but most importantly: civil. The floating clouds hid this land from everyone and us from them. Rows and rows of trees coated the pillars of stone in dark green as the rain dripped down, making the air a fresh, earthy scent. The others ran past content like they were satisfied with life. I carefully and silently tiptoed across the edge of the cliff as to not alert the elders, or plummet to my death like others have. I stood at the edge of a cliff, a hard to reach place, gazing down at the layer of clouds that hid from us the unknown. Some have told tales of a mystical land, where magical creatures defy all science; others refused to believe in anything at all. I constantly wondered about this place when I wasn't allowed. Did it exist? Could I go there? Would I come back?

My parents grew up in a different time. The village had not been divided into two yet. I heard it was a better time, a civil time until everyone disagreed on everything. My dad would regale me with stories that seemed too fiction, at least my mum would insist they were. My mind carried me to this imaginary world, only to be brought back by the soaring birds shrieking above me. As I stared down the edge of the cliff, my eyes following the cracks in the rocks, something urged me to jump, but I knew there was no chance I'd survive.

As I pondered about the world I lived in, the gong echoed through the mountains, triggering me to start walking as if I was a robot in a simulation towards the sound. Knowing I would be late and that it wouldn't matter if I was there or not, I took my time carefully climbing over rocks and at the edge of ledges. Suddenly, an uprising of chaos erupted. Voices of disdain, spreading anger and hate drowned out the civility I once knew. The peace between our two tribes was now destroyed. I watched my brothers, my sisters, my parents, my family all fight for nothing to come of it. I knew this would end with the destruction of all. It was inevitable.

I had a choice. To die a slow, painful death, watching the blood rush out of me and staining the earth crimson or to run and never return. I quickly sprinted faster than I have ever before regardless of the danger. These rocks were ingrained in my head. I knew exactly where to step and where to go next. I kept going, winding up and down an imaginary path, weaving through clusters of trees, until I could go no further. The screaming of pain and yelling of madness slowly faded but never disappeared.

I ventured further than I had ever gone. I was lost. Definitely lost. But I had no intention of going back. There was nothing to go back to anyways. I screamed in pain from the cuts and scrapes I sustained as I slid down, some of which left scars that are permanently ingrained in me. My muscles were aching from the endless hours of tumbling down mountains. I was so close to giving up. The pouring rain and chilly air sent shivers down my spine. I was cold and hungry and tired.

I strolled down the mountain, still aching but delighted with my discovery of new life that I thought could never possibly exist. Birds feathered with colours I had never seen before. Gleeful trees howling in the wind, unlike those cold, distant trees clustered together on the tips of rock. I would never have found such freedom and joy if I had stayed. Despite all the agony, I had no regrets.

It had been too long since I last interacted with a human. The last time I had a real conversation with a physical being. The figments of my imagination would appear before and I would laugh and joke with them. I recognised them as part of the tribe, wearing the traditional clothing, but acting rather unorthodox. Those who were like them and defied The Rule were given the ultimate punishment, death. We were told that from a young age. "Do not step out of line.", my grandfather said firmly yet calmly, "Or you'll be banished and forgotten forever." I kept thinking about this as I descended to the unknown. I presumed I had been banished, but I was already forgotten and civilization had since been destroyed, never to be rebuilt the same.

So much time had passed that I didn't notice I was below the clouds. I squinted up at the glowing sun illuminating the ground below and warming me up. Finally, after soaking in the embrace of the warmth, I noticed I had arrived.

It did exist! It was real! I remember feeling both excited and relieved. My father was telling the truth, although there were no magical creatures that were said to be here. Instead, there was something even better. There were no rocks in sight. All there was was flat ground covered in fields of green grass dancing with the wind that brought a sense of peace I had not felt in a long time. I gazed around and looked up at the clouds that hid this land from everyone. I was satisfied with all I had accomplished. Some would say there was nothing here, but I knew I was home.

The Yellow Earth Beneath You

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Wong, Alyssa – 16

The exhibit is unnamed, small, forgotten. A plaque tells you these artifacts are Neolithic, from a 9,000 year old settlement in Huangshan, the Yellow Mountains. You stare through the dust-clouded glass at clay pottery jars, stone tools, bones. The skeleton is illuminated in a display at the back. You scan the scant information offered: female, around 60, successfully healed foot fracture.

But your mind chips away the years, peels away centuries, unravels millennia. The story you tell is not true, but the truth you seek cannot be found. All you have are glimpses, reflected and refracted through thousands of years. All you can do is reach out to the past you can never return to.

--

The mountains, her mother tells her, *are trying to kill you*. That same reason for why she must not leave the village is given by her father, her brothers and sister, and everyone she knows. But the mountains cannot have cursed her, because her spirit and the mountains' are one and the same. There is nobody else who climbs as deftly, who can balance on the narrowest ledges a knife's edge between life and death.

So for the first time in more than three months she is there. Standing in front of the mountain. The stone hands of buried gods. She thinks, *if the mountains wanted to kill me, I would already be dead*.

The long path is safer so she takes the winding route up the side. A dull pre-dawn gloom casts the mountains rain grey. Last time, it was because of the rain, not the mountains.

Thin, watery ropes of rain lashed against the earth. The sides of the mountain turned slick as hostile. She was lucky to survive, to stumble back to the village with a splintered, shattered foot. Her mother is a healer, and even she had feared her daughter would never walk again. But the bones knit themselves back together. The foot healed. And the mountain remained. Formidable, unchanging.

Waiting.

When she reaches the top, she is out of breath. The air is so cold it hollows out her insides. She imagines wind whistling through empty stone. Here, with only a precarious foothold and her back pressed to the rough rock, she feels she could fall off. Her family thinks she believes the mountain protects her, but she does not. The mountain protects her as much as it tries to kill her. The mountain is a callous, stone heart and if she tipped off the side, plunging through the tendrils of cloud and mist that tangles through the trees, it would be as insignificant as a pebble bouncing off the rock.

It makes her feel alive to think she is looking at death, and death is indifferent, and enthralling. The village is so small she cannot see it, transcending her own existence. Perched on the top of millions of years of rock, her spirit bleeds into the mountain's, like drops of rain seeping through porous stone.

The sun, which has crept up the sky beside her all this time, lights the edge of the sky. As it turns incarnadine, soft orange embers float across the rest of the silvery blue sky, warming it pink. She feels the sun reach out with rays of warmth, touching the rock burning from the sun like life. Feet poised on a sliver of yellow earth beneath her.

--

I see you, and others like us. I thought I was the only one who noticed, but people are always curious. We look at bones and make up stories to fill the unknown. We pour a cup of water into the empty sea.

When you walk out of this room, you're swallowed back into the mundane waters of life. It soaks through to your bones, to that quiet seed of knowledge. That constant knowing of how one day the waves of time will wash away. Trickle out. Until what was and is you is crumbled by the pestle and mortar of history. There are only single motes of dust suspended in a beam of light. Scintillating flickers of light in the depths of the ocean. Droplets of water in rain.

Yet for now, the future sinks into unreality, hidden by an ephemeral existence. All that is left is sharp, clear air around you. A lambent orange sun above you.

And the yellow earth beneath you.

A Search for Home

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Yin, Jenny – 15

Mountains soared upward as if determined to kiss the heavens. Just looking at them it was easy to see why the ancient Emperors thought of staying here, ruling from their home in the clouds. Each of them was white-peaked, but nothing like the neat line around a chocolate waffle cone. The snow reached down from the cap in craggy white fingers, no doubt up close there were mighty cracks in the rock deep packed with ice. Even though the ice and snow dominated the entire surface, mighty beautiful pine trees still stood unyielding.

A young boy, built of a twenty year old but with youthful features of a teenager, stood still and silently on a bridge that was fighting to hang on between two steep cliffs. The boy controlled an elegant but cold aura. He dressed simply, but he was completely motionless as if the strongest winds had frozen around him.

He blinked then looked towards the concrete ground, as if he had finally realised the height and danger which he was losing focus at. His eyes twitched, due to a small patch of dirt on his snow-white Tai Chi shoes. Very gracefully, he knelt down without making his Hanfu, which were the same colour as his shoes, make contact with the ground. Sounds of panting, shuffles of feet, and wailing slowly found its way to this discrete place. The boy seemed to have noticed too as his hands immediately stopped to the tiniest sound of misfit from before. He stood up effortlessly and turned to face the vast distance as if to admire the view for the last time. But it couldn't last for more than a short second.

A hand reached out aggressively from behind the boy and sunk into his left wrist, as if his sleeve had torn completely, while lifting it right in front of his forehead. Although the offender's build might not have seemed much stronger than the boy's, the hand pinched and twisted. It was surely enough to make the boy's surrounding smooth skin turn red as if it had been burned by flames. It was virtually cruel. The boy managed to maintain expressionless, but with deeper inspection, his eyes were unconsciously searching for help.

"Yongqi (勇奇), you—," Fortunately, the eruption of the volcano was interrupted by the voice of a goddess.

"Please be gentle!" A girl cried. Her voice was sweet and calming — the type that immediately makes you think the person controlling it was delightful, but her words were disconnected by heavy breathes just as she struggled to climb the last few stairs within the cave that led up to the bridge. Yongqi's eyes instantly widened up, his face tensed.

"What is she doing here?" Although still monotone, the pace which his words gushed out of his mouth exposed his surprise and confusion.

"Since none of the maids could find you in the wing rooms this morning, I decided to come fetch you myself. Coincidentally, your sister realised your absence too, so she decided to follow." The man's voice was breathy and hoarse, but undoubtedly filled with less fury than before.

"Father, I am sorry. I never meant for you to come here personally to get me." Yongqi looked up determinedly at his father, with his teeth clenched and with beams of sweat sliding down his cheeks — even he himself didn't know whether they were caused by his fear or anger. He again said composedly but with a hint of mockery this time, "Father. Please let go of my arm, my clothes are becoming wrinkled, and I am sure you would hate it."

The girl finally reached the bridge and knelt down in exhaustion. She seemed very young. Definitely much shorter than Yongqi and his father. She was occupied with catching her breath and therefore couldn't pay attention to their conversation. The sounds of her pants echoed through the mountains, further submerging the voices of others.

"Very well. Since your sister has not realised, I will not deliberately shame you in front of her. Considering that you are the only person she listens to." Yongqi's features loosened up in the most subtle way just as his father's hand relaxed around his wrist. The pressure between Yongqi's shoes and the ground seemed to ease, and his muscles contracted.

“No! Don’t run!” Her sister shouted suddenly. But it was too late. Yongqi was already turning, getting ready to sprint. A vigorous wrench forced backwards, however, and the ice caused him to lose balance. His hip strikes the edge of the stone barrier; his angle twisted severely; a shriek from his sister pierced his ears. Then, when nothing else could be processed anymore, a black empty void dominated.

—— *To be continued.*

Immortal Satisfaction

Heep Yunn School, Chu, Sui Lam – 16

Nightfall, the perfect disguise for the undesired wanderers. Tiptoeing past the threatening eyes of patrols, camouflaging his presence against the intertwined rows of crooked pine trees and vandalised rock columns, Zhang Hui leaves the slight trace of his wanderlust on a frosted blanket suffocating the rocks. An aspiring pharmacist, with ambitions greater than peaks of the Yellow Mountain, first set foot on these ridges two years ago, photographing various plant species and recording the encroaching vegetation throughout the cycle of seasons. This visit, however, is a far cry from the logical and hunter-gatherer-like aspects of his work, or the findings of his predecessors documented in the treasure troves of 'Proceedings of the Chinese Geological Society' and 'Geographical Journal'. His eyes stray away from the thousands of shrubbery begging for a place in his ever-growing logbook, but towards the waterfalls gushing downwards with crystal clear liquid mirroring the celestial ivory orb. The volatile rhythm of the plashes and splashes from above breaks the silence of twilight, serving as Zhang Hui's audio guide for the much acclaimed springs.

One of which would, hopefully, contain the Elixir of Immortality.

As he saunters the illuminated trail reflecting the lustre of the moon, the familiar silhouettes of spiked leaves lingers on his journey. Intermingled Masson pine form menacing beasts of tigers and dragons, with gnarled roots invading the snowy path like the claws of a phoenix, cautioning the trespassing traveller of his unwanted presence in his uncanny mission. The peering eyes of grotesque rock statues loom over every footstep Zhang Hui leaves and scrutinises every piece of geological history that may or may not have been tampered. A palm-shaped rock appears in the distance, having the air of being all too similar to the red-and-white plastic 'STOP' sign imprinted in his memory from the many years of dealing with traffic as a regular citizen. Is the brain convincing him to abandon his goal built upon tales of eternal living? Yet, he fears none of such illusive omens. For him, it is merely flipping through the photo collections in his logbook, occasionally dotted with unauthorised plucked ferns and tea leaves hastily stuck on, not to mention the myriad of sticky notes adhered to pages of parchment bleeding with rollerball ink.

However extensive and lengthy his geological research is, Zhang Hui has reminded himself to save several pages at the very end of the logbook for a desire of his—keeping an account of the discovery, properties and effects of consumption of the Elixir of Immortality. Centuries of rumors passed down from one generation to another, of naive wanderers, hoping to taste the specialty of the water in the Yellow Mountain, ended up with a blessing of never being near Death's door at the price of vanishing from the conventional human civilisation like decomposing corpses. 'A small sacrifice to be made for unlimited opportunities for happiness and success,' he has always thought to himself, eternal life would provide him with ample time to reach prosperity in his career and personal affairs. This yearning of triumph has instilled, within his mindset, a seemingly unrealistic mission to unravel the location of this enticing potion. Carrying along with him numerous empty vials to be filled with every type of springwater flowing from the heath of the mountain, he paves his way through the pine forests dangling from baseless ravines of bizzare rock columns for his venture.

Out of the corner of his eye, he catches a glimpse of a speck of white light appearing on the black backdrop of an extra-terrestrial stage, stealing the spotlight from the evening sun. He stops to admire the performance. In the blink of an eye, the speck of light fills up the canvas with its blinding light, revealing it to be a shooting star. Before the blazing white comet trails away, he makes a wish, despite his mindset of reason telling him otherwise.

'I wish I could gain the Elixir of Immortality.'

As soon as he lets loose of the earnest clasping of his hands, a low murmur of unintelligible Chinese disrupts the falling commotion of waterfalls. Realising he's not the only sign of life concealed amongst the peaks, he surveilles the ominous environment for protection in case of security patrols. He spots a cave with ingrown rock clinging pines; a suitable place to cover up his presence. Without second thoughts, he dashes towards his newfound hiding spot.

Little does he know, as his footsteps quicken, the ghostly voice grows louder and more distinct in context of rambling.

‘O dear shadow and O fine pine, dance with me under radiant moonlight!’

It’s spoken in an unusual dialect, ‘definitely not the Mandarin we know of today, nor the voice of a security guard’, Zhang Hui mumbles. It’s almost like Cantonese, but somehow contains a harmonic and fluent assonance lacking in said modern-day language, quite like poetry. It has an alluring quality, like the songs of the sirens, to attract the curiosity of passersby, but also undertones of desperation, like an elaborate invitation beseeching them to join the lonely ball its owner has created for oneself. A pitiful plight the holder of such a singsong voice has, only able to find solace in the haunting beauty of the Yellow Mountain.

Eventually, he finds himself drawn to the mysterious voice and its poor owner as much as he is to the elixir. Accepting the invitation with hopes to confront the stranger possessing the melodic voice, he treads upon the frosty blanket cautiously, following the echo of a summoning to nature, like an audio guide, to its source—the very cave that caught his eye. He enters as the feathery snowflakes begin showering the mountain.

‘I drinken to thy warm mylky glow, O sweet moon!’

The rebounding sound of the stranger’s poetic, and rather unique declaration of admiration hushes the burbling ripples in the hot springs and the cascading of waterfalls. Here it is, the centrestage of a peculiar performance starring an actor speaking in bizarre gibberish, while hiding behind the curtains of luscious evergreen pine leaves. Determined to unveil the silhouette of the ‘Stranger With a Weird Dialect’, Zhang Hui threads his way through the cluster of greenery, as if he is peeling off the skin of an orange little by little to reach the saccharinity of its core. The more the rustling of the spiral needles of pine leaves against stone cold cave walls overlaps the soliloquy of the hidden individual, the more his anticipation grows to identifying the owner of the mystical voice. Dodging under the trunk of the last ingrown pine tree, his eyes finally meet the ones of the other sign of life thousands of metres above sea level.

Except, those eyes are looking at him lifelessly. In fact, the ‘Stranger With a Weird Dialect’ is nothing but a pale spectre of a disheveled man cloaked in a monochromatic turban, fashioning a messy bun and a tangled beard. His entire body is translucent with a tint of whiteness, with much resemblance to a spirit. In his right hand, he carries a jug of supposedly wine, judging from the ghost’s comparatively higher concentration of tint on his cheeks, apparently drunk.

‘Blink twice,’ Zhang Hui utters shortly before taking action, ‘no I’m not seeing things, he’s still here.’ No prior memories of dissecting rats in biology class could prepare him for the fright of his life. Before his eyes is the embodiment of the origins of horror stories. His mind and body are at war; the brain is sending signals of multiple escape plans through the nervous system of the body, but human anatomy has malfunctioned from numbness of fear, leaving Zhang Hui quaking under his knees, his face frozen in shock. Entranced by the spell of fear, he is only woken up by the same accented voice he has heard previously.

‘Who art thou?’

There is no running away now that the spirit of a drunkard has taken notice of his presence, he must answer. But nowhere in his mind could he comprehend the Cantonese-like dialect.

‘I don’t speak Cantonese, sir.’

To his surprise, the drunk ghost, suddenly alerted, switches his dialect to the familiar Mandarin language.

‘So you are one of those, what I call, modern mortals. There’s no need to call me sir, but do say your name.’

Zhang Hui hesitates before answering, a ghost.

‘I’m Zhang Hui, I’ve come to find the Elixir of Immortality.’

The spirit chuckles incredulously, accidentally spilling some of his liquor before questioning the dumbfounded traveller.

‘Are you a Taoist practicing alchemy, Mr Zhang, or are you a businessman trying to sell poison to the public?’

‘No sir, my intentions are purely academic.’

Zhang Hui proceeds to present his logbook to the poet. Spectating the faded hand breeze through the crisp pages of his perseverance, he reflects on his intent of foraging the elixir. It has been a lifelong dream of his to document his findings and publish them as stepping stones for his worldwide recognition as a pharmacist, but then wouldn’t he become the ‘businessman’ selling poison to the public? That is, if the elixir could even be considered a threat to mankind. How could a remedy for human dissatisfaction, an antidote to the cruel passage of time be a tool of harm? He would gladly take a sip of the potent draught and spend his eternal youth gathering as much success as he could, indulging in opulence in infinitude. He would be reigning over his destiny, grasping the Sceptre of Control in one hand and the Sovereign’s Orb of Affluence in the other. His thoughts on immortality cease abruptly upon noticing the poet has finished reading.

‘Nice journal you have created, though I don’t approve of stealing pieces of vegetation and taping it to your notebook; nature should not be disturbed by human activity. Seeing your dedication and my need for company, I’ve decided to join your little conquest.’ Catching sight of Zhang Hui’s raised eyebrows, he reassures him, ‘I know these ridges well, you’ll find me useful, except perhaps my tendency to rejoice nature and drink excessively. But I swear on the beauty of the Yellow Mountain I shall lead to the Elixir of Immortality.’

A ghost for a guide, but not just any ghost, the spirit of Li Bai, the Immortal Poet who visited the Yellow Mountain for its picturesque beauty in his time of living. Despite him possibly being knowledgeable of every peak in the Yellow Mountain, the unsettling thoughts of acquainting with a supernatural being baffles Zhang Hui. Who would he credit in his findings in publications, the absolutely existent ghost of the great poet Li Bai? Before Zhang Hui could raise further objection, the curtains of pine leaves sway in synchronised motions from the gloating of the spectre, ushering him to go along with the poet’s spontaneity.

Stepping on the powdery white trail, he observes that the recent snowdrift has enveloped the once forest green pine needles with a sheet of white gold, with remnants of needle tips basking under the dim moonbeam like glimmering emeralds. The flexible branches of these pinaceae have withheld the blustery blow like bars of bronze; no traces of trauma could be engraved in the bark by the blades of wind. The full moon, however, like a glistening pearl, conceals itself in the nacre of the mollusk of pale snow clouds for protection from the mortals’ eye.

‘The immortals have stolen my precious white jade plate!’ Li Bai laments to the heavens above, proceeding with a gulp of alcohol to calm his nerves.

Ignoring the blabbering of his intoxicated companion about how ‘mountains are the conduits of gods’, he sees a calligraphy brush-like rock monument takes shape on the landing of a cliff, with orchids flourishing from the blank sheet of snow-like paper at the tip of the ‘brush’, as if the writing utensil has sprouted blossoms and petals from the mighty power of a pen. A rather relieving omen for an individual who wishes to publish a book on his findings in the Yellow Mountain – the factual and the fantasy.

About an hour on the tiresome journey, Li Bai motions to stop a series of ancient houses. ‘But there’s no time for accommodation issues,’ Zhang Hui protests initially, but on second glance he realises the ‘houses’ are actually Taoist temples. Symmetrical halls of tarnished red walls, wooden pillars and herbal gardens decorates the frosted terrain, housing a populace of religious devotees. The pungent scent of burning joss sticks escapes the walls of the temple and greets their arrival, to which Li Bai takes great delight in sniffing with a guilty grin. A faint steady ringing of bells echoes from the chambers within. The solemn chimes in adagio are interrupted with sighs of nostalgia from the poet.

‘I was once a Taoist, and for years I had written poems for guidance to the secrets of the elixir. I was still living and breathing the air of immaturity back then, believing immortality was the route for achieving ecstasy.’

‘But wouldn’t having an eternal heartbeat fuelling your journey of fame and fortune be satisfying?’ Zhang Hui points out in defense of his own beliefs. The pale cheeks of Li Bai rapidly lose more colour, turning almost transparent, as a realisation dawns upon him.

‘Dear gods not another mortal misinterpreting the meaning of immortality in Chinese culture! I thought you were a scholar Mr Zhang?’

‘Not exactly.’

Under the spectre’s gaze of ridicule, Zhang Hui makes his confession.

‘I am simply an aspiring pharmacist hoping to publish my logbook.’

‘So you are a businessman trying to sell poison to the public, what a shame. Dishonour!’

‘No, I am not an entrepreneur! Plus, what’s so dreadful about immortality when you could receive infinite chances for success? I could make an astronomical amount of fortune by collecting medicinal herbs here alone till the end of time!’

‘For the last time, immortality does not equate to becoming imperishable in Taoism! It’s a method of achieving ecstasy through alchemy. Some enlightened ancestors decided that ingesting cinnabar, a mineral that synthesises mercury, would grant the consumer ascension to heaven and immortal life. Generations of Taoists have fallen for the myth and unwittingly cut their lives short by drinking good—for-nothing poison,’ the angered spirit inhales the scent of joss sticks before continuing his venting, ‘I don’t need more ghosts joining me, so you can forget about putting that Elixir of Immortality in your book, or rip out a single weed from this mountain!’

Li Bai, opaque in the face, swiftly floats away from the stunned human before suddenly snapping his head back in disgust.

‘Curse me for swearing on the beauty of this mountain to bring you to that spring! A promise is a promise for an honourable man, now move!’

Ushered by the unsettling breeze the speeding spirit creates, Zhang Hui quickens his pace with great difficulty from numbed feet, proceeding to jog along the path of bleakness to a toxic spring. Without the casual humour of Li Bai, the overbearing tension stabs his face with the chilling blows of his companion’s cold shoulder, that he would have thrown himself off the Bridge of Immortals if it were not the determination to complete his goal.

The gradual surge of rippling gurgles from the reddish brown liquid and the pungent scent of sulphur signals the arrival of their destination, the Cinnabar hot spring. The deep crimson stains the white slush of melting snow, incriminating the scene of murder. Who knows how many cases of manslaughter have befallen on travellers like Zhang Hui himself? The vicious bubbling of the spring cackles at him for his late discovery, mocking him for his idealised beliefs. Cautiously avoiding being seen by Li Bai, he fills a vial with the hazardous elixir ironically representing vitality and immortality. In an attempt to break the silence, he raises a suggestion.

‘What if I debunk the myths of immortality in my logbook?’

‘Suit yourself, nature should not be disturbed.’ the spirit turns around, appearing much paler than before, to face Zhang Hui. ‘It’s almost the dawning of a new day, I must retreat to my cave. You may want to stay for the sea of clouds though, I remain in awe for my daily viewing.’ As soundless as the morning breeze, Li Bai floats away before farewells could be said.

The first ray of light graces the horizon moments later, revealing the extent of the hazy veil masking the civilisations below. The indigo sky is splashed with streaks of salmon pink and champagne gold, as the sunbeams refract the colours onto the brume, transforming the undyed silk chiffon into Joseph’s Coat of Many Colours. The rising orb of fire steadily ignites the ether with tangerine flames, blazing the stratus clouds with hues of apricot orange. Time softens its pace as Zhang Hui gazes at the art of nature while pondering about the concepts of immortality. With no Elixir of Immortality to take control of his fate and fortune, or create an undying legacy, the disillusionment invades the precarious goals he has withheld in mind, attempting to shatter remnants of plausible ideals like stained glass in church windows. He recalls parts of a poem on his journey from Li Bai.

‘What is there to prize in life’s vaporous glory?’

Standing in the fragments of his broken dream, among the chaos he reaches an epiphany. Centuries old pine have stood their ground from sturdy roots, lifelong dreams of his have stemmed from memories of a tale. Under the sea of clouds are millions of chances to forge new memories and aspirations, all he has to do is—what was it that Li Bai had quoted on the journey?

Oh yes, ‘carpe diem, seize the day’.

fata morgana

Heep Yunn School, Tsui, Yu Hei Iris – 15

autumn, 1958

‘What the war did to dreamers.’

She looks up, all bright eyes and red hair. ‘I’m sorry?’

He hands her the photograph. ‘Look at this. The Yellow Mountains in Anhui, China.’

Her gaze flits over the image, wonder filling her eyes like golden liquor filling emerald-green bottles. ‘It’s like a fairy bridge,’ she whispers.

‘Over there, they dreamt just as we did.’ He sips red wine, feeling the alcohol hit his bloodstream in a rush of creative fervor. ‘They had poets in those mountains, including your favorite. Li Bai, isn’t it?’

‘The drunken poet who drowned trying to capture the moon’s reflection,’ she says wryly. ‘What a dreamer.’

‘We’re all dreamers,’ says Jack Kerouac. ‘Dreaming is what ties mankind together.’

She tilts her head back, downing champagne. He says, ‘Haven’t you had too much to drink?’

‘When the war has annihilated your ability to dream,’ she says, setting the bottle down with a thud, ‘alcohol is the antidote. We’re Beat Poets, Jack. Our words manifest upon spontaneous inspiration. That’s what makes our poetry...’

She pauses. His eyes trace her silhouette as she paces in some obsessive pursuit of creative insight, the lamplight an incandescent glow upon her fiery hair.

‘Perfect,’ she finishes.

Her room is drenched with moonlight. Her mind, hazy with drink, etches images on the blank canvas of the ceiling with a palette of grey shadow.

She dreams herself back to the winter in 1945, that disoriented fragment of time when a world war was brewing, when grey faces and grey silence and grey monotonous terror eclipsed all color. Grey was the color of the whispers about the atrocities committed by the Nazis. Grey was the hue of American glory when bombs decimated two cities in Japan. Grey was the shade of the coat of the man who came to tell her that her father had gone to see her mother — in heaven.

That is the farthest the spirals of memory go before she resurfaces, gasping as if she has been drowning, wiping her tear-soaked face and gulping liquor to annihilate that treacherous territory of remembrance. When she sets the bottle down, her fingers catch on something. She lifts it to her face, the photograph Jack left behind emerging into clarity.

And suddenly the shadows are shifting again, rearranging themselves into a landscape painting composed only of whites and greys. A vision emerges — of the glittering prairies of a sea of clouds. The mist wafts upwards, assailing the craggy peaks, invading those vast and uncaring skies... it is as if the entire mountain was made of mist.

Fata morgana, she thinks, a mirage.

Her breath stirs the misty landscape of her dreams; it dissipates, congeals, reforms. She realises she is not alone, upon that sea of clouds.

Two figures arise from that sea, hazy like the figments of a half-forgotten dream, outlined in silvery plating against the dark curved ceiling of the night sky. The rag of a scarlet skirt bells out as its wearer spins, the vivid flare of color parting the mist. Behind her follows a ghostly phantom, cloaked in shadows, feet weaving patterns across the floor of the foamy sea. His cloak billows, a tempest of darkness; she trembles under his touch, recoils from his advances. Every throw of his arm, every thrust of her hip is an outburst of suppressed emotion — of rage and terror — of yearning and desire — a yearning for something without shape or name, for some unattainable state of perfection —

The moonglow trickles down, powdering the dancers with a snow of light.

She gasps, resurfacing from the realm of imagination, drenched with exhaustion, as if she has struck some lonely chord of colossal victory. She gropes for her notebook, pencil scrawling across paper:

*On the bleakest of December nights —
A phantom stood before me.
His eyes were like my father's eyes —
Filled with stars I cannot see.
He sits with me in trenches
Where the bones of my father lie
And he brings with him the canvas
Of a grey and stormy sky*

*Fear
is of falling*

when there's nothing beneath but sky

Lost

*in no man's land,
in scarred and shifting landscapes*

*RAGE
at a broken world
where your words hold
no meaning*

She turns to the window, blowing out a frustrated breath. The wishing stone of a moon extends moonbeams towards her, offering a loom on which she can spin her dreams.

summer, 1961

Jack drives her to the airport on the day of her flight.

'You sure you want to go?' he says.

'I'm sure.' The glow of the streetlights flickers across her face, picking out the golden tones in her auburn tresses.

He sighs. 'You're sure going to a communist country two months after the Soviets shot down an American plane is a good idea?'

Her face is closed off, imperturbable.

'That's why I'm going there,' she says. 'To escape.'

autumn, 1961

Through the fiery gauze of her hair, she watches a young man approach her at the hotel bar, which sits on the shoulder of the Yellow Mountains.

‘You’re the American poet from the cover of *Poetry Review*,’ he says, ‘The one who’s been compared to Li Bai.’

She looks up. ‘I am. Did you like them?’

‘Not really,’ he says. ‘Too sentimental for me. And the themes were incoherent—your message got confused—’

His voice is a tolling war-bell in her ears, invasive in her mind. In her chest an echoing melody rises to meet it, a war-chant that reverberates down her spine, a deathly rhythm of rage and terror and self-loathing —

She interrupts him, desperate to break that pounding tune. ‘Does this mean you’re a poet?’

His coal-black eyes smolder, ready to leap into flame. ‘I was.’

She sits beside him on the stone steps overlooking the sea of clouds in the early blue-spun hours.

The clouds congeal and dissipate, networked with seething rafts of sea foam; she can almost hear the deep, subsonic roar of the sea. If she falls, she thinks, those shifting waters would catch her. She could drift upon that silent sea as the clouds roll on, indifferent to the petty quarrels of men, unmarred by the scars of war.

As the dawn breaks, a figure, crouched like a hermit, materialises out of the shifting mist.

‘The Stone Monkey,’ he breathes. ‘Legend has it that he fell in love with a beauty who was repulsed by his hideous looks. He sat on the cliffside in sacred vigil over her home. He sat there so long that his heart and flesh turned to stone.’

The sunlight hits the sea of clouds and sea-spray ricochets in droplets of spun gold. The weight of myth releases her shoulders, dissolving into the silence of the mountains.

She whispers, ‘It’s like the entire mountain is made of mist.’

He’s silent, the golden daybreak reflected in his coal-black eyes.

winter, 1961

*The sweet-throated warblers pour out their battle songs
Into the glowing swelling spaces among the dying stars —
Vermillion azaleas bloodied by starbursts of bright gunfire;
I roll up my sleeves to see where the world gave me scars.*

*Fear
of seeing
a dark-eyed phantom in the night*

Lost

*When he
lets my demons out into the light*

*RAGE
at myself
that I can’t ever be*

what this world needs me to be...
what I need me to be...

She does not see him again until the snow is falling. An argent cape swathes the mountainsides in pristine white and frost glitters on dark boughs. When the pale sunlight hits them, it glances off the brilliant fractals, until the mountains are aglow with blue fire.

‘You’ve been here a year,’ he says one night, as they lie staring up at the inky–black canopy. ‘How’s the poetry?’

She traces the river of stars with one finger. ‘I can’t stop writing.’

‘Why?’

‘I can write about the sun on new–fallen snow, dwell on the shoals of clouds as they swim across the sky, wonder why the wind doesn’t move the moonlight,’ she says. ‘But nothing I write can bequeath its beauty to the reader.’

‘And that is what all artists come to see,’ he says wearily, his sigh a strand of mist in the frosty air. ‘We offer readers a snapshot into our visions of the world, but the color they fill that snapshot with is never the same as our own hues.’

Her fingers trace the frozen patterns on the ground. Beneath her fingernails, the frost makes billions of tiny diadems, a lattice of dumbfounding complexity.

‘Is that why you stopped writing?’

‘Mm–hm.’

She shakes her head. ‘But didn’t you *enjoy* it? That feeling of your heart like a pendulum against your ribs. Your blood like a golden flow through your arteries. Didn’t you *like* that quest for perfection?’

‘You’re always talking about perfection,’ he replies. ‘What will you do once you achieve it?’

She looks at him. His pupils are filled with the milk of the galaxy they lie under. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘If you become as legendary a poet as Li Bai,’ he says, ‘and you achieve that momentary perfection as he did...what will you do with the rest of your life? Who are you if not for your poetry?’

Above them, the stars wheel and churn, soaking her with wet light.

She shakes her head. ‘I don’t understand.’

spring, 1962

The lamplight tints the white curtains with shades of rose. *Clair de Lune*, on the piano, a Chinese singer crooning in poorly articulated French as the syllables fall languidly like ash.

‘Wine, miss?’

She waves the waiter away. ‘Just water, please.’

The radio crackles, a broadcaster speaking in the breathy consonants of Mandarin.

She notices nothing at first. But then the lamps darken, the rosy glow fades, and the white curtains look like drowned hair. A clamour rises, a cacophony of panicked dismay.

The broadcast switches over to English.

Tensions rise between America and the Soviet Union. Experts warn that a major crisis could take place by the end of the year.

Suddenly she is six years old again, and the man with the face of a phantom and her father's star-flooded gaze is kneeling before her, his withered grey hand brushing her cheek.

Your father has gone to see your mother — in heaven.

She blinks. When her vision refocuses, her knuckles are white on the edge of the table and the glass of water is in splinters on the floor.

The grey fog is gathering, suffocating her breath, obliterating the beauty of the mountains. Her vision soars over Europe, over the towering wall dividing the continent into two, over the trenches where the bones of her father lie.

When the waiter offers her champagne, she does not wave him away. As the ghostly chords spill over the piano, she raises a glass to the perfection of the silvery moon.

One drink turns into three. Then more, more, golden rivers of molten lava down her throat, until her mind is so hazy she cannot think. This happens, night after night, in her room.

She waits for the liquor to stir the creative ardour within her. But the words that spiral from the tip of her pencil are faded to her, as withered as fallen leaves, handfuls of crumpled stars. Beyond her window the moonlight is bloodied; her dreams of perfection disintegrate into dust.

Instead the alcohol stirs something else — a dragon that has been slumbering since the silence of the mountains lulled it to sleep. A ghostly phantom with her father's eyes and a dark, shadowy cloak that conceals everything she has fought so hard to put away.

Sometimes she thinks he's possessing her — that when she reaches for more wine, it's his hand that brings the bottle to her lips. That when she writes, it's his words that spiral from her pencil.

*Our phantoms whirled and drifted in a dance across the floor
And you spun and spun me faster under the lamplight's revolving core.
I was breathless
You were merciless
My red satin dress was torn —
But the moonlight never pierced the shadows of the cloak you wore

And on midsummer's eve, you stood over a silenced world
You whispered
'Come, fata morgana.'*

summer, 1962

He sits down beside her on the stone steps, in the blue-spun hours of early morning.

Her unbound hair whips around her face, loose tendrils of flame. He surveys her bloodshot eyes, devoid of the creative ardour that had bewitched him. The scent of alcohol stings his nostrils. When he puts his hand on her face, it is cold, so pale she could fade into the bleached white of the sea of clouds, leaving behind nothing but a dash of red fire. *Fata morgana*, he thinks. A mirage.

He says, 'I'm worried about you.'

'Why?' Her voice is raspy with drink.

'All this time in Huangshan,' he says, 'you've never had to rely on liquor for inspiration. But now —'

'Now,' she breathes, 'the world is teetering on a knife's edge. One wrong move and two superpowers collide.'

'What does it have to do with this?' he whispers.

‘How long will Huangshan stand before a nuclear warhead obliterates all the beauty that has lurked in these mountains for a million years?’ she says. ‘How long before this timeless beauty must succumb to implacable change?’

They stare at each other, oblivious to the golden dawn. When she speaks, her voice is fey.

‘Goodbye.’

She rises, stumbling down the stone steps. The fog swallows her in an instant, leaving him breathless, calling her name.

autumn, 1962

She returns to the stone steps at dusk to join the Stone Monkey in silent vigil.

The sea of clouds is shaded with muted blue and its underbelly shot through with pulsing amber. Around it the encircling mountains loom, its peaks plumes of black flame. The sun is a rotating lamp and the imperturbable shields that have held that grey twilight at bay have fallen, but heavens, how beautiful anyway.

Around her, tourists burst into applause, their laughter echoing in the crevices. She has not realised how she has starved of it, that pure, *human* sound of rapture, of childlike wonder, as if they are seeing the light for the first time.

She closes her eyes, tears leaking from beneath her eyelids. Oh God. How long until everything is perfect, and we can all go home?

She sits as if in a dream. Her vision soars over the divided nation they called the Reich; over the scarred and ever-shifting landscapes we call nations; over her father, lying in the trenches with his eyes filled with stars; over the glittering silhouette of Massachusetts, where Jack sits in a dimly-lit bar, hunched over a manuscript and downing bottle after bottle of wine; over the young man, coal-black eyes burning into her own; over the Yellow Mountains and its extraordinary beauty that exists in another current of time, a beauty that is ultimately doomed.

When she opens her eyes again, the mountains are deserted and she is alone in the darkness, the moon her only companion.

But is it? The wind sighs, blowing her fiery hair out of her eyes; the shadows interweave upon the blank canvas of the sea of clouds in a hauntingly familiar pattern, as if she has seen it in some old film before... A girl in a scarlet dress, driven and derided by anguish and terror, her every move dictated by the dark-cloaked phantom dancing by her side.

It takes her a moment to realise she is not alone.

Beside her glides the phantom, looking at her with tender eyes. She recoils from him.

‘You’ve got so much rage in you,’ he breathes. ‘Just let go.’

She trembles. In the pale moonglow, she feels weightless, ephemeral, made of air.

Fata morgana, she thinks, *a mirage*.

Her hand trembles; her notebook lies open in her lap. Her body is running on the fuel of creative ardour; her pencil works feverishly under the raw, impassioned moonglow.

She envisions that girl in the scarlet dress, dancing in the arms of a phantom who has her father’s eyes. But now the girl is struggling, writhing in the phantom’s grasp — and suddenly she breaks free — free! The shadows waver and recede, and she stands, poised, bathed in moonlight.

For a moment she is victorious — but the vivid scarlet of her dress is fading, the fire purged, and then she is dissolving, dissipating, into the silence of the mountains.

The phantom holds out his hand. ‘Come, *fata morgana*.’

She rises from the stone steps, notebook slipping from her lap. She steps towards the edge and lets the sea of clouds take her. And it rolls on, indifferently, as if it has never been disturbed.

autumn, 1962

Dear Mr. Kerouac,

I regret to be the bearer of sad news. Your friend, R. Cassidy, vanished from her hotel on October 22. Some, including myself, believe she was drunk upon her disappearance.

She left behind one last poem, discovered upon the steps of Huangshan. If she attained the perfection she craved, she has given her life for it. Yet I find it unfitting to pronounce her... I would say she became fata morgana indeed — a mirage, dissipating into the silence of the Yellow Mountains.

fata morgana

*We danced by the lake where the drunken poet drowned,
by the light of the silvery moon.
I saw my demons in the shadows of the billowing cloak you wore,
fear, loss and rage — I've known them all before.*

*I battled them with the fire of all my passing dreams,
so I didn't have to sit in trenches where my father's bones lie.
But now I'm engulfed in flames and I'm burning out too fast —
and you know it's in your arms that I die at last.*

*O phantom, I'm the girl you called fata morgana.
O phantom, it's in your arms that she died at last.*

Mountain Time

HKTA Tang Hin Memorial Secondary School, In, Chen Yan Jenny – 16

“Thirty six strange peaks, immortals with black top knots. Morning sun strikes the tree tops, here in this sky mountain world...” Uhh! How come these poems are so hard to recite? And why do I need to study this dull stuff! They are completely unrelated to my life, aren’t they? I’m quite sure that they have nothing to do with my work prospects, since I would not have to give out an impromptu speech like any of those poets. Okay, back to reality. I still have five hours left to deal with these elegant words. Hm...frankly I have to say Huangshan looks spectacular and worth a visit, at least from those photos in my textbook. The surrounding mist makes Huangshan especially enchanting. Wait, wait...why can I feel warm, moist drops when stroking the pictures? It seems that I’m not only touching the page, but actually feeling...spray!

I find myself fully in haze. I can catch a whiff of smoke but what’s in front of my eyes is only white and grey. I instinctively wave my hand in front of my face. I gradually see my surroundings. I am encircled by mountains! Oh my goodness...what’s happening? Is it me staying up late doing revision? Anyway...anyway...the view is incredibly amazing! I am on top of such a high mountain that I have a great view over everything. There are various towering mountains in extraordinary shapes. Some are as sharp as pencils. Some are as curvy as instant noodles. Some are arranged as neat as five fingers. What makes the landscape much more alluring are the clouds and fog. The cloud dolls wear feathered pure white dresses and dance at will. The whole thing is just dreamy like heaven. I can’t genuinely describe what my eyes see – everything is just so out of sight. I believe this is more likely to be a fantasy world than that counterfeit Disneyland. After looking all around, I notice the back of a man sitting on a stone far away. He looks a bit strange due to his old clothing style and snake-like posture. However, it’s a must for me to find out what’s happening as soon as possible. And obviously he is the only clue I have up till now. Be brave, girl!

“Excuse me sir, may I ask where I am?” I gently pat his shoulder and ask cautiously. No response. “Excuse me, sir?” Still nothing. “Excuse me, sir!” I largely increase my volume and intensify the force.

“Ouch!” He jumps up and yells all of a sudden. Oops, it seems that he had been sleeping.

“So sorry to disturb you, sir...may I ask where this place is?”

“Ah, ah? Where?” He turns his head and I see his face. I have to admit that his appearance shocks me a little at first glance, since he has a messy hairstyle and long, untidy beard. Also, I can tell he is drunk from his pink face.

“Oh...Thirty six strange peaks, immortals with black top knots. Morning sun strikes the tree tops, here in this sky mountain world...” Okay, he is probably not yet conscious. But wait, his words seem familiar. It’s the poem **“Dawn Vista on Huangshan”**, which I have been working at through the whole night! So, is he Li Bai? And I am in Huangshan?

Be calm, girl. Be calm, girl. Recall everything that happened. I have been working with a ton of Chinese poems. When I was reciting “Dawn Vista on Huangshan”, I touched one of the photos of Huangshan in my book and then haze came out from nowhere. Well, all the surroundings in fact seem quite in line with those pictures and descriptions, and this man seems quite in line with that portrait in my book too. I must have traversed through space and time!

“Hey, girl! You look so amusing! How come I have never thought about this cutting and oh, this colour is great too!” says the man I should probably call Mr. Li Bai, looking at my clothes. To be honest, I am taking a dislike to him because he is acting weirdly. Moreover, how come those poems written by this guy can leave us poor students to study for hundreds of years long after? If he had not drunk so much, most likely we wouldn’t have to deal with such a large amount of stuff. Thinking of this, I throw a resentful look to him.

“Hey, new friend. You look frustrated. Don’t worry! While in this wonderful land, we have to enjoy! Smile! Throw away all the bother! Follow me!” Li Bai laughs cheerfully and staggers up. He is really enthusiastic and energetic. He takes the initiative and brings me for a stroll.

Huangshan is really engrossing. I have never seen any rock formations as unique as here. These countless mountains, hills, rocks differ from one another. Every stone is worth looking at because they all have their own special power. The clouds and fogs are also wonderful. They have made this place mysterious and magical. This is probably the first time I have felt such a fascination with nature. Everything is just right. Nature has built a perfect sculpture which is definitely irreplaceable. Being a millennial, I rarely have a chance to enjoy myself in raw nature. Even small-scale hiking trips I have only tried within five times because of laziness or busyness.

“Hey, brother!” another man’s voice pops up while we are walking.

“Oh, Zimei! Long time no see! How is your day?” Li Bai looks delighted to see this man. This man’s appearance is quite similar to that of Li Bai – pink face, messy clothes. Oh, I know! He must be Du Fu!

“Well, actually not good. I have been fired again. And that’s why I come here again. As you know, I can always find a sense of relief here.”

“Oh, brother, same as me. We have encountered the same situation again! Anyway, when I come to this wonderland, all my troubles disappear. Let’s enjoy ourselves!”

“Ha–ha, you are right! Let’s go!” These two odd men can switch their emotion from down to cheerful in only a second. And they simply ignore me afterwards. Never mind, I will just follow them and enjoy this wonderland.

“Thirty six strange peaks, immortals with black top knots. Morning sun strikes the tree tops, here in this sky mountain world...” Gosh, here it is again. “Oh Taibai, is this your new creation?”

“Yes, but I have not yet finished it...” Li Bai climbs on a rock, deep in thought.

“Today is a shiny day. Hey, Taibai, look at the sky. You should not miss this great weather,” Du Fu looks up and says.

“Yes, you’re right. It’s a pretty good day. Raising our faces to appreciate this beautiful sky is worth doing,” Li Bai follows Du Fu and mutters. “Ah...Chinese people, raise your faces! For a thousand years cranes come and go. Far off I spy a firewood gatherer...plucking sticks from stone crevices! Oh dear, I have made it! Thank you so much! What do you think about it?”

“Marvellous! You see, taking a short break can always help.” Wow, it turns out that this was how the poem I have been studying was written. I have never imagined that there could be such an interesting story behind those tedious words. I found myself smiling. Happiness is very simple to these two crazy men. By drinking wine, staying out in nature, and being with friends, they can completely throw away all their worries and laugh as children. Their joy seems to come from nowhere, or in fact simply comes from their hearts. Is this beauty just of the ancients? No, I should own it too, and everyone should own it. In fact the poets are right – compared with this gigantic natural world, humans are really insignificant. And our problems, our worries are even more minor. So why do we have to struggle with insignificance and make our own life full of darkness? As humans with limited life, shouldn’t we try our best to enjoy this wonderful world as much as possible?

“Thirty six strange peaks – your turn!” “Immortals with black top knots! Ha–ha!” Oh dear, these two monkeys have started playing a poem solitaire singing game. I suddenly remembered my Chinese exam tomorrow. I should not forget this cruel reality.

“Excuse me, sirs. Could you help me to go back to my original place?” No response. Maybe I should try to find out how to return by myself. I came here by touching the photos in the book, so maybe I should touch something here. Okay, it does not work. I look around to find anything I can use. Oh! There is a bottle. Let me sample it...it’s liquor! It probably belongs to Li Bai, who was a well-known heavy drinker. The liquor is so strong that I feel dizzy instantly. I totter and fall on a giant rock in front of me.

Ouch! It seems that somebody is using alcohol to clean a wound on my forehead. It’s so painful that I regain consciousness.

“Thank god! You finally woke up. What happened? How can you hurt yourself so seriously in your own room?” I see my mother’s anxious face. I’m confused.

“Mum...what’s happened? How is my Chinese Exam?”

“You did not get up early as usual yesterday. We were thinking that you just wanted to have a lie–in. However, at two o’clock in the afternoon, when we decided to wake you up, it turned out that your forehead had been hurt and you fainted on the floor! Don’t you know how worried we are! What happened to you?” She started to blame me after recognizing I’m fine – as she does every time.

“Mum, umm, it is quite a long story. But can you first tell me about my exam?”

“What exam? Have you lost your mind?” I stand up at once to check the calendar. Oh gosh! It’s one month earlier than when I left!

“No exam...” I mutter.

“Okay, don’t be so intense suddenly. Stay in bed and take a full rest, girl,” Mum says sulkily pushing me onto the bed.

After Mum has gone, I get up and walk to the mirror to investigate my forehead. It is a strange wound. It is bumpy with some unexpected lines and dots, like something has been stamped on it. And I have seen this sort of thing. Oh! It is exactly like the rock at Huangshan that I fell down on. The journey can’t have been fake! But thinking back to the whole process, despite Li Bai talking to me at the beginning, neither poet actually seemed to recognize my existence. There is an even more important question; I am now home one month earlier, so was that month I had been experiencing fake? Oh gosh, I can hardly sort out this complicated experience. I may have become a real Alice in Wonderland. Anyway, I’m thrilled that I still have a month left to prepare for my examinations. Plus, I am not so nervous about them now.

Fog

International School of Beijing, Liu, Haozhe – 15

He rested in the deep shadow of a rock, fire casting shadows and crackling in the quiet night. No cicadas thrummed their wings, the pine needles too thin to rustle, and the man silent in his fear.

The darkness is merciful on him today. Days ago, *how many has it been? Why can't he remember?* Qingshan grows used to the darkness where no moon could shine through. He sits, and longs for what he had.

★

Fall was a quiet affair that year in the mountains. The crops yielded little, game was scarce, and the pelts did not sell to the travelers far and few in between. The medicine stock fell low and wounds were gone untreated. Even the Wang's formidable wealth did not allow for more trade opportunities. A hunting party was gone too long, until Chuyun returned in an ambling stagger through the gates with soot-stained clothes and dark circles under his eyes, raving of dead men.

He rambled incoherently. Madly, even. And once, when Chuyun was supposed to be asleep in his home and Qingshan standing guard in case his injuries worsen, he caught the madman with eyes open wide and unblinking. Staring at him.

★

Shadows ruled their sight when the group turned a curve into a darkened hollow in the rock. It gets darker as the group travels into the mountains. The pines here were regularly overshadowed by the tall mountains, so they grew twisted and branches reaching towards the sky.

Deep green reached out to the rag-tag band like claws, snagging at every article of clothing and tangles in sweat-matted hair. Fog hangs low in the surroundings, allowing the dampness to seep into every article of clothing Qingshan wore. The mornings were the coldest of the time they had to travel, but they had to rise before dawn to make time. After all, the chances of a midday thunderstorm were still high during this time of the year, and it was made even more dangerous by the thinning tree line near the summit. So they trekked, with the song of birds at their backs the only comfort they could seek.

Soon, they reached the dark outcrop of rocks, halfway up the mountain. Qingshan swept the dew away from the granite and leaned against a tree. He studies the soil for potential herbs. Halfway up, and the earth was already darkening from the yellow of their last climb to brown. Soon, he spies some of the plants. But Qingshan frowns. The plants were in a cluster, small stems molding into purple wisps that went by as flowers, and just under the length of his palm. Spring had yet to come, and it was already in bloom. But they were good for wounds, so he nips and drops them into his pouch. The break was over, so he stands to find the three others with him already finishing their lunches. One more person than the norm, but only because of his paranoia. Just to be safe.

They had to return to the place. If the accounts were true, too much would be lost if they do not go, and soon. Those riches...

"That terrible cold..."

He shivers though there is only a slight chill.

They had found a dead bear on the way up, body slouched in a small stream and already starting to smell foul. The group quieted when they neared the mass of brown-black fur. The older Wang brother was already running his hands through it. "We'll mark it for later," he declared, and continued on. As the others sidestepped around the carcass, Qingshan stooped. The tinker of the stream ran in the background as he stared, wondering the question all the others held their breath and quickened their pace for.

Bears, with such mighty claws it once took over a dozen men to take one down, what could have killed it?

★

There was something inherently wrong once they were above the treeline. They were getting closer to the site Chuyun found, closer to the landmarks he described in his mad ramblings.

But where is the blood? Where are the bodies?

He could almost hear the ashes of the once-campfire in front of them twist and turn in the sudden wind.

He realized—

It was too silent.

Shifts in fabric, a hand sign to pause and stop. Whiter knuckles. The others noticed it too. Yet no one spoke.

For a moment, the group stood in dumb shock. Sounds now seem amplified as the men shifted uncomfortably. The sniffing nose of Wanghui sounded once, twice. Then stopped as soon as it became the only sound in their world. Snot now ran down his chin. And no one spoke.

A bear? A leopard? Qingshan glances around. It wouldn't dare attack so many of us! But it was as if all the creatures of the forest realised the tension, and where natural racket was, eerie echoes remained.

The unnerving quiet continued, and the men fell into a cautionary circle with a wave of a hand from Wanglu. To speak would be to give away their location. It was open ground where they stood, spears pointed outwards. The warmth at his back told Qingshan they could now see approaching danger easily, and the glisten of sun on metal from the corner of his eye reassured him. But they continued standing to attention.

One.

Qingshan started counting inside his head. Numbers reassured him, wielding logic against the chaos of reality. A countdown. For what, he did not know.

Qingshan felt his spine stiffening.

Two.

The wind stopped picking up, and the leaves swirling around the area fell back to the ground. The noise flattened out. The others' quickened breathing was a drum at his back.

Three.

Qingshan started praying. *Heavens above, help me.*

And the first snowflakes started falling, when it was not yet due for another two months.

★

The strain added and added, weighing the four men down. It was getting colder. Shivers started when it felt as if more than two hours have passed, and Qingshan was beginning to hear the hum of birdsong in his sensory deprived ears. It was not real, for once he turned his attention towards the source, it disappeared, only to come in another direction. And it was another long while before the pressure increased until it was a pounding in their head that Wanghui spoke in a hushed whisper, "Are—".

You fool!

His voice was clamped short by the elder Wang.

Blood pounds in his veins.

Qingshan realized he was going to die for the foolishness of others. *Oh heavens, we are going to die.* His entire body tenses like a spring, waiting for whatever that was hunting them to start their move.

He grips his spear tighter.

He senses a gaze on him, and turns. To see a shadow change in the patch of tree nearest to them. He hears nothing, yet starts running.

Qingshan follows his primal instincts away. Away from the monster!

He hears the men break formation in a flurry of pounding on the ground, but he dares not turn back to look.

★

Darker. Clouds on the horizon.

That was what Qingshan saw in those brief clearings he passed where the trees were sparser. Pine needles burst into clouds with his every footstep, but where the crunching would be only silence remained. His heavy breath echoes in the suffocating silence.

The darkness did not bother him, not as much as the unnatural silence. The feeling of a brittle stick under your feet snapping, yet no sound registering, unnerved him. It was as if he had gone deaf, so different from the darkness he was

used to during the countless moonless treks and lampless nights of his childhood. Even then, there was the wind, the crunching of peat underfoot.

Then, there was nature all around you; you were the son of the earth, and the animals and the trees all sang, just for you.

Not now. The woods were deathly quiet, twisted, and turning against you.
They aid the creature now.
To hunt you down.

★

The mountains never age. Pines stay evergreen in their fervor for sun, rocks a never-changing constant.

How many lifetimes of man could they last? A fallen leaf is soon replaced, the seasons pass in blurs of changing color, while men rot in their houses damp from the frequent fogs.

"We lit fires, all the way down and back. Curse the fog and mists. They drained all the dryness away from what wood we could find. They went out after we left, the fires all died in a whish. It couldn't've been the wind. One by one, like fireflies following us. Fiery footprints leading it down here, don't ya think?"

★

He ran. The icy sharp cold breaths he drew in stabbed at his throat and dried it. Qingshan swallows to soothe it. How did it suddenly become so cold? He pulled the hood of his cloak forward, trapping the warmth of his breath, or at least what remains of it. The remaining men were gathered together, huddling their coats, as the sun flipped a switch and went out. It became much harder to see now.

Qingshan froze in his trajectory. Cold sweat drips, turning the inner fur of his coat a colder mess. Darkness has become their reality.

It was still foggy at this moment in time. Qingshan had found only two others, and their legs were bruising from what they described as a mad dash away. *Foolish*. They did not know the ways of nature, too big a step, a slip, and an ankle would be sprained. He eyes Wanghui's limp and starts busying himself with the ankle. Even if it would only heal in a few days, even weeks. Time they do not have. Qingshan contented himself with the examination, if only to resort to muscle memory. Wenran was just a little better.

Fear still grips him, and they did not speak. By now, it was too dark to even see his wounds properly. He needed light. And warmth, for he has begun to lose feeling from his feet.

They needed all of that. Fire... It was their answer. *And if Chuyun's rambles were true...* He took out some flint and held it to the others in a silent question.

The answer was simple. Yes. They would freeze soon, and the darkness is treacherous. No matter how they could be found by their assailant, they had to light a fire. They found some dried leaves to start the kindle, and soon flames danced and spluttered as the oil from crude torches dripped, bathing them all in a golden glow. They sat there for a while, soaking in the warmth. All eyes pointed away from their beacon, scanning the woods for movement. He thought he saw some, but the fog was now too thick, and by now it was hard to even see the pile of logs next to their packs—

Qingshan soon realizes their circle of light that was their world was growing smaller.
The darkness was creeping on them.

And they had to leave.

"It comes with the darkness, or it brings the darkness with it; those two are one and the same. But the night was too long after it came. It felt like days..."

★

Fire did deter the monster. Qingshan saw movement in the corner of his eye and threw his torch at it. The torch spun in a wide arc over his head, flames whipping dangerously low, but in the dense fog, it was as if a beacon had been lit. It fell, crashing into the undergrowth where Qingshan swore he saw a shadow.

And the darkness retreated.

Even though it was just for a little while, the circle of darkness left, and natural light was once again in their eyes, blinding them. He thought he saw the beauty of the mountains again, light fog curling over green in the briefest moment. Sound returning. But once he regained his sight, it was cold again. But Qingshan was hopeful, and walked with more purpose in his strides.

★

So far, the snow posed no danger. So Qingshan trudged on. The white particles stick to every piece of him it could attach to and made the frost creep into his bones. There was nothing but desaturated white in his path. Whites and greys and blacks all fade into a blur while his eyes strained to see a landmark.

The snow is also treacherous. The brittle crust it forms from the fire's heat gives way to softness with a crunch under the step of a boot. It hides the occasional root that makes itself seen with a stumble from one of the men. The clouds' shape that morning they left for the mountain told him it was not due to snow, yet it gathers now, defying the wind that usually blows through the alleys formed by the mountains and congregating into a cluster above their head. The snow stayed white as it fell. And it was getting harder stay awake. So he had to resort to fire's burning touch. Burn marks now scar his hands.

★

He last saw the others some days ago, Wanghui's ankle leaving him slower than them, too slow a pace to get down the mountain before the food runs out. So he stumbled along with last in their line of torches.

Qingshan turned to check on him in one moment, and in the next, he was gone, swallowed by the fogs. Qingshan had stopped then, staring at the fog. The light for Wanghui's torch colored the surroundings yellow, and then it was gone too.

Qingshan could have thrown his torch. He could have rushed into the fog. But there was only a small bundle of torches and oil left, and they were only halfway down. He could only hope Wanghui's death would deter the monster longer.

It did not.

Qingshan was there a moment too long. His torch started to flicker. So he turns and leaves. *Trudge along.* He did not cry in his hopelessness because he would have felt the cold on his cheeks.

"I had to burn myself, days without sleep will force you to do that. That and the terrible cold. Made my fingers fumble."

★

Qingshan dreams of Chuyun when he rests. He sees the madman on his chair, swaying in a silent rhythm.

"Down to two for the last climb down. Treacherous, but we had to. Men were gone too fast and it was only old Yan and me. Wonderful, seeing the torch he carried go out." Chuyun grinned widely. "He died! I lived!" Arms spread wide, he repeats. "I live!". "Only when the only sound I could hear was me did I realize how terribly alone I was".

Qingshan wakes to a tap on the shoulder from Wenran, unwraps himself from the cloak of their fallen, and takes watch.

The woods were still silent, with only the cackle of fire and the dark sky above.

★

It was three days by Qingshan's calculations that he has been on Huangshan. He was alone, Wenran was gone, and his last chances of sleep were gone with it too.

The fire was dying. And Qingshan is quick to realize how he was going to die. It has been too long since the snow fell, and all the wood he gathered was damp. The torches were gone too. For a moment, he longs to stay by the dying torch, standing his ground against the creature. But soon that rush of adrenaline is cleared by the harsh winds. Was it even harsh? His beard did little to shield his nose and cheeks, and they were numb. He sniffled to stop the snot from dirtying his face further, but his fear of causing more noise for the creature to track dissuaded him from doing it even more. He barely felt the wetness of the liquid now.

He takes one last look at the dying embers of the torch, and runs. Running to stop the prickling stinging in his feet as it freezes, running to warm his blood. He knew it not wise, and yet he trips, gets up, and runs again.

The pain was just a sting now, and Qingshan watches in fascination as his blood runs across his palms from how he had fell. It should be chipping, like ice, and he realizes that he has lost his sense of limbs.

He feels like he is floating, as feet lose their concept, and the snow powder and pine needles fly past his boots. The runs warm him, enough to feel the tingling as blood rush to his extremities. But once he loses his pace, the cold returns. If he does not get treated, he would lose a hand, an arm, his ears, nose, face. Why was he worrying about that now?

He even abandons his walking stick, stops sticking it in the ground ahead to test for cavities in the snow. One had swallowed Wenran up whole, but all the carefulness slows him down, and he runs with reckless abandon across the white expanse.

He falls one last time and does not get up, foot wedged in a root. He rests his face against the snow, feels it hardening from his warmth, until he could not feel anything anymore. Qingshan continues to shiver, until he remembers people dying from the cold were all found with peaceful expressions. He remembers the monster, and sees the darkness inching closer.

He decides a far better death is one from nature. Thus he forces himself to stop shivering, and lays still.

Pop

International School of Beijing, Wang, Peter – 14

The sovereign of the midnight approached, and all the graphs, papers, tables, binders, and empty reports remained blank of markings, all layered on top of each other on a small table surface caged by a grey wall and his colleague Mr. Wei's desk was identical to his desk, layered with empty papers. A warm stream rushed out of his mouth upon this sight. He stood up from his chair slowly, heated by his body, and walked towards the door. Outside of the frost glazed door, into the surrounding of faded poster boards painted with his colleague's face with Mr. Wei on it pointing to him with his finger, and a partly erased line of text below it yelling to him in faded red characters with childish inexperience. "Shape the world with your imagination and live in mountains of gold. Tell us your ideas, and we will make them true."

Out of the frost glazed doors, he went, into the sidewalk layered with the snow's neon luster to the square table with three cups of beer where his colleague sat with a table surrounded by three other unoccupied chairs under a dim spotlight in the dark restaurant. His eyes briskly darted from side to side, finally took a seat quietly in front of the metal pot, where he dumped vegetables and the few pieces of meat into the tomato soup that had yet to boil. His two chopsticks clenching all of the meat tightly, not letting any slip away. The table creaked, and the footsteps of midnight swiftly coming growing more audible ever so slightly before it thundering its presence with the popping of crimson firecrackers, fireworks and a flame that set the iron earth which the hotpot rested on ablaze, lighting up the stone-cold lonely store with its warmth and orange brilliance.

"Your company, how are things going?" He asked Wei

"As fine as it can ever be." He briskly said

His phone rang, making him jump in his seat before answering it. His father's voice came out of the other side. He put up his hand with his fingers spread out, signaling Wei to stop talking.

"Hey, son, how are you doing."

"Hey, I am fine. How are you doing? Why are you still awake pops, it's past 12."

"It's the new year's. Have you forgotten?"

"I am already had a happy new year. There's no need to wish me to have a happy new year...Um, also, how are.." He lowered his voice, trying to get his sentence out as fast as possible while pushing aside his cup of beer, and shot a stare at his colleague's glass of grape wine, finely faked to be luxurious. Wei looked into his eyes with a lopsided smile, hanging from the corner of his lips, and pointed at him before proceeding to flip the menu swiftly as though he had memorized the menu.

"Son, you coming home for new years?" The father asked on the other side, with a smile hanging from his mouth, interrupting his son's sentence. "I made you your favorite milk candy."

"It's ok. I can buy that in convenience stores." He lied, "I don't think I have enough money to come home this year, but...but I probably will make it next year." Then a glass of grape wine, masterfully crafted to cost less than a cent, arrived as an addition to the table.

"I am sorry, but I...um believe you may have misinterpreted my meaning. I don't drink alcohol." He said to Wei while turning his head to Wei, looking at Wei after he had moved the phone away from his mouth temporarily.

"That's fine. I can still ship some milk candies to you."

"No...no...no, thanks, I really don't need them. Just save the shipping fee. I got...to..Um..go sorry.." He stuttered as the food began to disappear from the boiling soup.

"Wait, a seconde..."

The father asked, but the son had already hanged up. His fingers, rough like tree barks, swiped away the screen, revealing a picture of his son's youthful smile while holding his graduate certificate in his hand in front of the father's closet with sliding doors as his phone's background photos.

The fluid's burble, the popping of the firecrackers, and the fireworks all cold to his skin and a heart much too occupied. When he looked down, some of the meat was gone from the grasp of his chopsticks and equally split among the plate of his colleague.

"You're not going home this year to your old home?" Wei asked.

"No." He replied.

"Alright, then I guess...well do you need some money? I could help give you some money," Wei said as he slowly slipped some money towards him, bill by bill, leaving only three one hundred-yuan bills in his wallet.

"No...no...no, it's ok." He replied while pushing back the money. "This is the closest I've ever got to another promotion! It is all about the effort you put in. Just...just keep the money. I don't need this mon..." He stopped, and his eyes became fixed on the thickness of the stack of red bills and counted them with his eyes. "But I

must thank you for your selfless offer...truly...sincerely. Would you mind telling me how you had earned so..." He spoke with lips, vibrating, before being interrupted by Wei's hand.

His colleague took back the money and waved at the waiter for another plate of meat before speaking.

"Honestly, I don't think working longer hours will bring you more wealth. Have you ever considered spending some time maybe to relax and have some fun? Well, I will tell you what, if I had more money, I would start a business to sweeten the world and make it a better place for all of our colleagues"

"I agree with you, but I am still quite curious how you had earned so much?"

Wei swung his head from side to side and spoke with an uncontained smile. "Seriously, are you really going to ask that? You know I don't think it is best to spend our time this way." He said.

"Yeah."

"Also, how much work had you finished?" Wei continued.

"Not much, how about you?"

"I've finished all my work. So, my new year break will be pretty relaxing, and we can come together and do something big."

He shot his colleague a stare of disapproval.

"Well, most of it at least, but I promise you they are all completed to perfection...in my opinion at least."

His colleague replied to his eyes

"Well, thank you for your advice, but it's getting a bit late, so I guess...I guess I will go." He replied as he shrugged.

"No, I suggest you finish your glass of wine. It tastes quite sweet."

"I guess I will have time for that." He lied and bent down and took a sip from the cup before swallowing with difficulty.

"What's wrong? It tastes good."

"Yes, but it's fake."

Quickly did the beef come, neatly laid on the plate arrive, but his chopstick's movement became sluggish before the slices of beef all disappeared from the plate, and he made sure that every slice was gone, not to be wasted. With full stomachs, they departed into the vast desert of the neon snow after dividing the pay after a fight of words and wits.

As usual, he went to work the next morning, but the door was stopped by something heavy; a dozen small boxes He took the box inside and opened it an array of white milk candy neatly laid inside the box. He put his palm on his face and sighed before putting the box into his bag. He stood up and rushed out of the door with one of the candies tightly gripped in his hand, fear traffic arrives upon the street as the rush hour rose with the pale misty sun. The subway's entrance behind him closed, and with his phone, he sent a thousand kuai to his father accompanied with a line of text "I have received the candy, and they tasted excellent and are excellently handcrafted, but I am really not in need of them right now." He messaged his father politely while smelling the candy pinched by two fingers, and the aroma of slit and rocks filled his nose.

"You always got into fights with your classmates for these. Especially when I told you that you've got to learn how to share. How come you stopped liking them now?" His father messaged him back with an audio clip.

"No, no, I still do like them...in fact, I am loving them, and I am...um especially impressed by your craftsmanship. It's just that I am not in need of these candies right now or anytime soon," he said as he dropped the candy pinched between his fingers into his shoulder bag. He hanged up the call and turn off his notifications with fingers hammering the screen like mallets before slipping it into his bag.

He sat at his messy table in his office as time ticked by second after second, and the smells of steaming bowls of rice rushed into his nose while his colleagues took out the candies out of the box he brought with him. He pushed aside his work and watched the man on the screen lecture him while drawing down a line that intersects and is tangent to a curved line on the blackboard around him with bar chalk, as short as a fingernail, pinched by his three fingers. His eyes were fixed on the screen, and his ears were muffled by the speaker's voice.

"You are still working on this? This is collage stuff." Wei walked by with a small smile on his face.

"Ahhh, sorry you scared me a bit. I am just reviewing this for something big." He replied to his colleague and paused the video.

"Well, I am sorry that I scared you too. Anyways if you need some support for your, umm...big plan of yours, just ring me up, ok." Wei said as he walked away.

"Yeah, but it's no big plan. I would need to have a much much better understanding of economics after my next promotion."

"Oh well," Wei replied and shrugged and walked away with slouching shoulders and a head tilting down slightly.

Surrounded by food, his nose itched, and he sniffed the air. He pulled out the milk candy that his father gave him with two fingers and ate it while wearing a frown that was replaced by a face filled with eyes of delight.

"Wait, I have something to tell you." He called out to his colleague with his eyes fixed on the empty box.

"Yes, what is it?" Wei questioned, and Wei's eyes became fixed on the piece of candy held in his hand. His head lent towards the sweet, and he observed it with widened. "Where did you get this." Wei continued to ask before he had the chance to answer his colleague's first question.

"Well, my dad makes them. He runs a small store in Huangshan for the tourists."

"Hmm...he must be having a thriving business? This can't be brought anymore from regular supermarkets. There should be a lot of demand for it...in theory a least." As is Wei and him glared at the empty box.

"Nah...most people who buy it from him are little children and nostalgic adults from the city."

"I have an idea, he said. It will bring us a lot of money to achieve what we wished for. How much work do you have during the break?"

"None." he lied. As he showed only the work he had completed.

The cityscape's light on the horizon faded away from the train's window, and the two beside each other with closed eyes as their surroundings moved by at a sluggish pace. With a short drive on the twisting road to the mountain base, they progressed up the stairs, with Wei becoming breathless in their ascensions.

"Do...do know why this...mountain is called...Huangshan." Wei interrupted the silence while trying to catch his breath.

"It's named after an emperor, right?" He said with his eyes darting from side to side search for old roads among the new ones

"Yeah, when we become emperors of the markets, let's name it something else...wait how...how are...are you not tried from...walking up from these...stairs."

"It is quite simple, actually. You wouldn't be tried from doing anything if you had done them a thousand times."

He phoned his father, and his father instantly picked up the call. He informed his father of their short stay, but his father insisted on making a meal for them after he had rejected the offer. Wei knocked on his father's door behind his storefront, and the door didn't open. He then signaled Wei to stop, and he knocked on his father's door. With a click, the loss door nob turned, the door swung wide open. His father welcomed him in with open arms with bright eyes, only to receive a short hug from his son as he signaled Wei to wait outside with an open palm and a pair of confident eyes.

"I did enjoy them, alright, right. They were good pops, they were really good. I've finished every one of them." He said to his father.

"Well, I am quite glad that you enjoyed them...I made them all by..." the father replied as he scratched the back of his head with his teeth white, but tilted, sandwiched between the opening of his curving lips before being interrupted by his son.

"I am planning on something...Something big. I am sorry, I am so so so sorry." He said as his father pulled a chair to and got up from the sofa. Then he gestured his son to sit on the sofa with him sitting on the wooden chair while holding his son's hand, he replied to him with a soft voice.

"There is nothing you should be sorry about." His father replied with curving lips.

"But I will be leaving soon again...but...but I will...will bring even you more money and buy you a better house...better medicine, good food for you. He replied with shivering lips accompanied by solid eyes.

"It's ok. It's ok...but...but come just stay a little bit longer. I've made some meals for you." His father replied and sighed before hiding his eyes from him with the back of his head. "Here, why don't you come and eat some noodles. You should still love them, right? Well, why don't you call in your buddy out there for a meal too." His father continued.

"Oh, yes, good idea, thanks for the reminder." He replied, pointing his finger upward beside his head and placed his hands on his waists before moving forward to open the door.

"Wow, I never expected the heating to be so hot in here now," he said as he unbuttoned his coat before walking towards a closet to slide open a door only to find it unable to slid open before pulling it open on his second try and hanged his cloth in there.

The three sat together at one table, each with a bowl of steaming noodles in bowls clean and scratch less. He looked at the bowl and felt the smooth surfaces before flipping the noodles around in the bowl, searching for dirt that came from the water faucet to pick out only to find none. A smile soon surfaced from his mouth before he and his father sipped the bowls clean.

"I guess we are all finished then. Let's talk about the...um our big plan," His colleague said. Wei looked at the two's empty bowls, and his eyes darted from side to side before sipping his bowl of noodles clean too.

"So, this is my plan. The supply of these candies are low in the city, and the demand should increase when more customers are exposed to them, but the cost of transportations are too high, so when we make enough we can set up a shop in the city where you can sell your candy does that sound good." Wei said.

"Yeah, sure, I guess?" His father replied.

"Very well then, may we have some more to sell?" Wei replied.

"Well, I am not very in need of them right now, so I guess you can take them," His father said and shrugged before pointing Wei to the boxes full of them.

He got up from his chair and waved his father goodbye, and helped Wei to carry the boxes out of the door.

"Wait, you've forgotten your coat." His father rushed out of the door and handed him his coat. His son dropped the boxes in his hand and loosely buttoned his coat, and His father placed both of his hands on his son's shoulders.

"Oh, I've also got hot tea. You...you got time to stay a bit longer?" His father lied.

"Sorry, pops, I really got to go." He took a few steps back before speeding down the stairs with the box in his hands.

"Wait, remember to come back next year." His father called out, waving to them with eyes tracking them down the long stairs. He turned back and looked at his father and his house like a proud engineer before catching up to Wei.

"Guess your right to an extent, but money won't help us no matter how much," He said to Wei, staring at him with worriedness, and Wei looked back at him, confused. "They are just candies. They do not cost much to make. They are meant to sweeten things up for everyone at a low price."

"Nah, I don't think so. It's what you dream of that make them sweet, just like that glass of wine you've drank. These candies are not something you can make with only money." He replied while looking back at his father still outside his house, looking at them before eating another candy and running up the stairs.

The Dollhouse

Islamic Kasim Tuet Memorial College, Bibi, Saadia – 15

There's a small poor family .There's a mother called Jannie ,father called James , one daughter called kannie and one son called tommy. There are 4 people in the house so this is a small poor family.The father's occupation job is to repair a bicycle .His salaries is very low and he always work for his family and for his kids to have a better future ,his father is a very hardworking person ,the father always think about her daughter to have a better life and better future for her daughter kannie and tommy ,said by James thoughts .

One day ,kannie came to her father and said father !father! When I grow up can I be a pilot ?father said oh come on my sweet little daughter if you study then one day you can be anything whatever you want to be but you have to study hard and be a hard working student ,Father said.Oh father but how can i study because you said we don't have enough money to afford for better education so how can i study father !.

Daughter said, ``My daughter, one day you will be studying in a better school and one day you will be successful don't worry ,because you know my situation, our family can't afford much and you know that my job salary is very low ,Father said . She was sad she walked through a park near her house. She wanted to play with her friends but no one was talking to her because she was one of the girl from the poor family and all her friends were from the rich family.She felt very unhappy like the clouds become black and the rain start like a sad rainy and the little girl was really sad .She walked through a big mountains which are near her houses and she walked through there and it seems like a mysterious place,she didn't know where she is going because she fall her head down and walking and walking because she was sad.

When she walked through a big mountain there was an old man called haungan. He was very old. He was around 80-90 age and he brought that Small little girl inside to the dark mountain and the girl was quietly following that old man.In that mountain they're were a lot of endangered species animals,a Homeless people,there were a lot of people doing their work, building a castle ,building many different things.The girl sit down quietly inside there in the mountain .Because she was shocked in the mysterious mountain she didn't knew that where am i ! ``You were walking through the mountain with an unhappy face and you were crying too so I just brought you to a mysterious place so that when you see all things in the mountain you will be shocked and happy and you can enjoy it over here”the old man said.The girl felt dwindled .The old man asked the little girl “why were you sad and crying”. The girl said I went to my father and I told him that can you buy me a little dollhouse or when I will grow up can I be a pilot ? My father said come on my sweet little daughter if you study then one day you can be anything whatever you want to be but you have to study hard and be a hard working student .But my father's situation is not good because I'm from a poor family and my fathers job is repairing a bicycle and his salary income is very low so we can't afford it better so that's why i cant have a better education .Oh come on sweet little girl don't be sad i can make your dreams come true.because I'm a person who makes people's dreams come true ,now you can wish whatever you need in your whole life cause Whenever I saw the sad kids walking through the mountain or anywhere so i will Bring them in this mountain where you came or any other quiet place ,The old man said.Then the little girl closed her eyes and made a wish happily and said i wish when i will grow up so i could be a pilot !.

.....

After a few moments,the girl opened her eyes and she was appalled .She was thinking where am i ? Where's the old man ?in the dream ,She was a pilot doing her duty in the plane.she was very confused that is the dream really came true or is she just dreaming?In the dream she got really fun because it was her dream to become a pilot and finally in the dream she was flying a plane by doing her duty as a pilot .In the dream she did enjoy many things full of peace and happiness .

But when Kannie rubbed her eyes and she saw that it was not a dream and she became emotionally sad .She talked to that old man and said ‘when can I achieve my goals ? Or when can I be a pilot ?The old man started to talk about the old story about the yellow mountain ,he started to talk about the war and all the long stories which made the girl happy and not to think too much about herself because whenever she would think she became sad the old man just made her think away from that mind .He talked about what happened in the war there were many fights between different countries human fight with human ,animals fight with animals so it was anonymous fight .The yellow

mountain looked very beautiful and it is full of greenish colour and yellow many people loved to come over that mountain and make photos ,videos because that mountain was realistic and mysterious. The girl felt very happy to hear about that and felt that this also happened in the war. The girl was shocked about hearing those war stories .

.....

After a few years, when the girl grew up and finally she became a pilot, whatever she wished it became true she was very happy and became an independent girl. She was grateful to that old man who gave him patience and to grateful to her parents ,She was how happy for being a pilot and she was hope to tell that old man haungan that she became a pilot and whatever she wished it became true so she run and run faster to find that old man and she was keep on finding him but the kannie couldn't find back him so she was thinking that the old man supposed to be here and why isn't he here ?.

She was tired. She sat for a while and an old woman came to kannie and said hello, girl who you're finding ,the old woman said. Im finding that old man called Haungan where's he ? I couldn't foundback him ,do you know him? Kannie said. Oh girl haungan was my husband and he has been suffering from heart disease so he passed away a few months ago, old woman said. Kannie became sad and she was crying because she wanted to tell that old man that finally she became a pilot and he was the one make me patience and wished to god for anything you want ,but unluckily I couldn't say so to him . That old woman said don't be sad I'm his wife so you can talk to me whatever you want to talk I'm always here for you and to help you always. Kannie became happy and relax after talking to that old woman ,after talking with her for few minutes then she went back to her house and celebrate with her family because her dream become true and she become successful in her life .

Magical Island

Islamic Kasim Tuet Memorial College, Raheem, Abdul – 13

Screams and gunshots echoed in the streets of Yemen, where civil war broke out seven years ago. Everyone's parents were saying the same thing. "Please save my child!" But the space on the ship was limited so they needed to take the nobles first. But Salahudin sneaked up onto the boat.

They were going to a nearby country. Suddenly the boat was filled with laughter. "You should have seen their pathetic faces," said one of them. The nobles were the cause of this war.

A thunderbolt struck the boat. Everyone's emotions changed from laughing to fear. The pattern of the tides slowly. The clouds were turning darker and darker.

A huge wave damaged the boat and it started leaking. The boat was slowly drowning. They needed to fix the boat quickly.

They were very worried and scared. In a blink of an eye another bolt struck the boat and it was broken to pieces. It was as if some had laid a curse on them.

Salahudin quickly grabbed a broken wooden piece. Salahudin was trying to swim for his dear life. "I couldn't die like this, I have to survive." he said as he lost consciousness.

When he woke up. He was on a deserted island. He stood up and looked around his surroundings.

"Where am I?" he said. He saw track marks on the ground. He decided to follow it. The path took him into a forest where there were thousands of types of plants. Most of them he had never seen before.

Eventually, The path took him to a very high mountain into a cave. It was big and cozy. where he also saw a very bright black ruby. "whoa!" he said. He was astonished by the beauty of the ruby.

He picked it up and was staring at it. But he accidentally dropped it. The ruby was broken. "It's fake afterall" he said while a loud noise interrupted him.

A thunderbolt piercing through air struck him. It wasn't painful. But rather it was peaceful and calm. It felt like he was slowly going to sleep.

When Salahudin woke up he was on a palm leaf bed. His body was full of bandages and bruises.

"Where am I?" he said. "oh you are up. My name is Achilles and you are in Rome. You fell from the sky."

Salahudin looked out of the window. There were many strange creatures. Which he never had seen before. "What year is this?" he asked. "It's year 269." that man said. "I am leaving, you better leave too the gladiators are coming for you" he added.

Salahudin realized that he had time traveled back in history. He wore his shoes and left. He was walking around in the streets. The scenery was beautiful. The streets of Rome were full of joy. Everyone was enjoying their lives to the fullest.

Just then he felt a severe pain at the back of his head and he went unconscious. When he woke up he was tied upside down.

"Tell me where are you from?" One of the men said. Then Salahudin looked around and he realized that he was arrested by the soldiers. "I am from...." Salahudin said and went unconscious again.

The pain from his previous injury was unbearable. He was unconscious but he could still feel the pain. The soldier started beating him with a metal stick until he woke up again. A few minutes of beating, Salahudin woke up.

They asked him again "Where are you from?". "I am from Yemen," he said. They then threw him inside a cell room with a metal door.

The soldiers informed the king about the situation. " Your majesty,we questioned the Mysterious man, he said he is from yemen.

The King sat straight and asked the soldiers to call that man.They went to the prison and brought Salahudin to the king. " So what's your name young man?" the king asked. " Salah.....udin my name is Salahudin" he said. " How did you end up here if you were from Yemen ?" The king asked rhetorically.

" I also don't know," he said while struggling to keep standing. " There was war going on in my country and I sat on the refugee boat but it crashed and I ended up on a mountain and now here." He said . King was doubtful whether his statement was true .

Soldiers bring him to Colosseum arena. For his punishment for lying and trespassing the empire. He is going to fight the griffin. "What is a griffin?" Salahudin asked. It is an animal with a body of Lion and the head of an eagle." the king said. "bring him to the changing room" said the king.

The Colosseum arena was 15 mins from the castle. King assigned one soldier to give leaflets to the people for watching the fight. King also went to change.

After 45 minutes the fight was gonna start and there was a long queue outside the Colosseum. "place your bets," said the staff. " I place my horse that Griffin will win," the man said . " I bet my house that the Griffin will win," said another man.

The king shouted loudly " I bet my life that the young man will win" Everyone was stunned by the statement. " But sir..." said the gladiators but was interrupted by the king. " You haven't seen the determination in his eyes. The anger, hope,courage. It's been a while since I have seen anyone with this much determination,"

Few minutes earlier in the changing room, The king was talking to Salahudin. " You think you can beat it ? " he asked rhetorically. " Yes I am gonna beat it and I am a man of my words." Salahudin said. "Your youthfulness is very interesting,"

The duel was going to start now so both of them went opposite ways. When the audience saw the Griffin they dropped their jaw. It was not a regular Griffin. It was a Griffin king . Which was twice the size of a regular Griffin.

Salahudin fixed his eyes at the Griffin king. It was like a predator setting its eyes into its prey. The Griffin dashed towards him. It tried to stab him with its beaks but Salahudin managed to dodge it.

Then the Griffin quickly swung its paw. Which scratched Salahudin's stomach. He started bleeding. The Griffin was attacking nonstop. Salahudin needed to find its weakness .Because his sword couldn't go through its thick skin.

Griffin then flew into the air. "Here comes the finishing move"said one of the people . The king continued observing while smiling even though Salahudin was at the verge of death.

The Griffin flew up in the air and pierced through air with its beaks set towards Salahudin. He didn't notice where the Griffin was. He was looking around . When he noticed the Griffin was in the air flying towards him. Salahudin started laughing loudly which surprised the crowd and the Griffin . The Griffin never saw anyone smiling before death.

This is where the Griffin got distracted and gave Salahudin just the time to dodge. The Griffin slammed its beak into the floor. " This is it" He said to himself and used his sword to stab the eyes of the Griffin. Which was the weakest part of its body.

The Griffin fell on the floor. Salahudin sliced its throat to give him a quick death. Everyone was shocked. "Who is this person?" Someone in the crowd said.

The soldiers took him to the changing room where the king was waiting for him. " Here is a map which will lead you to the magical island from their you can go back to the time you want." said the king.

" How did you know I was from the future ?" Salahudin asked. " I am too," said the king. " The boat is at the port. Be careful the mountain is known to have harsh weather." he added.

Salahudin nodded to everything the king said. Salahudin sat on a carriage which took him to the port. Where he saw a big boat.

He got on the boat and started leaving towards the magical Island . When he was one kilometer away from the Island. It started to rain heavily.

When Salahudin reached the island. He saw a the same path which led to the mountain where he saw the same ruby

But there was something written on the wall inside the cave. Think and reach. Which Salahudin understood instantly. He grabbed the stone and started thinking "Yemen 1870". That's when something caught his eyes. The writing on the wall changed to "You want to go to Yemen 1870, are you sure". " No, I want to go to Yemen after the civil war where everyone is happy." he said and broke the crystal.

That's where a thunderbolt struck him and he fainted. When he woke up he saw his mother. " You are finally up," said his mother. It was the most sweet thing he heard.

He was doubtful if everything was a dream or real.

The Story

Islamic Kasim Tuet Memorial College, Wahab, Abdul – 13

Prologue: In the near future monsters started to appear in China and slowly the whole world.

After almost more than a million deaths.90% of the population started to develop supernatural powers and started to fight back the monsters and found out they came from china.

Year 3069:day 189,976,078,70 of the expedition into the chinese portal and we found a demon god that wiped out all of our offensive companions and kidnapped the smartest people in the group.we are stranded and the underlings have started to pick us out one by one and i am the last survivor of the group if you find this send it to the government.And that folks marked the 16th anniversary of the lost international group in china's yellow mountains.And also when the Huangshan district was overrun by the undead and thanks to china's quick responses we were able to barricade the whole city and the undead didn't takeover the world.

As a survivor group in Huangshan starts killing the zombies that were attacking them suddenly a 16 year old girl crashes through the window and is accompanied with a half cat girl,The survivor group points their guns at the two and starts shooting at them.after a while they calmed down and saw they were still alive.the girl holds the shield down and says don't shoot please. She's hurt and needs medical attention immediately while sobbing. They bring them back to their base and ask their magic girl named Star to cast a healing spell on the catgirl.She gets better. Star says she needs rest and heads off to marco.then they ask the girl her name and how they got hurt. Apparently they got attacked by a large herd of zombies and got hurt while escaping.then she introduces herself and the catgirl.the captain gets on stage and says :hey guys may i have your attention please this is adora and the injured catgirl is catra. They also came through the big blue portal in the sky. ok aora let me introduce the cre to you the blond girl is star butterfly,the boy holding her hand is marco diaz,the the girl in the purple ape is luz,the girl sleeping on her lap is amity,the girl with crab hands is—.she is interrupted by adora as she screams SCORPIA.we were so worried.are bow,glimmer and perfuma,entrapta— she was interpreted by scorpia as she says:we were think you would know.

Bow pov:

Me and glimmer were teleported into a mysterious world after our wedding after a big portal opened up in the sky. Glimmer panicked and teleported everyone out of there.

When she came back for me she got sucked into the portal with me and we got teleported into a weird house and a weird old lady with an owl staff and two girls one with green hair and the one with brown hair.

Luz pov:

Me,amity,eda,king,Amelia and lucía were playing monopoly when a huge portal opened inside the owl house and sucked king,lucía and Amelia were sucked into the portal when lucía was saying Oh Fuck— but was cut off by the portal and eda tried to do some advanced magic to track them and suddenly two people came flying trough the portal and crashed into me and amity.

Eda quickly restrained them and asked if they worked for the emperor's coven.

Glimmer POV:

As bow and me were restrained by some weird lady with two girls I could almost instantly tell there was something between the girls so I asked hey are you guys dating and they both instantly blushed beet red and the one in the cute hoodie said N—N—No of course we are not dating we are rivals .

I got gay vibe from them like they LIKE LIKE each other and I fucking shipped them even tough they were the ones that kidnapped.

3rd person view(the person who broke the multiverse)

As the mortals connected with one another, their worlds were in chaos as they did not yet know what was to come to them.

Lucia pov:

As we (me,king and the love of my li-i mean Amelia)crashed into a wackjob of a zombie apocalypse, we were attacked by every possible direction by zombies in all sizes and shapes (some were even burning).we were saved my a catgirl and a girl with a BIG sword so we thought we were safe except they had no plan to get back from wherever the Hel-(she was punched by Amelia) they came from.

3rd pov:

As they all were teleported into his ship.he introduced himself as the first being in existence and his name is Cronus

Cronous pov:

I have summoned you all to fight my evil twin Uonorc .

He has already destroyed multiple universes and he is coming to your universe next.

3rd pov:

As Lucia threatened to end him on the spot he laughed and Said that he was an immortal here before even the beginning of time and space. He was the responsible for the Big Bang and all the good in the multiverse his brother on the other hand was responsible for all the evil in the multiverse

As they all agreed that his brother needed to be stopped they all wondered how to kill the unkillables and as they were resting a breach opened between the rooms and their evil versions of themselves start coming out of the portals and as adora transforms into shera and kills star butterfly's and marco's doppelgängers their good versions also disappear in to dust and lucia starts to protect both luz's and Amelia's doppelgängers . The evil versions kill themselves and as luz is disappearing amity runs to her and puts her in her arms and kisses her passionately and says "I love you luz ".

As she sobs luz says don't cry amity because it's over smile because it happed.as she disappears completely amity goes into rage and makes her way to the being that summoned them there and sees that he was there sipping on a cup of tea with his so called brother and all goes red for amity as she summons abominations onto the ship and asks Cronus if Luz's death was actually meaningless.

He chuckled and said if you have lived as long as I have you don't need to care about mortals and just have fun.

Hearing that, Lucia jumps in and stabs Cronus hundreds of times while screaming, "You're sick! What's wrong with you?" as tears roll down her face.

He smiles at their Futile attempts to kill him and crushes her head with two of his fingers and sparks a fire in the ship killing everyone one by one leaving one alive to tell the tale.

As he leaves Eda the owl lady alive to tell the tale, she gets enraged by his actions and her curse marks activate turning her into a god. She rips his head off and goes in for his brother. He stabs her in the stomach and destroyed all her organs, in a state like that she yanks the dagger from his hands and stabs his brothers heart (weapons like that can kill the gods)

she captured him touchering him for all of eternity until she dies of organ failure and the evil brother starves for all of eternity with daggers sticking out of his arms and chest and dies of a god bird pecking his brain out over the course of a hundred years

The Ascension

Kellett Senior School, Beskhumelnitskaya, Anna – 15

Feng panted like a wild dog as he scrambled up the rocky cliff face. It dug sharply into his palms and left shallow gashes where he slipped – he was panicked and every movement he made drove him further into that state.

He made the mistake of looking down into the dark woods beneath him and deeply regretted it the next second – he was fairly high up, yes, but it was not the thing that scared him – he could see glinting silver reflections beneath him, clear signs that his attackers were not far behind. Feng pushed on through the exhaustion and the pain, he had to get out of this; he could see that just a few meters above him there was a break in the cliff face.

Grasping the next protruding rock of the cliff, Feng bit down a pained yelp as it further tore open his already lacerated palms. He tried to ignore the pain; he would have to focus on it later, not now.

There was a horrifying whizzing sound beneath him and then a dull thunk, and then another one and another one; Feng chanced another glance down only to see dozens more arrows heading his way and his panicked movement became even jerkier and more uncontrollable. He had to reach the break – now.

Feng grunted as he hoisted himself over the last rock and rolled over onto his back before curling over into a fetal position – everything hurt and ached and he could already feel the ground beneath him becoming slightly wet with his blood. He bit his lip and tried to calm his racing heart, yet he knew it was of no use, nothing could help him escape the dread and the fright he felt. He was only just a man, still a child at heart, he could not fully even understand or comprehend the situation unfolding, but he could, of course, understand the gravity of it – if he was caught, he would die. He feared death like any man and wanted to prevent it – to stall it for as long as possible and live in the bliss of ignorance.

Everything was still for a long, horrifying moment.

It seemed like time stopped. The wind quieted down and all sounds of life were erased. The ever present fog and mist above him stopped its insistent swirling and froze in place, painting the mountains a light beige. The sharp edges and cliffs were blurred and became hazy; everything looked slightly wrong, ethereal and unreal to a degree that one could not describe but intrinsically *knew*. Even the birds, high above in the ultramarine sky, seemed to be almost suspended in the air – as if they were being held up by invisible ribbons.

There was no sound. Only Feng's erratic heartbeat.

Veesh, and then, a quiet *whud!*

Feng jolted backwards from the sound and looked down on the arrow that perforated into the basalt, very close to where his legs were moments ago. Feng was frozen at the sight of the projectile, so alike to those that drove him up the mountain and chased him through the woods in the first place, but now it was very close to him and it made his current predicament feel even more real and hopeless. With a whispered curse Feng picked up the arrow and crawled towards the cliff edge before rolling onto his stomach and daring a glance downwards – there were at least a dozen men on the cliff's escarpment. They were all clad in dark stained tunics and bore formidable weapons; at least half of them were looking upwards.

There was a muffled, yet domineering shout from beneath him that sounded so much like a screeching vulture. A man, probably the ring leader, caught sight of his brown hair and caterwauled to his men of that fact. Feng shuddered and sprang backwards, backing himself into the cliff's face as he did so; he clutched the arrow in both hands in front of him, as if it would protect him from the onslaught of arrows that were sure to come.

They did.

They rained down on his hiding spot and all Feng could do was make himself as small as possible and hope that none hit true.

His prayers fell on deaf ears. Whatever gods that had watched over him previously had now forsaken him, abandoned him and left him to atone for sins that were not his.

The arrowhead impaled itself deep into his left tricep, with the shaft sticking out solidly, and Feng let out an animalistic whimper before clamping down his hand on his mouth to stop any noises from escaping. Biting on his fingers to somehow ignore the pain, he focused his blurry eyes on his arm; he slammed his eyelids closed as he caught sight of his mutilated appendage but then, very carefully, forced them open and tried to stop his repugnance. Feng's breath caught as he stared at the arrow and his thoughts spiraled madly. His grey shirt was ripped open, stained with a deep burgundy that was quickly spreading; Feng's brown eyes welled up with tears at the sight of his mangled arm and the tan skin that was torn open.

There was a dissonance between him and his body. He was there, he was staring at his arm but he could not comprehend it. The burning ache dulled his brain; he could only stare and stare in mute horror as more and more ichor was lost. It stained his skin, a rich carmine that was sure to dry into an oxblood red, and wound around his arm like shackles – cementing his fate.

Feng raised his shaking right arm towards the arrow and grasped it, as firmly as he dared, and then started to slowly pull it out, or attempt to. The pain wracked his body, making his whole arm pulsate so harshly and forcefully that Feng could not prevent fresh tear tracks from running down his face; he continued to pull the arrow out, stopping and sobbing when the torture became too much, and when it was close to coming out, he yanked it which summoned fresh spurts of blood. He dropped the arrow and clamped his arm over the hole it made in his tricep, dizzy from the pain and blood loss.

He cried out again; it was a quiet, guttural sound that came from the very depths of his soul and threatened to take over his whole body – he battled with it. He had to run, he had to escape, he had to survive.

Feng opened his eyes but they were blurry from the tears and the nausea yet he pushed through it; he removed his right arm from the wound that was slowly leaking blood and ripped a part of his tunic off before hastily wrapping it around his tricep. That sparked a fresh wave of pain through his whole body and made the fingers of his left arm numb. Shakily standing up on fawn legs, Feng leaned on the cliff face for support and promptly dry heaved onto the ground as he accidentally struck his arm on the stone. He clutched the cliff and looked upwards – it continued on and on and on, but there were breaks in the unrelenting face of it – little footholds and crannies where one could rest. Feng knew that he had no other choice, he had to make it to the top if he wanted to have even the smallest chance of survival.

He crept towards the first overhang and grasped it with both hands, biting down on his tongue as the pain rose up again. As he scrambled up there were shouts from below and Feng felt another spike of a grotesque mix of fear and nausea that pushed him onwards and dulled the pain somewhat.

Feng shuddered and continued his gruelling ascent.

It was hours later when Feng could clearly see the top; it was mere centimeters away.

The day had already turned into night and the shouts of the men below were long gone. Far in the horizon the last tendrils of the sunset could be seen – they were a harsh blend of cerulean and claret and salmon orange, all blended together in an entrancingly beautiful sunset. The mountains looked like giant stone statues and they seemed to stare at Feng, making him feel claustrophobic and trapped under their omniscient glares. He felt like a rabbit in front of an all-powerful pack of Fenrir.

Feng could barely see his own fingers, yet he pushed on, as if in a trance. The movements had become so repetitive that he could barely feel his arms, legs, or even his body. It felt like he was floating somewhere high up in the sky, watching his body struggle feebly upwards. His wound was still bleeding and his mouth was stained shades of crimson and burgundy from the numerous times he bit his tongue. He did not notice, even as the fluid dribbled down his chin and stained his tunic and neck.

Feng grasped the last rock and hauled himself upwards, legs kicking and providing momentum for him to heave himself over the last ridge. His tricep shot a sharp twinge of pain and he bit his tongue to stop it from affecting him. He finally could feel solid ground beneath him and he crawled forwards before shakily sitting up on his knees.

As soon as he did so, a sharp, brutal cough escaped his throat, and then another, and another. He could not stop, anything he did just made his coughing worse; his throat was sanded down, rubbed raw and bloody. He could taste the blood on his tongue and in his neck – it was disgustingly warm and metallic and Feng rolled onto his back to stop from throwing up.

It seemed like only eons later the coughs subsided, leaving him with broken vocal cords and a vermillion throat.

He pushed his exhausted body into a standing position and started to quickly limp into the woods. Glancing around with half unseeing eyes, he thought he saw a glint of a bright, otherworldly colour but it was gone the next second and Feng chalked it up to his imagination.

He ran and limped and stumbled further and further into the enveloping darkness, leaving a sanguine trail behind him that turned black and silver in the shimmering moonlight.

Feng woke in a place he had no recollection of being in.

It was a small cave, no wider than a man and no taller than a child. There was a certain kind of darkness around him, one that seemed to encroach on him and make him feel like trapped prey. He could barely see but he could pick up strange indentations on the walls of the cave; Feng tried to sit up to get a closer look but he couldn't. He physically could not force his body to move; it was as if he was paralysed – weighted down with shackles. Even though his body was shaking and wet from sweat and blood, he could only faintly notice it – it seemed like everything was dulled, as if he was underwater.

He focused on pushing himself up again, now using his hands to drag his body upwards, or, well, trying to at least, but he couldn't. He could barely move an inch and the more he tried, the more frozen he felt – the only thing capable of movement were his eyes and parts of his neck.

His eyes frantically flitted over his surroundings before settling on his abused body. He felt himself seize up and his whole body go cold – there was a massive gash across his chest; it looked black and distorted, like someone ripped his chest open and then deformed the cut.

It looked mauled – like a man, or beast, hurt him. Yet the worst part – the part that scared Feng the most, was that he had no clue how he had received such grievous injuries.

There was a void where his memories were supposed to be – a certain vacuity that both terrified and astounded him. In a strange, almost mortifying sense, he was curious as to what had transpired and left him in such a wounded state.

It was clear. Something had happened high above the treelines, up in the mountains. Something sinister had harmed him, either because he trespassed on *its* sacred land or because he simply was unlucky. With a dawning horror Feng realised that it was most likely the former; he had grown up on stories being passed down from generation to generation about the mountains, stories about vengeful spirits and trapped souls that roamed the misty mountaintops, eager to slaughter any traveller foolish enough to set foot on their land.

Feng, for a split second, knew that he was going to die. He did not know how he knew, it was almost like a premonition, a presentiment that would surely come. However he dismissed the idea, or the feeling, as soon as it came. He would not die, he could not die and even if Feng had to cling to irremediable hope to at least delude himself, he would.

He tried to sit up again but this time a sharp, ripping sound emanated from his torso. Feng could only manage to glance down and see that the wound had ripped open completely, before he felt his whole body seize up and he seemed to be almost spat out of it before being violently tugged back in. His body felt too still, too alien and it seemed like his torso was pulsating in an offbeat, discordant way.

He had no time to wonder about the unnatural stillness before his body started to shake and pulsate with pain and suffering – it hit Feng all at once, like Algea themselves had descended upon him, eager to cause as much pain as humanly possible.

He could only open his mouth in a silent mockery of a scream or a yell before his eyes rolled back and Feng was forcibly pulled down into the depths of an aberrant ridicule of Samsara.

Feng came to days, or maybe even weeks, later. He felt weak, cold and emaciated and he had almost no energy. He could barely open his eyes and when he did he could not summon the surprise he for sure would have normally felt. He was outside and he was somehow sitting up, though his body still felt paralysed.

Roving his eyes around, Feng tried to take in his surroundings. He was on the mountain peak, overlooking the vast cloud landscape that seemed to stretch for miles, whirling slowly in the distance. He was at the highest point of the mountain range and if he craned his partially paralysed neck he could make out dense forests beneath him. It was beautiful, even in the dying sun – it felt almost symbolic, in a sense.

The trees beneath him were tinted coral orange and wine red, shimmering as a light wind brushed against their leaves. The birds were there, singing and chirping very quietly far below him. The whole scene seemed idyllic, paradisiacal even, as if one wrong move could shatter it.

Feng knew that he would die. Feng was dying, right now, and he could not do anything about it.

He was not scared, as he thought he might be, he felt almost peaceful. It was a strange feeling, to watch and feel as his life left his body – it felt freeing, like some kind of weight was lifted. There were no expectations for him, no people who wanted to cause him harm. Just Feng, alone and dying on a mountain.

It felt right.

This was the way he would have wanted to die, if he had to choose.

A forgotten, ancient, animalistic part of him snarled and thrashed against the idea of death – the inevitability – but Feng did not seem to care anymore. Why should he subject himself to more suffering just for another millisecond of life?

As the day bled slowly into the night and the clouds swirled ever closer to his frail husk of a body, Feng felt more and more exhausted. Though, it was a pleasant kind of exhaustion – an exhaustion a child would feel being tucked into bed after a long day of playing.

Feng could feel his eyes begin to feel heavier and he did not resist the feeling, he just simply smiled and relaxed as he felt colder and colder.

He felt his body die at that moment.

As soon as it did, an unseen, powerful force tugged Feng's consciousness upwards, shattering through and breaking his skull.

The world exploded into colour. Feng could see everything. He could see colours that did not belong in this world, swirling and merging and blurring in and out of each other. He could see misty, ethereal shapes dancing above and below him, leaving trails of starlight after them.

He could see the stars, and how close they were! They were shining, captivating beacons of burning colour that were beckoning him closer and closer and he let them. They were almost smiling down at him, so different to those malicious mountains far below – they felt so much warmer, so much more welcoming and he felt safe and protected by them.

As Feng, be it his consciousness or soul, flew closer and closer to those burning, godly stars, the happier he felt. This was the right thing; this moment that seemed to be etched into time was everything that his life was leading and culminating up to – to these searingly beautiful and pure feelings of happiness and safety.

Some all-powerful force was pulling Feng and the stars closer and closer and Feng could feel his very essence smile up to them.

Feng's soul sang with happiness as his whole world was overtaken by a blinding, celestial white.

He was part of them now, wholly and truly.

Tales from China's Magical Mountains

Maryknoll Convent School (Secondary Section), Cheung, Wan Sin Tiffany – 14

The wind is howling, the mist thickens, the dew on the leaves glimmers, the sun silently falls.

As Shi-a goes up, she sees the cliff, that cliff, silently sitting there. Well, her vision is hazy, but at last, she's there.

That cliff in everyone's rumours, "the cliff of all ends". It's been in everyone's mind, Shi-a's classmates, neighbours, friends, are all talking about how special the cliff is.

"If you jump off the cliff, it'll end everything!" Shi-a's classmate told her about this piece of information she heard from somebody else.

"But isn't it the same outcome if we jump off from any other ordinary cliff?" asks Shi-a.

"Ah, no! That cliff on Huangshan was so high, that if you jump off from it, you will disappear, without a trace. Due to how distant it is from the urban and suburban areas, nobody will ever find you out, as the abysses are so deep, that you cannot see the bottom of it, with all those mist covering everything."

"Makes sense, I guess?"

"And most importantly, I've heard from my friend's bestie's aunt's grandchildren's—"

"Skip to the point, please."

"— That before you die, you will see the ultimate dream of your life— but you have to jump off it. Eeek, so romantic!"

Ew. Shi-a hates how everyone at this age just starts romanticizing suicide. How people think having depression makes them unique and elegant— what kind of logic is that?

Especially when nobody knows, she is willing to die. From a very long time ago, Shi-a has been tired of a lot of things — life, school, extra-curricular activities, people's attitude. She is somewhere at a point, that she just wants to escape this hellhole. Each word they say, each action they take, Shi-a is overwhelmed.

That's why she is here, where the cliff is — Huangshan. She excused herself from her family, turning down every volunteering opportunity of the neighbourhood, then took a train, a taxi trip, a cable car ride, and here she is.

The evening daylight shines from the gaps of the hills, as Shi-a's breathing turned into ivory white and cast away, due to the low temperature — it's late November.

Far away from the tourist spot, she walked along the rocky spiral staircase, as she gazed down the icy pine trees below her. It's a tranquil place, with birds chirping as they fly away.

She's almost there. She saw it, she can't miss it. It's misty everywhere, but she doesn't care, she has to reach it.

But something caught her eyes, it wasn't that conspicuous, but she just can't look away from it.

It's a cottage. Right at the peculiarly shaped cliff. There's an old woman, wearing some thick clothes, sitting on a chair, drinking from her teacup.

That sixty-something woman saw Shi-a and smiled at her, as Shi-a walks towards the woman.

"Little girl, why are you here?" The old woman asked, as she slowly stands up, "I haven't seen a youngster came by from centuries ago!"

Somehow Shi-a feels safe to talk all her problems here. She can't express how she has been feeling to her close ones, to the people she always interacts with, but she is alright to tell a strange old woman. It's always like that, just like how she always uses those anonymous letterboxes to vent. Maybe because through this way, nobody will use her words as a threat to herself.

"...Ah, feeling a little bit shy, aren't you? It's okay, come on in, I'll let you taste some of my homemade buns." The woman opens the door of her cottage, but Shi-a refused — she's a stranger, after all, who knows if she's attempting to kidnap her?

Then the woman went inside her cottage, and pulls a chair out for Shi-a, telling her to sit down. She did.

Then the old lady asked, "What brings you here?"

"Rumors, I guess. How the cliff is 'the end of everything', and I just followed my heart and came here."

"And why did you decide to come to this cliff?"

"I don't know, I ... just want to escape, maybe. Or because I am free? Or because I am simply attention seeking?"

"Definitely not the last reason, I believe." she slips from her teacup, "I think there's so much more to live."

"I don't think so. I feel like, everyone's so selfish, nobody is living like how they told us to live, everyone's contradicting to themselves. It just feels... useless to live on."

"My dear, living on isn't for others! It's for yourself. How people view you, how you view people, it doesn't matter, life is not limited to that. How others live, it's not really that important. Just like how my friends decided to move into cities, and I want to live in this majestic, magical and magnificent mountain. And look- I am still here, drinking my tea! It's just that simple."

Shi-a feels like, all her questions, all her problems are starting to fade away, like the sun here.

The sky is getting darker and darker, like a painting of orange, blue, red and purple colour. The mist is getting thicker and thicker, and cricket sounds start to appear.

Shi-a asks her last question, "Why is this cliff called 'the end of everything', while I don't think it is?"

The old lady thought for a moment, and answers, "I don't know. How people talk about it doesn't matter to me."

"Thanks, ma'am. It's getting late now. I need to go home. Thank you!"

"Glad to help you!" She waves to Shi-a.

As Shi-a walks down the staircase, she decided to turn back and view the cliff from faraway, but then, she was surprised-

The cliff disappeared. Is it because of the darkness, or...?

Then eventually, she arrived at the cable car stop, and managed to catch the last car.

Why is it the cliff of all ends? Shi-a think, it's because it ended her problems. It might not be a fast solution, but she thinks she is starting to get a glimpse of the way she should go onto.

The cable car starts.

The wind is howling, the mist thickens, the dew on the leaves glimmers, the sun silently falls.

Shi-a closed her eyes, waiting for the cable car to arrive at its next destination.

The Huangshan Legend

Maryknoll Convent School (Secondary Section), Chum, Anson – 15

Between peaks and valleys, a man panted as he climbed upwards with his well-carved wooden walking stick. His long white hair and beard flew in the soft, soothing breeze. For an instant, he looked celestial, as if he was an immortal descended from the palace in the sky. The next moment, however, his weariness and agedness proved him to be earthly.

Slowly he progressed, making his way to the peak. The sea of misty clouds in between the rocks of different shapes became orange. The old man stopped. He gazed at the sunset, his tiredness vanishing at the sight. Pine trees of great history stuck out from the rocks and cliffs. Rocks of different shapes feel as if they were individual, yet together they build the peaks of Jing Shan.

He sighed. Looking forward and realising that he would not be able to reach the peak before dark, he gave up the idea of advancing. Alas, it didn't really matter if he arrived at the peak earlier or later – he was simply attracted by the view here when he was wandering nearby without destination. He searched slowly until he finally found a rock cave. He did not enter it immediately, though. After observing the environment nearby and checking for animal tracks, he carefully ventured into the cave. The cave was rather small and shallow, but enough to keep him away from the wind or any rain at night. He settled down on the floor, his movement causing slight echos in the space.

With a flash of sorrow appearing in his eyes, Quanyuan took out a piece of ration from his cloak and bit into it. The bread was hard, and winced at the soreness in his jaw. He was no longer the brave, strong young man who fought the great Chi You and the Yan Emperor. He could no longer tame a beast like a bear, much less a tiger. Now, he even had difficulty biting his bread. Even though he did not want to admit it, he was old.

The night was cold. Quanyuan shivered as he curled up into a ball beside the campfire. It was weak, as he didn't want to attract the attention of wild animals nearby. In the sound of the wind echoing slightly in the cave, he stared at the top of the cave, his tangled thoughts stopping him from drifting off.

He was a legend. He was the person who taught the people of the tribe to build shelters, tame wild animals, and grow grains. His wife was the person who invented silk farming and improved people's clothing. He was the one who ordered Changjie to create the first Chinese character system in the mythical lands. People admired him, worshipped him. He was the leader, the hero.

But he was also human. While people out there worshipped him like a god, he aged – grey hair, wrinkles, and sores from years of fighting, scars that people have not heard of... After busying himself over astronomy, calculations, calendars and all those things he invented over the years, he earned himself a break to relax and breathe. He never felt the weariness when he was occupied with work, but once he paused, he collapsed. Aging, stress and exhaustion hit him, and without the determination in working that he used to have, he was vulnerable.

Staring at his own reflection in the water every morning, Quanyuan sometimes wondered what he was living for. He had made people's lives better, and the tribe more prosperous. Yet, as he looked at the people, including his servants working around him, who were looking back at him with respect and admiration, he felt as if he did not belong there among them. He felt as if he could do nothing to contribute to his tribe anymore. The admiration from people was no longer an honour, but a burden to him.

The same lasted for months, until he finally made a decision. His son had grown up into a man with the abilities to continue his work. He could see himself in his son. And so he left. Not wanting the people in the tribe to stop him or waver his determination to leave, he only told them that he was going on a journey. He had not brought any servants, and had headed off with merely a sack and his walking stick.

These weeks and months, he had fallen sick, and faced storms alone. He had not only one time thought over his decision. If it wasn't for that decision, he would have been enjoying the service of his servants back at home in the tribe and worshipped by the people. He thought it over and over, but at last he decided that he did not regret it at all. He had been served and protected for so long, that he had forgotten how he had survived alone when he was young and how he had fought monstrous beasts and powerful leaders. This trip had reminded him of his old days. Despite his aging flesh and bone, he felt as if he was back in the old days again. The scenery out there had pushed the fog and clouds in his heart away, replacing them with streaks of bright sunshine.

The sun rose, and he shook away his thoughts. As he stood up, he stumbled and a coughing fit hit him. A sleepless night in the cold has left him rather ill and weak. Despite the unwellness, he headed out of the cave. He could have stayed there and rested for the day, but he doubted whether he would get better. He had fallen sick quite a few times along the way, and each was worse than the previous one. He had the feeling that if he stayed, he might not be able to reach the peak ever.

He started climbing early. The peak was not very far, but every step of his was heavy. The irregular rocks were steep and hard to climb, especially when he was not in a good condition. Every now and then, he would have to steady himself with the aid of the evergreen pines nearby. The lingering mist met the sky at the horizon, and in front of it, he couldn't help feeling small in front of it. Knowing that he was on his own, he gritted his teeth and continued, never pausing, as he feared that once he paused, he would not be able to climb again. He feared that he would collapse, just as he once did.

One step, two steps, three steps... Time passed in sweat and coughing. He let out a last sigh as he reached the peak.

Quanyuan stumbled as he took in the view. Looking from above, it almost seemed as if he was in a magical realm. The layer of clouds seemed to separate the peak from the mortal world below. Standing there, he felt as if he was empowered above mortality. With a satisfied smile, Quanyuan closed his eyes and felt the cold breeze numb his body. His white hair danced blissfully in the wind.

Quanyuan never left the mountain. Legend has it that he had flown up to the palace in the sky at the peak, but there was nothing to prove it. Nevertheless, the mountain was renamed after him in memory of his myth. The Yellow Mountain stood, as with the legend of the Yellow Emperor for countless centuries.

Tale of the Mist

Maryknoll Convent School (Secondary Section), Tse, Yu Ching Megan – 16

Once upon a time, there was a village in the mountains. The villagers believed in gods. There were the mountain gods, keeper of the trees and animals. There were the river gods, protectors of the rivers and streams. Then there was the sun god, who commanded the sun and sky.

The villagers prayed to the gods. They would pray for good harvest, good weather, comfort and safety. In return, the gods left them in peace. No earthquakes ever shook the mountains. No floods or landslides ever occurred. The village was in a state of serenity.

To thank the gods, the villagers built them temples. Every year, they would go to each temple and give their offerings.

The temples scattered across the mountains, each beautiful and sacred in its own right. However, none of them could rival the magnificence of the temple of the sun god. It stood at the peak of the mountains, where the sun shone the brightest. Long ago, the emperor's most talented architects had gone up the mountains to build it. Each pillar was etched with golden embellishments, shining under the light of the sun. Every year, the villagers would bring their crops and best animals to offer to the sun god. But they soon got weary of the steep steps and rocky slopes. The temple was abandoned, and soon worn down. The gold peeled as did the paint. Soon, there was nothing left but a shabby temple surrounded by wild grass.

One day, the sun god looked down from the heavens. He saw the villagers travelling across the mountains to the temples, bringing their best offerings. As he looked at his temple, he was shocked to find it in a state of ruin.

"Where are my offerings?" the god cried in anger. "Why are they visiting the other temples but not mine? Have these mortals forgotten my existence? Impossible! I bring light! I make the sky bright!"

He raged, and with a whip of his hand, he sent a shower of flames raining from the sky. Each flame fell into the mountain and caught on a small green leaf. They swallowed the leaves, digesting them till nothing remained but ash. But a single leaf could not satisfy their hunger. They reached for another leaf, and another. They climbed up the barks and branches, reaching for vines and twigs. Soon, the trees were up in flames. They spread, one tree after another. Soon the fire consumed the entire mountain.

The fires raged as did the sun god's temper. Soon, it had reached the village. Houses burned, crops wilted from the heat. The village was filled with cries and screams. The smell of burning wood filled the air, suffocating every man and woman. The villagers dashed to find their most prized possessions and herded their animals down the mountains.

For four days and four nights, they watched as the fire consumed the mountains. The once lush green forests were now burning in a golden haze. The flames continued to creep down the mountainside. It would not be long before the fire reached their sanctuary.

The elders of the village gathered to discuss. That night, an announcement was made.

"We must have angered the sun god with our negligence!" the leader addressed the crowd. "We need a representative to go up the mountains to fix the temple and give the sun god our offerings to seek for forgiveness! Who will go in our stead?"

The crowd chattered amongst themselves. None of them were willing to risk their lives. All shook their heads, but one.

"I will go!"

The crowd turned to the source of the voice. A young man came up and stood in front the elders. "My name is Long. I will go up the mountains."

The villagers quickly gathering the best of their remaining harvest and slaughtered their plumpest pig. They packed Long's bags with tools and paint and sent him off.

Long climbed the steps up the mountains. The steps started out in gentle slopes, but as he walked on, they became steeper and much harder to climb. At times the steps would be rocky and unstable to step on, but he went on. Sweat grew on his forehead as the burning heat grew in temperature. The air was hard to breathe in and he choked on the smoke.

On his journey, he saw forest animals escaping the fires of the forest – bodies burned and eyes full of fear. He washed them and fed them water from his stash. He then showed them the way down the mountains, hoping they could escape in time.

As he reached the peak, the sun was a burning furnace. The heat scorched his skin. Long took out his tools and began repairing the temple. The flames melted the paint, but he kept on working, applying and reapplying coatings of paint on the pillars and walls. When he finished, he laid out the crops and pork on the altar. He lit the incense sticks and kneeled.

“Sun god!” Long cried out loud. “I am here to give you my offerings! My people beg for your forgiveness!”

But the sun god was too consumed in his fury to notice Long's pleas. With another whip of his hand, he sent another shower of flames raining down. One of the flames struck Long. He stumbled, and the poor man fell down the peak, blazing through the air like a fiery comet.

The gods of the mountains and rivers had witnessed this. They were deeply moved by Long's bravery and kindness. And they pitied him.

As Long fell into one of the rivers of the valley, the gods transformed him into a dragon. Long rose from the waters and shot towards the heavens. With every breath, a cloud erupted from his lips. The clouds gathered, changing from puffy white tufts to a dark grey mass.

At one moment, the sky cracked opened, and a spear of light came down, lighting up the sky with a blinding flash. As the heavens boomed, rain fell. Each water droplet chased a burning flame, taming it till it disappeared into nothingness. Slowly, the fires died out. The smell of smoke dissipated. All was left was the sound of rain pattering against the rocks, the air fresh once again.

As the sky dried its tears, the clouds lingered. They floated across the mountains, forming a sea in the heavens. They covered the highest peaks and shrouded the mountains with a blanket of mist.

The villagers returned to the village, but Long never returned. They rebuilt their homes. Soon, the village was at peace once again. They resumed their routines and made offerings to the gods every year. Once, they tried to reach the temple of the sun god, but the mist had blocked their path, ushering them away.

The villagers often discuss where Long went. Some say that he stays in the heavens, spouting out clouds with every breath. Others say he guards the mountains from the sun god, so that he never burns the land of mortals ever again.

The blanket of mist stays and never wavers, shrouding the mountain tops in mystery.

They say that on days when the heavens are calm, when the sun god's temper was a bit tamer, Long would uncover his blanket of mist just a little. You could then take a peek of the peak of the mountains, dyed in a golden hue from the breath of the sun. But as the sun sets, Long would cover the sky once again, shielding the secrets of the peak from the world below.

The Scrolls of Immortality

Maryknoll Convent School (Secondary Section), Wang, Yu-Sin Happy – 16

Everything comes with a price—everything. The question is: what price are you willing to pay? How far are you willing to go? How heavy is the price to pay to obtain what you desire?

Endless inspiration...would require a heavy price. Perhaps more than a mortal could possibly handle.

...

The vivid sunlight rained on Mei as soon as she stepped out of the taxi, causing her to blink rapidly while her eyes adjusted to the brightness. She stretched and patted her pouch bag, where she had kept her camera, notebook and pen for scribbling ideas. She was an aspiring author who had gained little publicity through her works, but today—*everything will change.*

“Huangshan... the source of endless inspiration. A lot of famous poets and authors have gotten inspiration after visiting Huangshan. Surely it will help me get off writer’s block!” Mei giggled to herself and clasped her hands together tightly. “Please, give me the inspiration I need!”

A breeze ran past her and brushed her cheeks lightly in response, tousling her hair along the way. Mei looked around, her surroundings gradually losing its warmth. She hugged herself tightly as another gust of wind nudged her from behind, forcing her to walk towards the mountains. When she got closer, she caught sight of her own shadow on the ground at the corner of her eye, morphing into a person with a lantern in hand. Surprised, she stopped in her tracks and eyed her shadow with caution. As if finally noticing her, her shadow gestured to her and started walking in another direction.

“What’s going on? Am I supposed to follow it—woah!”

The wind gave her a harsh shove and she stumbled forwards, trying to regain her footing. Whenever she refused to take another step forward, the wind would shove and push her forward. In the end, she complied and followed the shadow to an area dense with mist and fog.

“Why did you bring me to a dead end?” Mei sighed and frowned. However, the shadow on the ground only shrugged before disappearing into the misty surroundings crowding near the base of a mountain. Mei stared at the spot where the shadow had disappeared, and hesitantly walked closer to the mountain with her hand stretched out. However, instead of the rough, rocky surface of the mountain, her outstretched hand felt nothing at all. Just as she was about to pull her hand back, she felt a hard tug on her arm, pulling her into the mist. She fell onto the ground with a thump and groaned as she picked herself up.

“W—Where is this? I don’t remember anything about this place in the guide or the Internet...” Mei looked around, the carvings on the wall soon caught her eye. The cave was full of carvings of little people on the wall, and one figure was unusually familiar to her.

“That carving looks like me...” Mei reached out and touched the carvings with gentle fingertips out of curiosity, ignorant of the fact her curiosity would soon open a new chapter for her. Her heart sank as her fingers felt stiffer, the numbness gradually spreading out through her body. She screamed as her fingertips began to dissolve and merge with the walls, devouring her until she was completely sucked in. She could tell someone was still pulling on her hand, urging her to run. Yet she couldn’t see anything—she could only clutch whoever’s hand was leading her with a tighter grip and with her eyes shut tight.

“Can you see now?” After running for a bit more, the person leading her suddenly stopped and asked her. She timidly opened her eyes, and to her relief, the colours of their surroundings immediately came to sight. She promptly let go of the hand and took a few steps back, eyeing the young man in front of her with caution.

“Hello! I’m Qi, one of the villagers living on the peak! I trust you know why you’re here, Mei?” The young man smiled and closed in on her, his welcoming smile almost ominous.

“Where am I? How do you know my name? Who are you? Why am I here?!” Mei frantically asked, her brain barely able to process what was happening right now. It seemed as if she was still on Huangshan, yet there was something odd which she couldn’t quite put her finger on. It seemed...more surreal and more magical than usual.

“You asked for inspiration, didn’t you?” Qi suddenly surged forward and grabbed her by the wrist, catching her off guard. “I know just where to bring you; come on!”

“What?! Wait! At least tell me where you’re taking me—” Mei yelped. Nevertheless, Qi chose to ignore her pleas as he dragged her away.

“Watch your step and don’t fall!” Qi said as he waved to her a few steps ahead. Mei took in every single bit of her surroundings: from above, you could barely see the ground—it was a sea of fog, and it gave the mountains a heavenly aura. The trees were the perfect shade of army green. and a fresh, minty fragrance was wafting up through the air. The rich and packed vegetation partly hid the rough, rocky barren surface, and whenever a breeze came to visit, the rustling leaves would make a much greater sound than one would usually hear in a forest. Every step she took, she felt as if she was wandering about in a Chinese painting.

“Come on! If we don’t hurry up, we’ll miss the best sunset!”

“Best sunset?”

“Yes, the Bright Summit is the best spot to watch the sunset; hurry!”

Mei picked up her pace as she tried her best to catch up to Qi’s footsteps. The rocky surface of the mountain scraped her skin and her legs began to grow numb, yet continued to take one step after another. Her vision gradually blurred, yet her consciousness somehow hung on. The tapping of Qi’s footsteps finally stopped, causing her to stop as well and look up. When she saw Qi’s hand reaching out to her, she grabbed it without hesitation. With a grunt, Qi pulled her up and chuckled softly as Mei sat on the ground, fanning herself and panting heavily.

“Ah~” Qi brushed his inky bangs away and pointed at the horizon. “We made it just in time.”

“Holy—”

What she saw knocked the wind out of her—the sky was painted in soft strokes of amber with faint trails of gold. Some clouds were dipped in a lighter shade of marigold, and some were still soaked in soft shades of pale blue. The blinding ball of light slowly sank, the rays of light more luminous than ever. Mei squinted as she stared in awe; her fatigue slowly crept away into the warm surroundings, melting into the horizon. Two humongous winged creatures shot through the sky, leaving a streak of foggy trails on the fiery canvas. With a final farewell, the beaming orb of light sank beyond sight, unveiling a red carpet for the night’s arrival.

“Wow, time passes really fast when you enjoy such a sight!” Mei grinned as she admired the shots she took with her camera. Qi stared at her silently, eyeing her as if in thought.

“Come on, we still need to get to the Locus Peak.” Qi got up and waved to her. “It’s an amazing spot for stargazing; the stars look nearly within reach.”

Mei sighed and picked herself up, following Qi with the slightest bit of unwillingness. Yet she knew the scenery would be worth it—after all, the breathtaking sunset was more than enough to persuade her that the throbbing pain running through her veins were nothing at all.

When she finally reached the peak, she noticed a few adorable, wooden village houses sitting peacefully. A woman was sitting outside the house with a scroll in hand, seemingly immersed. Only when Qi waved and greeted her did she finally noticed the arriving pair. Adults and children peeked out of the houses and came out to greet Qi.

“Mei, these are the villagers living on Lotus Peak. This is also where I live.” The other villagers surrounded her and she was instantly enveloped in lively chattering; some younger ones playfully tugged on the hem of her shirt and her sleeves, some looked at her with curiosity and some had a larger interest in the camera she was holding. Mei listened as the villagers told her tales from the past, causing her to be so absorbed she nearly couldn’t hear Qi calling out to her.

“Mei, look up.”

When Mei finally took notice of Qi’s words and looked up, her mouth slowly opened in amazement as she stared at the night sky. The stars shimmered brightly, hung in deep hues of sapphire. The sky was drowning in harsh strokes of pale indigo, and the moon radiated a bewitching glow. It reminded her of a famous poem by Li Bai: Drinking under the moon.

“The moon does not know how to drink her share, in vain my shadow follows me here and there.” Mei quietly whispered into the breeze. Qi smiled upon hearing her mutters, and held out his hand.

“To the songs I sang, the moon flickers her beam; with the dance I wove, my shadow tangles and breaks.” Qi grinned widely and took Mei’s hand in his. “I’m happy to have met such a cultured soul. Would you like to join in on a bit fun?”

Qi let Mei follow his lead and twirled her around gently as if treating something fragile. The other villagers got into pairs and started dancing while singing a joyful tune. Mei laughed and hummed along, despite being unfamiliar with the melody. Their shadows waltzed with them, coming together then scattering apart. Just as written in the poem, they sang to the crescent and danced with their shadow; as lively as ever, yet loneliness loiters in their mind. Loneliness...and desires of more companions. Mei was so absorbed in the bustling atmosphere, she became ignorant of the empty stares she was receiving from her surroundings.

“Ah, it’s probably time for me to go home...” After hours of dancing and singing, Mei stretched and yawned as she held out her hands to the night sky. “I finally have enough inspiration to write!”

“Don’t mind if I ask, but...” Qi said casually as a shadow fell upon his face, the moon completely covered by dull, floating clouds. “What exactly are you going to write about?”

“The luscious golden strokes of the sunset viewed on the cloud dispelling pavilion, the breathtaking scenery viewed at the peak...looking at these pictures gives me ideas running through my head like a heavy waterfall!” Mei smiled happily as she showed Qi the photos she had taken with her camera. “I think I’ll start typing up a vague storyline for an adventure story when I get home!”

Mei turned on her heels as if about to leave, yet Qi immediately grabbed her by the wrist, this time with a lot more force than earlier today.

“I’m afraid I can’t let you do that, Mei. I wasn’t planning on telling you, but I’m the ‘welcomer’ of Huangshan. You were meant to stay with us from the very beginning. Everything was decided the moment you existed.” Qi smiled dangerously, the other villagers followed suit and closed in on her. “Li Bai and Du Fu...had to stay hidden in the mountains for the same reason. The mountains will whisper an endless source of inspiration into your ears, but in

exchange, your friends, your family, all the people who knew you would forget you. You'll be known as the famous author Mei, and you'll live on in everyone's memory as Mei the author and **nothing** else."

"What?! No, I refuse! Listen, I'll leave my camera and notebook here and everything, please just let me go home!" Mei yelled as she tried to fling his hand away. Qi only tightened his grip and with a flick of his other hand, he signalled the other villagers to grab Mei by her shoulders and arms.

"It's a pity we can't erase your memory, can we? You took the inspiration the mountains offered, now it's time...to checkout at the cashier~" Qi smiled warmly as he pinched Mei's cheeks roughly, finally letting go of her now swollen wrist. "We'll just gently push you into the Misty Fountain of Immortality, and you'll stay with us forever."

"No, please! I—"

A sharp chill.

A sharp, painful stab of gust shot through her as the villagers shoved her off the peak with a blank expression on their faces. Mei clutched her notebook close to her chest as her vision spun, the freezing surroundings thumping on her head with force. The stars seemed to have lost their light, only a few flickering while looking at the falling girl with pity. The silence was deafening, almost a distorted, murderous screech as gravity tugged and clawed at her hair, urging her to hurry up. She couldn't scream—she had already lost consciousness, yet her soul held on desperately to her notebook. Not because of the ideas she had scribbled on the pages, but an important shard of her hidden in the pages. The night sky was deep hues of the abyss—drowning her, watching as the girl sank to the bottom and disappeared in a sea of mist.

Mei became a name everyone was familiar with, and her books were greatly loved by the public. She was known to live in the mountains to avoid being disturbed by anyone, and rumour had it that there was a voice always whispering in her ear, giving her limitless ideas. Her family and acquaintances were unknown, yet it didn't matter to anyone. To them, Mei was only a talented author, *nothing* more.

The carving on the wall—the one Mei had touched out of curiosity, had become a girl shedding tears as she held her hand up high. Beneath the wall, Mei was scribbling furiously in a tiny, dark closed space with a candle as the only source of light. Her tears dampened the pages, yet her hand made no intention to stop. Gradually, instead of trails of black ink, the page was flooded with warm, crimson liquid gushing from her fingers. Her other hand gripped onto a torn photograph tightly, the sharp ends cutting into her already numb palm.

"What was...my mother's name...again?" Mei sobbed as her memories of the outside world slipped away, and with trembling fingers, she held her left hand up high and loosened her grip, the crumbled photograph slowly fluttered onto the pages. It was a picture of her family with their faces blurred out—yet there was someone missing.

She was missing.

Her carefree, smiling face was torn from the photograph—it was as if she never existed. She became known to the public, but at the same time, she became unknown to the people she held dear to her heart.

"These people... who are they..." Mei slammed her fist against her forehead, trying to remember why these people were important to her. Trying to grasp the last shard of memory—yet she watched as all shards of her being dissolved into pure nothingness, her sanity slowing slipping out of her fingers. Mei cried in anguish, yet she immediately stopped crying and turned her head when she heard visible footsteps.

"No..."

Someone, seemingly to have stumbled upon the cave, was eyeing the carvings on the wall. Mei pounded on the wall, desperately screaming at that person to stay away. Yet to mortals of the outside world, Mei was merely a carving on the wall now.

Mei slumped to the ground weakly, her fists all battered and swollen with blood continuously gushing out. She stared at the scribbled pages and suddenly screamed in rage, screaming and holding her head as her face twitched. Her cheeks were smeared with the blood she had lost from writing, her eyes were bloodshot from the sleep she lacked, and her lips were curled up into a broken smile. The mountains constantly whispered ideas into her ears and made her write it down, yet her stamina could barely withstand it. She lunged at her notebook and clawed at the pages, leaving marks with her nails. Finally, out of exhaustion, her consciousness gave way and she collapsed, knocking the candle as she fell to the ground.

The flame devoured the torn photograph slowly, and the sight of the mortal reaching out to the carving on the wall blurred before everything went black.

Challenging the Gods

Shanghai Singapore International School, Hedge, Sathvik – 15

It is a simple choice, life or death, yet I hesitate. Jumping over the precipice and onto the ledge opposing is a daunting task, and the jutting, sharp rocks at the dizzying bottom of the jump did not help matters either. I ready myself for the plunge, take a deep breath, and then abruptly turn around. Better to be robbed than risk death.

The highwaymen cordially hold me at sword point as they plunder all my worldly possessions, of which there are admittedly few; some quill pens, ink, parchment, stale bread, and most importantly, money. They take my boots, but leave me with one of theirs, and they take my money, but leave me with all the tools of my livelihood, once they hear that I am a poet. All told, it is more of a business dealing than a robbery, and strangely enough, I walk away happier than I was previously. Perhaps the optimistic mood has to do with the scenery around me, it certainly is marvelous, and much more majestic than I had been expecting. I had read several poems, and stories, of the Huangshan mountains, but coming here, I have the sense that none of them truly captured the soul of the grand environment. I shoulder my pack, and start forward on the path I had been on until that surprise ambush. I had been expecting it subconsciously, in truth, the roads have been terrible of late. Soldiers deserting from the incessant wars preyed upon hapless travelers, and the emperor was hard pressed to counter this. But at least it had happened; if it had never happened, I would have been half dead from the sheer anticipation. The worst had happened, but it hadn't been that bad.

I force my mind relax, and observe the scenery around me, waiting for inspiration. To be considered a true poet, I have to compose a poem of sufficient quality, and that is no easy feat. I have personally seen numerous hopeful initiates fail, and some of them write better than I can ever hope to. It is a daunting task, but with my mood as it is, I feel up to it. The sun is reaching its zenith, and I continue upon the path. Trees as old as our most exalted bloodlines tower over the path, little more than a glorified animal trail. They dot the lofty, rocky peaks that stab into the sky, and whisper of a bygone era, when dragons once roamed. Some say that to this day, dragons can be found hidden in the misty valleys and the highest peaks. The mountains are the place of legend; countless heroes have emerged from it, and countless others have never returned. I hope that I join the ranks of the former, rather than the horde of the latter.

The next few hours pass by in a blur, and before I know it, the sun is setting. The wind is picking up, and I know I have to make camp soon. The mountains may seem like paradise, but there are darker creatures afoot, lurking in the shadows, and they emerge in the night to hunt. But I am saved the effort of finding a spot to spend the night, just ahead, I see a roaring fire. I stumble to it gratefully, throwing both caution and reason to the wind. Three indistinct figures are huddled around the fire, swaddled in thick clothing, despite the cool autumn clime. I feel a chill down my spine. They look oddly familiar, but I cannot for the life of me remember how I knew them.

“Could I share your fire?”, I ask.

The figures snap their heads around to stare at me, unnervingly coordinated. I feel like I have made a mistake, but then my fears are assuaged. One of the figures laughs, and throws back his cowl.

“Come stranger, join us!”, he says. The man has a sharp face, and eyes that remind me of a snake's, cold and cruel. The tone of his jovial welcome is a sharp contrast to that, and I shake away my thoughts. Judging a person when I did not even know them does not seem right.

The other two follow suit, shedding their hoods, and welcome me. I sink down to the ground, and they pass me some food. I take it, mumbling my thanks, and we pass the hour like so, eating and making small talk, discussing anything but ourselves. I haven't asked their names, and they haven't either; the common tradition here is to remain anonymous. Having eaten to repletion, we lie back, into something of an awkward silence. The first man broaches the silence.

"Let's pass the night by telling stories. I shall tell one, and then you, poet. Let these fellows judge whose is better."

I nod, and then freeze. How did he know that I was a poet? I move to ask, but the man starts his story, and I am immediately enthralled. The story is a harrowing epic, filled with intrigue, mystery, and romance. I can safely say that it is the greatest story I have ever heard or read. Strangely enough, I could not recall any of the story later on. After he finishes, silence reigns. And noise returned. I realize that the world itself was listening to this tale; the wind silent, the birds noiseless.

"How – how can I ever hope to beat that?", I manage to stammer out.

The man smiles, comfortingly, but I can see a hint of mockery in his grin. A coal of anger lights up in me, and I resolve to do all I can to up his tale, though I know it is an impossible task. I recount the history of the world, from the very formation of the earth, to the rise and fall of nations. My voice, faltering at first, rallies and rises in both emotion and volume; by the end of the tale, the sun itself rises, and shines a beam of the purest light directly on me.

I take a deep breath, and realize I am finished. The man smiles again. He turns to the silent judges, who look almost identical.

"Now, it is time to see who has told the better story", he says.

The judges, silent as they had been all the while, cogitate for a minute, and then, seem to reach a decision. One of them points at me, and the other, at the man. The man laughs, and then, turns into a dragon. It is an abrupt shift, one moment, I am before a man, and another, before a dragon. I stare at the beast in mute amazement, scarcely believing what my eyes tell me. I had dismissed the existence of these creatures, and seeing one before me, my view of the world shatters. Before I can do anything, the dragon speaks.

"You have nearly bested a dragon, and for that, you have my respect. Never before has this been done by a man. For that, I grant you a wish", he says.

I take deep breaths, and gather my thoughts. I think long and hard, going over options, and then I arrive upon one. I say it, and the dragon smiles, a third and final time. Then, he spreads his wings, and takes flight. The two men who had been flanking the dragon are nowhere to be seen. How strange.

The tale of the dragon and the man became a classic in all the lands. Most called it a fictional tale, but some maintained that it was all true, which was of course nonsensical. True or not though, it told of a man challenging the gods, and that resonated with all

The Gifted Curty

Shanghai Singapore International School, Soh, Qi Ru – 15

I've always heard of the legend of the beast Curty, lying and sleeping in the deep and misty yellow mountains. Since I was a child, my grandfather would always read to me the story of beast Curty. After 20 years has passed, I came back to my home, and saw the yellow and crippled story book still lying in my bookshelf. As my fingers ran through the pages, the smell of aged paper filled my nose. It read, "In the yellow mountain of Anhui province, it was said that there is a beast, Curty, that guarded the mountains of any outsiders. It is rarely seen and said to be only found at dawn in the deepest parts of the mountains. It has golden fur, a long tail..." As I was reading, I thought to myself, "I should fulfil my dreams. I need to go on an adventure to solve the mystery of beast Curty and find out the truth." I leapt up from my warm bed, packed a small backpack, and was making markings on my map, ready for a discovery the next day.

Before birds started chirping, I was already up brushing my teeth and preparing breakfast. I made a heavy breakfast consisting of congee, eggs and bacon to make sure it would fill me for the hike. Within thirty minutes, I was on my journey. The bumpy rocky roads made me feel like I want to throw up. I couldn't stare straight as I was feeling dizzy and going through nausea. As I look towards my left, I couldn't believe I've already drove 20 kilometres into the mountains. Looking downwards, there seemed to be no end to this mountains. Lushy green trees covered the ground and at right at the bottom, it was as dark as the black hole. Nothing could be seen from where I was, and the thought of getting lost in the woods made me feel a cold down my spine. After around 2 hours of drive, I was stopped by a sign saying "no more cars". I had no choice but to park my car around and walk the rest of the journey into the heart of the mountains. I took my bag and excitedly walked into the mountains.

As soon as I stepped inside the caves, a shiver ran through my body and filled me with goosebumps. I couldn't see my fingers as I stuck my hand out, and I was unconsciously shivering from head to toe. Hoot, hoot, came from above. I looked up and saw two gigantic eyes staring at me. I jumped and hit a rock on the right side of my head. "Ouch!", I screamed. The walk through the cave took a while as I had to walk through muddy swamps with a broken head torch lighting up occasionally every few minutes. The moment I stepped out of the cave, my jaw dropped and my feet stopped moving. In some places mountains were so tall they were touching the sky, while in some places they were so short that they are only up to my knees. All of them seemed to be covered with dark and light green blankets, protecting them from the cold during winter. I checked my map and realised I was only five kilometres away from the heart of the mountains, where beast Curty laid. I stared at the starry sky and checked my watch; the Sun was about to rise in 2 hours. I finished up some snacks and continued my way.

At last, I reached the heart of the mountains. I tiptoed as I walked near the beast's territory. I was scared that any false move will wake it up. I moved one step at a time, hoping to discover a large and mythical character. Suddenly, a puppy with yellow fur jumped out behind the bushes. I couldn't help but stare at it, wondering if I have come to the correct place. I thought, "Is this the beast Curty? How can it be this tiny and adorable little creature?" The longer I stared into it, the more I believed that this petite creature could guard the mountains. Its eyes were watery and cute but full of fierce when you tried to harm it. Its fur was different from others, with a tint of gold and sparkles to it. After I saw this creature, I suddenly believed that there is magic in this world. Even this little thing is known as a beast and guard of the mountains, then what else can we not do? It might not look like it has the abilities, but from the story and from the look when I stare into its eyes, I believe that it's gifted with the power to protect the astonishing yellow mountains.

Although what I saw wasn't what I expected, I was filled with satisfaction and slowly walked back to my car. I didn't want to leave Curty, but I waved goodbye and promised myself that I will come back again. As I was driving back home, I thought about how the stories about it were misleading because they want to portray an image of a fearful and frightening beast. To pay tribute to Curty, I decided that I will write my own story about it, naming it "The Gifted Curty".

The Soul, I Ching, and the Mountain

St Joseph's College, Siu, Sung Yan – 15

The memory of my birth lingers powerfully. Arising from darkness, intertwined with the scent of fragrant blossoms. ***Ch'ien / The Creative; Dragon appearing in the field.***

With haunting symmetry, I remember too well the scene of my death, plummeting back into that same darkness, my life force drained away. ***"Ch'ien / The Creative; Arrogant dragon will have cause to repent."***

These memories painted vivid pictures in my soul, as if they had been carved there with permanence.

But from that moment of peace, my eyes reopened and were filled with the cold, bright light of a hospital ceiling.

I had been introduced to this world for a second time, and here I was, sixteen years later, head slumped on my desk.

"Charlie! Wake up! School's over."

I was awoken by a firm poke in the shoulder from Benjamin, staring at me intently from his furrowed brow. As if under a spell of psychokinesis, I felt myself sit up straight, harnessed by his blazing glare.

"What did I miss, Ben?" I asked in a dreamy stupor.

"Everything!" The class monitor folded his arms impatiently. "Just try and stay awake if you can, Sleepy. Luckily for you, there was nothing important to note except tomorrow's hike."

"Oh, a *hike*. I can't *wait*." I groaned through gritted teeth.

"Well, I'm rather looking forward to it, and you could do with the exercise. Doctor's orders remember. Quick, let's go before you fall asleep again." With that he grabbed me by a floppy arm and out of the classroom, as I stifled a last gasp yawn, hugging my *I Ching*, my makeshift pillow.

I've been friends with Benjamin since kindergarten. He was always the yin to my yang. I couldn't keep up with his energetic, sprawling approach to childhood, but at least he was willing to wait for me. You see, I was always tired and I didn't know why until, after my sixth sleep in one day I was taken to hospital by despairing parents and diagnosed with hypersomnia.

As I walked home, a memory from childhood flooded my mind. We were in the kindergarten playground, playing hide and seek. Unsurprisingly, I was found first, asleep halfway up a tree. Amused by my terrible hiding skills, Ben took a shine to me and we have never looked back, our bond growing with every day that passed.

Lying on my bed, I put my palm above my copy of *I Ching*, a book with which I felt a deep and instinctive connection, as if it was ingrained in my soul. As if magnetised by my energy, it flipped open by itself. Levitating, it tore its own pages into hundreds of floating paper fragments. They surrounded me, like every time I tried to test for danger or fortune. They formed a *Hexagram*, but then returned to their original positions in the book, and no traces of the tearing were found. Only one sheet did not return, but stayed levitating. I sat up and looked at it. ***Chen / The Arousing; Six in the second place; danger.*** I breathed deeply, dissatisfied with the upcoming future, and decided to change it myself. Closing my eyes, I stroked the book. ***"Ken / Mountain; Nine at the top; Good fortune."***

I recited the altered prophecy aloud without opening my eyes. Relieved, I sighed. "I guess it's worth another extra 81 hours of sleep."

The next day, I arrived at the mountain, my eyes burning with exhaustion, staggering towards the bumbling buzz of chatty students. Promptly, the teacher led us up the hill.

"I've heard of sleepwalking, but you're the first sleep hiker I've seen," hissed Ben, punching me in the arm.

As I strained to open my eyes, the misty view of the mountainside floated into my vision. Vast and spiralling masses of intertwining tree branches towered above me and into the distance. The neglected and well worn path and its crumbling, tattered brick wall weaved its way up the green and knobbly surface of the mountain. I dragged my feet along the uneven surface as the sun reflected against the dew droplets of a lush carpet of sparkling green blades of grass. A fleeting feeling of wonder and awe briefly filled my mind, quickly interrupted by the voice of Mr Davis.

"It's free time, children! Meet back here by eleven o'clock," Mr. Davis muttered half-heartedly, already glancing at his phone. "Oh, and make sure you don't get lost."

"Finally," I said, perching on a rock, "I can get some sl..."

"Don't even think about falling asleep!" said Benjamin disapprovingly, reading me like a book. "Let's explore! I've heard the ghost of Emperor Ying once ruled over these hills. Maybe the thought of that will keep you awake." Knowing better than to protest, I dragged my feet behind him, wandering along the meandering stone path and up the mountain.

"Did you know this mountain is called little Kun Lun? Legend has it that the *Yellow Emperor* once came here, but lost his orb that contained *Tao* -- as of Taoism." Benjamin told me, "But I find that unlikely, don't you? Utterly impossible, you might say. I would expect that... woah... Check out that roof. Is it a temple?"

And so it was.

We pushed the doors of the temple open as we approached. The metal handle seemed to be brand new; not at all rusty. The walls, however, were worn down, in contrast to the doors, with round, black burn marks as if there had been fire in this room. The paint peeled like gold leaf, barely holding to the walls. As we headed towards the centre of the temple, a table came into view.

"What's that on the table?" Ben was quite curious.

"There's a *stone* on the table. That's the playing piece of Go." I replied.

"You know how to play Go?" Benjamin seemed surprised.

I opened my mouth, but no words came out. I was suddenly overwhelmed by an uncontrollable drowsiness, but it wasn't that of my normal exhaustion. This was different. The world started to distort, into the shape of a *Hexagram*. And then all light drained from the room, plunging us into darkness. I was plummeting, falling for what seemed an eternity.

I was awoken by Benjamin shaking me violently, his face a tortured picture of anxiety and concern. But he was greatly relieved the moment I opened my eyes.

"I-- What happened?" I found myself lying on the icy floor.

Benjamin looked at me worriedly. "You passed out, coughed up blood, and then you were out cold for at least ten minutes. I thought you were dead! I tried to wake you, but couldn't. I didn't even have phone reception!"

I looked at my t-shirt. The huge red stain was quite a shock, but I've never felt more energised than at that moment. It was as though I had been filled with a new lease of life. The tiredness that had haunted me for a lifetime evaporated. What a magical feeling. And what euphoria in my veins.

Our conversation was interrupted by the haunting sound of doors creaking. A young boy had entered the temple, wearing ancient robes, the kind you see in museums. He tripped over himself when his eyes met ours, a bewildered expression frozen on his face. Wearing a crown on his head, the young boy was carrying an engraved rectangular object made of stone, an orb embedded in the centre of it. A slate.

All three of us froze.

“Who are you? What -- Why -- How -- did you appear?” The young boy stammered. “Ah! You must be *sages*!”

“Who are you? What’s a sage?” I replied, completely shocked.

Benjamin looked at the boy cautiously, then hissed under his breath at me with astonishment. “I never knew you could speak another language. What did he just say?”

“Am I speaking another language?” I was confused.

The young boy interrupted by introducing himself. “I am the first emperor of the Qin Dynasty, Ying Zheng. *Sages* are wise people who have eternal life and can wield magic. You must be sages! You are wearing clothes that belong to the Gods, and the device you are holding can emit light!”

I looked down at my casual shorts and t-shirt in surprise. The Emperor was indeed speaking in a foreign language with strange syllables, but I could fully understand what he said. I exchanged glances with Benjamin, and translated the Emperor’s words.

“Is he mad? The Qin Dynasty perished 2000 years ago! Let’s get out of this temple first, and try to call the hospital.” Benjamin was furious, and dragged me towards the exit. But as he pushed open the door, he stopped dead in his tracks.

“I think we’re on the peak, Ben.” I said, my pupils shaking.

A crowd of people were chatting next to the temple when they spotted us. They knelt down at us, shouting, “The *sages*! The *sages* have arrived! His Majesty has the approval of the *sages*!”

Bewildered by the joyful gleam in the eyes of the crowd, Benjamin and I ran back into the temple. As we reentered, the Emperor placed the slate on the table, kneeling in front of it.

He cried, “I, Ying Zheng, the first emperor of the Qin Dynasty, under the supervision of the two *sages*, have now united the six countries. So I hereby offer this slate, for my reign to last forever!”

My *I Ching* flew out, and formed a *Hexagram* again. Trembling, I put my palm on it, just as a piece of paper levitated in front of my eyes.

Ken / Mountain; Nine at the top; Good fortune.

Benjamin looked as white as the book I was reading. “Tell me, Charlie, that this is just a prank, right? Charlie, please! Please!”

“Ben, I think we might have gone back in time.” I said, surprised by my own air of calm, avoiding eye contact.

Suddenly, a swirl formed on the surface of the slate. The plants on the mountain all wilted and withered at the same time, disintegrating into white mist. The swirl acted like a black hole, except it only consumed the mist.

The Emperor knelt deeper. I could see his excitement, he was trembling with glee. Benjamin was trembling too, but due to anger.

“Why? Why did you lie?” I could see tears on Benjamin’s cheeks. “I thought we were friends!”

To everyone’s surprise, we heard a deafening roar. A dragon, constructed by the white mist, formed right on top of the slate. Its eyes looked deeply into mine, and all of a sudden, it flew towards me. I was completely surrounded by mist for a moment before it was sucked into my heart like a typhoon. I felt that drowsiness again, and fainted.

But this time, nothing went dark. I could “see” from another perspective. I could sense everything nearby like I hadn’t fallen. I could even see Benjamin supporting my body, and shaking me to wake me up.

I tried to talk to Benjamin, but no sound came out.

The Emperor locked eyes with us, his menacing gleam portraying a deep jealousy. He turned at once and left the temple, leaving the slate behind.

The next thing I knew, time stopped. The motion of the emperor leaving, Benjamin putting me down, my breathing... they all stopped. An old man with a dirty grey, long beard appeared. His body was translucent, and like the dragon, he seemed to be made of mist.

He looked at me curiously, when suddenly, he clapped his hands as if he had reached enlightenment.

"I've been waiting for you. Would you be kind enough to listen to an old man's ramble?" The misty figure asked me.

I wanted to refuse, but my words did not cooperate.

"Yes" I said, my voice unnerved.

"So where shall I start? Ah, let me introduce myself first. I am the spirit of Kun Lun, the soul of this mountain. I was born in the form of a dragon ten thousand years ago, arising from chaos. I was a God, too, for I could use the power of the mountains and nature. It was a peaceful time, where all species lived in unity, following the rules of nature. But one day, humans wanted more. They wanted to rule, to dominate, to reign. Humans started to destroy nature, exploiting the fuels, gifts from Earth, to provide energy. They broke the balance, the *Yin* has exceeded *Yang*, after which the *Yang* exceeded *Yin*, in a vicious cycle which shall surely cause disaster. The boy over there, the Emperor, will be able to harness the power of nature the moment time resumes."

I could see the mingled *Yin* and *Yang* starting to battle each other, sometimes one defeating another and one consumed by another. And then, the elements lost control. Fire broke out in forests, water flooded countries, earthquakes destroyed cities, and hurricanes knocked down homes.

"If you don't believe in me, you should recognise the fragments of memories in your soul. The dragon should have given you all of my memories except my birth and death. Is that right?"

I could suddenly see the memories of the old man, his life as the spirit of the mountain, like I was watching a film. It fit perfectly with the two memories of my "first life". I finally understood.

"You get it now, don't you?" The old man laughed. "Your soul succeeds mine, for when I die, all my memories will be washed away, but my soul will be reformed. I will *be* you."

"Your divination skills and ability to speak ancient language originate from me, the memory fragments I left behind. And because your soul is so energy consuming and your body merely human, you have suffered with extreme exhaustion for your childhood."

"Ah, it is time for me to go. Just one last thing, the orb on the slate is the Yellow Emperor's. If you leave it in the temple, you will continue to drain nature's powers. But leave it in the wind and you will return the powers to nature. Goodbye."

The old man's life force was drained back into the slate, and time resumed. My soul returned to my body, and I regained consciousness

To our shock, the Emperor twisted sharply and blasted fireballs at us from his palm.

"*Sages*, give me the dragon!" he snarled. We ran away, dodging the Emperor's newly found power. Lightning appeared out of nowhere and began to chase us, and as I held Benjamin's frozen hand.

I took out my *I Ching*, and the *Hexagram* enlarged, swirling, providing a pathway just for two. I dived into it with Benjamin, hoping it would bring us back to the present.

We arrived at the temple again when we came out of the *Hexagram*. This time the Emperor wasn't here.

Benjamin was entranced by confusion. “What happened? Why could you levitate a book? Why did someone shoot fireballs and you took me through a *Hexagram*? Was that a dream? Am I even awake?”

I spoke of the events that happened while leaving the temple. People outside were wearing normal clothing, and I was relieved that we had returned to the correct time.

“So you died once and learnt divination? That orb on the table, it’s the one in the legend?”

“Yes, yes.” I answered Benjamin’s question. “But what should we do with the orb?”

“I don’t think two teenagers should decide the world’s fate, should we? But then again, fate chose us to decide it, I guess?” Ben asked.

“Yes,” I replied meditatively, an enlightened calm falling over me as I remembered my former self’s words of wisdom. “but we humans are merely products of Mother Nature. It is not for us to rule, to dominate or to reign. The only way is to let her decide, with the elegance that she possesses.”

And with that, I tossed the orb into its rightful place, far into the depths of the mountain pines.

Tales of the Gods at Huangshan

St Joseph's College, Zang, Xi Paul – 15

" Good morning, everyone! Today, I am going to introduce Huangshan to you all.

"First, a bit of introduction: my name is Paul, and I am a form 4 student. I am honoured to have been invited to this orphanage to talk about Huangshan.

"Huangshan City, established to support Huangshan Mountain, has become a tourist attraction that includes Huangshan Mountain Scenic Area and many ancient Huizhou style villages. It is located at the southernmost tip of Anhui Province.

"Located in the subtropics, the city has a typical subtropical monsoon humid climate. It has four seasons, with a short spring and autumn, and long summer and winter. The comfortable weather affords good opportunities to travel to the city and its stunning environs throughout the year.

"It is a region with a long history and splendid culture. Its former name, Huizhou, reflects its ancient Hui cultural roots. In this region, you can see the famed Hui carvings and architecture, study Xin'an medicine and paintings, and listen to Hui Opera."

"What a very interesting introduction, Mr. Paul. But now, we should take a nap, so that we can process all of this interesting information," a child clapped sarcastically.

"Would you like to hear a story?"

The drowsy children immediately woke up. Their eyes sparked with interest. Seeing this, I was encouraged. I started," As you all know, Huangshan is one of the most famous mountains in China. It's well-known for its scenery, sunsets, peculiarly-shaped granite peaks, Huangshan pine trees, hot springs, winter snow and views of the clouds from above. Many tales are told to people because it is so majestic, and I've also heard many. Here's one:

In a dark, horrifying cell, a bloody, half-dead man stared at the ground.

"Creak!" The old, rusty wooden door opened. There entered a man, holding a bolt. The man waved his hands and said, "Guards, you have been working for a whole day now. You should rest! I will ask the criminal a few questions! Don't let anyone disturb us!" The guards nodded and left. Soon, there wasn't any noise to be heard.

The man asked, " Do you still want to revive the gods?"

"We shall not lose our faith, we shall not give up our dreams...something bad is coming, and you, all of you...you will surely die in this assault!" A peculiar purple light glowed as the half-dead man answered.

"Very well. Die!" Before the half-dead man could even resist, the mysterious man landed a heavy blow on his head. One, two, three hits... until the head of his foe exploded. Normal people would have been scared to death, but the mysterious man didn't blink an eye. Blood flew from the exploded head onto the floor and onto the man's face. Wiping the blood off his face, the man left coldly.

A long, long time ago, there was a village was on Huangshan. Many unusual people lived there. Some had horns on their head, some were cow-faced but had a human body. Some were very elvish and had peculiar looks. They all gathered together and lived in this village. They were called Gods and they all had different powers. The lucky ones had awesome powers, like the ability to control the weather, to control death, or having good combat skills. But most gods were not so lucky. They either had some silly powers or powers that they didn't want to have, like bad luck or lizard powers.

These gods had a system, similar to Chinese emperors. The emperor was the highest power. He had what all the other gods wanted – the power to control the Gods' deaths (as the Goddess of Death only controlled human death), women, and money. After the revolution 500 years before, the gods lived peacefully.

"We thank our ancestors for the peace we have. 500 years already! It may seem short to others, but I am very grateful already, brother," the Emperor of the Gods said. His name was Ares, the God of War. "I have worked tirelessly to reduce the possibility of war. But now, I have a bad feeling. My head has been aching for a very long time, and the pain is increasing drastically. Every time my head aches, something bad always happens...I still remember the war that happened 500 years ago. We cannot return to those days, do you agree, brother?"

"Of course, brother."

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair..."

"Quite right, brother! That was just the situation that happened."

The two then fell to contemplation of a memory of 500 years ago.....

"Rragh! Die, Hayden!" Bartemoeu, the God of Fire shot a fireball at Hayden. He was a man of his name: fiery, he really liked fights, and he was very impulsive. He threw fireballs at Hayden.

Boom!

"Watch where you throw your fireballs, Bartemoeu!" But, just as that God finished his sentence, a fireball flew at his house again. "Garbage!"

That was it. Bartemoeu's fire was completely on. He began to charge at the God.

"No...no, please don't!" Hayden panicked, not really managing to run away. Bartemoeu was about to leap at his victim, who had now staggered and tripped. The God raised his hand, trying to block the deadly fireball Bartemoeu was going to fire at him...

After a long time passed, however, the God found that he was still alive! Confused, he opened his eyes. Before him, was the God of Atalanta, Namor. He put his trident down, and said coolly, "Next time there will be no one to save you, punk." He then lifted the dazed god onto his feet.

Just as they were about to leave, they heard a rumbling sound. The floor cracked, and the sky turned into an extraordinary orange. Namor's face showed an unnatural reaction. He said to the god, "Run! Run as far as you can! Also, tell the emperor to send reinforcements. Go, go, go!"

The god followed the order and ran. At that moment, three phantoms appeared. In a wicked voice, they said, "Well, well, well! We finally meet each other, Namor! Why? Why did you abandon us?"

The first phantom said, "I used to be an honest farmer, Namor! I lived in a very small village, farming every day. Those days were very boring, I know. You gods may not like that kind of life, but I was very happy. And then one day, the government came! They took our land for commercial use! My ancestors! I was so sorry that I couldn't protect our land – I disappointed them!"

Black tears began to tickle down his face, though the phantom had lost nearly all his humanity. "Do you know how they got the land from me?" The phantom glared at Namor. "First, they sent a seemingly well-educated man to my house, trying to compromise. I was willing at first, but after I looked at the terms, I was shocked! Agreeing to meet the representative made me guilty enough already, but with the representative offering such an unreasonable price? I immediately refused.

"Do you know what he did to me, Namor? Do you know what they did to me? You gods observe what happens on Earth, yet you don't intervene in the wrongdoings to put a stop to them!" His eyes got darker and darker, and his eyes grew more and more fierce, like an ancient beast staring at his prey. "They hit me, Namor! With a stick, they beat me until I fainted. Once, twice, three times...I wanted to hit them back, Namor! I really wanted to! But what could I do? They had at least 10 people, and I was alone! I could do nothing!"

"Soon, I was beaten to the brink of death. I was vomiting blood, but I thought this would soon be over and they would have mercy on me. I was wrong again, as always. They lifted me up on my feet, dug a hole, and buried me! I was left to die. Do you know how desperate that feeling is, Namor? Of course, you wouldn't know. You gods are immortal, and only gods can hurt other gods.

"I suffocated slowly. Waiting for death was frightening. You can hear all the insects scuttling around you. They sensed the presence of death, I think. They were just waiting for me to die. Then, they swarmed and ate my body, bit by bit.

"What sin had I committed in the last life? What had I done to get this?! I didn't deserve this fate! Why, gods? Namor! You stopped me from taking revenge, saying that you had a better way to help me. Now, tell me, Namor, what have you done?"

An orange beam appeared in the phantom's hands. He was about to charge towards Namor, but the other two stopped him. "Let him hear what sins he has committed, and then we will attack him," said one of other phantoms. The first phantom stopped his attack and allowed the other two phantoms to talk.

"We were farmers too, Namor. We were brothers. One day, a government official came to our village, telling the villagers how good the city was. After hearing all the advantages of working in the city, we were excited to go. We thought that our farming skills could be used there, that we can have a better wage, better social security, and enjoy more public facilities. We went to different companies to interview. Many of the companies rejected us due to our poor academic profile, but one company eventually hired us. We celebrated then. Good old days! But no! We cannot go back to that time now, Namor. We are dead now." Saddened by the sober memory, the phantom paused.

"I'm sorry." Namor lowered his head.

"It's no use now, Namor! What is the use of apologising after everything that happened? You can't fix it anymore!

"Pathetic! You gods used the ancient Chinese system, keeping an emperor, trying to blend into human society. What is the use of it? One of the characteristics of humans is that they tend to help each other when they see others in need, Namor! What have you gods done? Sitting there, relaxing, being silent observers! You gods have such awesome powers, yet why have you done nothing? Why is life so unfair?

"After being hired, we worked our fingers to the bone, hoping that we could make higher wages to pay our mother's medical fees. In the end, what did we get? Late wages! When we protested, we were fired immediately! They used lofty-sounding reasons, saying that we disrupted the rules of the factory, so they had no choice but to fire us. We were thrown out of the factory. The worst thing was not being hungry; it was being unable to afford our mother's medical fees. The hospital phoned us and demanded we pay. We begged them, threatened them, anything we could say to beg them save our mum first. We promised that we would pay them after the treatment. These money-hungry doctors! Isn't saving lives more important than money? Why did we chase money? Mum died that afternoon. We had lost everything in our lives, our hope, our mum, our jobs...we couldn't bear it. Finally, we committed suicide. That is why we are here now. Hatred is another reason.

"Well, Namor, that is the end of our story. Answer this question, would you, Namor?"

Namor nodded, silently, solemnly.

"Would you help us now, Namor, after knowing why we died, or will you be the cold-blooded observer, watching things develop?"

"I...cannot help you. The gods' work is to observe, not to interfere."

"You still wouldn't help us in the end. We expected this. Fine, then. DIE, NAMOR, TRAITOR!" The three phantoms yelled, charging at Namor.

As the king of the brave Atalantans, Namor had good combat skills, and his trident increased his attack to another level. However, the three phantoms were all very powerful, as they had a great amount of hatred. One of them fired orange energy balls at Namor, the other one fighting him hand to hand, with the final one writing words on the floor: "Silent observers should die!" Then, he joined the attack.

Namor could barely deal with the attacks, even with only two phantoms. Now, with three, the battle had become one-sided. Namor's armor was soon broken, and he was disarmed, on the floor, panting.

"We once believed in you, Namor! But now, you disappoint us once more! Die!"

"Don't worry, it's just one hit, Namor. You won't feel any pain! Ha ha!" The phantoms laughed cruelly. Just as the phantoms were ready to land the deadly strike...

Boom! Boom! BOOM! Flashes of lightning landed precisely on the phantoms, mortally wounding them. With the most maliciousness you could ever imagine, the phantoms said, "You may kill us, Gods: Zeus, Ares – regardless. However, there are millions of us, gathering, evolving. Be aware, Gods! We shall be back.

"One last warning: our spy has entered your ranks, Gods. Let's see if you can find him! Ha ha ha!" With that final laugh, the three phantoms committed suicide, for the second, and last, time.

"Strengthen our defences! Repair all the damage that has been done! Go, go, go!" Zeus, the God of Weather commanded.

His fellow gods followed orders. An extra magical barrier, disguised in the shape of fog, was used to protect the gods. That is why Huangshan looks so magical and misty.

"Emperor, something is happening! Look at the sky!"

An eerie orange bright light appeared in the sky. This pulled them back to reality. Ares said to the guard, "Evacuate the citizens. Tell them that the phantoms are coming. They must run, as fast as they can!"

The guard followed his orders and ran off. "Argh! My head!" Ares knelt on the ground, hitting his head painfully. "Quick, Zeus, my brother, take...take me..." Getting weaker and weaker, Ares lost consciousness.

At the exact same moment, Zeus took out his lightning bolt, and stabbed it into his brother's chest. He glowed with the same purple light glowing as half-dead man. "Goodbye, brother! You have been king for long enough! See you in hell!

"Now, with the help of the phantoms, and Namor's demise, who will be my opponent? Is there anyone who is worthy? Ha ha ha! Huangshan is mine now! Attack!"

At the far side of the mountain, a pair of purple cold eyes watched...

"This is the end of my story. I'm sorry that I have bothered you guys for such a long time. Go to sleep now," I told them softly.

"Mr Paul – a very interesting story indeed! Do you think that the story has any hidden meaning?" the boy who clapped sarcastically asked me.

"Well, I do. I think that the phantom symbolises all the unlucky ones due to fate. Yet, becoming a phantom is their choice. They could challenge their fate, yet they chose to give up. The gods, I think, symbolise power. The problems that the farmers were complaining about are indeed problems happening now. They are indeed quite serious, and if there are no solutions, people may suffer, just like the story's ending. Will the other gods be able to get through Zeus' assault? Probably, but at a high cost. Maybe, they won't survive.

"This is my interpretation of the story. Now, any more questions?"

The children all shook their heads.

"Then I have one final question for you: will you help others, even if you have difficulties, or will you be a silent observer, or a person who takes advantage of and bullies others?"

"Alright, children, I will leave now. Have a nice day!" I strode out of the orphanage, waving goodbye.

Asylum

St. Mary's Canossian College, Lau, Alicia – 15

I dipped my feet into the clouds, watching jagged peaks peppered with flecks of green stretching into the heavens, silhouetted against the brilliant glow of sunrise. Dazzling rays of orange pierced through the mist that shrouded my whole body, and I rested my head against the walls of stone behind me. I tried calming my mind, but it would not stop returning to the white jar in my pack. It weighed heavier with each step until I could not bear it anymore. By then, I had reached the summit, yet the pride of victory and the serenity of the view did not calm me as it used to.

Open the jar, I told myself. I had taken it out, letting myself get accustomed to the weight. Wasn't this what mother wanted? *'Huangshan was next.'* This was why I was here, wasn't it? To spread her ashes at a place which she loved.

But something nagged at me, telling me that *this was not the place*, so I pushed myself up, grabbed my pack, checked my compass and watch, and turned back. I had to make sure I was at the right place, I told myself. Or maybe I just couldn't let go.

Lost in my thoughts, I didn't notice the sweat coating my hands and the rocky path before me. Time seemed to slow down, and I watched as the jar slipped out of my hands into the misty haze with widening eyes. Before I could scream, a wild instinct took over and I leapt after the jar.

Into the clouds.

I didn't know what I expected— possibly perpetual free falling, then death. I was out of my mind when I leapt off the cliff. But it wasn't the wind against my back that I felt, but silky softness that rose to my knees. When I looked around, it was not the vast blanket of fluffy white that stretched endlessly, but the sea of golden barley that ruffled against a gentle breeze. It was not the jagged peaks of exquisite stone I witnessed, but tiny village houses with smoke billowing from chimneys. The area was no longer devoid of human beings, instead, humming with life. The mountains emanated tranquility, yet this strange asylum breathed safety.

Lost in the moment, I almost forgot about my jar. But thank heavens, it was lying right next to me, safe and intact. I hugged it to my chest, and it seemed to hum. It was probably just the wild beating of my heart after leaping off a cliff.

I looked up. How had I gotten here? I fell off a cliff— I should be dead. Was I dead? Perhaps so— that was the most sensible explanation. How ironic— to save my mother's ashes just to die myself! Yet I felt very much alive. My heart felt as if it were about to leap out of my chest, and my ankles, after the landing, still hurt. But even if I was alive, there was no way I could get back up there— wherever there was— and something in this place seemed to call to me. *'Come,'* it seemed to say. So off to the row of cottages I went.

The closer I got, the more I realised that its beauty was a deception. This place was like a hollow shell— dazzling on the outside but empty on the inside. There were people, yet their eyes were vacant, their movements slow and exhausted. There were flowers of all kinds, but their colours were dull, like a faded painting. There were animals and critters, but even the dog's bark and the bird's trill were lifeless and weak.

This place was like a prison with golden bars.

Despite the gloom of the place, the pull got stronger. I could feel my jar purring now— it was not the beating of my heart. At its strengthened humming, the people looked up, and at the sight of me, their sluggish gazes took on a speckle of interest. I headed to the nearest one, and the rest huddled forward, curious.

'What is this place?' I asked the first question I could think of. The man before me was short and stout, teeth crooked and belly bulging, but his eyes were kind. 'This...I suppose you could call it a home, of sorts,' he said with a forlorn smile hanging off his lips. When I frowned, he pointed to another cottage in the distance, slightly larger than

the others. 'Go speak to the chief. There's nothing more I know.' Though befuddled, I nodded and walked towards the hut, a trail of murmurs left in my wake.

The door was already open for me when I arrived. Darkness seeped out from it, its blackness sucking out all the surrounding light as if it were a black hole. I shivered, but continued, the jar's hum stronger than ever.

A woman stood out from the gloom, and there was something all too familiar about her that I couldn't quite place. She staggered at the sight of me, her eyes bulging before regaining her composure. As if my presence called on a hurricane, she slammed the door behind me. When she turned to me, hatred from her eyes was like piercing daggers, and I doubled back against the wall, hugging the jar against my chest. Why was this stranger looking at me as if I had murdered her family?

Faster than lightning, the woman darted forward and grabbed my jar of ashes. 'No!' I cried. Before I could reach her, she had already twisted off the cap and took a few sniffs. 'I knew it!' she growled. 'Stay away!' she snarled when I attempted to reach for my jar, and I instantly froze in place.

'Sit,' she ordered, pulling a chair before me, and I obeyed. She had my jar; I had to take it back. 'What's your name?' she asked. Facing the wall, I couldn't see her expression, but I could sense the silent warning in her tone, so I replied honestly, 'Lin.'

Turning my chair to face her, I saw her anger recede into pity. 'Oh, child,' she sighed, 'do you know what you have gotten yourself into?' Yes, I wanted to reply. I came here to spread my mother's ashes to fulfil her death wish, but instead fell off a cliff into this strange, storybook place.

But I was truly afraid, for I felt alive and wanted to stay that way, so 'no' was what I whispered. 'Can I have my jar back?' I couldn't help but add. 'I really need it.'

'What is the use?' she sighed. The rage seemed to have drained everything out of her, and she sat down, leaving behind only weariness. 'You will never be able to leave this place, anyway.' But she tossed me the jar, the action so abrupt that I nearly missed it. Cradling my mother's ashes, I had to think twice to take in her words.

Never leave this place?

'Wait. Wait,' I must have sounded desperate, because her face once again morphed into pity. 'What do you mean? Why can't I leave?'

She sighed again. Then it dawned on me that she looked so much like my mother. But how could this be? My mother had no relatives. '*You and I against the world, Lin.*' she used to say. It couldn't be. Yet my breath quickened, and I had to grip the sides of my chair so I didn't fall. *Who is she?*

The woman must have seen my understanding because she shifted closer, her eyes softening. 'I'd better tell you now, seeing that you will be here forever.' *Forever.* There it was again.

'More than a hundred years ago, our ancestors discovered this land and settled here. They were tired of the world—of its complexity and endless evil. This was meant to be an asylum, and it was, yet peace and harmony never come without a price. To stay here, they made a deal with the gods— they must never leave. The generation must stay, and if someone left, we would be cursed. But this place was a haven, and no one would ever think of leaving, so the deal was made.

Little did they know how wrong they were of human nature. Twenty years ago, a dauntless young girl decided that she could not stay. She needed to know what was outside, and her carefree, stupid courage led to the disbelief in our dealings with the gods. To this day, I still regret letting her go in secret. But she was so eager, so enthusiastic, and so, very blinded of the consequences. How couldn't I let her go?

The day she left, the hurricanes began. They swept up our crops, destroyed our houses and killed our cattle. Then the air became sickly warm and polluted, and the fog was thicker, our crops less healthy. Our senses were sharp, and we saw, plain as day.

Then my parents, the previous chiefs, died. It was a slow process, and our village was forced to watch as, day by day, our chiefs became weaker, their bones frail and their coughing fits increasing. And we never saw the girl again.

It was then we all realised that this was not an asylum, not a sanctuary, but a cage. It was a sad truth: our ancestors sought for peace and serenity, but we had to pay with captivity and separation.

Now, child, you too are trapped with us.'

'What was the girl's name?' My mind had already made the connection, but I couldn't quite believe it yet. Yet the second the woman's lips parted, my shoulders sagged.

I could see it. My mother had the spirit of an adventurer. She was always looking for more, searching for the unknown. I thought this was why she loved climbing so much, but perhaps it was more than curiosity— she missed her home.

But I was my mother's daughter, and I had her spirit, which was why I would not be trapped here forever. At the thought, my jar, which had gone silent the last few minutes, hummed again. My mother would have agreed with me.

Yet I didn't know how. How could I leave if my departure would bring upon my mother's people another curse? I refused to be such a selfish person, but a small voice in me said otherwise.

The woman's voice broke me out of my trance. 'You can stay here for now. I'll ask the workers to build you a cottage. They'll be thrilled to be put to work,' she said. 'Oh, and my name is Shan. I'm your aunt, if you haven't figured that out yet.'

That night, I couldn't sleep, so out I went with the jar in hand. I needed my mother now, more than ever. The night breeze was cold and unforgiving, but now, when all was calm and quiet, I could finally think. I climbed to the roof of the cottage and lay down, the stars above trying to coax me to sleep. I could see why this was an asylum, and why it was no longer.

A curse. I didn't believe in myths and legends, yet here I was. I laughed at the irony. I came here to escape, to let go, only to find myself closer than ever, more trapped than I'd ever been. 'Oh, mother. Why would you lead me here, if you had known?' The jar hummed, but I couldn't decipher what it meant. Perhaps she didn't expect me to find this place. Or perhaps she had one last selfish wish— to return to this cage which was, though suffocating, still her home.

Soon, I fell asleep.

Day after day, I stayed in this 'sanctuary'. There was no one left for me outside, so I was not anxious. Or so I thought. After a week, I had explored every crevice of the asylum, yet everywhere I went, too much beauty followed. The flowers first looked dull, but now I found them too bright; I used to think the brilliant, fiery orange of a sunset was the most dazzling thing ever; now it pierced through my eyelids, and I had to turn away; homemade meals were once my favourite food, but now they were either too bland or overly flavored.

I decided that I could no longer be selfless. Like mother, like daughter, I suppose. There was a bitter resentment for my mother, though I still clutched the jar wherever I went. Did she not know I was a free spirit, unable to withstand constraints and hold?

So I sneaked into Shan's hut, scrambling for my pack. She was a heavy sleeper, so I made no care to make my movements light. Through the fields of golden barley and sleeping huts, the moon guided my way. My heart felt strangely hollow, but I would soon be free, and the very prospect of that lifted the weight of my bouncing pack and jar or ashes from me.

Finally, I reached the base of the cliff. I had not realized how high up it was. But that didn't matter— I was a skilled climber, and this was just another mountain I had to conquer.

Before loosening my hook and climbing gear, I turned back to the asylum. As suffocating as it was, my mother survived twenty years of it. Yet when I looked back, all I felt was drowning guilt. The jar hummed, reflecting my intensifying guilt. I ignored it. But when it vibrated again my chest, louder this time, I looked down.

Open it, something told me. Why not? I slid open the jar, careful not to let any of the ashes spill. When I looked down, the ashes, instead of piling at the bottom, formed the words *save them*, and I staggered back, nearly dropping the jar.

I almost laughed. All this time, my mother had been trying to talk to me, when, out of obliviousness, I had ignored her! Then I put thought into the words. *Save them*. I laughed again at how ridiculous it was. *That* was what my mother wanted to do? Save them? How, talk to the gods that I've never seen? The jar hummed, and the ashes rearranged. *X gods*, it read. I racked my brain. X gods? Was that supposed to be a name? The jar vibrated again, showing *story* → *curse* → *fear*. What?

I thought of Shan's tale. Was there anything special in it? *Shan's tale*, the ashes now showed.

Tale. Tale. What was it with Shan's tale?

Then it hit me. *Shan's tale*.

Shan's tale was just *a tale*.

X gods. There were no gods. *Story*. It's just a story. *Curse*. The curse did not exist. *Fear*. It was fear that kept the people trapped. As if in agreement, the jar hummed.

There were no gods, no curse. The curse was simply the effects of climate change, a resultant of human pollution. *The golden cage is not a cage, but a decoration. They aren't trapped. They trapped themselves!*

The realization hit me like a blow. Suddenly, the asylum's beauty was so ravishing and enchanting that my heart swelled. But the jar hummed again, once again forming the words *save them*.

I knew what I must do.

I was not impatient, for I knew that detaching people from their beliefs would not be easy. First, I talked to Shan. She scoffed at me, but I saw the hope of possibility in her tired eyes. So then, I went from household to household, showing the people the countless discoveries in the 20th century. Every day, villagers surrounded me, craving for more. 'What is electricity?' they would ask. 'Tell us more about Albert Einstein!' others would add. I was no scholar, but I tried my best, explaining what I could. All their lives, they had been living in a bubble, their curiosity compressed, their creativity limited to their little home of beauty they could not enjoy. Now, I had awoken their human nature.

At first, Shan and many elders warned me not to 'disrupt their lives', but soon they too joined my lessons. And the more they listened, the brighter their eyes became, and the wider their smiles were. Finally, one day, I approached Shan again with the same ideas. Instead of scoffing at me as if I were a madwoman, she rested her head on her palm. I knew she would be thinking about it that night.

I did not know how long it had been, but I knew I had awoken something in the people. They were no longer dull and weary, but tireless and eager. I didn't know if it was good or bad, but I had awoken something in them, and the knowledge I gave them was something they all deserved to have. The jar hummed, and I couldn't help but smile. *Thank you*, I thought, *for bringing me here, for giving me a purpose*.

The day we left, there was no curse bestowed upon any of us. We were scared, but our spirits were high. *We did it*.

When we reached the cliff where it all started, a strange sense of melancholy settled over me. I awaited the hum of my jar, but it never came, and that was when I knew that my mother's spirit was truly gone.

It was time to let go.

'I've done it, mother,' I wanted to say. But all I did was twist open the jar, and, with a deep breath, I spread my mother's ashes into the sea of clouds. I watched the granules fall, as fine as sand, and smiled when the wind carried my mother away.

While the villagers rejoiced behind me, I dipped my feet into the clouds, watching the sun sink with rays of purple and pink, the peaks silhouetted against its enchanting glow. For once, I didn't yearn for peace and tranquility.

Sinned

St. Paul's Co-educational College, Wong, Ching Ching – 15

It is believed that all things are intertwined, and woven together to form a tapestry, and we are mere threads which made up the colossal mass of the world that we are living in. It is believed that each and every one of us are interconnected, albeit in different locations, present or past.

Some brave themselves into the mystic mountains of Huangshan, to probe into their roots and ancestry – but isn't audacity a mere leap in heart – an excuse to unveil the secrets in front of our very own eyes? And aren't paths trails of the commutes made by man before us, and guidance to those thereafter?

Lian:

Mouth agape, eyes widened, I saw Huangshan for the very first time. The mountain ranges stood like ballerinas, tipping toes, backs straightened, eyes gazing into the distance; befallen was the exuberance of life, shown from the hints of greenery – the tinges of an energetic green. But half barren were the mountain tops, bulging in irregular patterns; its crevices and creaks bifurcated into two, three paths; ubiquitous yet tidy, seen clearly from far and above. The curvatures, all in different angles, managed to fixate themselves upon the ground, like fingers of Mother Earth herself, stemming from the ground, fingertips touching the clouds – this was unequivocally the masterpiece of the Creator himself.

Huangshan:

A man, late in his dotage, was standing at my feet. He stood, legs quivering, back slumped, eyes gazing into mine; befallen was a sense of solemnity, shown from the hints of depression – the tinges of isolation, condolence. Half ambivalent were his eyes, blinking in an irregular pattern; the image of his cane bifurcated into two, with his trembling hand leaning on it, and at the same time, securing it from collapsing. He was wearing a linen tunic with a wide coat, and his feet concealed by a mere layer of ripped leather. Under the smothering heat, sweat precipitated on his wrinkled forehead, and he wiped it slowly with his wrist.

As I looked down, the man looked minuscule – like a speck of dust in a vast surrounding mass – tiny and almost insignificant. But something told me he was different; he was not like the others.

Then, he started walking up.

Lian:

I felt like the mountain was looking at me as I immersed myself in her soothing embrace. As my febrile imagination ran amok, I felt a striking rapture, as if I was connected to the spirits of the mountains. A howling sound came from afar, and soon it rummaged the trees with its tactile hands – they swayed left and right in slight inclinations – it brushed past the leaves – some of them swirled along the swiveling wind, the wind pushed it forward slightly, and when it past, they hovered their way down, landing on the soft mush of earth. Nature was a musician – the wind its conductor, the leaves arched in elegant curves like the music notes playing a melody to its finest. It was nature's reverie that I was listening to, it was rhythmic and harmonious.

Huangshan:

He was walking up, taking only a few strides between each tree. From atop, he just seemed puny and obscure, trying to make his way up. The reason I felt like he was different – he was almost in a hurry, pacing unstop to the top, unlike other tourists, who take intermittent rests. Finally, he stopped in front of an elegant pine tree.

Lian:

I didn't tell anyone I was making this trip or planning for it. I should have gone back to visit my wife, but I did not. There was something so mystical and enticing about Huangshan that I could not resist; her enigma had coaxingly drawn me into her immense landmass. All the years, living in the cell has worn me and torn me apart, I was a broken man – tainted by crime and wrecked by isolation. I was irrational, ruthless, ambivalent 30 years ago. Now, I am back into the world, but I know deep in my heart that the handle of my clock is striking midnight – I did not have much time. No, I did not.

I wanted to search for absolution in Huangshan, by walking in a sinned man's shoes and immersing myself in nature's beauty – I was on parole, but I could never walk as an innocent man again– I am a guilty man, and forever I will be. Absolution is powerful, but unattainable.

My walking came to an abrupt halt as I saw the pine tree in front of me – it was climbing along a near-vertical cliff. Its canopy was elongated, reaching and burgeoning towards its opposing cliff. Its curvatures were arches bridging the gap between the two cliffs, the branches twisted and turned as they shot into the blue firmament, forming a network of veins, like those on Mother Nature's very hands. The green on its leaves was the green of satin cloth on a mahogany bed in an old Victorian room – a deep and sophisticated green.

Huangshan:

He was panting – mouth agape until he stopped in front of the pine tree. For one second his eyes glimmered at the sight of the oblique tree, thriving in the cracks of the rigid cliffs, and maintaining its upright posture. I did not know why he stared at the tree with such realization or epiphany, but I knew that the tree meant more than a tree to him.

Lian:

The pine tree – it reminded me of nature's beauty. Nature is beautiful in a way that it is pure and unscathed by temptations and greed. It was not ignominious in any way, but forgiving in all times. Yes, I killed, I injured, I was imprudent and foolish – will nature forgive me?

I had been at whim, as a teenager who had been drunk. I had been astonished – standing next to a body with blood all over me. Manslaughter, they said I committed – but did I even deserve to not be convicted of murder? I am no longer the person I was. The pine tree – although it rooted on such a precarious location – it did not bend over and fall. Instead, it sought to stand up right, like a noble not giving in even when his very lifeline was being cut off. The pine tree embodied perseverance, it incarnated the very value of integrity and goodness; and I, the meek convict that sinned again mankind... It was a stark contrast – the purity and heinousness.

Huangshan:

His body sank down the ground as his ineffable emotions suffused through his face. It was pain, but more so, it was agony. It was as if I could hear his internal screams – he was remorseful and desolate.

A while later, he was on his way.

Lian:

Trudging along the narrow paths of Huang Shan, I continued my journey. Passing through, I saw numerous pavilions on both my sides, but I did not even look at them. I knew I need to hurry – I did not have much time.

After a few hours of hiking, I reached the Flying Stone.

I had never witnessed anything so majestic, so lofty and imposing. It stood there on the tip of a cliff, bending outwards, tilting towards the basin configured by other mountains. The obelisk was erect and a bit lopsided; its surface was rough and the patterns on it were irregular, almost erratic. As I traced my fingers through the rock, I felt the tiny spurs and cracks on it – as if it were armored with a platter made of corrugated iron. The Flying Stone was Earth's finger, its tip contacting the sky, ruffling the clouds as they passed by, swirling and stirring up a little wind as it made deft and genteel movements. It was like a lightning bolt, commanding the wandering of clouds, the rising of the Sun, the emergence of light. For a second it seemed to me the centre of the universe, where the Sun and stars and a panoply of earthly entities revolved around it. The rock, teetering on the brink of the cliff, symbolized eternity, and the unchanging sentiments of the Earth that will not be tainted till the end of time.

I wanted to cry, I did.

Huangshan:

He was in the heart of me – the Flying Stone. Myths have had their version of the story, of how the Flying Stone was being deposited by Nuwa Empress when she was mending the sky – this could not be truer.

Lian:

I closed my eyes as I placed my hand on the rock again. I felt a sudden warmth in my hand, as if the rock were an egg that was being incubated. It was warm but not at all hot. The warmth flowed through my arms as a sense of coziness swooned me, like a hearth in snow, a fireplace when you were shivering. All of a sudden, I was light minded, elevated, and I could see nothing but an image of an immortal woman – divine and exuding a kind of grandeur only fit for deity. Her hair was tied back and embellished with rare diamonds and pearls, in the middle of her forehead was a chain with a red diamond as pendant. Her eyes were shut, eyelids draping down like a gauzy curtain; a narrow and elegant nose and a calm smile – she looked convivial. On her body were exotic fabric, with prints of the dragon and phoenix hovering and gliding; her fists loosely clenched, back slightly bent. She was neither sitting nor standing, but appearing out of thin air.

I did not gasp in astonishment, nor did I attempt to discern whether I was dreaming. Why did I see the Nuwa Empress? Was she trying to send me a message?

Huangshan:

I know it when a visitor is special. They awake the spirits in the mountains and the spirits will contrive a message to them. There are two types of people who can resuscitate the spirits – they who believe and they who seek connection with the nature.

He who seeks for absolution must repent,

He who seeks for repentance must absolve.

Lian:

Nuwa was the incarnation of nurture, nourishment, and wholeness; she mended the sky and dissolved catastrophe. Me seeing her – was she trying to seal my past sins and cleanse me afresh? No, I am a sinner, I will not be cleansed. But I knew nature has accepted me, and I must forgive myself for the world to forgive me.

Huangshan:

There are two types of men – good and bad. For Lian – I knew he was good in heart; his killing could certainly not be justified, by any way or means. His expressions were inscrutable at the moment, but I knew he thought he deserved more sentence than this. Men always believe they should be worse off than they are. It was guilt. They always feel like they were culpable of all the mishaps that were remotely related to them – at least good men do. Lian was a good man.

Lian:

I am not a good man. I am sinned, frayed and frazzled by the magnitude and gravity of my crime. I did not even deserve to be out on parole.

I continued my journey and hiked my way up to the Bright Peak.

The Bright Peak was raggedy but magnificent; consisting of many giant rocks and pedestals, it was like one of the places where immortals ascend to the celestial. The peak was bleak and brazenly bare, with just a few hints of vegetation scarcely flourishing in the cracks and gaps of the rocks. I could see another peak opposite to the Bright Peak, and in between were two shorter, narrower rocks – as thin as needles compared to the peaks surrounding it.

Mist rolled in, ferociously flooding the two narrower obelisks; the two peaks made way for the vroom of clouds – thin, airy, but with a solid white colour. It flowed rapidly like a river when the dam just opened – the accumulating fluid, ready to be discharged into the sea – it flowed, multi-directional, to all sides, filling the space between the mountains; and I, at the top of the Bright Peak, was on a tiny, protruding oasis in the middle of a white, milky sea.

Huangshan:

He looked tired, extremely exhausted, but fatigue could not spare him from aweing at the mystical phenomenon. He knelt, hands clenched with one another, as he repented and prayed to the mighty nature.

I felt the spirits in the mountain being awakened once again.

Lian:

A man was walking up the peak. Down the peak, all was so misty, but somehow, he made his way through the layers of mist. His attire was different from other people that I saw. His clothes were baggy, his beard shaggy and long. His snowy white hair blended with the clouds perfectly, and on top of his head there was a small bun.

‘Why are you praying?’ he asked.

‘I’m sinned,’ I said.

‘He who seeks for absolution must repent, he who seeks for repentance must absolve,’ he murmured, as he paced around the peak.

‘What does that mean?’

‘That means, when you want to seek for absolution from others you must repent, but you must absolve and accept yourself before seeking for repentance.’

Huangshan:

Lian stood up abruptly – the man’s words jolted him.

‘Wise man, who are you?’

‘I live in the mountains.’

He tilted his head askew, ‘the mountains?’

‘Yes, and I must depart. Farewell, Lian.’

‘How... how did you know... Thank you, wise man.’

The man waved his scepter, as a cloud appeared under his feet and carried him to the tiny village houses above the clouds.

He was HuangDi.

Huangshan:

The intricacies in life are unpredictable. Sometimes the spirit in nature interweaves with people in the past, the posterity and people in the present. Nature has always been sending messages to us, and for Lian, he has learned to accept himself for who he was.

Lian:

I looked up at the sky and was astounded to find out it was already the daybreak of another new day – I have not stopped for more than 20 hours. I laid down beside a rock, as my vision spun and blurred. My eyelids were shut tight – Huangshan was a good final destination.

Tales from China's Magical Mountains

St. Paul's Convent School, Chan, Sum Yi Marissa – 15

The girl ran.

She ignored the shouts of her parents, ordering their guards to chase after her. All she had in her head are her mother's words: *You are to be the madam of another house*. Her mother knew how she would react, so she concealed the truth in honeyed words, soft touches. She knew better.

She was to be in an arranged marriage, affiliated to a prominent house of the dynasty.

So she escaped in the middle of the night, packing her belongings in a light sack. She had planned this escapade with her older brother, who prepared a map written with brush and ink for her.

“Go there,” her brother had said, pointing to the mountains on the west of the map. “Mother and father would never find you.”

She snuck out in the middle of the night, saying a final goodbye to her brother in his study before she did so. Her brother accompanied her to the front door, telling her to be as inconspicuous as possible.

She smiled at him, mouthing a quiet “thank you”, and opened the door—only to be face-to-face with her parents. It seemed like her parents had already guessed that she would run away from home.

Her brother yelled at her to run.

She nodded at her brother, running past her father and mother, and following her were guards, ordered by her parents to bring her back.

She ran through alleys, staircases, following her brother's map using a torch she had lit up while hiding from the guards. She headed straight to the mountains her brother had told her to go.

In front of her now, was a giant mountain. It cast a shadow upon her, a stark contrast to the moonlight that had been cast upon her as she ran. She gulped. She took a first step up to the mountain, feeling the touch of soft grass on her sole compared to the touch of hard stone that paved the streets. The mountain seemed ethereal, quiet, and peaceful. Wind brushes her face, and she hears its whistle.

She walked on, but she soon heard the sound of chattering and shouting coming her way, beams of light breaking the darkness and serenity of the mountain.

She tried to run but failed to. She had already used up all her strength from escaping her house. She didn't know why, but she seemed to see lights and smoke up the mountain. Maybe it's her desperation, she reasoned.

She hid behind an oak tree and prayed that they couldn't find her.

They did.

A week later, she got married.

The girl, now a woman, runs. She runs again to the mountain that her brother had told her so many years ago, holding the same map she did then.

She isn't running away from her fate this time though. She now runs away from her burning city, consumed with colours of red and orange. She smells the stench of blood and burning flesh as she sprints across the city. Her tears well up, but she tries to stay strong. In her arms is her daughter, just a few months old.

She arrives the mountain once again. She takes a deep breath, and takes a step towards the mountain. She hears the soft crunch of the grass as she walks, the whistle of the wind. She walks, walks and walks. She doesn't look back at her burning city, dancing with flames.

She takes a rest in the middle of traversing the mountain. She has just found a waterfall in the middle of the mountain, so she washes her face and drinks some water.

She looks at her surroundings and gasps in wonder. Bamboo trees surround her, wind rustling through them. Birds chirp, and she hears the rush of the waterfall behind her. *The mountain is alive*, she realizes.

She wonders how her brother knew of this mountain.

She would never be able to ask him the question, though.

Her body aches from the strain of today, so she lays her daughter next to her, and sleeps on the grass.

She doesn't wake up to the sound of the waterfall she had fallen asleep next to.

She wakes up in a house instead.

She springs up out of the bed she was sleeping in, looking for her daughter, only to find her next to the bed she is currently on.

She breathes a sigh of relief.

She walks outside and realizes that she's on the peak of the mountain. Surrounding the house she currently is in are a few other houses.

She finds it quite picturesque. Are these houses the reason she saw lights and smoke up the mountain?

She walks through her surroundings, admiring the landscape around her. The sun had just risen, giving a vermeil hue to the mountain. She smiles.

She hasn't smiled in ages, and tears fall down her cheeks.

Funny, she thinks to herself, that fate would bring her here again, to this mountain.

She escaped to this mountain, the first time, for her freedom, the second time, for the lives of her and her daughter.

She feels free, for the first time in her life. The bamboo trees cast a shade over her head, shading her from the sun.

Somebody taps her shoulder.

"Salutations." She jumps from the contact. It is an elderly man, wearing a cloak.

"Y-Yes, hello. You must be the one who brought my daughter and I up the mountains. Thank you very much." She tries to be composed but fails to.

“It wasn’t a hassle, don’t worry!” The elderly man replies with a hearty laugh. “You seem better now, you were seriously bruised when we found you yesterday.”

Really? She didn’t notice much of her injuries.

“What brings you here to the mountains? It’s quite unusual that you people from the surface would come up here.”

“I came here to escape from... everything.” she answered, after a pause.

She continued. “Would it be permissible... that I live here? Up in the mountains?”

The elderly man smiles at her. She tries to smile back.

“Of course.”

Haunted Wilds

St. Paul's Convent School, Hui, Savina – 16

Huangshan was one of the most beautiful places in the world. It was also, unfortunately, very haunted.

The ghosts were a recent addition. The oldest was little more than a century old, and the youngest ones only had a year or two to their names. No one could recall exactly *when* they had first begun to appear, but somewhere along the line, a couple of ghosts had drifted to the mountains on their travels around the world. Captivated by the scenery, they refused to leave.

And then the ghosts kept coming and coming, like a supernatural tsunami.

Neither salt nor iron nor any traditional exorcism methods had any influence on the ghosts. There were dozens of theories as to why, but Mei-yue was a park ranger instead of a scholar for a reason.

Nevertheless, since the ghosts couldn't be banished, *someone* had to keep them at bay. Naturally, this job fell onto the park rangers of Huangshan National Park.

How fortunate for them.

★★

Mei-yue gritted her teeth as she batted a ghost away from a pine tree. This one had badly dyed blonde hair cut into a bob, and pale skin that flushed bright red at the indignity of the situation. As the ghost desperately wrapped herself around the tree, she screamed, "I demand to see your manager! They'll have you fired for this!"

Bam!

Mei-yue's baton connected with the ghost. Mist drifted away from the point of contact, until nothing remained in the space that the ghost had occupied.

Finally. Mei-yue wiped away the sweat on her face as she took a moment to catch her breath. The ghost would be back, but not for at least a week.

When she had first been hired as a park ranger, she had expected to be stopping obnoxious tourists from damaging the environment and keeping people away from dangerous paths. She had *not* expected to be stopping *ghosts* from damaging the environment and scaring off tourists and wildlife alike.

No wonder so many rangers had quit.

It didn't matter anyway. Mei-yue had chosen this life and she was not jumping ship so easily, unlike her more cowardly coworkers. She clipped her baton back on her belt and continued her patrol.

If she was lucky, she could finish her patrol early.

★★

The staff kept a scoreboard in their room, something to alleviate the annoyance ghosts inevitably brought with them. It recorded the number of ghosts each ranger had to deal with during the week. At the end of each week, the rest of the rangers bought the 'victorious' ranger a drink, a consolation prize for having to deal with so many of those slimy bastards.

After this encounter, Mei-yue was certain she would win the week's drink.

She stormed into the break room dripping wet.

Zhi-ling gaped at her before laughing, “Did you fall into a spring?”

Mei-yue scowled, “Ghosts. Five of them, bathing in a spring like it’s a *pool*.” Her nose scrunched up in disgust as she collapsed into one of the hard plastic chairs. “I tried to kick them out and they dumped half the spring’s content on me. My socks are *soaked*.”

Zhi-ling winced, “I have an extra set of clothes in my locker. You can borrow them.” She raised her head, calling, “Did you hear that? Add five points to Mei-yue’s score!”

“Six,” Mei-yue corrected, “I had to deal with the blonde one who likes to complain too.”

“Ah, it’s been a week already, hasn’t it?” Xiong-yan patted her shoulder sympathetically. He had been the last one to deal with that particular ghost.

★★

“So that area is off-limits, but if I go along this path I can still see some of the area?” The tourist asked, scratching his thick beard.

Mei-yue sighed, “Yes.” She usually didn’t work in the Visitors Centre, but Yang-tin had a family emergency, and since Mei-yue was such a nice friend, she had taken over Yang-tin’s shift.

A tourist rushed in, panting. She stumbled to the enquiry desk and screamed, “Lion!”

Mei-yue frowned; there weren’t any lions in Huangshan. Leopards, absolutely, but lions belonged in the savannah.

A thundering roar resonated from outside the Centre. The tourist looked as if she was about to faint. “It’s here.” She trembled, claspng onto Mei-yue’s arm, “Save us.”

Powerful limbs phased through the wall. A translucent lion landed in front of Mei-yue, his majestic mane billowing in the windowless room. Tourists screamed and scattered. The female tourist covered behind Mei-yue.

“Oh.” Mei-yue breathed a sigh of relief, “It’s just Furball.”

Furball was one of the...less annoying ghosts. On good days, he didn’t disturb anyone and just hung around. But when he was bored, he liked to scare the tourists and newbie rangers. It wouldn’t have been a problem, except people often reacted irrationally to him. He had given a tourist a heart attack once, and another had nearly fallen off a fenced area to escape him.

Although Mei-yue would never admit it, she had screamed the first time she saw Furball too.

Mei-yue grabbed her baton. “Furball, you’ve scared them enough. Leave before I make you.”

Furball purred. The deep rumbling sound filled the room. Mei-yue interpreted this as “Yes, the tourists’ fear is satisfying enough. See you next time!” He phased out of the Centre the same way he came in.

The tourist behind Mei-yue wrapped her arms around her, “Thank you! We are saved!”

Mei-yue’s smile was strained; she would take dealing with ghosts over strangers hugging her any day. “Yes, but can you let go of me?”

★★

Thunder rumbled. Raindrops splattered onto the roof of the employee dormitory. The wooden floorboards creaked as Mei-yue walked from the showers to the common room.

She smiled; for once, she had the afternoon shift tomorrow. She could afford to spend extra time taking a hot shower, relax in the common room, and go to bed later than usual.

Her heart sank as she noticed three figures talking animatedly on the couch. There went her evening of peace and quiet.

Zhi-ling visibly brightened upon noticing her, “Mei-yue! Come join us! We’re watching one of the horror films Qing-lan brought from home!”

Mei-yue made a face, “Don’t you have the morning shift tomorrow? You’re gonna be insufferable if you don’t get enough sleep.”

Zhi-ling stuck out her tongue and pointed to Mei-yue’s towel hat, “Aren’t you supposed to dry your hair after taking a shower? *You’re* insufferable when you get sick.”

Mei-yue scowled; that was *différent*. “You really should go to bed. Relying on caffeine is not healthy.”

Yang-tin made a face, “Don’t be a *spoilsport*. You sound like my mother.”

Qing-lan heckled, “Yeah, don’t be a *spoilsport*. Come join us!”

It was a terrible idea. Mei-yue really shouldn’t have come to the common room. “*Fine*. I’ll join you.”

★★

Mei-yue pinched the bridge of her nose. She loved her friends, but sometimes they had ideas so stupid it grated on her nerves. “Let me get this straight: you want to watch a film about a haunted house on a mountaintop in a thunderstorm, in a dormitory *on a mountaintop in the middle of a thunderstorm*.” At her colleagues’ nod, she continued, “*Why?* That sounds like a recipe for a nightmare.”

Zhi-ling gave her an imploring look. Mei-yue cursed internally; she couldn’t say no to that puppy face.

“If I have nightmares, it’s your fault.”

★★

Goosebumps erupted down Mei-yue’s back. The power had just gone out in the film protagonist’s house. Any moment now, something was going to jump out of the shadows.

The protagonist fumbled to light a candle. The wick caught onto the match’s flame. Then, a gust of eerie wind blew both the match and the candle out.

The protagonist spun around. All the windows in the house were closed.

Mei-yue shivered. She tugged her bare feet from the floor onto the couch, where they didn’t feel as exposed; she had a sudden feeling that something was going to grab her bare ankle. Next to her, Yang-tin mirrored her action. Zhi-ling burrowed deeper under her blanket.

The protagonist lighted another match. The match went out again.

Thunder rumbled outside. Qing-lan grabbed Zhi-ling’s blanket. “Lemme under there.” Soon, all four of them were clustered under the blanket.

Mei-yue felt slightly better. She wasn't as exposed, even if her neck was still bare.

Disembodied sobs echoed from the speakers.

"I don't like this," Yang-tin muttered, "I hate jump scares."

Mei-yue wanted to tell her she signed up for this when she agreed to watch a horror movie, but she shared the same sentiment.

Something brushed against Mei-yue neck. She nearly screamed before realizing it was only her towel hat unwinding.

Idiots. They were all overreacting.

The protagonist, still not managing to light a candle, went out of the house to investigate the cries. The door locked behind him.

Mei-yue shivered again. She could see her breath mist in front of her.

The room had definitely become colder.

Lightning flashed, illuminating a strangely shaped shadow. The shadow scuttled behind the protagonist.

Mei-yue held her breath. Zhi-ling grabbed her arm.

"Make the rain stop! I demand to see your manager!"

Mei-yue screamed. The others followed.

The door to the common room slammed open. "What's happening?" Xiong-yan demanded, brandishing his baton, "Where—*oh*. Why are you screaming about *her*?"

He...what was he...*oh*. Standing in front of the television was the blonde-haired ghost.

They had been spooked over *her*.

Yang-tin barked out a laugh, "I...we're so stupid. I can't believe..." She doubled over in laughter.

Red crept up Qing-lan's neck. "Sorry," she muttered as she paused the film, "We were watching a horror movie. Did we wake you up?"

Xiong-yan gestured at his disheveled hair and pajamas, "Obviously. I think you woke everyone up. They should be here in about...now."

Right on cue, a disgruntled crowd burst into the common room.

Mei-yue grimaced.

★★

After the horror movie incident, it was safe to assume that Mei-yue wasn't going *close* to any horror-isque situations again.

At least, that was the plan until she heard crying coming from one of the off-limits areas.

It happened like this: it was a warm, sunny day, and Mei-yue was patrolling along the more isolated parts of the open areas. Some tourists enjoyed sneaking into the off-limits areas, so Mei-yue hadn't been particularly surprised at the crying. She had reasoned that it was only a lost tourist.

But as she went deeper and deeper into the off-limits area, Mei-yue realized something felt...off. Eerie. Unnatural.

With the horror movie incident was still fresh in her mind, the situation reminded her uncomfortably of the disembodied sobs in the film.

Mei-yue reached for her communicator. Static.

Mei-yue shivered.

The disembodied cries grew louder and louder. Mei-yue grabbed her baton. If it was a ghost or some other supernatural creature, she could at least try to fight it off.

She rounded a tree. There; the crying was coming from a pond.

Next to the pond was a girl. Mei-yue breathed a sigh of relief. It was just a girl, not some supernatural being out of a—

The girl flickered. Her edges blurred into the surroundings. Her clothes changed colors. She was wearing a t-shirt and jeans. It melted into a cheongsam, then a hanfu. It transformed into a hoodie and shorts, then back to a t-shirt and jeans.

Mei-yue sighed; of course it couldn't be as simple as a lost tourist.

The girl's ears twitched at her sigh; how had Mei-yue not noticed how pointed her ears were before? She turned in Mei-yue's direction, wiping tears from her cheek. She didn't look like she had just been crying. "Don't you know it's rude to spy on people?"

Mei-yue swallowed as she emerged to be seen more clearly by the girl. "I heard crying. Are you okay?" She hoped that was polite and sincere enough that it wouldn't backfire. She normally wouldn't care as much, but the horror film weighed heavily in her mind.

The girl tilted her head as she stared at Mei-yue. She didn't blink. "No."

"I..." Okay, that wasn't what she was expecting. "...I see?" Mei-yue cringed at her reply.

"I suppose you want an explanation. Look here." The girl gestured at the rock in front of her. "What do you see?"

Was that a trick question? "...a rock..."

"It *is* a rock now, but it used to be a spirit." The girl looked at the rock sadly, "He was my friend."

Mei-yue felt a little bad for intruding now, even if she had only been doing her job. "I'm sorry."

The girl shook her head. She went from looking at her friend back to staring at Mei-yue unblinkingly. "It was his fault. He was captivated by his reflection in the pond. Sometimes, when a spirit does not move for a long time, they are absorbed into their surroundings."

Mei-yue had many questions, none of which were appropriate responses to when a ghost explained how their friend died. "Isn't that a Greek myth? Narcissus, right?"

A strange expression crossed the girl's face. "All stories have some truth to it."

Mei-yue nodded. A solemn silence fell between them. It reminded Mei-yue of her grandfather's funeral; mourning someone out of obligation instead of personal attachment.

The girl—the ghost, really—was like no other ghost she had encountered. The conversation she just had was the longest conversation Mei-yue ever had with a ghost, for one. And the ghost referred to herself and her friend as spirits. Mei-yue hadn't even considered ghosts could die. How many times had she wished the regular annoyances she dealt with would be gone forever?

"You don't think I'm like the other ghosts." The girl stated matter-of-factly.

Mei-yue startled; since when could ghosts read minds?

"You think ghosts are pests, annoyances to be gotten rid of." The girl was back to staring eerily at Mei-yue now. "But aren't humans the same?"

"What?" Mei-yue frowned. "That's not true."

The girl tilted her head, "Isn't it? You complain ghosts scare humans and wildlife and damage the environment. But don't humans do the same thing?"

"Not all humans do that."

"Not all spirits are nuisances either. The spirits you found in the spring weren't hurting anyone—not humans, not the wildlife, not the environment. You chased them away anyway. Or do you mean the lion you call Furball? He never scares creatures without reason." The girl paused, and then added, "He finds the name Furball very offensive, by the way."

The mind-reading ability was very disturbing. "Okay, first of all, stop reading my mind. Second, how are the ghosts using the spring like a pool not damaging the environment? And Furb—the lion ghost once gave a tourist a heart attack. Another tourist nearly fell off a fenced area because of him. How is that acceptable? And what about the blonde complaining ghost?"

The girl smiled. Had her teeth always been this sharp? "One, I'm not reading your mind. Two, spirits don't interact with their environment; they interact with the *idea* of their environment. Things touched by spirits aren't eroded the same way things are eroded when touched by living organisms. As for the lion spirit, he only goes after people who are harming the environment. The one who had a heart attack was a poacher. The one who nearly fell off the fenced area was about to feed a monkey. Are those good enough excuses for you?"

"Are you saying," Mei-yue said in disbelief, "the lion ghost is an *environmentalist*?"

"*Exactly*. I'm not saying that his methods are acceptable, but he never purposefully scares people without a reason."

Mei-yue pinched the bridge of her nose, "What about the last one? The blonde one who likes to complain."

"Oh, there's no excuse for her. I just thought you would like to know about the others."

"...okay..." How had she gotten from following suspicious haunted house sobs to discussing the psychology of ghosts? "Why do you call yourselves spirits, anyway?"

"It's just a difference in terminology." The girl waved her hand dismissively. "We're basically the same thing, it's just that 'ghosts' imply we have died, and not all spirits are souls of the dead. 'Spirits' is more inclusive. I could go into more detail, but I don't feel like it."

Mei-yue really didn't understand the girl—the ghost—the spirit? She had spent the past hour talking to Mei-yue, but suddenly she did not want to anymore. "Okay, then."

There was a period of awkward silence. Mei-yue shifted nervously. "So...I really have to go back to my patrol. I have to leave now."

The girl nodded as she stood up. "Think about what I just said." She disappeared.

Mei-yue noted the girl didn't have a shadow.

★★

That night, back in the common rooms, Mei-yue told Zhi-ling all about the day's excitement.

"Hmm..." Zhi-ling frowned.

Mei-yue's heart sank. She didn't believe her.

"Well, we learn new things about nature every day. Why not this too?" Qing-yan sauntered over, having apparently eavesdropped on the conversation. Behind her, Yang-tin nodded enthusiastically.

Mei-yue sighed. "I just don't know what to do with this new information. Most of our interactions with spirits are rather negative. Even if we accept the spirit girl's reasoning, I doubt others will."

"Whatever it is, we'll help you figure it out." Yan-tin promised.

"Yeah! Even though I'm a little insulted you only told Zhi-ling." Qing-yan agreed.

Zhi-ling rolled her eyes, "You were *busy*. She was going to tell you later!"

Mei-yue smiled. She was so lucky to have such good friends. They had been with her through thick and thin; spirit attacks and bad decisions and embarrassing circumstances alike. With them by her side, everything would turn out fine.

The Last Hike

St. Paul's Convent School, Lam, Kelsey – 16

It took one whole year for everyone to agree on a weekend to hike up the famous Huangshan, and the long-awaited weekend finally came. The five of us gathered around the base of the mountain before dusk and prepared ourselves mentally for the long hike ahead of us.

As we went higher up the mountain, the scenery around us changed and we could not see the ground anymore. Instead, we could see a forest of trees below our feet, and since it was September, the leaves on the trees were of different colours. From our perspectives, the image below us looked like a painting by an experienced artist. The trees were growing in a way that they looked like waves as some were tall and some were short. The gentle wind constantly blowing the leaves also made the leaves look like they were dancing, creating a sense that we were on a boat surfing through the green sea below us.

After an hour of non-stop hiking, we decided to take a break. As my friends were chatting away under a shade, I went to survey our current surroundings. I looked up to see the vast blue sky above me, only a few clouds floated by every minute, so I knew we had chosen the perfect day to hike up this legendary mountain. Under my feet was an endless plain of lush, green grass. As I was admiring the environment around me, my friends decided it was time to continue the hike.

The air started getting cooler as we went even higher up the mountain, and suddenly a sea of mist emerged in front of us and engulfed us. However, not only were we swallowed up by the white mist, the other hills around Huangshan were also nowhere to be seen, until we went towards a ledge to look at the view. Only a few hills escaped the wrath of the mist, but none were totally free of it as if the mist was hugging some parts of the hills very tightly. The view in front of me was truly breathtaking, as I had always lived in an urban city where nature had completely vanished. The mist also gave off a mysterious feeling which made the hills look more mystical. It truly felt like we were living in a different world, as if we had gone to heaven. As everyone was absorbed by the glamorous scene in front of us, the time passed by quickly and it was time for the sun to set, which also meant that we would need to quickly find a suitable place to set up our camp for that night's rest.

We quickly made our way out of the mist and started to search for our camping grounds before the darkness completely blocked out our sight. After walking for half an hour, we found a plot of flat land next to a cliff and decided to pitch our tents there. As we hammered in the nails to the ground, we felt something was strange, as poking a few nails into the ground shouldn't produce such a squishy noise. We decided to pull out the nails and the almost-ready tent and move towards another plain. However, when the tent was completely yanked out, the bottom of it was dripping a thick, dark liquid. "Is this oil?" One of us exclaimed in shock. No one managed to raise an answer, as we all were still in a confused state and no one dared to look more in depth for what the gooey substance was, that was until I grabbed the hammer we used to secure the tent and hit that specific part of the ground until it cracked open as if I had summoned an earthquake.

The squishy sound of oil developed into a mysterious crunch. I looked into the mini crater I had created to find bones in it. "Everyone, come look!" I shouted to grab everyone's attention. They all came to look and confirmed that what I saw was no illusion. There was a preserved, pristine skeleton of a dead person buried under that oil. We instantly left.

After settling down in another campground, this time with no oil nor skeletons, we lit a fire and chatted about the incident we saw earlier. "What was that back there?" "A skeleton under some oil." "No I didn't mean it literally..." "Well, all we can say is that it was a grave of some sorts." "Seemed more like a crime scene which had never been discovered to me." "Does it even matter what we think at this point? Shouldn't safety be our biggest issue currently?" "What do you suggest we do then? Hike down the mountain and leave?" Silence followed afterwards. The fire went out and we all went into our own tents to rest for the night.

Approximately three hours into my deep sleep, I heard some weird noises and woke up immediately to see what had happened. There was nothing outside our tents. I went back inside my tent, but I stopped midway. There was a bonfire lit in the place where we found the oil and skeleton. I moved silently as if I merged with the darkness of the night so that whatever was nearby that fire wouldn't be able to spot me at a glance. What I saw in front of me both

terrified me and intrigued me. Shadows were dancing around the fire. I could make out a few words from the weird noises I was hearing, as if they were mumbling some sort of prayer. When I looked into the fire, however, I saw what we had seen during the incident: a skeleton-shaped thing covered in oil. It was burnt as fuel for the bonfire. A lump of meat was also hanging over the fire. It didn't catch my eye at first but then I saw its shape up close. The meat was a dead body, without its skeleton.

Now that the mystery had been solved, I persuaded my brain to calm down and sleep more until the morning came. And as expected, I didn't get a single second of sleep afterwards. A flood of questions poured out of my mind and yet I would never be able to find the answers. Luckily, I think only I was subjected to viewing the spectacularly odd ritual yesterday night and I hoped that this was true.

Morning finally came, everyone woke up, we had breakfast, then we hiked to the top of the mountain and headed down back to the base all within one day. My friends enjoyed this trip a lot and I could tell they were satisfied since they all had wide smiles on their faces, but on the contrary, a part of me died because of this hike and I would have nightmares forever after this trip to Huangshan.

The Fire of Hope

St. Rose of Lima's College, Yeung, Kenisha – 15

Fannis was just a normal rooster wandering around on a mountain in China by himself. He used to be taken care of by a human. Fannis had lived an uneventful life within the fence with other chickens in the mountain. He had sometimes checked out different objects like books the human left around on the ground. He hadn't understood much but the depictions of different creatures in the books were interesting. However, Fannis had been tired of living similar routines. So he had found a way to sneak out and marched into the unknown, into the world of endless possibilities.

One day, as Fannis was skipping around happily, he suddenly heard a 'crack' sound of a small branch snapping. He quickly dived for cover behind a bush. He heard footsteps of a mysterious creature and then it stopped. Fannis poked his head out cautiously. What he saw made him gape. The creature was absolutely fascinating.

The creature's side was facing him so it couldn't see Fannis. It wasn't extremely huge. But it had a size of a large dog. Its unique appearance got Fannis mesmerized. It had wood-like antlers with leaves and vines on them. It had the head of a bear. Its chest and belly fur were long while the fur on the other parts of its body were short and feathery. It had front legs of a wolf and back legs of a deer. It also had a lion's tail. The most intriguing thing about it was its wings. It had gigantic wings of a moth. The wings were translucent and it glowed slightly in blue. Its body was mostly light brown in colour.

Fannis leaned forward to take a closer look. However, the movement caused the leaves of the bush to rustle. There was a slight twitch of the creature's left ear. It growled threateningly and suddenly turned towards his direction. They both froze as they saw each other.

Fannis didn't dare to move. The silence stretched on for a bit. All of a sudden, the creature exclaimed, "I am so sorry! I didn't mean to scare you. I thought you were something else. Are you ok?"

Fannis was too shocked to say anything so he just nodded.

The creature stepped forward and gave Fannis a comforting smile, "It's ok. You can come out. I won't hurt you. My name is Thea. What's yours?"

Thea should be a female's name so Fannis just assumed it's a she. Fannis came out of the bush and replied hesitantly, "My name is Fannis."

After a while, Fannis began to relax around her. They started chatting and telling each other things about themselves. Fannis had never known he had been living on a magical mountain. He was glad that he had met Thea. They had quickly become friends.

Thea's eyes suddenly sparkled and said, "How about I bring you to see different parts of the magical mountains?"

Fannis sputtered, "What?"

Thea's antlers suddenly glowed and large vines shot out of the ground. Fannis stiffened when the vines picked him up. They were surprisingly gentle as they lowered Fannis on Thea's back. After the vines disappeared, her antlers stopped glowing.

Thea turned to look at Fannis. She smirked, "My main magical power is to control those vines. It's awesome, right?"

Fannis calmed his racing heart and agreed, "Very. But you should really stop startling me."

Thea replied with an amused smile, not sounding apologetic at all, “Sorry. I must’ve forgotten you get scared easily. So are you ready?”

Fannis thought for a while and bobbed his head, “Sure!”

Thea beamed, “Nice! I have already used a few spells to keep you safe on my back. So don’t worry. Now, off we go!”

Before Fannis could fully comprehend what Thea had said, Thea flapped her beautiful wings and they shot up into the sky at high speed. Fannis became very alarmed. His breath quickened and he shut his eyes in fear.

When Thea slowed down, Fannis still didn’t dare to open his eyes. He only opened them when he heard Thea’s voice saying, “You really should open your eyes. You wouldn’t want to miss this view.”

When Fannis calmed down a bit and saw the view, he gasped. He was very high up and the view of China’s magical mountains was truly breathtaking. The lower parts of the magical mountains wore a cloak of greenery, while some of their bare tops were scarfed and beribboned with snow. They were like great beats beneath thick blankets of white slumbering deeply as time goes by. The mist around some of the mountains made them look mystical.

Thea told Fannis which mountain was home to what types of magical creatures as she flew by them. Sometimes Thea would fly closer to the mountains to let Fannis have a clearer view of the habitats of different magical creatures.

Fannis loved the qilins’ mountain. That mountain had some lakes with sparkly water. The best thing about it was the waterfalls. The waterfalls were like a powerful silver dragon plunging down. They were magnificent. The qilins were also very kind to let them stay for a while.

When they were at qilins’ mountain, Fannis asked Thea, “What did you mistake me for before you found out that I am a chicken? You seemed to be ready for attack.”

Thea was silent for a few moments after she had heard Fannis’ question. Then she answered, “I thought you were the demon that has been terrorizing these mountains. But your eyes were not red like a demon’s so I realized you’re not it. That terrible demon has been draining magic from different magical creatures. A lot of us have died because of it.”

Thea lowered her eyes and said, “Dragons had been sent down from heaven to search the demon. But they hadn’t been able to find it. It has been about a thousand years. So they moved onto more important matters and stopped searching.”

Thea sighed, “The demon must be very smart to be able to hide from them. Demons should not be able to sense dragons’ magical signature as demons are not familiar with it. I have no idea how that demon can stay undetected for all these years.”

Thea looked up and saw Fannis’ expression. She knew that Fannis wanted to know more so she told him, “Hundred thousands of years ago, a seer bird prophesied that a fire of hope shall appear and the guardian chosen by the mountains will protect us. My elders told me that one day, a powerful and beautiful creature appeared and she proclaimed to be the guardian of the mountains.”

Thea’s eyes had become unfocused, as if she were staring inside of her memories of her story, “When I was born, the guardian had already been in the mountains for a few thousand years. The guardian was a nine-tailed fox. She had pure white fur and bright blue eyes.

“She could turn into mist and teleport to different mountains. She also had fire magical powers. The young creatures were very delighted when she made balls of fire dance around.”

Thea noticed Fannis had cocked his head to the side in a questioning manner. She chuckled, “Magic is all about intent. So there were no fire hazards.”

Thea’s smile faded slightly as she continued, “However, starting from around a few hundreds of years before she disappeared, I felt that she had been sad and angry. Maybe she had a feeling that something bad was going to happen and she might not be able to stop it. Then she went missing. Dead bodies drained of their magic started to appear.”

Fannis headbutted Thea’s side comfortingly and said, “The guardian is missing but that doesn’t mean she is dead. I’m sure she will turn up one day.”

“I hope so,” Thea turned to Fannis. “We’ve been staying here long enough. Let’s go to my magical mountain that belongs to my kind, the hybritas.”

Thea once again secured Fannis on her back and flew off. Fannis enjoyed being in the air. He wished that one day he could miraculously be able to fly on his own.

Fannis and Thea finally landed on her mountain. Thea let Fannis down. Fannis looked at his surroundings curiously. There were lots of trees around them and the trees were stunning. The trees were all glowing slightly in blue, like the colour of Thea’s wings.

Suddenly, a voice yelled, “Thea! You’re alright!”

Thea and Fannis looked behind them and saw a larger hybrita with impressive looking antlers running towards them. The hybrita’s eyes scanned Thea’s body as if it was searching for injuries and it relaxed slightly when it found none.

The bigger hybrita proceeded to berate Thea. It turned out that the other hybrita was Thea’s brother, Theo. Another hybrita was missing and he was extremely worried when he couldn’t find Thea.

Then Theo insisted that Thea came with him to find the missing hybrita on the other side of the mountain, without bringing the ‘dumb’ chicken. Thea glared at her brother when he said that.

Thea walked over to a small rock. She touched it with her paw. Then both her antlers and the rock started to glow. She levitated the rock towards Fannis. Thea proceeded to secure the glowing rock on Fannis’ right leg by wrapping it with vines. Fannis was very confused by Thea’s actions.

Thea said to Fannis, “This magic rock can alert me of your location. If you are in danger, think of the words ‘come help me’. It will alert me when you think of those words and when it senses your fear.”

Fannis was grateful. He nodded, “Thank you, Thea.”

Thea trotted to her brother’s side and they flew away together. As Fannis watched them go, He sighed. He was really looking forward to spending more time with Thea in her mountain. It was time to explore alone again.

As Fannis walked, he could see a white glow ahead. He walked towards its direction to investigate. Fannis walked past bushes quietly and got closer to the white glow. When he got close enough to see what it was, he almost fell down in shock. Fannis saw the white nine-tailed fox guardian in all her glory next to the pond right in front of him.

When Fannis had told Thea that the nine-tailed fox would turn up one day, he hadn’t known it would be this soon. The guardian’s back was facing him. So the fox couldn’t see him. Fannis thought it was time to make his presence known.

Fannis stepped forward and greeted, “Hello.”

When the huge nine-tailed fox turned around, Fannis instantly knew something was wrong. The fox's eyes were crimson red, nothing like the bright blue Thea described. She grinned at Fannis, showing her sharp teeth. Then Fannis saw something that made his blood run cold after the fox moved aside. There was a dead body of a hybrid next to the fox on the ground. Fannis was very alarmed by this. He immediately thought of the code words to activate the magic stone on his leg. Fannis had to stall the fox until Thea came.

The nine-tailed fox approached Fannis slowly. She wondered, "What is a little chicken like you doing here?"

Fannis ignored her question. Instead, he asked, "Why did you drain the hybrid's magic? Aren't you the guardian of the magical mountains?"

The fox looked at Fannis in surprise. She said with an unkind smile, "Interesting. What makes you think I am the one that drained it?"

Fannis answered bravely, "The fact that you haven't denied doing it yet."

The fox found Fannis' reply amusing. Then she said, "I had caused a commotion on the other side of this mountain to distract the hybrids. So I had let my guard down. I see now that it was a mistake."

The white fox circled Fannis and told him, "Since you are the first creature that caught me red-handed, I'll humor you and answer your questions."

Fannis kept a blank expression but he was actually cheering internally after he heard the fox's response. The nine-tailed fox likely needed a while to finish telling her story. Fannis could only hope Thea would come here before the fox was done talking.

Fannis listened as the nine-tailed fox told her story. He learnt that she used to live in heaven with other gods and legendary creatures. However, one day, the gods had decided to send her down and made her the guardian of the magical mountains. Other legendary creatures like dragons had been given tasks of exploring other realms while she had been given the most unimportant task.

The fox had believed that the gods dismissed her as weak. She had hated that. Therefore, she had rebelled against the gods. She had stopped following orders given by them. She had stopped acting nice on the mountains. She had only started draining creatures' magic as a rebellious act. But she had become addicted to it ever since.

She used to live in heaven so she was familiar with all dragons' magical signatures. She would teleport away as soon as she sensed them. Her magic was no longer pure and she had turned into a demon.

When the white fox had finished telling her story, Fannis was panicking. Thea should be here by now. Where was she?

The nine-tailed fox leaned forwards and her large head was in front of Fannis. She bared her teeth and said, "Now that you know the full story. I can't let you live to tell the tale, can I?"

At that moment, Fannis did the first thing he could think of. He jumped on the fox's face and pecked both her eyes out. The red-eyed fox let out a howl of agony. She flung Fannis away with force and put a paw against her bloodied face. She growled with malice.

A voice shouted, "Fannis!"

Thea flew down to help Fannis up. When she noticed the bloodied fox, there were instantly hundreds of questions forming in her head. However, she readied her magic vines to attack instead.

The nine-tailed fox was annoyed and mad as she sensed a magical newcomer. The fox couldn't see but she could still sense magic with her sixth sense. So she could sense the location of the hybrita and the stone on the rooster's leg. She aimed and shot her fire balls rapidly towards her targets.

Thea quickly noticed her magic powers were not very useful in this situation as the fox's fire burned through her vines immediately. Fannis and Thea were separated. Both of them could only dodge.

It was at this moment, Fannis saw a huge fireball was hurled towards Thea. There was no way she could dodge that. Fannis ran with the speed of light and hit her out of the way. Thea screamed as the fire ball hit Fannis instead and he was burnt into ash.

When Fannis woke up, he discovered that his surroundings were white as snow except the golden dragon in front of him. Fannis asked cautiously, "Mister Dragon, what is happening? Am I dead?"

"Currently, yes," the dragon hummed. "But you will not remain so. The magical mountains have made an interesting choice."

Before Fannis could ask more, the world around him started to fade and he felt himself begin to change.

Thea tried to dodge as tears rolled down her face. Fannis died to save her. She would not let his sacrifice be in vain.

All of a sudden, Fannis' ashes glowed a bright yellow. The ashes swirled up and turned into a glorious red bird. This scene distracted both Thea and the fox. The bird in the air let out a trill that warmed Thea's heart. But the trill didn't seem to have the same effect on the fox. The fox dropped onto the ground and thrashed in pain when she heard it. Then both the bird and fox burst into flames. The bird remained calm the whole time while the fox screamed loudly. The fox seemed to become smaller and she became unconscious. After that, the flames were gone. The bird landed.

The bird said, "Hey, Thea."

Thea recognized the voice and gasped, "Fannis! Is that you?"

Fannis nodded, "Apparently, the magical mountains have chosen me as the guardian. I was given this new body after I died. I can also hear the mountain's whispers. They taught me how to use my powers to purify the nine-tailed fox. Now her mind, body and magic are pure. She has been reduced back to the state before the start of her hatred. She is now just an innocent creature without the memories of her past evil doings."

Thea was too shocked to say anything.

Then, the golden dragon descended from the sky. The dragon went to Fannis and said, "You have become an entirely new immortal magical species. The gods decided to honor you by naming your kind by your name. What is your name, guardian?"

Fannis answered, "It's Fannis."

"Your name is Phoenix?"

"Uh—"

"If there will be more of your kind, they shall be phoenix," the dragon smiled.

Before Fannis could correct the dragon, it carried the unconscious fox and flew away. Fannis sighed. Thea only laughed at him.

Since that day, Fannis the phoenix had become the guardian of the magical mountains in China. He would protect creatures in the mountains from any harm. Fannis also used telepathy to talk to the human that once took care of him. The human surprisingly treated him with great amount of respect when they met. Little did Fannis know, the human published a book called 'Tales from China's Magical Mountains' when the human had returned to civilization.

The magical mountains in China were once again filled with joy. Fannis had become their fire of hope and would remain so forever.

Precious Treasure

STFA Leung Kau Kui College, Chan, Suen Kei Norelle – 15

A bright sunny day with a cold breeze in March. The sun was shimmering above the mountain of mysteries, Huang Shan, so brightly that we could only see the outline of it. It was as far as we could not reach closer to the sky. The mist was shrouded in the mountain, just like a bride covered with her veil but her own beauty was still conspicuous. We could not really recognize which part was the sky or mountain as they were fused into one. How we could describe it was a beautiful, breathtaking and mysterious painting.

Once under the cryptic mountain, there was a small village where the Wong's lived. Yat Hei, the curious and joyful little boy who was sitting on the floor, listening to his Mama's "ancient stories". "Long time ago, the Yellow emperor was trying to find a treasure....." "A treasure?" Yat Hei asked with his eyes wide. "Yes, a TREASURE," Mama said lightheartedly. "A treasure that can cure all kinds of sickness and live for ages long," she continued. Hearing the arcane story of Huang Shan, Yat Hei was so excited and eager to get it a ride and find the treasure.

When Yat Hei woke up in the next morning, he could not wait to rushed for his adventure. Seeing that Yat Hei was extremely impatient to wait for the adventure of the mountain of mysteries, Mama started to worry about him, "My dear, I have to remind you something before you set off for your journey. There might be something that you really like or you are willing to get it, have it or even take it away, please don't try to take risk on it, or else you will definitely feel regarded. And remember what I've told you, it's just a STORY, it can't be true," Mama said thoughtfully. Yat Hei did not really pay attention to his Mama's warning, instead, he started packing up his things for his fantasy journey.

At the bottom of that hilly misty mountain, Yat Hei looked above the long stairs along and the lush scenery around which made him felt placid and delighted. As he was climbing up, he started to see things blurrily. Clouds were twisting and spiraling, roads became more tortuous, trees were turning upside down. Everything was spinning around him. Very soon, he fainted.....However, he did not realize that he fell asleep. Instead, he felt himself still climbing up the mountain with each step getting lighter and lighter like floating. Soon, he met an old man who was waving at him with an amiable smile with a white deer beside him. Yat Hei felt so familiar that he thought the old man could lead him to the hidden treasure. He kept refreshing his memories of the story of Huang Shan which his Mama told him. "It was the Yellow emperor!" he shouted out loud when he saw the napkin he found next to his backpack, which his Mama had given him. So he followed the old man securely, hoping that he would help Yat Hei find the treasure. Walking along the tortuous road and passing through layers of mist, Yat Hei could not see anything, just like he was trapped in a white sealed jar which was full of marshmallow.

Rubbing his eyes, he saw a brand-new world. Willows grew everywhere along the path but they were not as tall as the ones on the mountain. Flowers were vivid in colors and formed a floral sea. When Yat Hei was walking forward, he saw birds flying above him and deer walking around. Following the sound of a pounding of the waterfall, there was a calm and perfectly transparent lake. Yat Hei was overwhelmed and he found the old man was missing. Neither he felt scared nor lost, Yat Hei started to search for the treasure immediately. Looking for every brownish and rough stone with a napkin on it. Jumping into the lake and running through the thick growth of grass until he saw a piece of white cloth. "I found it, I found it!" he repeated excitedly. When he was about to catch it, it turned out the white cloth was just a white rose petal. He did not understand what had happened and started questioning himself, "Why could I not find the treasure? Doesn't it work as the story does? Should I crack the stone with an axe and get my treasure?" he whispered to himself.

Suddenly, he heard a sweet and familiar voice. "Beloved one, how have you been?". It was his mother who passed away for years. Feeling so surprised, he could not even say a word. Yat Hei smiled cheerfully and gave his mother a big hug. They laughed and chatted while finding the treasure together. Visiting this fantasy world, they ran and chased each other as if playing hide-and-seek. YatHei was the seeker, he called his mother out loud, "Mum—mum". He had never felt so happy. When he finally saw his mother and attempted to touch her hands, he found himself grabbing air instead of her hand. He realized that it was just a dream. "Beloved one, it's fine to let yourself

live in your dreams. Staying with me, you can feel pleased without getting back to the cruel reality.” Mother said softly. Yat Hei was struggling between staying with his mother or going back to his home. He knew that his mother had gone. All of these were just a reflection of his memories and his love for her. Although many of us would choose to live in this wildest dream. Certainly, Yat Hei could not resist it. But the chance to discover more things in reality was more valuable to him. More importantly, he wanted to stay with his Mama. “Life and death would never exist in the same world,” Yat Hei murmured in his mind. Starting from the moment he could not touch her hands, he understood no matter how hard he would try, he could never live with his mother. After all, it is just a dream. Therefore, Yat Hei decided to go back home.

Once he had decided, he woke up from his wonderful dream and started to walk back home. Although he did not feel as happy as the time he spent with his mother, he felt homey and full of warmth on his way home. Looking at his backpack, he realized that the old man wanted to let him know the treasure he had been searching for, was not the same as the Yellow emperor’s. It was the warmth and love that his Mama has given and the life-affirming future waiting for him to discover. And so when he arrived home, his Mama asked curiously, “Have you found any treasures?” Yat Hei cuddled his Mama tightly and said gracefully, “Yes, I found the most precious treasure of all.”

The Miracles in the Mountain

STFA Leung Kau Kui College, Tso, Chin Yu Edith – 15

Below the floating clouds, cold brume, it was the place where Zhang Chuen was born — the Yellow Mountain. It was the most sacred place he could ever think of, derived from a word — mysterious.

Zhang Chuen was called the son of mountain. His late mother told him that he was born and taken to the mountain. His name, Chuen, literally meant snowy water in Chinese. There was a saying called *rather belittle mountain, never belittle water*. He thought the mountain was the best haven for him, far away from the raging torrent and certainly those devious ministers around the emperor. People could not find him, thinking of him dying. Yet he was actually watching everyone on earth from the top-down perspective, just like God.

Staying and thinking of reaching the state of solitude one day, Zhang Chuen needed not to deal with relationship, and he enjoyed that kind of life — enclosing himself with the world. Although he had heard that the poets loved to live on the mountain, he was not interested in searching for their footprints. They might have the same reason as Zhang Chuen. The mountain was said to be the foundation of imagination and the closest place to heaven.

He was thinking about the meaning of his life...

He lived in a little secluded hut in the mountainside. He had seldom stepped out of the hut. He just went out for food and quickly returned to his hut, hardly making any contact with the world and even other people in the mountain.

The view of the Yellow Mountain was a paradise. Breathing the thinner air and enjoying the limitless greenery, everything was pure and natural.

After he finished the washing up and the meal, he decided to go out for a random walk to discover what was new on the mountain. He had seen the mysterious old man for some days. Zhang Chuen hadn't heard him saying a word and he was probably a newcomer to Yellow Mountain. Not knowing his intention to the mountain, he carefully observed this gentleman. He was wearing ordinary clothes, nothing fancy. The old man seemed to have discovered Zhang Chuen standing behind him. He turned to Chuen at a slow and steady pace.

'You look like my son.'

The old man rumbled, without even looking at him for a second. Chuen was astounded. It was the first word that Chuen had heard from the old man. The old man soon stood up and left, leaving no time for Chuen to react.

'What should I call you?'

Chuen yelled, being slightly impatient. However, he couldn't get any responses but just saw him leaving, not even waving, until he disappeared from his sight.

Life on the mountain was just the same every day. Repeating the whole set of action and routine, watching the sunrise and sunset, but only by himself. Since his mother had passed away, no one shared the same feeling and the same heartbeat with him. The only thing that Chuen valued was that he could enjoy the incredible scenery by himself. No one was there to compete for the blue sky and fresh air with him. Chuen was standing on the vast ground, embracing the state of being peaceful and mindless in mind while watching the breath-taking nature.

'Man, life is hard huh.'

The old man suddenly appeared from his left side. He came from somewhere and sat next to Chuen. It seemed like this ground in the mountain had become the meeting place belonging to both the young man and the old man. The old man was carrying bottles of alcohol, his view of Chuen and the bottles, showed that he was inviting Chuen to drink. Chuen picked one of the drinks, not hesitated to speak a word.

'Life isn't hard on the mountain, life is hard if only you live for yourself.'

The old man sipped a mouthful and answered, *'Not really, you are living only, when you live for yourself.'* The man swallowed hard and spoke, *'I am Zhang Shan. I used to be a poet, writing to meet the expectation of my friends and parents. Being a friend of Li Bai and Du Fu, my parents expected me to write great work like them and offered a post in the imperial empire, but I just could not. Desperately, my dad sent my wife and son somewhere, in order to force me to write wholeheartedly. I was given a picture of my son drawn by my wife on my son's 20th birthday and that was all.'*

'But why are you here though? Getting inspiration for your poems?'

'I am tired of being oppressed and forced to work in the imperial empire. I decided to live in Yellow mountain so that no one was there to check my writing progress. Young man, life is hard. You must encounter different obstacles or even oppression. When you truly live for yourself, expressing through writing —that's the meaning of life.'

Zhang Chuen fell into deep thoughts. *'I was raised up by my late mother alone and I'd never known who my father was. I thought life with one person was the greatest thing in the past but now I am afraid that I was born alone and die alone. I understand your feeling of losing the chances to live with your beloved. I also wonder why I am the chosen one without a father.'*

'Young Man, there are things that we can't control. When I am able to free myself from others' expectations, I realise that my greatest dream is not writing great poems, I just want to find my family and live a happy life. Life is harder than you thought huh.'

The old man looked at the sky. A silence fell on the mountain, this moment simply stopped for them. Maybe what meant for life wasn't a big deal anymore. The Yellow mountain had a magical power to allow people to reflect a lot upon themselves and their lives as well as issues that really related to them. Not contaminated by the pollution and the darkest side of humans, the mountain remained the purest paradise for them.

It was the sixth day for him not seeing the old man since the day they had shared their life stories. To Zhang Chuen, the old man entered his life and had become something important that he really cared about. Conversing with the old man seemed to have become his new meaning of life. He didn't experience the feeling of being a son and tried to treat the old man like his biological father (the old man taught him morals was like what a father supposed to do). He went to the vast ground on the top of the mountain every day and tried to meet the old man. However, the old man had disappointed him from time to time. He thought the old man had left the Yellow Mountain already. Being slightly disappointed, when he stood up and about to go back to his hut, he heard a voice behind.

'We have met for some time but I still haven't known your name. What's your name, young man?'

Zhang Shan suddenly appeared in the opposite direction. He was treating Chuen as his real friend.

'Zhang Chuen,' he stayed and replied.

'You are Zhang Chuen? My son is also called Zhang Chuen!!' Zhang Shan was amazed, his voice was shaky. His eyes were filled with tears of joy.

'You are my dad?'

'No wonder you look so familiar with the drawing of my son that my wife sent to me. You already are!!'

Knowing the one standing in front of him was his father, Chuen was too shocked to react. He struggled. He crumbled. He giggled. He went silent.

It took some days for Chuen to evaluate over his relationship with the old man. The man he admired was also the one who abandoned him. He was raised alone by his mother and he would just claim that he had no father. As a matter of fact, he was quite delighted to have found his father eventually but he was not ready to accept a father in his

life. Anyways, he thought that the old man was correct, life was really hard—but he decided to go through it with the one he loved.

He decided to step out of the hut and find the old man, to be exact, his father. When he stepped out of the hut, he saw Zhang Shan, who was also trying to find him at the spot.

Not waiting for Zhang Chuen to speak, Zhang Shan expressed his feelings right after he arrived at the hut, *'I know you find it hard to accept the truth. But I am always your father who wants to repair our relationship. I originally went to Yellow Mountain to find a new quiet life, but I occasionally find my son. Maybe the great God had heard my wish.'*

Zhang Chuen was moved, he gave him a big hug.

'Father I miss you so long.'

They decided not to leave the mountain, the place where they belonged. Zhang Chuen's life remained the same, the only difference was that he was not lonely anymore. He lost his mother and he no longer want to lose his father anymore. His dad had missed lots of prominent moments to witness the growth of Zhang Chuen but it didn't matter anymore. They could spend the rest of their life together in the Yellow Mountain, the mountain full of mysteries and miracles.