



# Fiction

Group 5

# Huang Shan

*American International School, Cheung, Ophelia – 16*

In this prosperous society, we still couldn't find the vaccine for the infectious virus. As I am a very active person, I wouldn't like to stay at my house, plus it's spring break. I was supposed to enjoy and relax, so I decided to go on a trip with my friends to Yellow Mountain since we all lived in Huangshan City which was named after Yellow Mountain in Chinese. Huang Shan is one of the most well-known mountains in China. It was known for the natural scenery such as the extraordinary shapes of the granite peaks, the view above the clouds and Huangshan pine trees which are also called *Pinus hwangshanensis*. I can feel the fascinations from other's opinions about the wonderful Huang Shan. How dare I if I don't visit in my life at least once? Due to the contagious virus, there should be no one visiting Huang Shan. Therefore, there will be no distractions when we take pictures and hike. What is better than this opportunity to reveal the true face of Huang Shan?

I called out my friends, Hua, Fai and Jie. We have been friends ever since elementary school. We all lived in a neighbourhood and played along with each other until now. Everyone is working hard to finish their assignments from online university and we barely even contact each other. I texted in the group chat:

“Hey guys! It's spring break time! Do you guys want to go to Huang Shan? The mountain that was described by Xu Xiake ‘You don't need to see any more mountains after seeing ‘the Five Mountains’ and you don't need to see ‘the Five Mountains’ after seeing Huang Shan’. Climbing Huangshan is as beautiful as the famous ‘the Five Mountains’ in China. As a citizen of Huangshan city, it would be a shame if we don't go there once in our life.”

After three days, we met at Huangshan Railway station and waited for the bus that would drive us to Yellow Mountain Scenic Area Bus Station. As we were waiting, Jie was leaning on Fai's shoulder and her arms were wrapped around his left arm. I never knew I came here for the shine from couples. At the same time, Hua was staring at me. It's a little bit awkward so I faked a cough.

Meanwhile, we arrived at the foot of the mountain. As I predicted, no one was there. We were just going wherever the road led us to, the hotels are still open and they don't need to book because there aren't people going there.

The first thing we saw was stairs. The endless stairs looked like it's taking us to a place that we could never see. To an unknown place and future. Just like life. We managed to keep it at a slow pace while Jie started to whine in the mid-way. “I shouldn't have come, Fai! I am letting all of you down. I haven't done any workout for the past years. What do you expect from me? Running on the stairs like Hua?” Jie said it with such impolite tone. Fai comforts her, “Babe! We didn't expect you to do anything, but just stop talking. You are going to waste energy.” Jie shuts up immediately and continues to walk. We took a break when we got to the first point on the map that I took from the bus previously. The Bright-Top Peak. The signature of this place is the ball and the weather centre next to it. We were still doing fine at this point except Fai have to comfort Jie all the way along. I wasn't tired at all because I am super excited to see this wondrous place.

We continued after 20 minutes of break. As I was walking up, I started to speed up as well as Hua. I am just so passionate about this place. The road started to get more steeper and steeper. The floor was more moisturised as I went higher and higher. I soon got led to a forest where the Huang Shan Pine tree is standing by itself between the clouds and the floor. It stares down the floor. Overlooking all of its friends down the mountain. Transferring greetings from the clouds and let the message moisturise its friends down there. The message is not complex, is just a simple, “How are you?” All the trees are competing against each other for height and strength. But this one is different. It's the leader out of all of them. While I was appreciating the trees, I realised only Hua was behind me. I asked her, “Where is everyone else?” She didn't know. She was just following me. After I visit the leader of the tree. I started to move on, to an even higher point.

My thighs were becoming heavier and heavier through each step. My shoulder was sending signals through my axon into my brain. Begging me to stop straining them, but my passion knocked them out of my brain. My sight started to

grow more dim as each step was taken. It was the time I knew, even though my determinant was strong enough, my body was refusing it. I need to take a rest. Hua was still behind me. Her face was super pale. I ran and checked on her. Her face was getting more pale and pale which wasn't great. I took out a candy and gently fed it in her mouth. She was feeling way better afterwards.

The sky was getting darker and darker. I realise I was too impulsive. Should've plan better with the time and locations. I am okay with staying outside but I brought Hua into this. I needed to keep her safe because she was the only person next to me now. We tried to walk for a little bit more. Suddenly, a whip of wind slapped our faces. It was brutal and cold. We opened our eyes and saw there was a house not far away. I decided to go check it out. Maybe there were people living there who could let us stay for a night.

The house was in ancient Chinese style. It seems to be made out of dried mud, rough stone and wood. The house was lifeless. It was dark and the window was made out of the special polychrome eye beads. It is surrounded by tall dead grasses. To be honest, I really didn't want to touch that door but I must do it with the sake of Hua. I knocked on the door gently and asked, "Hello~Is there anyone?" Silence responded to my question. I pushed the door slowly as the door started to scream like I tore its soul apart. The room was dark. I turned on my torch and used a match to light up the candles in the room. Hua discovered something, "Hai, look at this! There were writing brush, ink and paper here along with wooden seats and desks. These are so pretty." I looked over to Hua. She looked super happy and excited on these objects. Her cute face was melting my heart. She focused on the corner of the house where tremendous amount of dead grass was there. She pushed aside the grass and kneeled down. The way she treated everything so serious made me fall in love with her. She read the words out loud:

昨夜誰爲吳會吟，風生萬壑振空林。  
龍驚不敢水中臥，猿嘯時聞巖下音。  
我宿黃山碧溪月，聽之卻罷鬆間琴。  
朝來果是滄洲逸，酤酒醜盤飯霜慄。  
半酣更發江海聲，客愁頓向杯中失。

It was one of the poems called, "夜泊黃山聞殷十四吳吟" from Li Bai. Describing his mood when he was living in HuangShan. He was listening to the sound of the forest. He released stress from his life by sitting in front of the lake in HuangShan. Listening to the music composed by the forest and drinking alcohol along with snacks.

The words really made me wonder where this house came from. I remembered that it wasn't there before the harsh wind splash on us. I didn't care that much, but as long as there are no one in the house, it would be fine for us to stay for a night. While I was still thinking about the house on the bed next to Hua, my eyes slowly closed.

Hua woke me up the next morning. She started to make assumptions about the house. There were a lot of words written on the wall, but somehow the desk are very neat and tidy. My fingers slides along the table as I walked around it. Everything was art. I touched the hard desk, smell the paper, sense the softness of the writing brush with my eyes closed. I picked up the writing brush and swunged it in the air like I was writing something. All of the sudden, a power shoots out of the brush. A dash of wind swirled up together. Then it was gone but a person was here which scared Hua a lot. She ran with her little short legs towards me and wrapped her arms tightly on my waist. The person saw us frozen up, he said, "Yay! Finally someone released me from the brush. Thank you so much you young men." I couldn't react to what he is saying. My mind went blank. He laughs, "Are you guys that scared? Well, right. I needed to introduce myself better. My name is Li Bai and I was a poet." Li Bai. The poet Li Bai. What on earth am I seeing? A person that lived in more than a thousand years ago. Is current talking to me? Not only I was surprised. Hua felt the same. She letted go of me and walked in front of Li Bai, then asked, "How do we trust you that you are really Li Bai? How is that possible? Do you have any prove? And why are you here? Did you make this house? Why are you in the brush?" Wow, right. Hua kept her sanity while facing this unreal situation. Li Bai said, "Wo! Wo! Wo! Young Lady! Calm down! I will answer your questions." He came toward us and touched our heads. We closed our eyes as Li Bai's flashback played in our mind from his hand.

“About a thousand year ago, I went up to Huang Shan with my friend Du Fu. Back in the days, there was a plague. It lasted for a year. In order to protect ourselves, Du Fu suggested going to the unknown mountain. When we got here, we hiked and stopped here to build a house for us to live shortly or live as long as the plague was gone. We stacked the break one by one. When we finally finished, I realised we got in a very good place. The view above all the clouds. The clouds were moving like water all the time. It would be a little naughty sometimes to make us go blind and not see anything. But they performed their show for us every morning to watch. Letting the sun colour them. The trees were growing in the middle of air, in the middle of the hill, taking the risk of falling upon the 1800+ meters below. The trees were talking to the wind all the time, so I wrote the poem ‘夜泊黃山聞殷十四吳吟’ and carved it on the wall. My hot spring spa friends were kind enough to let me go into them. It was touching my skin gently. Healing all my wounds that I made from going up the mountain.”

We were speechless after listening to what he said. The exact reason that leads me to Huang Shan. We were both fascinated by the magical and unearthly elements of HuangShan. Then I asked, “Why are you in the brush?” He took a moment and said, “Because I really liked the calmness of Huang Shan and I think it would be the best place to live in, so I led my soul to here but then I just didn’t have enough strength to become a god. Now I was just a fairy. I was playing Hide-and-seek with other fairies. I got no place to hide so I hid inside the pen. I couldn’t get out, so here I am.” It was very interesting to know about the story Li Bai but then we got to go down to find our friends. Before anything had being said, another man came in and said, “Oh my gosh! Is it really you Bai? I missed you so much!” “Hello~Fu.”

They eventually started a conversation. During their talks, I could tell Li Bai and Fu is a pair which was kind of cute. At this moment, I decided to tell Hua how I felt about her. We both turned to each other and said, “I’ve got something to tell you!” I let her go first. “Hai! I’ve followed you everywhere since we were children. You were always special in my heart. I don’t want to be friends anymore. I want more than that. I want to be your girlfriend, your wife, your soulmate. Are you willing to?” She said it with her cheeks as red as an apple. I held on to her face and leaned my head towards her. I kissed her juicy lips. We stared at each other and started to laugh. Bai and Fu were staring at us like weirdos but they were too. I asked them kindly to lead the way down, so we can find Jie and Fai.

Bai and Fu didn’t just lead us down. They sent us to Fai and Jie. Before we left them, Fu said “Thank you so much for saving him out of the brush. I was searching for him super hard. I wish you two a great marriage.” We bid farewell to them as Hua’s tears were dropping. I was concerned about it but turns out she cried because the couple was too cute.

When Fai and Jie saw us, Jie was trying to complain but then they were shocked by Hua and I holding hands. Fai asked, “Since when did this happen?” Before I said anything, Hua answered “No one can fall in love except for you two?”

Fai explained that Jie sprained her ankle. Therefore, they couldn’t catch up to us. They went to the hotel for the night. Hua and I didn’t want to tell them what actually happened so we lied and said we went to the upper mountain hotel. We ended the HuangShan trip with an abundance of unforgettable memories.

### Many years later

It was Hua's 70th birthday. I wanted to surprise her, so I took her to Huang Shan blindfolded. She didn’t remember much about it since she was diagnosed with Dementia at the age of 60, but then she smiled and said, “Let’s visit Bai and Fu!” I almost cried my tears out. She remembered! She remembered! A snapshot was taken. The moment lasted forever.

## Happier Through Ignorance

Bubbles! The spheroidal iridescent figures, ethereal, yet earthly; transparent; yet encapsulating the colours of the rainbow; flimsy, yet flamboyantly flying all around, have always fascinated Yuan. There is something irrefutably interesting about bubbles. Is it the wind that lifts and carries the bubbles or do they have invisible wings to fly? Parks seemed to have them in abundance, thanks to the bubble gun vendor whose business is thriving because of an over-excited group of children. Yuan is unable to keep his excitement at bay, his legs shaking uncontrollably as he watches a little girl blow into her bubble maker. Her small cheeks balloon up with air before she exhales sloppily into the soapy wand, releasing a trail of tiny bubbles. The girl huffs in disappointment as the bubbles crash to the ground immediately. Mirroring her dismay, he observes as the child takes in another big breath of air and blows into the stick in her hands. She fails yet again. Yuan grips the bench underneath him. He shakes his head, his long brown hair falling sloppily all over his face. He looks up, tucks a few strands behind his ear and waits as the girl blows into the bubble maker for the third time. Her perseverance is rewarded. A giant bubble leaves the yellow stick. It successfully lifts off, making him clap in amusement.

Yuan jerks up from where he was sitting and hastily runs to the bubble. Seeing a tall stranger run towards her, the little girl shrieks and runs away. In a few seconds, Yuan gets to the bubble, and lets out a happy giggle. His eyes focus on the sphere, its walls made of a thin soapy liquid. The incredibly fragile figure reflects and refracts the sunlight that hits its surface, and as it floats about, it slowly but steadily starts descending to the ground. Realizing this, Yuan begins to whimper in disbelief, his heart shattering at the thought of this bubble reaching the ground and meeting its end. To stop it, he tentatively puts his cupped hand forward in an attempt to catch the bubble as it falls. However, when the bubble touches his hand, it pops, leaving a small thin circle of soap on Yuan's hand. When he realizes what had happened, he brings his hand up to his face to examine it, staring at the calloused and slightly soapy hand in front of him.

Letting his hands drop down to his side, Yuan looks up in defeat at the sky. Above him, he sees a clear blue sky littered with just a few clouds, and the calm canvas soothes him. He looks back down to the scene at the playground and spots more little kids blowing bubbles near him. His mouth stretches into a big goofy smile, and his eyes search for the little girl he saw earlier. He runs up behind her. As he was a lot taller than the child, Yuan squats down and politely taps her on the shoulder. The little girl whips around, her bangs too long for her face and her smile drops.

"M...more b-bubbles for me?" Yuan asks the girl. When she doesn't respond, he repeats his question.

"More b-bubbles?" he asks, his neck twitching to the side as he stutters. The girl stares at Yuan, closely examining his face and experimentally mirrors his twitch, not to mock but to understand. A woman then calls out a name, and the little girl turns around and runs away, leaving him alone. He reluctantly stands back and jitters uncomfortably, his neck twitching to the side again.

His eyes follow the little girl as she goes to her mother and hides behind her legs.

"Mommy, what's wrong with that man?" says the little girl to her mom loudly, pointing at him and tugging at her skirt. The mother quickly shushes her but doesn't answer, continuing to gawk at Yuan, who averts his attention from the two. Discouraged, he runs away. Like a child, his hands animatedly move around him as he sprints and reaches the bench. When he gets there, he touches his heart through his clothes, shrieking out loud when he can feel his pulse. He echoes the rhythm of his heart out loud, so loud that many people in the park take notice.

Yuan is oblivious to all the attention he's getting. A few people get their smartphones out and start recording him as he loudly mimics the sound of his heart. Once his heart beat slows down, Yuan huffs in disappointment and lets his arms rest. Disheartened, he collapses onto the bench, tipping his head back and closing his eyes. The harsh sunlight stings Yuan's eyes, so he brings up his hands, cupping them over his eyes, creating a blanket that brings darkness which lets him relax.

He stays seated for hours on end until the harsh sunlight mellows out around him, settling into a more pleasant orange. The temperature has dropped too, and Yuan's already thick jacket wasn't enough to combat the cold. Yuan

takes his hands away from his eyes. He gives his eyes a few moments to adjust, and when they do, he opens them comically wide and blinks continuously. He then looks around the park, and seeing no one else, he quickly stands up.

Amused at virtually everything, Yuan continues his journey through the park. Suddenly, he spots a map of the park, complete with a 'You are here' and a braille version of the plan. The braille map makes him giggle. He warms up his hands by blowing into them before placing them on the braille map and closing his eyes. He feels the plan, allowing his fingers to experience the different textures. He feels the little bumps throughout the surface, each signifying a landmark. He feels until his hands grow numb from the cold, and when it does, he opens his eyes in shock and rubs his hands together frantically to generate some heat.

Before he could walk off, he stops at the notice board next to the map and reads the different papers plastered on. One of them reminds the park goers that pets are not allowed inside the park. Another appries people that the bathrooms will be closed for a few days for renovation purposes.

But the notice that catches Yuan's attention is a colourful poster of the Huangshan Mountains. The mysteriously magical mountains in the poster catches Yuan's attention instantly. The advertisement seems to be showcasing a bungee-jumping hotspot high up the mountains.

"Y—you don't f—fall, you fly..." Yuan sounds the catchphrase on the poster out loud and immediately, his interest is piqued. Like a child, he jumps up and down frantically, unable to hide his excitement.

Clandestinely, he grabs the poster from the notice board, tearing the edges slightly. Regardless, the words, along with the beautiful picture of the Yellow Mountains, remain. Yuan stares at the piece of paper on his hand and smiles, pure joy taking over his face.

"I—I want to do this," he says out loud to himself. He looks around the park with a sheepish grin, and when he doesn't see anyone else, he shouts, much louder this time.

"I'm going to fly!"



That night, Yuan goes home and sees his mother, fast asleep. Taking his chance, he rummages through her room, finding the stash of cash she hides for emergencies. Before leaving the room, Yuan goes to his mother, gently kissing her forehead. He then leaves their home and heads straight to the subway station where he boards the next train to Huangshan.

Rubbing the sleepiness off his eyes, Yuan looks back at his disappointing 12-hour train journey. The train was way too loud, and he couldn't sleep for as long as he wanted to. Regardless, he was at Huangshan now, and his irritation dissipates. It was quite cold in the city but thankfully Yuan is prepared. He wore a huge parka jacket which easily engulfed his tall figure. Just then, a man approaches Yuan with a friendly smile.

"Welcome to Huangshan, would you like to join us for a one-day group tour? We go on an exciting trail up China's legendary Magic Mountains!"

Yuan's eyes sparkle at the mention of the Magic Mountains, and he digs into one of his pockets to pull up the crumpled piece of paper. Despite ecstatically approaching numerous people on the train ride and showing them the piece of paper, he was greeted with avoidance.

"Will you take me here?" Yuan asks the man, handing him the poster. The man squints his eyes and frowns at him.

“Oh, we can’t, unfortunately. But maybe you can come with our hiking group. About half-way through, I can show you the route to get to the bungee-jumping spot?”

Yuan agrees in an instant, nodding enthusiastically. The man hands him the poster and Yuan folds it up in a hurry before putting it into his pocket.

“Great, follow me, I’ll help you get set up,” he says and beckons towards him. Yuan follows suit, his heart racing. The man leads him to a van and shuffles around the compartments in front of the driver’s seat. He then pulls out a bundle of forms from the compartment and turns toward Yuan.

“Found it!” He walks to the seat where Yuan’s sitting quietly and sits adjacently.

“Here are the forms, just fill them out, and you have to pay ¥460 if you want the normal room when we reach the top or ¥560 if you want the deluxe room. It covers the trail, food and the bus rides!” He says, and Yuan’s knees start moving up and down from the excitement.

“P...pen?” Yuan stuttered out.

The man raises his eyebrows and eyes him cautiously, reaching to his pocket and taking a pen out. He hands it to Yuan who fumbles it around in his hand. The blue pen then drops onto the form, and he frowns. He picks it up again and positions it onto his right hand. Testing his hold on the pen, Yuan wiggles it around. Once it is stable, he starts filling the form out, voicing out as he writes, sounding each character. The man takes in a second to notice Yuan’s eccentricities. He seems to be pretty restless, and his neck twitches a little to the side. There’s somewhat of an innocent aura around Yuan, showing his excitement for trivial things without holding back. Of course, he does stutter quite often. The man guesses that Yuan is about thirty years old, a few years give or take. He’s quite tall, but the coat he’s wearing with the hood up seems to undermine his height.

Yuan takes his time with the form, occasionally glancing at the man only to see him staring at the other. Innocently, Yuan gives a toothy grin to the other, whose response isn’t as enthusiastic, but it’s a positive response nonetheless.

“D-Done!” Yuan yells out suddenly, scaring the other man who clutches his chest in surprise. Immediately, Yuan takes one of his hands and harshly slaps his own mouth, his eyes comically wide.

“Too l-loud,” he says. The man shakes his head to the side.

“No, it’s okay, you just caught me off guard,” the man says, and Yuan’s reaction changes completely, and he goes back to his bubbly self. He takes the form from Yuan’s hold and waits as Yuan fishes into his bag for his wallet. He then digs through and he seems to be quite loaded, his wallet almost overflowing with cash. Yuan takes out a ¥500 bill and hands it to the man.

“This should be enough, right?” Yuan asks. The man, without thinking, shakes his head.

“No, it’s actually ¥500 more,” he says.

“Oh, okay,”

Yuan pulls out another bill from his wallet and hands it to the man. The other regrets this immediately when he sees Yuan give in without any protest. But he takes the cash and safely stores it in his back pocket.

“Great, then...,” the man looks at the form, “Please just stay in this van for a little while, the others taking the hike along with you will join shortly,” he says and starts to shuffle towards the door of the bus. Just then, Yuan grabs his arm and quietly asks.

“Will you come b-back?” Yuan asks. Taken aback, the man clears his throat.

“Yes, I’ll be leading the hike,” Immediately, Yuan’s expression changes again, and he gives a large smile.

“O—Okay!” He says and lets go of the other’s arm.

The man walks out of the bus and leaves Yuan on his own. Yuan makes himself comfortable on the bus, shifting around his seat until he settles in a spot that doesn’t have anything poking at him. Later, he places his face at the window, and his jaw drops at his surroundings. He sees mountains all around him, so tall that he can’t make out where they end from within the bus. Curious as ever, he stands up in his seat and plasters his face against the window, trying to see the tip of the mountain, but lets out a disappointing groan when the added height doesn’t do anything else. As he breathes against the closed window, his breath starts fogging up against it. He grins at that instantly and takes his hands out from his gloves carefully. From there, he picks up the poster from one of his pockets and memorizes the three letters that excite him the most. He exhales more air onto the window and then uses his pointer to write down the words *fly* sloppily. Yuan smiles at himself when it’s done and lets out a content sigh, before sitting back down and letting his head rest on the cold glass. He shivers at first, but his cheeks slowly adjust to the cold, and he falls asleep with a smile on his face.



During the bus ride to the start of the hike, Yuan desperately tries to talk to different groups of people to gain companionship, but they all shun him away without much thought. The man who helped him register, Feng, moves next to Yuan when they get off the bus, and out of empathy or perhaps even guilt tells him that he would be his companion throughout the hike. Yuan lets out the biggest grin he can muster, and jumps up and down in sheer delight.

Throughout the hike, Yuan stays close to Feng. Yuan isn’t extremely talkative, but Feng can tell that he appreciates company, like when he stops and tugs at Feng’s hands when he spots a house among the trees. He tries to communicate, but it often comes out in stutters and Feng has a lot of trouble understanding him. But, he would just nod along and smile, which was more than enough for Yuan.

To Yuan, the Yellow Mountains are the most beautiful things he’s ever seen. They are like waves of a mighty ocean, sandwiched between a clear blue sky and the earth below. Patches of bare rock peaked through the dense forests, trees reaching high. These peaks stretched out as far as the eye could see, blurring into what seemed to be the edge of the world. Some of them were hidden by clouds, adding to the beauty sprinkled with a little mystery.

Weeds grow through the cracks in the trail’s concrete stairs, their stems straining forward to get sunlight. A bright red flower catches his attention. Yuan, curious as ever, stops in his tracks, reaching forward to touch the flower. He reaches forward to touch the flower and feels its soft petals on his fingertips. It’s unbelievably smooth, almost velvety. He then sees the flower slowly glimmer and his eyes widens. Yuan tugs at Feng next to him, pointing.

“What?” Feng asks.

“S—sparkly” Yuan answers and the other raises his eyebrows and looks at the flower. He tries to see some sort of glitter but finds none. He tells Yuan to continue on with the hike and he reluctantly lets go of the flower and looks ahead.

At one rest—stop, Feng turns to Yuan and gives him the directions to go to the bungee—jumping spot, reminding him to follow the map and look at the directions. After listening carefully, Yuan gives a final grin to Feng before separating from the rest of the group. He trails on, by himself, stepping on each stair with newfound excitement, realizing that soon, he’s going to live his dream. It takes a few more hours of hiking. Yuan’s legs almost give out, but he persists. The blue sky around him turns into a dull mix of orange and pink, and he stops at a precipice. He looks to his right to see another set of beautiful mountain ranges extending through the horizon. Not far, he sees the bungee—jumping spot, and with a gasp, he realizes that it matches the view from the poster.

He immediately pulls up the crumpled up poster in his pocket, opens it and compares the view. Right in front of him are the exact mountains he had spent hours staring at, standing magnificently. The top of the peak glimmers like a



diamond, much like the flower he saw earlier. Yuan shrieks in delight, whilst giggling at his luck. Swiftly, he steps away from the hiking trail, holding on to the trunk of a tree nearby to keep him steady. He voices out the poster again to himself.

“You don’t f–fall, you fly” he stutters out. Yuan looks at the poster again and sees the person jumping down the bridge, a harness surrounding their legs and a smile on their face. He then folds up the poster and stores it inside his pocket safely. He takes a deep breath, spreads his arms out like wings, and leaps forward.

Yuan enjoys every moment, until his ignorance blissfully kills.

Straw sandals press on soft moss, as the cool morning mist layers on the endless fields of rice. The paddies undulate like the ridges of a dragon's back. Seated on the mountain-top, I gaze at the orange glow.

“This is where you went.” Xue wheezed. “Come down, we have to tend to the farms.”

Ignoring Xue's beckoning, I sit entranced by the sound of soft winds weaving through the fine mist.

Named after the first snow that blessed these mountains on the night of his birth, Xue lived up to his name with his snowy white skin. He skips down the mountain, I smile at him and begin running.

“Not so fast!” he shrieks as we run against the wind, laughing our way to the boundless expanse of rice below.

Tossing a basket at Xue I haphazardly trudge into the rice paddies. Cold water rushed over the top of my feet, my straw sandals soaked and sticking to the mud below. The coldness is a shock at first, but my skin quickly adjusts to the sensation. I bend to pick the first stalks of rice to begin the long months of harvest before winter. Xue joins me a moment later, grinning from ear to ear as we race down the field. Our feet know the paths better than our eyes, every stone ridge as familiar as the thatched tiles above our homes. I skip over a twisted root out of habit, but I am no match for Xue, the reigning champion of our weekly races.

“It seems I win again!” taunts Xue, as he hops around victoriously.

I just smile, laying my stalks on the large racks to dry. Leaving his empty basket, Xue lays on the stone pavement, warmed by the soft golden rays of sunlight. He looks sublime, basking in the delicate glow, his face illuminated by the slivers of sunlight that seeps through the mist.

There aren't many other children in the village. Situated high in the Huangshan mountains, our village encompasses a small area, surrounded by high cliff walls and rice fields. Due to the nature of this natural fortress, there are only two paths down the mountain. One was the main path. Only those honored by the gods were permitted to take the holy trek down the mountain. The elders consulted with the gods yearly to determine the blessed pilgrims. The other was a closed gate, barred by rough iron chains, rusted by the curse of time, forbidden. It stands, all imposing, and omnipresent. I glance at it as we pass, shivers snaking down my spine, in fear of what the door stands for—the eternal condemnation of the gods.

We arrive at the main village square, and I spot my mother in her woolen gown. I hug her from behind, cackling as I take two buns, and sneak back to where Xue was waiting. I toss him a bun, as I bite down on mine. The soft white flesh seeps into hands, still hot from the steam within the bamboo basket. We meander down the village paths. I watch Xue eat, his pearly white fingers shredding the bun apart with precise motions before he devours each piece.

He notices my staring.

“What?” he mumbles around a mouthful of bread, his delicate manners forgotten.

I shrug in reply.

Later on, we reconvene with the rest of the village children for our daily prayers. The elders stand before us, indistinguishable from the rest if it weren't for the heavy staff each elder carries, crafted from one of the sacred pines

that decorate our village. As always, our eyes follow the movement of the staff, enraptured by the legends our mothers whispered to us. Each pine carried the life—force, or the *Qi* of an ancient deity, and entrusted to us while they lounged in their heavenly homes. It was said that one of the heavenly kings, the Yellow Emperor, had once sacrificed his life to protect the life—forces of his subjects. Once he died, his pine shattered, and his body dissipated into mist, protecting us against the greed of power—hungry spirits. The staffs were crafted from his shattered pine, and bestowed upon the village elders as symbolic evidence of our duty.

The village elders smile warmly at us.

“Have you all completed your morning duties?”

“Yes,” we chorus obediently.

“Do you do your work with honor to the gods, to your fathers and mothers?”

“With honor to all and with honor to our elders,” we reply.

The elders finish the prayer with a sprinkling of freshly collected dew.

After the prayers, we gather around as a group, forming a natural circle around the village elders who murmur their words of wisdom to questioning villagers.

“Elder Huang, I am afraid I need help with my roofing again. Last night’s showers caused a small leakage in my abode,” Widow Mei speaks softly.

Widow Mei’s husband had died many years before my birth. Without a husband or a child of her own, we often tended to her needs. My mother had often encouraged Xue and I to visit her frequently with baskets of rice cakes, so that she may enjoy the company of children.

“My sincere apologies for your troubles, Widow Mei. I recall having sent someone to fix your roof only a lunar—cycle ago. Who among us has made this careless mistake?”

A hesitant hand went up. It was Wu, the young man who had taught Xue and I how to climb the slippery edges of the mountains when we were only fresh in our straw slippers.

“It was me, Elder Huang. Widow Mei, I am very regretful over my careless work. I will attend to your home with another brother who can properly instruct me.”

Widow Mei smiled gently. “It is not your fault, Wu. My home is situated high in the cliffs and is often the first to bear the showered blessings of the gods. Please come and I will share some of my freshly stewed mutton with your family. If you all may excuse me, I must now depart to prepare the dish for Wu.”

Widow Mei leaves the gathering, her dark hair shining with mist droplets before she fades out of view.

“Elder Huang, may we share some of the games my family has caught? We have an abundance, and we fear not every bow was blessed this morning,” another villager requests. In her hands she carries a wrapped up bundle, but

it is clear from the white feathers that peak through the opening that they are silver pheasants; birds sent from the heavens as a reward for our faithfulness.

I peek over at my mother, hoping to see any indication of her agreement. It is true that my father's bow had not been blessed in recent weeks, and it had been almost a lunar-cycle since I've tasted the sweet flesh of the silver pheasants. To my joy, she bows and accepts the game from the villager, throwing me a knowing smile.

After the sharing, Xue and I return back to the mountain top, seated at the edge of the cliff overlooking the village and the fields.

"I wonder what the gods see," I remark, "If it's already so beautiful from here".

I behold the view, Bluetails and redstarts chirp from the treetops, squirrels climb the evergreen trees. The leaves hang over the edges of the mountain, spread outwards as if they were peering down upon us.

"You know what, forget the holy pilgrimage. I don't see why anyone living here would prefer to leave," I admit bravely.

"Even if you were handpicked by the gods?"

"Even then. How could it be a holy pilgrimage if we must venture down? The gods watch us from the sky. If anything, we should be ascending."

Xue laughs in disbelief at my nonsense, knowing that I would be severely reprimanded if the elders were here.

"Let's play a game," says Xue suddenly.

"What game?"

"Hide and seek." he says with a mischievous grin, "You count to a hundred, while I hide—"

"I know how to play hide and seek!" I interrupt. "What are we, little sprouts again?"

Xue smirks, "Then start counting!" He shouts as he leaps down the mountain.

I close my eyes, and start counting, all the way to a hundred.

I open my eyes. To the rest of the world, it is as if no time has passed. Only Xue was gone.

I ran down the mountain, resolved to find my friend before the sun had set. I headed to the fields, looked in the sheds, checking under rocks and behind doors, but Xue was nowhere to be found. I run back, retracing my footsteps in hopes of finding him, but no such luck.

"I give up!" I shouted, "Come out!"

"Look up!"

I looked up above where I was standing, and there he was, perched like a silver pheasant atop the branches of the old pine tree. He looks down on me, standing in triumph over his victory.

“You can never beat me at anything!” laughs Xue,

“Alright then, come down” I laugh, in utter disbelief that he would hide in a tree, in the old pine of all things. “Before the elders see you messing with their old tree. It’s also about time we began our afternoon duties.”

Xue climbs down the tree, slowly at first but hops down after almost reaching the floor. He grins at me, leaning close to rub salt in my wounds.

We walk back to the main village, famished, tired from the long day.

~

The next morning, I awoke to the clamoring bells of the village elders. Hurrying to the village square, I see a large crowd gathered around. I sneak through to get a closer look but almost wish I hadn’t. In the center, surrounded by the three elders of the village, was Xue. He was tied down to the floor, secured by coarse ropes, each strand acting like tiny whips biting into his old wounds. Above him, an Elder’s pine staff dripped with blood, falling across his pale skin.

I cried in disbelief, rushing over to him. The guards shove me back, my back hitting the ground as hard as the reality that soon sunk in. One of the guards was Wu, who had so humbly patched Widow Mei’s house the day before. His face was hardened now, but his eyes begged me not to interfere.

I looked towards Xue’s family, but they too stood silently, their faces impassive.

“Uncle Hei? Auntie Yin? How can you allow this?”

I feel cool hands wrap around my shoulders and gently, but firmly, fingers press against my mouth.

“Hush, dear child. He is no longer their son. You cannot save someone who has wronged the gods.”

Elder Huang spoke, “Here is the traitor, the first criminal our holy village has seen since the time of my predecessor.” He spoke with such conviction, such sorrow, such... pity. It was almost enough to convince you to empathise with his sorrow. I was disgusted. “He has disrespected the gods, breaking the vows that our ancestors had made to protect the sacred monuments of the deities. He has been judged by the gods themselves, and charged with sacrilege of the holy pine. As a result, he is sentenced to exile through the gate of hell, to descend the mountain in shame and turn his body to hungry spirits that await.”

I sank to my knees. It was my fault, I shouldn't have agreed to play the game.

After a short delay, the head guard took upon the sacred weapon, a *Ji*, a weapon once wielded by some of the great heroes of Chinese history. Its moon-bladed edges shone with brilliance, but all I could see reflected back at me was my own horror. He took the polearm, and lifted Xue up into the air by the ropes that tied his arms behind his back. Xue cried out in the sudden movement.

I attempt to stumble forward at his cry, but my mother’s fingers harden like shackles around my arms. The same fingers that had loving kneaded rice cakes for us now held me back.

The soldier had taken him to the foot of the closed gate. Elder Huang stood, his face still so impossibly sorrowful even as he produced a small black key from a pouch that hung from his waist. Pressing it into small padlocks, the iron chains fell, one by one, each chain falling, signalling banishment for Xue. At last, the wooden doors open, ominously silent despite years of disuse. Mist poured into the village, shrouding what lay beyond the accursed gates. I strain against the crowd to take one last look at Xue but in vain. With an audible slam, the doors shut as if spiritual forces themselves have welded it closed.

The villagers disperse soon after, murmuring among themselves, avoiding me cautiously as if my protests would bring curses upon them. I turned to my mother and father, but they hurried me away as quickly as possible, their hands suddenly unfamiliar. Only Widow Mei gazed directly at me, her dark eyes bright with sympathy. I lay there, prostrated in despair and shock. Everything had happened so quickly. How was it possible that the laughing boy who had skipped down the mountains with me since we could walk, was now permanently gone?

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Later on I lay in bed, cursing myself for my creature comforts. My mother and father had locked me in the house and went on with their duties as if nothing had occurred.

I imagined all sorts of atrocious horrors that awaited Xue. Perhaps the hungry spirits were ravaging his body now, greedy for the years of good fortune in his spirit and flesh. Imagining him, alone. Steeling myself, I packed a small sack, and carefully climbed out the window.

To my surprise, Widow Mei stands just outside my home. Her expression is calm, as if she had expected me to meet her. I bow out of habit.

“Take this scythe and trust its reflection. Do not look directly into the mist or heed the howls they make. They are the hungry spirits who seek to lure you to their dens. Just follow the path, and I pray that you may find your friend.”

My mind is heavy with questions, but my tongue is too heavy to speak. Wordlessly, I take the scythe from her and carefully tie it against my back.

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I stare at the gate and its heavy chains. While it had once impressed a feeling of deep fear of what lay beyond, it now only stood as a physical obstacle between me and my best friend.

Using the thick iron chains as footholds, and a farming scythe for stability, I climbed the tall gate, one step at a time, digging the scythe into the hardwood. My feet were covered in slashes, the rusting iron carving lacerations into the soft flesh of my heel, even through the straw sandals. My hands were red with pain, the icy chains biting into my skin. Mustering all my strength, gripping the scythe with both hands, I finally hoist myself above the gate into the unknown.

The thick mist swallows me, as I flinch from the pain of landing on my feet. The coldness is ever-present here, the darkness eating any trace of sunlight. The road was slippery with the condensation of the fog. All my years in the village had not prepared me for such cold, such darkness. Every step was unfamiliar here, and I found myself stumbling more than once as I failed to find footing. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, a road, made from red stone and speckled with lichen.

Whispers fill my head, telling me secrets to stories I had long wondered. Many times, I was tempted to step off the path to follow a particularly charming voice. But, I remained steady, using the scythe's reflection to reveal each step through the mist. Once, a young girl's cry briefly broke my focus. I turned, and was instantly assaulted with the scent of warm honey, fresh bread, and hot meat. I was tempted then, so tempted after following the cold mist for what felt like hours, or days. Only the thought of Xue kept me moving.

After my feet have gone numb with cold and could walk no longer, the fog finally clears. I spot a prone white body laid across the stone and rush over with renewed energy.

"Xue...?" I breathe, "Are you still with me?"

I check his body for any vital signs of life, but all I feel is ice. My own fingers move clumsily.

I look around desperately for help, and it is only then that I notice the spirits have stopped their whispers. In this deathly silence, with my freezing limbs, I lifted Xue over my shoulder, and carried him onwards. A hint of sunlight gleamed beyond, and unfamiliar fragrances assault me. I hear a distant rumble, steady but slowly looming closer.

"Let's play one last game Xue. This time, we both seek."

Atop the breathtakingly sharp peaks of the mountains in Huangshan, sits an undisturbed man. Around him, luscious patches of grass grow untouched, saplings and wildflowers are scattered freely. Mr. Zhang takes in a deep breath as he absent-mindedly admires the expanding bed of clouds, floating out of reach in front of him. The palms of his hands rest flat on the soil, making imprints in the soft blades of grass. Callocus are visible through dirt covering his fingertips. The workman he is, smiles with pride towards the land which he treasures, a sanctuary resembling a dreamlike escape—a heaven. Mr. Zhang sits with nothing but a bucket and a wooden whistle tied around his neck.

Behind him, a backdrop of a village appears to be almost watercolor-like. The complex shapes and integrity of the small-buildings give this location a sense of wonder. It's asymmetrical top-heavy houses which lack order and structure, the dark black shingles hanging over magnificent arches, and twirling trees poking out from any crack in a wall. The warmth of the mountains have touched every soul within the village for as long as it can be remembered. The cobblestone pathways with overarching houses have remained in tack for a millenia, keeping the history of this mysterious town with it. This village provides an escape to those who desire it, shown through their frequent visitors, traveling from distances no man or women living here could ever comprehend. Most travellers stay for only a few days – as the small village is simple and without luxuries. It is difficult to reach high up in the mountains, and there is very little trade with the outside world. The population of the village is small and everyone has a role to play in helping the village function. The people in this place understand Mr. Zhang as a man with great importance. When visitors do arrive, the town's people gather around the fireplace in the evening to listen to the wonderful stories of what life is like on the other side of the mountains. Occasionally, somebody would be too amazed by the mountain's magic to leave, and so they become part of the village.

The fog around Mr. Zhang begins to collect and roll down towards the sea, leaving a long trail of mist behind them. It eventually hits the clear water sitting hundreds of feet below the peak, creating a lingering layer of thin mist. The untouched water flows calmly. In the still, bubbles begin to slowly rise up and pop. More and more come floating up. Then in a striking motion, a bird dives straight down into the motionless water. For a moment everything reaches its former silent state, until it is followed by another bird. Suddenly a whole flock of cormorant birds can be seen flying in and out of the water, staying under for great lengths of time and pulling out large fishes when they resurface. The bird's large body is covered in slick black feathers. Wrapped around each of their throats are a tightly bound wire, keeping them from devouring the catch. The fish flop around in the pointed yellow beaks trying to escape, but fail to the bird's cunning attack.

Mr. Zhang sits still on the grassy mound, he watches as seven slender birds shoot through the thick floating clouds, each one with a large fish caught in their beaks. One by one, they fly to Mr. Zhang so he can help remove the fish from the bird's throat, dropping the half dead fish into his hand crafted bucket. Pleased with his birds success, Mr. Zhang gets up from his lookout and begins to walk back to the village, bringing his catches of the day with him.

He walks until he reaches the last house on the cobblestone path. It's structure curves slightly more than any other seen in the village. Mr. Zhang feels a warm embrace as he walks through the fence. On the left of his front yard, stands a large wooden cage, nearly the height of Mr. Zhang. The silhouette of seven black birds reveal themselves perched up on the shingles of the roof. Zhang brings the whistle around his neck to his lips, and with a loud burst, the birds begin to swoop down slowly. Mr. Zhang approaches the tall metal cage and unlocks it. All seven birds glide into the cage. He reaches inside and one by one begins to pull off the collar from each bird. A mark of irritated skin is noticeable around their throats, standing out against their smooth black body. Mr. Zhang didn't like to use the wire, he didn't want to hurt the birds, but knew it was a necessity in order to keep them from swallowing the fish they catch. But more importantly, so that they fly back to him to be fed and taken care of properly. Without the collar, the birds would leave him forever, a risk too great for Mr. Zhang to take. He pulls out a knife and begins to cut a couple of the fish, feeding the unrestrained birds small pieces.



As he hurriedly walks through the cobblestone pathways, Mr. Zhang is greeted with smiling faces and friendly figures. He is seen holding a bucket of fish. Appearing to be in a rush, his pace picks up as he nears the market. An old lady greets him with a disapproving look, "what? The birds were too talkative again today?" Mr. Zhang acknowledges as he places the bucket of fish on the counter.

"Why so few fish today? I hope another one of your precious birds didn't choke to death!" Xiao questions cautiously as she begins to string the fish together.

Mr. Zhang brushes this off as he throws four stringed fish across his shoulders, two on each arm, "there will be more tomorrow, I had to stop early today, something important to do."

Xiao Xi grunts as she watches Mr. Zhang march further up the cobblestone path. He reaches a wooden door with engravings of long slender dragons across the frames. He gives the door a loud thump and waits for a moment before being greeted by a well-built man, "Welcome Zhang," he gestures for him to come inside.

Mr. Zhang walks in and is greeted by a warm cup of oolong tea by the man's wife. He takes two fish tied together and presents it to her, "a gift for good prominence," he then turns towards the man, "so have you had time to go over my proposal? I hope Si'r is accepting."

"We believe Si'r will be a lucky man with your daughter," the man replies, "And Chen is only 11 years younger, a perfect match."

"As long as Chen's a good cook," the wife adds, with a sense of humor in her voice.

Mr. Zhang awkwardly laughs the comments off as he takes a slow sip of his tea. "I wish Chen to share a long and promising life with your son in this village."

"I am delighted to hear that."

"And I am sure her mother would approve of this arrangement as well," Mr. Zhang sets the empty teacup down on the table, "I am afraid I must go now, a traveler will be arriving soon in my home. Thank you for the oolong Ms. Jie, it was a pleasure."

"It is our pleasure to have you, thank you again for the fish, we are always delighted to enjoy some of Mr. Zhang's special catches."

Mr. Zhang takes a deep bow of respect as he leaves their home.

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With the remaining two fish around his neck, Mr. Zhang walks up to his thick wooden door, noticing a pair of unfamiliar shoes laid out. Before he could open it, a young woman throws the door open.

"I notice our guest has arrived," he claims as he hands the fish over. His daughter abruptly grabs them and begins to walk away. "Chen, make sure to take the bones ou—" before he could finish, she had vanished from sight through a door on the far side of the room. Mr. Zhang looked on, unsatisfied as he walks in, welcoming the guest who is sitting hunched over at the table. He wears a thick black robe tied together with a frayed rope around his waist, a worn out messenger bag hangs by his side. Mr. Zhang notices his thick and calloused fingers—similar to his own—as he grasps his teacup. Both seem alike in a sort, as men of knowledge and experience. Both traits are valuable and treated with praise in these mystic mountains.

"Your daughter seemed amazed by the stories I shared," the man says, while blowing on the hot tea in his cup. "

"Most people here haven't left the village," Mr. Zhang replies while taking a seat across from him. He lifts the ceramic pot placed in the center of the table and tops up the visitors teacup, "it is why travellers are so welcomed here, to share their stories of an unknown place." Mr. Zhang begins to pour himself a cup.

"As a traveller, I have come here to learn about your village and you. So tell me Mr. Zhang, how are you able to get fresh fish way up here in the mountains?"

When I was young, my father used to take me out on the water. He would teach me how to train special birds like these to fish by diving in and out of the water, getting a fish caught in its throat and beak and flying it back to me. To keep the bird from swallowing the fish we wrap a tight collar around its neck. When the bird returns with the fish, I have to help quickly remove it, as the bird struggles to release the fish stuck in its throat. After returning home from fishing and the birds are back in their cages, I remove the collars and feed them.

“That collar must hurt the birds,” commented the visitor. “Isn’t it cruel to keep them locked up? With the collar on, they are forced to be dependent on you, but wouldn’t this burden their lives with anguish? If they fly away with the collar on they would surely die.”

Mr. Zhang was taken aback by this comment. The thought of the birds suffering brought an uncomfortable feeling upon him. “Please excuse me as I need to check on the cooking,” Zhang claimed as he stood and walked across the scantily furnished room and through the door where the fish was being prepared.

“I saw you go into to Si’s house earlier,” Chen states in an apprehensive tone.

“They accepted my proposal,” Mr. Zhang replies.

A moment of silence passes through the kitchen.

Chen states with a fierce look on her face, “I will not marry him.”

“Si’s a good man, and I trust he will be the right husband—.”

“You know what I’m talking about,” she interjects.

“I don’t think you understand what you would be getting into.”

“You know how much I want to leave this village, there is so much in life beyond the mountains. If you force me to marry that man, I won’t ever experience the world as it truly is. I would rather run away from here than to serve Si’s and his family, of all people!”

The conversation drowns out of focus.

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Mr. Zhang shuts his eyes. He opens them and he’s back in his patch of grass, staring out into the muddled horizon.

The day seems foggier than usual, a sunrise-blue reflects against his face. Gushes of wind blow past his figure, swaying the whistle dangling by his neck. An empty bucket lays beside him. Zhang sits in the grass with a feeling of guilt brushing over him. He remains there, an undisturbed man surrounded by beds of fog. Alone with his thoughts. Mr. Zhang loves his life in the village, he loves collecting food which swims just slightly too far for the ordinary man to retrieve.

Segments of the conversation he had with his daughter flash through his mind. Zhang’s harsh remarks felt like a double edged sword. Without his daughter, he would lose his sense. Zhang tore his wandering eyes away from the sky, and began to focus on the sounds of something approaching at high speeds. Suddenly, black cormorant birds rapidly pierce through the clouds. Each one flying down and delivering their morning catch into the bucket. Mr. Zhang sits up and observes the flock, a puzzled look washes over his face as he counts only six. The birds take back to the skies, besides the seventh, which falls to the ground, into the thick fog. Choking sounds screech from the mist, as the bird rapidly beats her wings in a panic. A spiral of fog forms from it’s struggles and circles out a clear patch in the grass. Mr. Zhang sorrowfully remembers a recent tragedy happening to his eighth bird. Without wasting another beat, he immediately rushes for the binding around the bird’s neck and rips it apart with great force. It makes a firm snapping sound as it is removed, releasing the bird from its restraints.

At first the bird doesn’t move. It lays in the soft grass as the fog begins to swallow it once more. Mr. Zhang hesitantly reaches to pick her up, but the bird begins to regain life. Its wings spread into a large span, but it doesn’t fly away. The two lock eyes, staring deep within the other’s gaze. Saying words, in silence. Then, with one massive beat of its wings, the bird takes off with the fog following it close behind like the trail of a rocket. Mr. Zhang looks back, catching a glimpse of the other six birds sitting in a row.

He doesn’t leave the hilltop for a while, instead he sits and admires the silhouette of the seventh birds flying off into the sun. Set free.

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Mr. Zhang returns home in a hurry. He looks desperately for Chen. In her room, he finds her packing things into a rucksack, “I have to leave, you wouldn’t understand.” Chen tightens the strings on her bag and throws it over her shoulder, “please don’t try to stop me.”

“Wait,” Zhang replies, “before you go, I want to give you something.” He takes the whistle off his necklace and hands it to her, “this belonged to my father, I took it when I left my own village, another life ago.”

Chen stands there puzzled.

“The day I left was the last time I saw my parents.” Zhang and Chen both walk towards the front door, “just promise me—”

“Of course I’ll come back, this place will always be my home, I just need to—”

“—I know.”

The two smile as they embrace each other, his daughter’s desire to leave is the one thing they can both relate to. He takes one last second before letting go. She walks to the front gate and hesitates for a moment, turning back for one last time, Zhang and Chen share an extended moment as they focus on each other for the first and last time in a while.

As Chen turns to walk away she smirks, after seeing seven black birds fly down and set themselves on the shingles of her father’s tilted house.

The day was at the brink of evening as the door to 3 Hutong Road creaked open. “Ye Ye!” the squeal of delight echoed through the great wooden entrance as the Yang family edged into their grandparents’ house. As the Yangs each embraced their grandfather, the scent of fresh food wafted through the air into the runny noses of the three children who had just entered. Bolin, the youngest of the three siblings, clutched his grandpa tightly just as Grandma Yang entered from the kitchen. After sharing customary embraces and being told that dinner was imminent, the Yang family got seated on the rosewood dining table with Grandpa Yang sitting at the head of the table and young Bolin seated a matter of inches away from his grandpa. Immediately after being seated, Bolin asked “Ye Ye, while we’re waiting for food, can you please tell us one of your stories?” Bolin’s parents chuckled as the rest of the children gently edged their seats closer to the head of the table. Grandpa grinned, for it was not that long ago when he told his last story to his young grandchildren. “Of course my child.” As the howling winds picked up outside the wooden walls of 3 Hutong Road, the Yang family knew that they would momentarily be transported far away.

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“Back in my day - when the study of archaeology was deemed a noble pursuit of course - I was fortunate enough to work across the nation. From the foothills of Tibet to the deserts of the Gobi, I had visited some of the most treacherous areas encompassing the Middle Kingdom, but there was something intrinsically different about the mountains of Huangshan. During my early 30s, I was called to the city of Huangshan - located on the southernmost tip of Anhui - to investigate claims of, well, unnatural activity on the mountains of Huangshan.” The children glanced at each other, perplexed. Grandpa Yang – detecting an air of confusion – assured, “Don’t worry children, we’ll touch upon that in a moment; for now, let us focus on my journey into the Huangshan.” The eerie tranquility of the room returned as Grandpa commenced. “It was twilight when I rode into the city. From Beijing, the journey to Huangshan is long – it took nearly 10 hours to reach the city at that time. I slept for most of the ride, but as we approached the city, my eyes grew transfixed on the landscape that surrounded me; the golden rays of remaining sunlight lay etched on the vast canvas of dark blue, but the mountains, the mountains were something else. Although darkness was creeping into the horizon, clouds wafted effortlessly through mountains that curved beyond my line of sight. The sheer vastness of the terrain that surrounded me magnetized every ounce of my being. Just as I removed my binoculars from my bag to get a closer look at the mountains, the coach halted to a seemingly abrupt stop. A polite man by the name of Hong approached the coach and told me to follow after him. I obliged happily and followed him off the coach. Immediately, I was struck by a glacial gust of wind that seemed to foreshadow the walk ahead.” Thus far, the children seemed to be unfazed by Grandpa Yang’s archaic diction, while even Mr. and Mrs. Yang, at this point, were beginning to be entranced. “On the tail of Hong, I began to acquaint myself with the surroundings: the temperature seemed to be hovering around the freezing point, the winds felt glacial yet reserved, and the terrain itself was fairly rocky. The pair of us began to approach quite a large, red building, which was evenly dotted with a few windows and a traditional entrance. A governmental building was my first instinct, and as I entered, a booming voice confirmed my initial suspicion. ‘Welcome to Huangshan Mr. Yang. On behalf of the city council, I would like to thank you for coming here. My name is Zhang Wei, and I am the leader of the city council.’ The man who spoke was at least 50; his slick grey hair neatly parted to one side and muscular stature screamed ex-military. ‘As you know, you were called here because there has been a general uneasy feeling about the mountains in recent weeks.’ The ambiguity in his speech piqued my curiosity. ‘What do you mean by uneasy, Mr. Wei?’ I inquired. Zhang hesitated for a moment before bowing his head, seemingly surrendering himself to a greater thought. ‘Mr. Yang, I’m sure you’ve heard of the various fables of the Huangshan?’ I smirked and responded, ‘Of the dragons and ghosts?’ Again, Zhang hesitated for a moment but responded with a resigned head nod. ‘These are just myths of course, but a growing number of townspeople have heard, seen, and felt certain things originating from the mountains.’ A veil of ambiguity seemed to cloak what Zhang was trying to communicate; I felt as if he was deliberately pivoting around something. ‘Mr. Wei, I have come a long way from my home in Beijing to Huangshan in order to investigate these claims. If you are simply unable to adequately describe the problem, I will be unable to help you.’ My words were initially met with a dissatisfied glare from Zhang, but he seemed to understand the rationality of my argument. Zhang looked around suspiciously prior to signaling for me to follow behind him. We

entered a vast, red hall, which was surprisingly empty. Zhang’s hushed voice echoed through the empty chamber as he ushered me into a compact room at the end of the hallway. As we entered, Zhang sat me down in a rosewood chair similar to the ones you are all sitting on right now. He sighed in resignation. ‘Mr. Yang, as a man of Science,

you must have developed notions about the unnatural, yes?’ I nodded my head. ‘Well, over the past few months, we have had a few problems. It all started a few months back when a local heard strange noises coming from the mountains – music originating from one of the mountain’s peaks. This was corroborated by others in the coming weeks, but additional witnesses attested to hearing bells. Subsequent to these events, we sent one of our men to the Lotus Peak - the tallest point of the Huangshan – with the hopes that he would discover something. When he came back, the perfectly healthy man returned as a mute. When we asked him what he saw, he wrote, ‘Humans but not humans.’ Other than that, he hasn’t communicated anything. As you know, the Huangshan has been a subject of a myriad of myths, and these events have only added fuel to the fire.’ I nodded. ‘If I’m anticipating where this conversation is progressing, you wish for me to investigate the mountains, am I right?’ This statement was also met with a nod from Zhang. ‘Tomorrow, you will venture out into the mountains for some time in the hope of finding something at the very least. I wish you luck Mr. Yang.’

As I studied the geography of the mountain that night, a cloud of eeriness dawned upon me. I sat alone in my room – for the first time – possessed by thoughts of the supernatural.” The kids were loving the story thus far, completely absorbed within the realm of the Huangshan. Grandma Yang entered the room to check on everyone prior to rushing out to the sound of a beeping noise, which momentarily interrupted the story, but the kids were quick to force grandpa to resume. “Where was I? Ah, the night before my journey. I distinctly remember my dream that night, I was being chased down a dark alleyway and eventually fell down a ravine; the second I hit the ground I remember waking up and being greeted by a certain symbolic noise from a nearby rooster.” The parents both grinned as the kids pieced grandpa’s words together. “Subsequent to ensuring I was fully packed, I touched base with Zhang to ensure that I was accurate in my geographical approach to the mountains. As he spoke to me, again, in a hushed voice, I noticed thick, dark circles sagging below his eyes, and kids, right then he gave me a single maxim of advice that I follow to this day.” The children stared intently at grandpa. “He said, ‘My friend, know one thing prior to journeying up the Huangshan, your greatest enemy will always be your greatest friend’ and he directed his finger up to his head. I nodded solemnly as we parted ways.

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My journey up the Huangshan began by finding the Eastern route, which required basic compass work. As I reached the eastern side of the mountains I gazed up in astonishment, for I had just seen the Huangshan in its entirety. The inky, granitic rock juxtaposed brilliantly with the chalky portions of the mountain that towered above my diminutive figure. I also picked up on the fresh scent of pine that seeped into my nostrils. However, for me, the most sublime aspect of the mountain was the low cloud formation, which enabled mountain peaks to pierce through flocculent tufts of clouds. I looked up at the walk ahead, as a number of birds drifted along with the eastern breeze, but despite the tranquility, an air of apprehension accompanied me.

The journey to the first outpost was not far at all, it took less than an hour to hike up the initial route. However, the hike to the second outpost left me with 15 minutes of noon to bask in the sunlight while catching my breath. As I sat slowly sipping water from my flask, I began to reflect on what Zhang had said. Ghosts? Spirits? Simply impossible. No empirical evidence that confirmed the existence of the supernatural existed - it had to be false. Nevertheless, a dark thought remained in the back of my head: could Science not have all the answers as yet? Could there be a presence beyond that of humans? My intuition was at odds with my emotions. For all my life, I had understood the world as a scientific phenomenon, but there was always something Science couldn’t explain. I had ridiculed those who believed in this, but now these thoughts were possessing me. I shook my head and scoffed at my behavior as I carried on.

I had always enjoyed the hiking aspect of my profession, for it enabled me to free my thoughts and, in a sense, free myself, but my mind was possessed by thoughts that I could not seem to get rid of. Regardless, I swiftly picked up my bag and carried on. Now kids, one of the basic techniques in archaeology is that of ground analysis, which essentially requires one to assess the ground to piece together any movement or past action that resulted in the

ground being affected. The granitic path was relatively clean apart from natural debris randomly scattered on the main footway. It was clear that the path was relatively free of regular human use as microorganisms had begun the development of microhabitats on the pathway. Just as I knelt down to further examine the composition of the microhabitats on the main path, an unmistakable sound glided through the autumn breeze: a consonant melody

played from the strings of an Erhu violin. I listened carefully. The melody started off soft but accentuated notes led it through a bewitching crescendo that rang through the crisp air and echoed for miles on. For a few moments, I was entranced by the rich melody that seemed to sway the pine trees from side to side. However, I regained my state of mind and followed the sound, but the melody took a turn: the consonance of the melody swiftly ceased as a series of dissonant notes began to lead the melody. As I quickened my pace, the tempo of the music picked up along with another crescendo that forced the music to an uncomfortable phrase. I began running towards the music – if you could call it that anymore - and pulled out my knife. A palpable tension flowed through my veins. I gripped the knife harder and felt the markings ingrain themselves within my palm. I was close – I could hear it. I turned the corner and held up my knife, but the music abruptly stopped. There was nothing around the corner – no movement, no noise, nothing. I stood there for a moment questioning my very sanity. It was impossible. I had just heard it. I looked around – absolutely nothing. The pine trees swayed nonchalantly as if nothing had happened, but as I turned around, I tripped on something. There was something buried in the pile of leaves that tripped me. I began to uncover the object, and in sheer disbelief, I found the remains of a sandalwood Erhu violin.”

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Young Bolin tucked into his plate as his parents discussed travel plans at the table. Everyone else seemed to be relatively fine with grandpa pausing the story at what felt like the climax; however, Bolin could not comprehend the rationale behind serving food at this point in the story. As Bolin indignantly jabbed his fork into his food, he began to consider his grandfather’s findings within the story. Bolin, for one, did not at all believe in the supernatural, for it was just an element of fiction that entertained kids his age. Despite his fervent disbelief in the supernatural, he felt a tiny thought creeping into the front of his mind. He shook his head – it was just childishness.

As the Yang family finished their meal, the kids urged grandpa to resume his story. With a wise grin, Grandpa Yang resumed. “By the time I picked up the Erhu, a thin breeze coldly informed me that it was time to set up camp nearby, and I started to make my way back to the path. As I returned to the main pathway, I noticed something queer: the microhabitats seemed to have been displaced. I knelt down and ran my fingers through the recently moved debris. While I gently stroked the leaves scattered on the ground, it became apparent that a serpentine pattern was etched in the ground. For the first time during the trip, I chuckled. You see kids, at that point I had come to the realization that the only thing that could further disturb me was myself, for I had experienced the most absurd of things that the mind wouldn’t even dare to conceive. I gazed up at the sky; a myriad of stars seemed to illuminate the trail ahead. I smiled once more and continued forward.

My steps grew smaller as I felt the weight of my journey mount upon me. A designated camp should be close, I thought, and sure enough, I stumbled upon my campsite. A flat granitic structure the size of this very dining table lay in front of me – it was modest to say the least. I rolled out my miniature tent and anchored it to a pine tree, for the winds of the Huangshan were as fabled as the creatures that lived inside the mountains. After finishing dinner, I sat perched on edge of the campsite with my feet dangling aimlessly above miles of mountain. The view from above was utterly mesmerizing; billions of stars lay powdered above, engulfed by endless darkness. As I looked around at my idyllic surroundings, I began to reflect on my journey - I was wrong. Whatever played that music guided me away from the imminent danger of the Moccasin Snake that was lurking around the main pathway. My preconceived beliefs were so rigid that I failed to see what was but right in front of me. As students of Science, we have been taught to keep our mind open to a variety of hypotheses. But fear and arrogance had clouded my judgement, for I had forgotten that living spirits are deeply ingrained within our very culture. Kids, my mind **was** my greatest enemy.

As I crept into my sleeping bag for the last time on the Huangshan, I lay my head to rest on my day-pack, and listened as the Erhu violin of the night serenaded me to sleep.”

The kids looked at each other in an attempt to come to a consensus about their take on the story. Ming, Bolin’s eldest sibling, inquired, “Grandpa, but what happened after that?” Grandpa Yang bluntly responded, “Well the

morning after, I informed Zhang of the spirits’ noble intentions and the events of my trip. Of course, I don’t believe Mr. Wei fully accepted my version of events so much so that he told the villagers a different narrative; one involving my confirmation of the lack of spiritual presence. Naturally, I only became aware of the aforementioned information after my ride back home.” Again, the children expressed great displeasure. Ming again questioned, “Surely this

occurred within your head grandpa? How could that all be true?” With a sly grin, Grandpa Yang looked back at Ming and responded “It could have definitely been in my imagination my child, but who’s to say it wasn’t real.”

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While the Yang family shared final embraces with their grandparents, young Bolin clutched his grandpa tightly.

Grandpa Yang chuckled as Bolin tried to get a few answers about the story out of him, but the young child was eventually dragged out of the door by his parents. Upon a last glance inside the house, Bolin noticed something on the mantelpiece that had seemed to have been there forever: an Erhu violin.

## The Scales of Justice

A gush of wind danced on the age-worn stones, which seemed to give off an unearthly glow under the red rays of sunset. A shrine's imposing figure cut through a wall of thick white fog, its harsh edges contrasting the dissipating swirls of mist. Sloping roofs of gold and intricately carved pillars, which depicted flowing dragons and glimmering phoenixes chasing one another endlessly around the curved surfaces, added to the shrine's ethereal beauty.

At the centre of the shrine's hall lay a giant stone scale. Its plates were even, neutral, dangling at a perfect balance. The dying light from above brushed the smooth surfaces of the balance in an assessing manner, as if trying to make sure everything was in perfect condition for its customers. A low horn sounds in the distance – the day has almost come.

The shrine stands still, waiting for its customers to enter through its ancient gates.

Legends long foretold that amongst the towering peaks and misty clouds that made up the Huangshan mountains, lay a secret stone shrine. Its existence was a mystery, as its exact location could never be determined. Yet every five years, villagers residing in the mountains would be drawn to its location and find themselves waiting at the base of its giant stone steps. No one dared to disobey the shrine's will, after all its presence both a blessing and a curse.

Its function remained a sort of enigma. Rumours circled, with some claiming that the temple gave out great blessings while others spoke of its cursed nature. Some claimed that it was watched over by a benevolent god, while others believed it to be a test from the depths of the underworld. The only instruction, carved into a large wooden plaque that never seems to rot throughout the many eons of the shrine's existence, eerily read "Repent for your sins."

So every five years without fail, the villagers would head to the shrine and kneel in front of the giant towering scales and confess. Confess to their crimes, their worries, their intentions and beg for forgiveness. Despite the hollow emptiness of grand halls and the absence of godlike statues and figurines, they knew someone was listening.

Little did they know, the shrine paid no heed to their desperate pleas for forgiveness. Instead, it weighed the truth of their words and the hearts against the weight of the crimes and gave out its final judgement.

After all, it was familiar with the workings of humanity and their true nature. What human could live without crime? Very little had the will to starve off the all-consuming greed that clawed at them, the need to consume consume consume, and still crave for more. Humans often cursed at a cruel god for their fate, but in reality it was not the shrine whom decided their fate but themselves. After all the shrine did not have influence on the direct actions of humans, it merely observed and tested the strength of their will and character. The shrine was merely the perpetrator of justice, the generous bestower of gifts and blessings, or the cruel executioner that prevented the criminal from escaping from the clutches of justice into the darkness of the night.

Judge, Jury, Executioner. The shrine played the role of all three. It did not have the same fallacies as the mortal's imitation of justice as it was not swayed by the weight of money or promise of power. After all, why would a shrine have use for thin, fragile pieces of paper and empty words of flattery and falsehood?

You get what you give, an eye for an eye. So went the shrine's motto.

Of course, the shrine also gave out blessings. After all, some dedicated their lives and time to help others and bring joy to the world. So it was only fitting that just as crimes were punished, good was rewarded.

You get what you give, an eye for an eye.

The shrine watched as the excited villagers scaled the ancient steps and entered the shrine's great halls. Mothers carried their young children who gazed around the hall with wonder, young couples clasped hands as their

trudged along the paths, old ladies traveled in groups in a comfortable silence only achieved after years of conversation, their husbands trailing behind.

The shrine had no emotions, it did not feel. Yet the stories told by the villagers somehow tugged at its non-existent heartstrings, sparking odd pressures and feelings that surged through its non-existent form.



At the distance, it spotted one of the Huang village's gardeners. She had been distraught last time she visited the shrine as her brother had caught a mystery illness and had been within death's crushing embrace. She had always done good things, containing a kind soul and kind heart. She still had the mortal craving for luxury that was common in all humans, but the desire for greed was all but replaced by the worry and love for her family. She had always gained the shrine's favour, saving the many wandering and starving cats that the shrine had sent her way. It approved of her, and thus sent out a blessing.

This time she happily strolled up the steps to the shrine, her long black hair glossy and her pink lips stretched in a dazzling smile. It was clear that the cure recipe that the shrine had sent had worked. It smiled self-satisfyingly.

There came another future victor, a possible candidate for greatness, a blessing. A young boy, his dark curly hair forming a shroud around his round face which emulated a youthful glow. His brown eyes were sparkling and round, untouched by the sadness and pain of age. When he prayed to the shrine, it was full of excited gibberish and rambling but ended with the phrase "Please keep my family safe and happy." The shrine was endeared. It would see him for many more years to come.

Oh, there came one of the shrine's favourite customers. It watched as the old man hobbled up its large steps, his wooden cane striking loudly against the stone floor. He was surrounded by his wife and their many grandkids, yet the shrine only focused on the man's figure. The shrine did not have emotions, did not have a heart, yet this old man was one that the shrine favoured. He had peaked the shrine's interest when he was a young boy, when the shrine saw how he had spent much time knitting and sewing scarves and hats for his younger siblings during the cold winter months. Even as he grew older, he opened a store and sold his knits, yet he always made sure to leave mysterious packages full of warm cozy knits in front of the freezing broken households littered at the edge of the village, full of peasants and prostitutes and those who had fallen out of the wheels of social class into the disgraced and carried out. He would bring joy to others, reading stories with a gummy smile to his enraptured young grandchildren balancing on his aching knees. Yet he paid no heed to the pain as the joy of his kin was all but a salve to ease his suffering.

Again, it was not that he was without greed. No human could survive without greed and selfishness, after all it was what prompted them to survive and strive. Without greed, one would die. It was a torturous poison, lying dormant within one's blood and veins which in excess doses would kill its human shell. But this man had offset his greed with his kind heart.

After all, the greater and grander one's good deeds were, the easier it was to hide and offset the jealousy and greed within your heart and acts.

Oh how he had earned the shrine's favour. It was entertaining to watch.

He confessed his sins and his acts of kindness. The shrine weighed them. The verdict came back, ruling once again in his favour. He had again done more good, and for that the shrine enacted his wish.

An eye for an eye. No more, no less. No exceptions given or granted.

Another young man knelt in front of the shrine, his head bowed low as a sign of respect but there was an underlying stiffness to the gesture. This peaked the shrine's interest.

Examining his thoughts, the shrine found some truly disturbing and appalling behaviour. It seemed that there was unrest brewing in the Lin village, something that the shrine had not seen in a long time, with this young man being at the centre of the storm.

The Lin village was perched atop the rocky mountain top at the centre of cluster of Huangshan mountains. It had always maintained peace given the strict hierarchy that the villagers followed. The shrine heard jokes from other villagers that the cold temperatures from the cold altitudes had froze their hearts, resulting in their harsh disciplinary lifestyle.

The shrine knew better, having peered into the hearts of many of the Lin. Their hearts were not made of ice, but of a raging passion that was formed by the brotherhood and bonds between the villagers who relied on each other for survival. Thus the shrine was almost surprised, at least it believed that this would be the emotion it felt if it could feel emotions, at this youth's actions and talent for sewing discontent among the villagers. With charges of looting and vandalism, the youth had committed a number of crimes that had sewn chaos and distrust amongst the villagers. His motivations were complex, as his heart was blackened with grief and sadness at the wrongs committed against him.

The shrine needed to balance his negative crimes and bring back peace to the village.

And with something as weightless as a spoken command, the verdict was declared. The youth's hands, the savage tools in which he used to sew entropy amongst the villagers, would be wracked with endless pain. Starting with light swelling of the arteries, the flesh would start to bruise and sting, cracking under the cold climate until viscous blood would dye the weathered cracks of white with a beautiful ruby red. His joints will swell and sting, until the all consuming aches and pains confined him to his chair. A scarlet mark was to also appear on his temple, a ugly spot that marred his face, ruining the beauty that he was gifted with and marking him as the criminal his actions declared him to be. It pleased the shrine to play with the designs of above, to remind them of the vulnerabilities and fallacies that they had been equipped with.

At this, the villagers would know that the mighty hammer of justice had struck once again and peace would be restored. After all, the fragile illusion of prosperity and peace is what encouraged the belief and longevity of the shrine's greatness.

As the ignorant youth raised his head, he felt a shiver travel down his spine. His heart throbbed with pain, harsher than the numbing grief he had kept locked inside. A cold rush of air swept through the hall, causing the others to shiver.

After he left, in came another. The cycle continued, an endless stream of visitors entered the grand halls of the shrine to confess and pray. The shrine gave out both blessings and curses for both the smallest of crimes and the biggest displays of kindness.

Loud chatter once again peaked the shrine's interest. Glancing at the hall's entrance the shrine saw another one of its favourite customers enter the grounds. The man stepped forwards, his feet gently wrapped with bundles of cloth which made little sound on the shrine floor. He was clothed in a long silk robe dyed a deep Burgundy shade, the delicate fabric was covered in an array of mystical creatures and flowers. He was surrounded by an envoy of chubby men and tall muscular women whom followed his footsteps and entered the shrine's halls. Ah, the viper's nest had arrived. The shrine grinned, it was time for some fun.

It had waited for the man to arrive, after all it had borne witness to the abhorrent nature of the man's crimes for the past decades. As the head of the Yuan village, the man was corrupt and selfish, only caring about keeping his own luxurious lifestyle even at the cost of others. His carefully constructed web of lies would have been foolproof—only if he didn't live in the Huangshan mountains. The executioner was finally ready.

For decades, the shrine had not watched in silence but had been making preparations for a gift, of sorts, handcrafted perfectly to suit its victim. The shrine made sure that an assortment of non-life threatening illnesses had befallen him, from a broken leg that caused him to have a limp, to pain in his joints. But the shrine placed on him a invisible brand on his forehead that prevented him from dying of illness or misfortune. After all, he was the shrine's prey now.

The man knelt, his clothes knees grating against the hard plank wood, and clasped his ring adorned fingers in a mock prayer. He closed his eyes, and at that exact moment the shrine struck.

A curse of madness. The deadly kind that drove even the great Hercules into the throes of deep despair. The man would feel the creeping whispers and tendrils of darkness caress his brain, disrupting his thoughts and his actions. The smug gaze would never once grace his face again, instead to be replaced by suspicious gazes and marked by the lines of stress. His carefully cultivated court of fools would fall, and it would be him that pushed them into the inferno. He would be the pyre that the shrine would set alight. A blazing beacon of shining hope for the future.

His veins would be slowly diluted with gold. The gold and wealth he had worked so desperately to achieve and had sacrificed everything for would reside amongst the liquid of his blood, his lifeblood. The shrine wondered if

he could survive, after all the pursuit of power and wealth had been his reason for living, so it wondered if he could survive on it alone. The shrine wondered how the man would react, would he pour out buckets of his own lifeblood to sate his greed? Would he cut his human flesh to reveal the glimmering liquid under? Would he drain himself until he could produce no more and died, an stain of human ugliness against the glittering gold?

A crazed Midas touch, a fitting punishment for the corrupt chief. The shrine smiled.

The man rose from his bow, his veins feeling oddly heavy and his head fuzzy. He stumbled out of the hall, his court followed him to their destruction. The cycle of life continued.

Another middle aged woman took the place of the male. She displayed none of his foolish bravery and self assurance, instead her head was tilted in a deep low bow and her expression was one full of sadness. This expression was familiar to the shrine, though it had been quite a while since it had seen a guilty murderer.

The shrine examined the case. The young lady had been walking through the night and been jumped on by a male who proceeded to attempt to take her under the moonlight. She screamed and had hit him over the head with her basket. The blow knocked the youth to the ground, his head crashing onto the smooth cobblestones and staining them with dark splotches of warm liquid.

An eye for an eye, the motto dictated. The shrine weighed the weight of her crimes against the weight on his and decided on a verdict.

Guilty.

Revenge was to be served. A curse was granted.

The hammer of justice struck once again.

After all, a crime could not go unnoticed and ignored. If exceptions were made, circumstances weighed, the shrine simply would not have the time to evaluate the complex motives of humankind in a day. If crime was ignored, society itself would crumble.

In this regard, the shrines weighing system was just as archaic as the scales of humanity.

As the sunlight faded and darkness rose, villagers quickly finished their prayers and headed back to their homes. The shrine watched as the last tendrils of humanity was expelled from its grounds. It would be another long five year before another human would set through the gates, but the shrine was excited to see the villagers progress. With stability restored and revenge dolled out, the villages should have remained quiet for many years. Yet the shrine knew that this would not be the case.

After all, the irresistible chains of greed kept humankind shackled to their destruction.

The shrine's duties had been fulfilled. Justice had been administered.

The beautiful shrine lay amongst the mountain peaks, shrouded in a thick mist. The swirling tendrils of white seemed to wrap around the structure in a tight embrace until not even the moon could admire it's elegance.

When the mist dispersed, the shrine was gone.

## A Long Shot

*Chinese International School, Ye, Allyson – 16*

*Flash.*

Serrated cliffs loomed from a bed of clouds, as if sculpted by the gods of another Earth.

I squinted at my camera screen. “Not bad.”

Senior year of college; I was studying photography on the outskirts of Hefei, and badly needed to enrich my portfolio for impending job applications. Naturally, as Labor Day rolled around, I seized it as the perfect opportunity for my creative getaway and hightailed it to Huangshan at the crack of dawn, snapping shots at every turn. Four hours later, I stood, winded, at a lookout point near the peak.

My camera was having a field day. I trained my lens upon an inverted world, one where the clouds clustered in shoals, where jagged mountains protruded like the undersides of glaciers, where the sky melted into an endless sea and sunlight glanced from its watery depths. It felt like I was on the ocean floor, somehow looking down at the heavens.

*Flash.*

Satisfied, I tucked my camera away. My portfolio was almost complete. But, there was still one image left to capture, and so I continued along the stairs with eyes peeled.

★

In all honesty, building a portfolio wasn't the only reason why I ventured, drenched in sweat and anticipation, across Huangshan that May morning. I was also hunting for something— a memory. And I was determined to find it.

Many, many years ago, when Ma and Ba were still together, we had hiked upon this very mountain. At midday, my little legs could take me no further, so we rested in a sunlit glade near the peak, filling our bellies with potato pancakes and lemon tea (or maybe it was ginseng, I can't remember). In our post-meal drowse, we spotted the trees, tucked at the fringes of the clearing. The two pines grew side by side, so close they were practically one, and spread wide canopies against the sky, beneath which each tree curled their branches around the trunk of the other. They looked like they were hugging.

Memory is a funny thing; you can love a moment with your whole heart but remember scarcely more than the feel of it. Much of that day on Huangshan had already been erased from my mind, leaving only fragments behind, like shards of coloured glass. Curling up between my embracing parents, full, blowing fat bubbles through the leaves. Scaling the pines to nestle in the arms of the arboreal lovers. I remember a knot between the trunks, dark and deep as a wishing well. Honouring this resemblance, we dropped a gold coin with a lotus insignia inside the tree hollow, and made a wish: for this joy to never fade.

Ironically, for somebody who freezes time as a trade, the one moment I wished to preserve the most was also the only one I couldn't.

As the seasons passed, my parents grew cold and bitter. It began innocently, with the odd terse remark and scathing clapback. But before long, door slams shook the house like thunderclaps as their disputes morphed into full-blown fights, ones I couldn't tune out no matter how loud I played music or how many blankets I dove beneath. The tension eventually left our family in tatters, cleaving a deep rift through their marriage, and through me, too.

So, was it wrong of me to hope that if I photographed the two trees, still embracing after all these years, and sent it to my parents, it would remind them of the love they once shared? I knew getting them back together was impossible, but I hoped the photo would at least restore some form of peace between them, the kind that filled their younger days. After all, it is said that the elixir of eternal life was first discovered in Huangshan, and the emperor who traversed its granite peaks returned a god. If this mountain made him forever young, why couldn't it do the same for us?

★

Heavy footfalls rang against the mountain stairs. I turned, roused from my thoughts.

There was a man, a few steps below me, laboring up the steps. He looked to be in his fifties, features starkly hewn upon a face dark and coarse as earth. On his neck and shoulders sagged a bamboo pole, which bore a basket of bricks on either side, both straining with weight. His back was hunched with exertion, his face pallid and caked in sweat, but he wore a look of utter resolve and continued to haul one foot after the other, ever-so-slowly scaling the steep stairs.

It was crazy. One single brick already weighed an anvil and he looked to be carrying up to a hundred, not to mention he was climbing from the base of Huangshan to the peak, at seven in the morning. Maybe Huangshan was China's Mount Olympus and he was a resident god.

I was debating whether or not to offer him help when I crested the knoll and spotted it: the glade from my memories.

“Oh my gosh,” I started sprinting, all else forgotten. “It's here, it's still h—”

I stopped. The fairytale clearing I remembered had been replaced by a labyrinthine riot of brambles and shrubbery. I craned my neck, but there were no tree-lovers in sight, only fallen trunks frothing with moss and overrun with clicking bugs. It was a wreck. I slumped onto a recumbent tree trunk.

After my parents split, the constant arguing had stopped, but a different tension took its place: total, tight-lipped silence. In many ways, it was worse than the fighting. And now, my shot at sparking another conversation between them was gone.

I shut my eyes. That golden afternoon at Huangshan was on the brink of fading completely. I could still see it, barely, in a tiny window at the recesses of my memory, like the wrong end of a telescope; inside, the dregs of day, a child with her eyes turned skyward, parents laughing, chasing each other through tiger-skinned grass, all three still full, warm, thinking they would never part, aglow in a square of reverie that now receded from me, inevitably, like a silent tide.

I don't know how long I sat there for, sinking into the mossy carpet. All I know is that minutes or hours later, I found myself staring at the ground, and that's when I caught a flash of gold in my periphery.

I scanned the brush, then leaned over. Wedged in a gap in the undergrowth was a battered coin.

"I remember you," I picked it up and thumbed off its coating of grime. Sure enough, the coin bore a faint engraving of a lotus flower. "We left you here a long time ago."

Then I flicked it to the floor. As if I needed another reminder of a wish that didn't come true.

I must've looked upset, because moments later, a stranger's level voice cut through the silence. "Is something wrong?"

I lifted my gaze. It was the mountain laborer from earlier, resting on a stump, a serene expression on his face. With his brown skin and utter stillness, I almost mistook him for a tree.

"What happened to this place?" I asked. "It was so beautiful before."

"A storm destroyed it," explained the man, words outlined in a foreign accent. "What a shame, too. There used to be two trees here that looked like they were—"

"Hugging. I saw them too. I came with my parents when I was little." This I said with a feeble gesture at my surroundings.

"Then why have you come back?" He fixed me with an impassive look.

Maybe out of courtesy, maybe out of need, I gave him the gist of why I was here—the memory, the divorce, my pursuit of the past. From the floor, the coin glinted distractingly. "I actually thought that coin could keep my parents together. Pathetic, right?"

To my surprise, the man chuckled. "Listen. Every day, I carry hundreds of tons of bricks up and down this mountain." He held up his hands. They were bright red and cracked. "This is from the dry sun." He turned around. The back of his neck swelled like a plum. "This is from the weight of my cargo." He extended a leg. A vein of white threaded through the length of his calf. "This is from the time I slipped when I had to climb in the rain."

"*Aiya*," I sucked in a breath. "That must hurt."

"*Mei cuo*. Yet, by day's end, I barely earn two hundred *renminbi*," Carefully, he withdrew a thin sheaf of bills from his sleeve and shuffled them with tender, trembling fingers. His face was pensive. "Why do I go through this? To pay for my son's education. He's a beautiful boy. Calls me every week from our home in Zhejiang and tells me about the airplanes he sees in the sky. My dream is for him to attend college and live comfortably." A sad smile appeared, like a small crescent moon. "Is this a pathetic pipe dream? Am I wasting time on something I can't achieve? People say so."

This was not making me feel better. "I guess we're both fools, then."

He held up a calloused hand. "But they don't know that we fools have the thickest skins. I don't believe we're dumb for working towards a faraway goal. I think we're strong for not giving up hope."

"Uh—" I dropped my gaze to the ground. Insects sifted idly through wrinkled weeds, twitching their gossamer wings. A thin breeze stirred twigs slimy with algae. Then, I shifted my focus from the rotted foliage to the gold coin. It did still gleam after all these years, even after its home had crumbled. That was something.

"I guess..." I began reluctantly, but the sage had vanished. I scrambled to my feet and onto the tree trunk, scanning the horizon. *Where did he go?*

I squinted. Above the thicket, a narrow staircase wound to Huangshan's summit, suspended across an aqueous sky. The stone steps glittered, opaline scales on the back of an undulating dragon. And there was his silhouette, too, like a strange, pint-sized balance scale, moving ever upwards as he tiptoed, resolutely, into the sun. Gold filmed across his hair like a halo. Then he was gone.

With renewed resolve, I hopped to the ground and kneeled among the ruins. The coin was haloed in gold too. Somehow, half-buried in dirt, she still had the strength to wring light from a black home and wear it with pride.

I lifted my camera, aiming it at the coin. I couldn't bring back the past, so I would send them a future.

*Flash.*

## Dragons of Opalescence

*Christian Alliance S C Chan Memorial College, Tsang, Wing Tung Viann – 17*

Round a jagged, juttled cleavage of a valley harboured The Peach Blossom Spring.

Bereft of dark alleys, but crystalline plains; of harsh levies, but riches of porcelain

An outlandish world of no pain –

Hundreds of adventurers or, a.k.a., “truth-seekers”, scoured the mountains’ wonderland – not one returned from the expeditions. Legend says they’re still out there, staying undercover, often unwilling to leave the hedonistic serenity.

The city dweller snorted at the stanza. A poet's wet dream, to gather wisps of idealism scattered at trajectories, forming the pathetically impossible. Exactly the reason why he hoisted himself onto a ginormous slab of rotting log next to the waterfall – to find and prove there was no such place.

Never.

And he slipped.

The water levitated empty-handed in what seemed like decimals, then refracted with the man in its talons. Given the monarchy of unimaginative scientific theories leading his equally mundane life, he refused to take in the peripheral of the place – once an unfathomable doom of the underwater plunge pool – resembling an old-era city of mellow lights and a seeping night.

At the entrance of the extravagant cave, he blinked, willing the mystic projection to go away. Two emerald dragon statues stood guard either side of the mahogany archway, like soldiers of the Imperial Palace. There was a bustling commence, consisting of dancers in sequenced gowns and floral-print sleeves, all going Coriolis in the square. Children with bandanas pecked at the stall owner, hands outstretched for red bean cakes. Lanterns were lit everywhere, as if the dark covered away. He took a polaroid of the cave, so that he’d know it was just a delusion.

*Screw myself.*

He thought the dragons peered his way, black sclera ablaze with wariness.

There was a Chinese vintage pub, *all but fictional*, where guffawing peasants drank from large vases like uneducated rascals. *All but innocent, joyous jingles*. He went for a barrel himself to calm down. Men exploded in loud incomprehensible gossip around him, but did not take much notice. Grainy rice wine caressed his haywired mind.

To no avail though, did the alcoholic beverage bring him back to his senses. The man's feet turned to rubber, simultaneously ached with an itch to dance Tic Tac. He stumbled for the exit, securing its hinges in his scrawl.

“Where the hell is this? Somebody? I need like, serious help. Or therapy for Schizophrenia.”

“Kuài Pǎo ... They... come.” A drunk fellow in his 50s slurred, arms lay sprawled on the table.

*Nonsense*, he concluded. He needed someone sober to answer his questions, and taking the token like horror movie characters do was not the solution.

Wobbly advancing the archway, he looked at the reminiscent city once again: *All but in two-dimension?* Strangely, the joyous people were still moving, but gingerly, like marionettes. The lights became dim of effect, like blobs of stars winking out on paper. The red bean delicacy no longer emitted plumes of hot goodness.

It was an antique screen, after all, which gave him the somber but sane slap, that all was simply a materialization of vestigial shock, hence the buzzing city. Except the statues – unengulfed by the black passageway, their queer gaze transfixed on the man.

“What on ear- ? ” his eyes darted to and fro, from the canvas of festive spirits to the beryl eyeballs. Suddenly desperate for an exit, he wrenched the screen aside, its joints crackling to fold inwards.

The lights came back on, a sear to adjusting vision. Only these were fluorescent, interrogation lamps. It’s a dungeon. A freaking dungeon behind the screen, replete with air – 23 degrees Fahrenheit. Cages with ivory thorns line the chamber, in them, haggard men drained of color, all shackled to the ground– either too labored to move, or a morbid assumption, dead. Hair a straggly mouse, their faint squint pivoted to the man.

Only a single one scuttled a length the chains could only reach. He could see the prisoners hand trembling on the bars. Cage pinnacles stuck out from gaps of his clasp. A camera strap lay dangling from his neck– lifeless – contrary to the sheer terror shimmering in his eyes.

“I am Javero Hernández ! I’ve been illegally detained for a week here and ... you can’t escape. No one can escape—once the truth is sought... They have to keep the myth alive at all costs... they...” The prisoner’s pupils turned a pristine white, rollicking and ghostly. Trailing off, he slipped some cassette tapes from the fissure, then retreated into the corner.

The latter took the tapes in one languid motion, unsure of words or action. Can’t go, won’t go.

“Please, I beg you, just take these tapes and go. For God’s sake just go before they wake up!”

He felt the presence before anything. Two towering isotherms of warmth radiated above and behind, squandering the previous chill. It made him feel even colder. Four beryl beads descended in front of the man, enormous, slender heads of magnolia scales hanging upside down. Slobbering on fangs.

“I – This is –”

The last thing he saw was cavity, spewing blue flames a thousand times brighter than a speeding meteoroid simulation he had seen in labs. The frontal lobes of his brain only allowed memory that he, had witnessed the land of graceful seasons, of fruitful reasons, of no hatred and treason.

The first thing after that, two emerald dragon mascots stationed either side of the cells.

He was right – There was no Peach Blossom Spring.

Never.

## The Colours of White

*ESF King George V School, Ro, Trinity – 16*

As a child, I loved watching the dewdrops of condensation race each other down the windows of my car, placing bets in my head on which would reach the bottom first. I was eight years old when we first made the winding car trip up the Mountains of the Yellow Emperor, and my mother scolded me for only watching the drops on the window

instead of looking at the scenery that we had driven hours to see. What she in her hindered adult mind had failed to realise was that the thick blanket of mist that draped the jagged skyline only made it that much more entertaining to watch as the droplets fattened with consumption. I remember thinking that the moon seemed to endlessly follow us no matter how fast we drove, its featureless white face smiling down upon us.

After the hours of driving that had stretched into an eternity in my mind, we had arrived at the floating villages of the mountains only for Gumball to spring off my lap the second my feet touched the ground and bolt at the sight of an unsuspecting stray cat. Gumball was a mutt, an unwanted street dog with a debilitating fear of humans that nobody except a little girl would've wanted. I had begged and begged my parents to let me keep him after he followed me home one day after school, ignoring their arguments that he was dirty or dangerous. My very first real purchase with my pocket money had been for a blue dog collar and chew toy. I chased after him, my panicked breaths creating fleeting clouds in the cold and my ears deaf to the shouting of my parents. It wasn't long before I was blinded by the fog that seemed to curl around me like a snake, and my eyes grew blurry from the tears. There seemed to be neither a right nor a wrong way, all that existed in that moment was the glaring directionlessness of the colour white. Standing amongst the colossal expanses of the mountains, I was frozen in my fear and trembling against a wind that seemed intent on turning my cheeks red. It was right on the precipice of abandoning all help when I saw the familiar navy blue of Gumball's collar, and even though it stung to smile I couldn't help it. It was in that moment of pure elation and relief that I met her.

If it wasn't for Gumball, I don't think I ever would have noticed her. She had a wispy quality about her, as if the lines around her were blurred, and her skin held the same luminance as the fog that had previously suffocated me. But before I could thank her for bringing him back, the sound of my parents' voices had me running towards them without a second look back at her. The rest of our stay in the mountains, I held Gumball tightly to my chest and vowed to never let him out of my sight again. During the following winter holiday, my family again made the tedious drive up Huangshan. It was during this year that I heard her voice for the first time. I, being the curious child that I was, had wandered off from the rest of the family and was investigating the wood pattern on a piece of bark I had found when I heard a voice that felt like honey and windchimes. She told me she was glad to see me again, and her cheerful smirk seemed to etch itself into my brain.

Even though I visited her winter after winter, she always refused to tell me her name. Bombarded by my questions, she would hide behind a giggle and a promise to tell me more once I got older. I found myself longing to see her, and the summers which I had previously loved started to feel like a bore. Even my parents had questioned my sudden enthusiasm to go up to the mountains, and when I excitedly told them of my new friend they laughed and wrote me off as having an overactive imagination. Although I grew and was no longer a child, she never seemed to age. Once I turned fifteen, I began to notice the ethereal beauty she possessed that I had neglected to notice as a child. Just the way she laughed made it feel as if the world was ours to conquer, and I found myself gazing at her in admiration and awe. Despite my desperate longing to, I could never bring myself to touch her. To me, she was something simply too pure and otherworldly to taint with my normalcy. I was sixteen when Gumball passed away, hit by a drunk driver on the intersection by my house. When I told her through sobs that racked my chest, she closed her eyes and with a tranquil smile told me that Gumball died without pain and was thankful for the life I gave him. I never questioned her on how she knew, as the comfort she had instilled in me was enough to give me peace.

One winter, I mentioned Li Bai's poetry. We had been studying his work in school, and my interest had piqued after discovering he lived in these mountains. The feeling that I could be walking amongst the same pine trees and breathing the same air as he once did millenia ago exhilarated me, and the romantic nature of his poetry reminded me of her. I soon realised why, as she laughed her usual teasing laugh upon the mention of his name and made the offhand comment that he always drank too much. I turned away, hoping she couldn't sense the twinges of jealousy that pulled at my heart the same reckless way a child plucks at the strings of a violin. I don't think she ever did, as she continued to boast on how he wrote most of his poetry for her. The shame felt like a crushing weight on my soul, and I angrily reprimanded myself in my head for daring to dream I could ever live up to those she has met in her lifetime. Throughout the thousands of years she has lived, how could I possibly compare to the geniuses and kings

that have loved her as I have? I had no poetry or riches to give her, only the despairing adoration of somebody who knows no better. That night, in a blinding jealous rage, I tore up his poems and left them scattered around my room like fresh fallen snow. The teardrops made the ink run and the paper disintegrate into an unrecognizable mush, a monolith to my foolishness.

I was 22, the first time I ever touched her. But it was also the first time I ever wanted to hurt her. When the glimmer in her eyes seemed to fade over the years and her skin lost its radiance, I had miserably hoped it was because I had finally started to love her less. But after watching her body grow weak and seeing her stumble on paths she could



have previously sprinted up, I finally understood that she was ill. The air in the mountains had become polluted, choked with the smog of oil-guzzling factories and a population that was growing faster than the land could maintain. It's a different kind of hurt watching somebody who owns your heart fade away because you know that when they do, they'll take it with them. You do anything in your power to not have to watch them leave, and in my case that meant losing all self respect and begging her to come with me to any place the air was better. I promised to be hers as long as I would live, to take care of her every day and to love her with every beating breath I'd take.

She refused. Told me she swore an oath to protect the mountain and all of its inhabitants, that she held an obligation to the place that had sheltered her across the decades. I couldn't understand how she could stay and wither away in a place that was slowly killing her. It stung, hearing her say her love for Huangshan would always trump my love for her and it was in the moment she turned to leave that something inside of me broke. I grabbed her wrist to stop her from leaving, my fingernails leaving crescent-shaped marks on her skin. And that was it. The first time I ever touched her was born of anger and violence, instead of the tenderness I had harboured for years. I hated her, hated the way she meant the world to me yet I meant nothing to her, hated her self-centeredness and vanity, hated the way she had ensnared me into loving her more than I could ever love myself. But when I touched her, she was warm and soft instead of the reptilian cold I always pictured her being, the same warmth I felt when I first heard her voice at eight years old. And just like that, my anger and loathing dissipated just as quick as my breath did in the mountain air. It was too late. When she turned back, she looked at me as one looks at a stray hair in their food. Disgust, contempt, annoyance. I knew that despite her frail stature she was inhumanely strong, that in an instance she could with a flick of her wrist crush my bones like glass. A part of me wishes she did, anything that would have given me more of her attention, anything to live on borrowed time and exist in her life for just a couple memories longer. But instead she tore me off her, and left. I stood there, drowning in my own helplessness, watching her fade into the mist as abruptly as she once appeared. As I was again left alone in the mist, I felt just as small and insignificant as I did when Gumball disappeared. To this day, I believe that it is only in the moments when you are left alone and broken that you truly realise the painful isolation of the colour white.

I never saw her again. It took me a couple more years and a lot of pain to realise that she was a butterfly, a fleeting moment of beauty that would flutter away before ever belonging to anybody. The most you can ever hope for with a butterfly is to keep it in a jar for a while and admire the way sunlight reflects off its wings before letting the guilt consume you into letting it go. Too many butterflies have slowly died as their bodies were starved of oxygen by little children forgetting to poke holes into jars. In their hopeful naivety, they fail to see its suffering, distracted by the enthrallment of owning a creature this beautiful. The human desire to possess even at the expense of destroying the beauty they wish to own scares me because I have never wanted to hurt anybody as much as I wanted to hurt her. In the end, I could never blame her for how she is. Living past everybody she ever hoped to love, the pain of loss must scar her heart until it becomes as impenetrable as the mountain itself. It makes sense that the only thing that has room in her heart is something she knows will forever be there. I know that to her, my entire lifetime is nothing but a brief flicker in which she found amusement and shelter from the boredom that plagues an immortal's life. I was just one of many who fell to her feet. And I know that the lifetime I spent devoting myself to her means nothing more than a fling, a tiny insignificant fraction of her life. But the sad, pathetic portion of myself that I keep locked away still hopes that I am at least the tiny insignificant fraction that she smiles fondly upon remembering. And maybe in another lifetime, another decade, another time, my love will finally be enough.

For a while, I spent my winters wandering across the vast expanses of the mountains until I would pass the same pine tree seven or eight times. My exhaustion and sleep deprivation would leave me delirious, hallucinating that the trees were bending towards me and whispering me directions. It was around the fifth or sixth year when I stopped and realised she could not be found unless she wanted to. At the lowest points of my despair, I wondered if the pollution had gotten too much for her, that the mountain hadn't been enough to save her. But I could still feel her presence, see glimpses of who she was in the evergreen. The way the sunlight would reflect off the morning dew, the way the

leaves would curl upwards towards the sky, the way the roots of the trees would hold each other close. The wind no longer felt like it was lashing at me, but instead gently caressing my cheek. An atomic bomb could detonate the world, and it still wouldn't be enough to stop her from existing there.

I got married to a kind and soft spoken man when I was 28, and bore him two children. The sort of love I felt for him was different, a subdued and comforting love born out of societal expectation but a love nonetheless. He works hard to provide for our family, and I know I am to live out the rest of my days with him. In my children I see the same spark and hope I used to have, and I pray the world doesn't take that away too soon. Every winter, we go up to the mountains and make bets on which dewdrop we think will reach the bottom of the window. They whine about the cold, but when the sun dips below the horizon and the light bathes the land in hues of purple and pink I can see

the flickers of a smile playing at their lips and I am reminded of the awe I felt when I first saw it too. What I would give to stand atop the mountains and feel no pain when I watch the sunset, to feel the simplicity of joy wash over me like waves wash over the shore. When I die, I hope to have my ashes cast upon the roots of the pine trees, to be able to return to the bare essence of who I am. Maybe then, I'll find the lifetime in which love is enough to make her stay.

## Tales from the Misty Mountains

*ESF South Island School, Chopra, Soham*

A quiet voice started to read aloud from a dusty scroll.

*“You must seal this god-forsaken cave shut” an old and gruff voice commanded.*

*“Of course Grandfather, but why? I must ask.” replied the terrified voice of a boy willing to please his grandfather.*

*“Why do I have to seal you into this cave? The local folks say that it is the entrance to...” the boy’s voice quietened “all the hells” he continued looking beyond his dear grandfather’s shoulder, while cowering like a rat.*

*“You must do as I say Grandson, after all, you can only achieve nirvana after experiencing the hells. What are my instructions again?”*

*“One: seal you in the cave, two: disguise the mouth of the cave, three: make sure no one finds out about the cave or about where you go and four: make up a believable lie which can hold under tense scrutiny and destroy all evidence.” he recited. “That’s it right?”*

*“Grandson, I have one final request. Down the path from this cave, there is a fork. It will appear to be a dead end. You will reach out to find a thin leather string hanging from the lowest branch of the tallest tree in the area. Pull on it. You shall find a small hut, my original hideout. Inside is only a box which you cannot open until you come of age. When you have opened the box, destroy the hut as it is the last remaining memory of me.”*

*The boy trembled and whimpered and cried but didn’t falter once when he said*

*“I love you Grandfather, I will never let you down, I will see this done to the end”*

*“Thank you so much.”*

*A loud roar reverberated from the depths of the cave, while at the same time a monstrous horn echoed through the valley below.*

*“Hurry up now Grandson, I must face my end. Tell my sons tha—” his voice shook “tha—” his voice rattled as tears streamed down his wizened face “that I am sorry for everything and to never forget what I was”.*

*With long and drawn out sobs the grandfather ran into the cave, leaning on his staff as he gingerly lit a torch. There was a loud noise behind him, and as he looked back one last time at the harsh moon, the light faded at last. He wandered down the cave and began—”*

“Go on, go on, continue with your fairy tale, you are supposed to guide me seeing as you are my guide, not read some random paper you found off the trail!” a second voice, Isaac, thundered.

“I can’t, that’s where it ends. The rest seems to have been lost or torn or burned. After all, this was found near signs of inhabitation.” came a quiet but eager reply by JinHai, the local guide.

“Hey, do you think that this bogus text might be true at all? I mean do you not see that massive scar in the mountain? That is the oddest rock formation in this entire area, and I do have a degree in geology.”

The two continued arguing long into the night, even going so far as to start a fire during sundown whilst bickering. They were both lost and confused, having gone off the planned route to chase some story about glowing mountain rocks gathered from the ramblings of an old, senile wanderer. The two were now arguing into the wee hours of the morning over the text and map when the moon peeked out from the stormy sky.

Suddenly, a luminous glow filled the area. A cold light cut through the clouds and shone brighter as the moon did too. A harsh wind blew fog into the valley beneath them. The haunting light stopped.

Both the local guide and the geologist were now staring at each other, dumbfounded and in awe of the dimly glowing scar, almost like the earth itself was bleeding. The two ran down the path in search of any sign of a fork but found none. The local guide muttered something about not being paid enough and started to look for a way out.

Isaac on the other hand was rummaging around his backpack for spare batteries and his insulin pen. He tripped on exposed roots and dropped everything.

“Damn!” he exhaled with frustration, reaching the end of his insufferable straw when he found a strange glowing rock embedded in the hard, packed soil beneath him. He found his batteries and whooped with joy, when JinHai came stumbling with a machete in hand. Both yelled loudly and turned quiet as the sky cleared once more and a path illuminated in front of them. JinHai knelt to investigate one of the glowing stones and silently gave Isaac his insulin pen.

They followed the path until it seemingly ended with nothing to be seen forward, but one of them found the tattered remains of a metal chain hanging next to about a million leather strings. One of them stood out, with it glowing a faint but harsh light. As JinHai tugged on the old leather cord, the sound of boulders clanking against one another echoed around the valley. The distant noise of a tiger followed suit.

A large wooden hut stood, succumbing to rot and disrepair with the bone dry skeleton of a long dead child holding a torn sheet of paper impaled to the door with nothing but a glowing spearhead. Isaac and JinHai stood, horrified at the sight before them. Isaac gingerly took the fragile document and gave it to JinHai to read who mumbled something about undead spirits and how he would ask for a raise.

*“—drawing symbols on the cave floor as he went along with a strange powder which glowed. He needed to hide the secret.*

*The grandchild on the other hand was fulfilling his Grandfather's wishes. He ate some strange glowing powder and grew to the size of a mountain with flesh. With one hand he sealed the cave and looked at the face of his beloved Grandfather for the last time. He quickly destroyed the area near the cave and made it blend in with the surroundings. As he was finishing up, an arrow shot through his hand. The boy ripped out the arrow with a grimace and ran down the path as he shrank in size rapidly. He stumbled to the hut before he got impaled with a golden spearhead.”*

“That’s where the excerpt ends. It mentions something about it being from the records of someone, can’t read the name cause it’s burned off. It’s a miracle that the paper survived this long.” JinHai whispered with respect.

“Stop whimpering like a coward and lets go into the damn hut!” Isaac replied with distaste.

“I feel that we shouldn’t meddle with these kinds of things Mr Isaac.”

“Well, Yin, you were only hired to be my guide, not my ethical or moral support.”

“JinHai, its Jinhai”

“Thanks what I said Gin—hey, now are you going to follow me into this hut or should I complain to the agency?”

“Fine.”

The two continued to the door and paused for a bit. Shadows danced across the termite—ridden walls. There was an old antique box in the hut with an intricate lock locking the box. It looked like it had been beaten with something heavy many times over with scorch marks all over it.

“Mr Isaac, with all due respect, are you sure we should be doing this? Is it safe? Is it legal? I really don’t want to go to jail!” JinHai bumbled as he fidgeted nervously.

“Shut up Gin—Hey! I am paying you to be here. How about I make you a deal, huh? You come with me for now, and when we get back, I pay you double?” Isaac’s patience was wearing thin, and he was desperate.

“No, no way Mr Isaac am I doing this without you paying upfront.” came a reply equally desperate.

“Fine, fine Gin—Hey! You win! Take the money and please stay.” said Isaac as he begrudgingly pulled out the cash, wad by wad.

They both once more looked at the sky as the stones shone brightly once more. They then noticed the golden spearhead glimmering once more. With a look of realisation they both ran towards the skeleton and wrestled each other when Isaac wrenched out the spearhead and looked triumphantly at JinHai when JinHai snatched from him, cutting his fingers.

They hadn’t realised that while they were brawling over a worthless rock, they had toppled the skeleton over. JinHai’s blood dripped slowly onto the bones, almost as if it were afraid to touch the bones when the moon shone once more and the bones glowed the harsh light.

A gut-wrenching scream tore through the valley, as the bones began knitting themselves together and flesh seeping onto them seemingly out of nowhere. Petrified at the gruesome sight before them, the pair didn’t see the blood trailing to the once-skeleton. All life near them began to wither and they grew weaker. The glinting blade began to shrink and lose its shine. Once the creature finished forming, it let out a sigh of comfort. It spoke in a strange way, speaking a dialect of Mandarin that hadn’t been heard for more than a millenia.

It spoke like a child, but had the gravelly voice of someone who had been smoking their entire life. The creature began to grow smaller, as it became apparent that this was the boy mentioned in the scroll. It smiled sinisterly. The creepy situation was ruined because the pair didn’t understand the boy. He sighed as though he had gone through this before. He reached down, picked a stick and began to trace characters in the hard, packed soil with ease. The stick broke and he moved onto another, and another until there was a small pile of twigs.

The child gestured towards the characters on the ground expectantly. JinHai started to read it and translate it aloud.

“Greetings, I am the boy you read about in the scroll. This hut was my dear Grandfather’s. You can now either make this easy for me and accept the fact that you will die or try and run while I rip you into pieces as I eat you with my bare hands. I am sorry but this is necessary.”

While JinHai had been translating and Isaac listening, they had both failed to notice the strange boy picking up a pouch from within a hidden panel inside the hut. He took out some glowing powder and sprinkled it on his tongue, relishing the taste.

JinHai and Isaac had now realised what was going to happen and they started to break for it. The boy, now once more the vicious, mass of sinew and muscle ran after them, laughing gleefully.

Isaac and JinHai had split up.

JinHai ran towards the path that took him to the glowing rock formation. He headed up quickly as possible and saw the monstrous creature look at him, smile and run in the other direction. He heard the screams of Isaac and JinHai struggled to empty his backpack to try and set up an ambush.

He fiddled with everything, messing up knots here and there, stumbling and tripping over himself. He swore again and again that he would pray everyday and help his parents if he made it out alive until he heard the snap of a twig behind him. A loud thud echoed. He looked back. He was terrified. None of his traps were set up properly. He looked on in fear. He tried scarpering up the hill, but the creature got to him first. He picked him up by his hair with one hand. The other hand reached down to his flailing legs and shattered his knee in one punch. The sound of his screams travelled down the valley and back. The creature roared with satisfaction. Birds fell from their nests and a horrible cacophony ensued.

JinHai reached for his machete and he struck the creature on its wrist and the creature dropped him. The once-boy roared. Loud. JinHai's ears bled. He could feel his life draining. He looked down and saw bone protruding from his skin. He vomited. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw the blood go back into the creature. He screamed at the sky, yelling curses and crying, all the while the monster took its time to walk up to him.

The sky cleared once more and the moon shone. When the light touched the creature, JinHai's heart skipped several beats, it looked worse than any monster he could think of. He started having a seizure. His eyes rolled back into his skull. The creature picked him up like a ragged doll by his torso and crushed him. The creature smiled as he opened his gaping maw, an endless hole straight to the void and ate what was left of poor JinHai.

The creature wandered back to the fork and took the other path that led to a small village outside the valley. There on the ground lay the bashed-in head of Isaac. Just the head, nothing else with a trail of blood leading back into the valley.

The creature reached into its mouth and pulled out the head of JinHai. It picked up the remains of Isaac that lay outside its mouth and took them to the hut and opened the chest.

Inside lay a note faded in a language long forgotten. The boy took a branch and cut open his palm as he put more of the glowing power into his hand. He mixed the blood and the glowing powder, swirling it with his finger as he hummed. He let the mixture drip slowly to the bottom of the chest, where a trapdoor opened. It revealed a large hole, filled with glittering skulls.

It dropped the two heads into the hole and picked out two other skulls. He closed the trapdoor and shut the chest, not before putting in the note. It closed the hut and went to the back.

It continued humming as it took two heavy boulders and started to smash the skulls into a fine powder. It gathered the dust and put all the he could collect into the pouch and licked the rest of the powder off the rock. The creature grew even more. It relished the taste. It picked up the spearhead, wincing as he touched it. He impaled himself to the door as he has hundreds of times before.

Isaac woke sweating with a start. He was still holding the spearhead. Him and JinHai had knocked each other out cold when they were brawling. His eyes hurt when he opened them, owed to the sun shining brightly. His eyes flitted around. He saw JinHai and flinched. JinHai's head was torn off and his throat ripped out. The smell of the rotting corpse got to him and he vomited. He tried getting up but he was pinned by a large boulder.

'Wait a minute, how did I get pinned by a damn boulder?' he thought.

He looked at the huts door expecting to see the skeleton there, but all he saw was a door with a hole in it. His eyes widened as realisation dawned upon his face. He started screaming for help, but none came.

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An old wanderer went about his normal day, roaming the paths of this unnaturally quiet and beautiful valley. The mountains towered over him, even the wind obeying the cold, distant mountains. Nothing moved, not a sound uttered. Blood dripped from where birds threw themselves off their high branches.

The trees themselves seemed to hold their breath, almost as though there was something dangerous.

The wanderer paid no heed. He went about his day, going to his old hut in the valley, near the strange rocks at the top of the hill. The rocks were glowing and pulsing unnaturally.

After lighting his tobacco pipe, he inhaled a deep, long breath and pinned the skeleton to the door once more with the golden spearhead.

He picked up a small pouch from the chest inside the hut and put the glowing powder into his pipe. He took another long puff, and blew a perfect ring of smoke that shone vilely in the early morning light. The wanderer went outside and tossed Isaac's boulder into the treeline and covered it with branches. He smiled as he looked fondly at the statue and softly spoke in a deep, calming voice "Thank you, Grandson".

A hoarse whisper filled the valley.

The old wanderer went about with his cane, the spearhead's original shaft, and left the valley.

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There is a village in the mountains where you will find a crazy man who smokes from an old pipe and hobbles with the strangest cane. All avoid his gaze, because everyone he talked to never came back. People hear the haunting screams every night. Most, except foreigners and their guides who often end up at the village, all for the pleasure of the old, senile wanderer and to the inescapable fate of the newcomers with their guides.

## Tales from the Misty Mountains

*ESF South Island School, De Alwis, Kavinda*

"Wake up" said a voice. I bolted upright in my bed, beads of sweat lining my forehead. Rays of sun cascaded filled my room with dancing colours, and my ears were caressed by the sound of chirping cicadas. Yet despite my undisturbed serenity, my mind throbbed trying to comprehend the voice in my head. I thought I heard it, no, I'm sure I heard it. The memory of it slowly slipped away the harder I focused on it, as if I were holding sand.

My door was flung open as Nai-Nai heaved in – my timeless peace now long gone.

“Jiang—” she panted. She coughed, trying to catch her breath.

“Yes, Nai–Nai?” I said. I leapt to help her and she clutched my arm, leaning on me; her soft cloth shirt stained brown by years of dry mud and field work.

“Jiang, there is no water.” she gasped. I tried not to laugh.

“Nai–Nai, there was rain just yesterday. I couldn’t sleep because it wouldn’t stop.”

“No, Jiang, there is no water.” she said again. Her voice was laced with despair.

“The well?”

“Gone.”

“Nai–Nai, there must be — ”

“No!” she said. I could tell she was beginning to get frustrated. I wondered if perhaps her memory was starting to fade. “Jiang, there is nothing. Go, check the fields.”

Skeptical, I stepped towards the door, and when I opened the door, I stopped in my tracks. My mouth fell, agape in utter and complete shock.

The rice fields, just yesterday lush emerald blades in a blanket of rolling green, were now dead. There was no other way to put it. It was as if the green pigment had been sucked out of it, leaving behind dull jaundice shells. I walked closer to the field in disbelief, the scorched earth crunching beneath my bare feet. I pulled a remnant of a stalk from the field.

I shivered uncontrollably, on the verge of tears. I racked my mind for something, *anything* that could explain this. A drought, perhaps? Yes, a drought. The stalk fell from my shaking hands as I stood up and raced to the well. It must be full right? The well stood parallel to the house, and never ran out of water. Not during drought, not during summer, not ever. Nai–Nai must have made a mistake. She’s getting old and she’s forgetting things. There must be water in the well, I told myself.

I lowered the bucket desperately. The bucket clinked as it hit the stone walls of the well in a rocky descent. I kept lowering it, waiting for the eventual splash as the bucket reached the water. I lowered it, further and further, deeper and deeper. By now, tears were streaming down my face; the bucket plunging down an endless pit. The rope toughened and Nai–Nai took my hands as I collapsed in a sobbing fit.

“Nai–Nai, we don’t have food. That rice was going to feed us this winter.” Words tumbled out of me in an incomprehensible jumble as Nai–Nai held me, stroking my head. “How will we feed ourselves, Nai–Nai? How will we — ”

“Jiang, you have to go up to the mountains.” she said, firmly. My tears stopped, as if someone had just turned off a faucet in my body. I looked up at her, confused.

“What?”

“The river down by the pear tree. Follow it upstream to the mountains.”

“Nai–Nai, we — ”



“Jiang!” she shouted. I had never seen her angry. Tears speckled the corner of her eyes as she spoke. “The river comes from the mountain, and the mountain never runs dry.”

“Nai–Nai, the well never runs dry but – ”

“Jiang, listen! The mountains *never* run dry. No matter what. And besides, we have no other choice.”

And so, that very afternoon, I set out by myself, with only a backpack with two plums. I bid a short farewell to Nai–Nai, and began my journey.

I walked through the fields, down the road and past a tree stump where I’d play with my dolls as a child. In no time, I had made it to the pear tree. During this time of year, there would be pears littered among the teeming leaves, and squirrels scurrying up and down the tree, but now, there was nothing except a yellowing carcass of what used to be a tree. The land itself was infected by a cancerous rot.

Just around the same pear tree would be the twisting river filled with catfish and laughing children, but I knew from the moment I came within vision of the tree that the river was dry. A deafening silence replaced the once gushing waters. I prayed that somehow, the river would be miraculously full, just coincidentally quiet, and instead I stared at the harrowing reality: bone–dry. Not a single droplet remained. Not a single living thing in sight. Not even a breeze to comfort my sinking soul. Just the sight of a trench in the slaughtering sun.

Upstream, I reminded myself. I traced my way up the dry river, watching my step as I did. My lips cracked and chafed, and my voice became hoarse like that of a river toad, and yet I kept walking. Left foot forward, right foot forward. Left foot, right foot. Left, right.

I had trekked for so long, with no sight of the mountains, that I had stopped looking up in search of them. The soft grass that chattered in the wind and lined the river was now a wasteland and stank of death, and so I averted my eyes, and stared at my feet, kicking up dust and rocks as I did, but when I felt a drop of water land on my head, I was forced to look up, and there it was.

The mountains.

A collection of massive stone giants towering into the sky, wisps of mist curling around its peaks, concealing it with layers upon layers of heavy smog. Sun glinted off the mountains and into the fog, creating rainbow glimmers that disappeared as quickly as they shone.

The sight was ethereal. Moss clung to the side of the jagged mountainside for dear life, and yet I smiled at the sight of the challenge that stood before me. Clouds meant water, water from which the river had drawn its source from, and water from where the drop that had landed on my scalp not more than a few minutes ago had come from. Clouds meant life.

I looked at the mountains as a whole, trying to gain some sort of perspective on how to even start climbing. The source of the river just ended at the foot of the mountain, disappearing into the stone. I peered at the mountain again, trying to look for an easier climb rather than trying to scale the vertical side of the mountain, and then it caught my eye.

It wasn’t much. It wasn’t much at all. It was just a tiny shadow, created by the tiniest of imperfections, but it was enough. Not a field’s length away from where the river lay a staircase. Barely noticeable, but there all the same. Cut

into the mountain flawlessly, so that when the sun lit up the mountainside, it blended in as if there were nothing there.

I started my ascent into the mountains, one step at a time, and in no time, give or take a few falls, and a couple of much needed rests, I made it deep into the mountains, immersed in the mist.

I reached a clearing at the top of the steps, the end of the stairway marked by a massive crimson red shrine gate. I took that as a good omen as Nai-Nai always said the gods would look out for me if I stayed close to where they rest.

I took a deep breath and walked through. The sweet scent of lichen and dew embraced me, and I opened my eyes to this untouched paradise, and then started laughing. Uncontrollably laughing. A pond lay at the edge of the clearing, and I dunked my head straight in and drank. I inhaled as much as I could, drinking straight from the murky water, and sat back.

“Water. How precious.” I thought to myself. “And fleeting.”

I looked around the clearing. It was embedded in the mountains, surrounded by cliffs, and forests of bamboo that were blanketed by the mist. I turned my attention back to the pond, and noticed two delicate lilies floating on the water, one twice the size of the other, but both a shade of dark periwinkle. It reminded me of Nai-Nai and I, two lonesome flowers, thriving.

“Hahaha!”

I stood up abruptly, listening attentively.

“Hahahaha! Stop it!”

I could hear it again, I swear. I began to stumble through the bamboo forest, searching for the laughter that taunted me. I was convinced I was close.

“Haha! You can’t catch me!”

So very close. Whoever was laughing was just beyond my reach. I pulled past the last bamboo shoot, ready to grab whatever was babbling at me, and, for the second time that day, was awestruck. I was speechless in the face of the scene that stood before me.

A village lay resting on the intersection of two mountains, a small path leading through to wherever. Sunlight streamed through the path, illuminating the village in an airy golden bath. A cluster of white houses with curved wooden roofs dotted the face of the mountain wall, and small children, source of the irritating laughter, giggled, shrieked and ran around terrorising each other to their heart's content.

To my left, a mother washed clothes, her hair pulled tightly into a bun. To my right, some young girls around my age were talking to each other, smirking. All of them seemed to wear white silk that draped off them like pure white water running off their skin. I didn’t know what to make of such a heavenly scene.

“Are you looking for something?” said a voice. I gazed in front of me with glossy eyes and saw an old man with a beard and stick, staring straight at me.

“I – uh, yes. There was a – um, river. It came from this mountain and I – ” I mumbled, distracted by a child running past my feet, snorting. I snapped back my attention to the man. “Sorry, but there’s no water down in the valley, and I was wondering if there was water somewhere here? Maybe the river got blocked, or a dam broke?”

“There is no river nor dam here. But would you like to eat, young one?” said the man. I nodded.

The man brought me inside his home, a palace compared to the wooden shack I lived in. He brought me steaming rice and a plate of roasted pork, each grain of rice a glistening white pearl and the meat still shimmering from the oil. I began to eat, sinking my teeth into the crispy pork, and bit back a moan from the juices that came forth.

“What does it matter if your river runs dry?” said the man, as he served himself.

“Because the fields depend on it, I think.” I said, mouth full.

“Is it harvesting season about now?” he asked. A child ran in and sat down next to the old man, his grandson I’d assume.

“I – I think so? I’m not really sure. I can’t seem to remember.”

“Well, you must have anyone with you in the fields, no? Maybe they know why the river ran dry.”

“No, I don’t think so. Maybe… actually. I – I’m not sure.” I said. The child shuffled closer to me.

“Some people say there’s a god who lives in a cave at the peak.” whispered the child, grinning. I nearly choked.

“A god?” I asked. She nodded, as if telling me a deep secret.

“Maybe *he* can solve your problems?”

“What problems?”

“Your fields, right?” said the child. I nodded, vaguely recalling some kind of field. A corn field, perhaps?

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Mei!” she chirped.

“Well, Mei, do you want to take me to see this god?” I asked. Mei’s face turned a bright red and she shook her head furiously.

“*You* have to go there yourself, otherwise the god won’t talk to you.” Mei explained.

“I see.” I said, finishing my last bite. “Thank you so much for the food, Gong–Gong.”

“Of course, Jiang.” he said. I wondered why he’d called me Jiang. It was a little strange.

“Mei, do you want to show me which direction the god lives in?” I asked.

“Right there!” said Mei. She pointed at the narrow mountain pass.

“Thank you, Mei!” I said. I opened my bag and gave her one of my plums, and she beamed from ear to ear, running back to her mother with her new prize.

Walking through the mountain pass felt like walking into another world. Visibly, nothing changed much, but as I walked through the other side of the pass, I felt like it was suddenly winter. There was an eerie silence, and pine trees loomed over me in a sprawling thicket. Petals danced in the wind, as if they had a mind of their own. Crater-like walls surrounded the entirety of the area in an almost perfect circle.

“A cave at the peak.” I chanted to myself. “A cave at the peak.”

I tiptoed along the edge of the forest, squinting for a cave. I stumbled across a mountain pass once, and I could hear conversation from the other side but I thought nothing of it.

I ambled into the forest, tapping each tree as I walked by. I came out the other side, all the while chanting ‘A cave at the peak’. I scanned the mountains and exclaimed as I spotted the cave: a gaping hole half-way up the side of the mountain wall. It was the only place on-top of the mountain that was void of any mist, and instead was a thick murky soup of black.

I scrambled up the side of the mountain, ignoring the cuts and bruises I started to get from climbing so quickly. I felt no pain, no remorse. Only drive. I made it to the cave, my mind as foggy as the mist below me. I sauntered into the cave confidently, blood dripping down my legs, and ventured in so deep the outside light was barely visible.

“Child, why have you come here?” boomed a voice. I dropped my backpack in shock, and two plums rolled out. The voice sounded familiar, like the sound of someone she had known a long long time ago.

“I need your help.” I said. The shadows around me shifted and churned.

“With what?” it said. I paused. I didn’t know. I truly did not know.

“I – I’m not sure. I just need your help.” I said. I began to agonise, trying to remember *anything* about why I was in that cave.

“That tends to happen to people who stumble through these parts.” said the voice. The shadows began to transmogrify into an alarming wall of royal-blue scales.

“What tends to happen?” I asked.

“Never mind, child.” the voice said. The scales coiled and twisted, parting to make way for a head that made me feel as insignificant as a beetle.

“Where am I?” I asked, not scared, but intrigued by the face. It looked too human to be reptilian, too reptilian to be human. Just the front tooth of the elongated head was the size of my body. Its eyes were beyond my comprehension, and I stared into the amber spirals, lost in its glare.

“You are nowhere, child.” said the head. The head readjusted itself, revealing its neck and body that twisted upon itself, like a snake.

“I should be somewhere then. Take me home.” I demanded. Two large flaps protruded from its back, horned at the tip and webbed like bats.

“The mountains are your home, now.” said the voice, almost sorrowfully.

“The mountains...” I repeated, my speech drifting off. I wandered out of the cave in a haze, fear painted across my face because I did not know.

I did not know who I was.

## Tales from the Misty Mountains

*ESF South Island School, Khanduri, Manya*

Up in the mountains, down the greenery, through the foggy hills, lies an abandoned nunnery. As I approached the nunnery I thought of my journey.

Walking on the stoned path was not an easy journey. The air becomes heavier as you go up the mountain, while the fog chokes up your vision. Slowly approaching my destination, I took a minute to absorb my surroundings. It was cold and gloomy. The sun had finally said her last goodbyes and the moon's rays were intoxicating the sky. I could no longer hear the intrusive voices of the creatures of the forest, yet I can only hear the sound of drums echoing through the vast valleys and up the mountains. The thumps vibrate through my body, from my veins to my ears. Every now and then, I'm always reminded of these thumps. Sometimes they're erratic, while other times they're almost non-existent.

It's said that if you hear these drums as you go up the yellow mountain, it means Leigong knows about your treacherous deeds against those who are innocent and is awaiting to give you your punishment at the top of the mountain. The punishment? Death.

Death is what he gives to those who breed with evil. Death is what he presents to those with. Death is what he will award me, and seduce me forever away to the land of evermore sleep from this bleak destination.

When I was in my golden ages, I used to tell myself that life was a path in which tiny bumps occur, but as that journey became longer and longer the bumps transformed into hills, and the gold slowly started to erode off and all was left was a dull broken alloy, ready to break at any given time. I chuckled as I remembered the innocence I used to carry around before I was robbed from it. Breathing in the bitter thoughts were always hard but this time they were easier to take in. Maybe my bad fortune was finally at its turning point I thought to myself.

Looking at the foggy path ahead, I saw the greeting pines. With their long thickened out trunks going from various directions, they were said to visualize a host, greeting hikers as they would enter in their domain. But this time I felt as if this was my last time being a guest here.

As I made my way past, I saw faces on the stumps of the tree. A face of hunger struck man, beside him was a wailing widow while under them was a scrawny child. The child was disfigured as if its skull broke and now the skin is hugging the boney edges in a warm embrace.

The greenery surrounding the disfigured child acted as a cradle. It hugged its wooded mutilated body and from afar it seemed like a cross-section of a growing fetus in a womb. Yet it was slowly dying, mould was growing all around it and bit by bit it was engulfing the babe. The mould was a vivacious dark green with bloody red undertones. It looked alive, yet it was barely surviving.

I wanted to end its suffering. I truly wanted to, but I remembered my task at hand and wandered to the path ahead. As I approached the nunnery, I thought about the labour that is life. How every day, we wake up to spend our scarce time running around fruitless dreams but rest knowing that once our souls ascend, all the time wasted is for nothing. We are nothing, yet we try to be something to feed the demon called hope, and then label that time wasted as the fulfilment of our life. Life? I chuckled as I advanced to the edge of the land, the nunnery resided on and took a last look at what was presented.

I saw my journey. I saw the high mountains, the hills and the trees. I saw my triumphs and failures as a human. I finally saw me.

With misty eyes, I looked down and I was greeted by the sight of the rugged mountains, ready to embrace this lifeless vessel.

This is it. This is my calling.

However, at that moment, I saw *it*. It had colours roaring in every direction enchanting one with its wide golden wings reaching the sun. To common folk, it was insignificantly small, yet to me it was beautiful.

As I stared at *it* with a bleary smile, I now had the confidence in what to do. *It* gave me the insurance I needed. *It* helped me.

## The Dragon Tamer

*German Swiss International School, Ma, Nigel – 16*

Lee had the dream again. Death and devastation surrounded him where he stood. The air was thick with smoke and he struggled for breath. There was a sickly sweet smell to it as well, the smell of rot. What were once rows upon rows of stone houses, standing together like solemn soldiers defending their land, were now reduced to burning ruins, blackened and deformed by the fire. Where once fields of wheat, corn, and other crops used to stand, forming vast oceans of gold and green and bearing them through countless rough winters, there was now only ashes and black smoldering earth. The once crystal clear river which had provided a seemingly endless supply of food and sustenance was now infested with swollen, mutilated corpses that floated like rotten logs about the foul, murky green waters. Lee simply stood there. His legs trembled violently and his mind went completely numb. He had been here countless times in his sleep, yet it never failed to make him lose his wits. “This is not real”, he told himself. Yet he struggled to utter the words. It felt as if someone were twisting a rusty nail in his heart. He saw the faces in front of him again. His father’s one was long and solemn, with brown eyes that were as cold and unrelenting as the earth itself. His mother’s as well, drawn and sorrowful, her eyes full of sadness. He saw his cousins too: cousin Chan, whose face was marked by laugh lines and dimples, his jet black hair always in a careless tumble across his shoulders; cousin Wong, whose

face was as hard as dried leather, who seemed to prefer clenching his jaw and gritting his teeth over smiling and laughing; cousin Yuan's face was often bright red from all the drinking. He had a big, shaggy, black beard and an even bigger appetite for life's pleasures. He was a firm believer of living in the moment and whilst many considered his lack of forethought rash and unwise, it seemed he was the wisest amongst them all in the end, for at least he had died with a smile on his lips rather than a scream.

The faces then proceeded to burst into flames. The hair caught fire first, and was promptly burnt off. Then the eyes burst and flowed down charred, black cheeks like eggs flowing into a hot pan. That did not bother Lee anymore though. He had grown accustomed to it. It was the screaming that he could never forget. The shrill, ululating wails of agony the faces let out, as the flames whirled and writhed around them. Lee tried to run, he would always try to run away, yet his knees would always buckle just like they did this time. The flames then proceeded to close in and surround him, as if he were wearing them as a cloak. His insides felt as though they were on fire and the pain was blinding, as if his body were being hacked into pieces by a red-hot axe. The world around him slowly turned to black.

Lee woke up to the taste of salt tears again. The hard dirt walls of his room were shrouded with darkness and shadows. In the corner a torch glowed dimly, with flakes of ash drifting up through the air and gathered onto the hard dirt floor, just as it had in his dream. *No*, he thought to himself, *not again*. He made himself sit up from his straw bed and there was a moment of dizziness followed by a headache.

The sun had not come out yet and so Lee simply sat there, contemplating.

He had been living in an abandoned stone hut at the foot of the Yellow mountains for the past few weeks, hiding away and nursing his wounds. What little food and water he had brought with him had almost run out and he was not yet strong enough to hunt. He still had some wine left that he was using to treat his wounds with. Some days, he had thought about drinking it all, that way his pain would disappear. Along with everything else.

The same dreams had been torturing him every night. *I am a disgrace*, he told himself, *I am stupid and weak. Those deaths were all my fault and there will be more. I should just disappear from the world. It would be better that way.* He often had these thoughts. He wanted it to end. He wanted the dreams to stop and finally find peace.

For centuries, his family held the titles as the wardens of the eastern kingdom. They had lived in the first and oldest town since the establishment of the kingdom, commanding its armies and guarding its borders against the savage tribes of the west. They were strong leaders and even stronger warriors who loved battles and glory. So did his father. Lee was his father's only son and had never been interested in the ways of warfare. His mother had passed shortly after he was born and he did not remember much about her, aside from her sad eyes. His father did not spend much time with him either. He was a stern man who was always focused on his duty above all else. When they did spend time together, Lee was mostly chastised about how he lacked focus and discipline. In his youth, he would occasionally play with his cousins, however he spent most of his time reading ancient scrolls and books about the myths and histories surrounding his town. How they established their current economic system or the legends of his

ancestors performing superhuman feats. What interested him the most, however, were the dragon myths. Legends of how his earliest ancestors used the mysterious Horn of Obedience to tame the fearsome dragons of the nearby Yellow Mountains and carved out the eastern kingdom with fire and blood. Nobody in his town had ever seen a dragon though. Foraging parties had been sent into the mountains in order to find them for the past decades, yet they would either return with nothing or not return at all. Many came to believe the dragons had died out or never existed in the first place. Lee did not. It was his dream to tame one and ride on its back not manage armies like his father wanted him to. "Stop reading this idle nonsense" he would angrily say, whenever he caught Lee reading a story rather than the books about laws and economics he was told to read. He sometimes tried to hide Lee's stories away, however Lee quickly managed to find them and he eventually gave up.

Lee never wanted this cup of wardenship to pass to him. However eventually his father passed when he was twenty years of age, and he had to drink from it whether he liked it or not. "I cannot force you to become a strong warrior like I wanted you to be" his father muttered, as he lay dying, "Be focused, be disciplined, be involved, and be strong, these are the keys to being a good leader however. Most importantly, never be reliant on your council. Promise me you will remember Lee. Promise that!". Those words still haunted him.

The first few years of his reign had been rather stable. The western tribes had not stirred and he mostly let the council handle matters of the state such as maintaining laws and managing food supplies for the upcoming winter. Lee had



even abandoned his duty of maintaining the army, believing that there was no need to. He had spent most of his time reading his books and managed to gain possession of the Horn of Obedience as well, which he studied whenever he could. It was a horn of roughly two feet, made of a dark unknown material. Legends claimed it was a mix of dragonbone and rock from the Yellow Mountains, fused together with dragonfire. The reed supposedly contained dragon hair as well. It was decorated with metal bands of ruby red and bronze and covered with strange glyphs from a more ancient and mysterious time. Its surface was shiny and reflective and nobody had ever laid their lips on it for thousands of years. He was absolutely fascinated by it and took it everywhere he went. It never left his person though he had never attempted to blow it either. He also often held lavish family banquets where he invited all of his cousins, which almost beggared the town on numerous occasions. Many members of Lee's council quickly grew tired of his negligent ways and deserted. Lee had not even realised this fact, as he simply continued his reading. He had completely forgotten his father's last words.

Eventually however, news had arrived that Khulan Khan, king of the western plains, had united the rest of the western tribes beneath his blood red banner and that they were marching towards the kingdom. Lee had simply brushed that matter aside as well and forgotten it, expecting his council to take care of it. It was only until he heard the sound of war horns that he realised what was going on. He had grown so reliant on his council and as most had abandoned him, he did not know what to do. He hastily gathered his untrained army together, as they prepared themselves for their historical enemy.

By the end of the battle, his army consisted solely of cripples and carrion crows. Lee himself was ineffective at commanding and did not understand how to organize defensive formations, and although he commanded the entire army of the eastern kingdom, they were simply not prepared enough to handle the might of the north. They were cut to pieces, like a hot knife through butter. He watched on, absolutely petrified, as his town, the oldest town in the kingdom, was sacked and put to the torch. After centuries of stability and protection from Lee's family, the gates of the eastern kingdom had once again been forced open and the western tribes were once again free to plunder and leave in it.

With tears in his eyes, he turned and rode away. He rode with all his remaining strength and willpower. He kept riding even when he could barely sit in his saddle, when he could hardly hold his reins. He simply put his head down and rode. When he finally came to, he realised that he was at the foot of the Yellow mountains.

As the sun began to gradually emerge from the horizon, shafts of light poured through the windows in his hut, filling it with light and life. His headache had subsided and he remembered more. He remembered his cousins' screams as they were being ridden down, remembered the flames surrounding the town library, burning away centuries of wisdom, remembered how women and children were ruthlessly slaughtered in the streets. It filled his heart with anger. He felt a surge of strength within him that he had never felt before. *I will no longer be weak. I will no longer look back. I will journey into the Yellow Mountains!*

The Yellow Mountains were an ancient place, old when Lee's civilization was still young. They were taller than the mortal mind could comprehend, with their snowy peaks disappearing into the sky, shrouded in mist and clouds. They were a place where massive, gnarled pine trees with iron grey bark twisted and jutted out from the smooth mountain rock. A place of hidden, unexplored caverns where mysterious bones are uncovered. A place of unforeseen wonders and unforgiving dangers. There were numerous stone houses and huts around the mountains as well, some near the base and others in the clouds, however all of them were abandoned. It was a wild and haunting place, ridden with death and mystery, yet there was an unexplainable sense of power to it. Many had attempted to explore these mountains before, to traverse through the caverns and discover some kind of treasure. Few returned and of those, none returned sane.

Lee's back ached. His arms were sore and his legs cramped painfully with every step he took in the cavern. This had been the tenth cavern he had searched and he hoped to finally be able to find something with this one. The previous caverns had all been filled with bones, rocks, and not much else. Lee was in despair. There was a little voice inside him telling him "It's ok to give up. Perhaps dragons never existed anyways. You've already searched so many, why would this one be any different?", and for a while he wanted to do what the little voice told him to. To stop and forget about the dragons. To live out the rest of his days in his little stone hut at the foot of the mountain and do nothing more. To admit defeat and forget about his failures as they destroy the lives of millions of people in the eastern kingdom. He would not do that. His weakness had already cost him his home and his family as well as the homes, families, and livelihoods of millions of other innocents. He was sick and tired of being weak, of sitting about

in his hut, of being reminded of his failure, and especially tired that he was not able to do anything about it. He would emerge from the mountains on the back of a dragon or not at all. With his torch in one hand, his horn in the other, and his sword strapped to his belt, he plunged deeper into the darkness.

Lee had emerged from the cavern once again with nothing but he did not have enough time to feel sorry for himself. The sun was setting and he had gone too deep into the mountains to turn back. He had gone further than many had ever gone and explored more caves than any had and still he ventured deeper into the woods, his cramped legs trembling with each step and all around him, the shadows seemed to creep closer.

It was amongst the shadows that he had finally spotted the beast stalking through the woods. What little light his dimming torch possessed managed to illuminate the dragon ahead. It was massive, possibly around thirty feet, with golden, dagger-like talons. Its scales were as black as sin, with silver horns and eyes that were like pits of lava. Its teeth were jet black as well, as long as his sword and twice as sharp and its jaws were large enough to swallow three adult cattle whole. Lee was absolutely stunned by it, so much so that his body froze, as if it were turned to stone. Any thoughts he previously had seemed to vanish in an instant, as he stood there admiring its beauty. By the time Lee came to, he realised that the dragon was coming towards him.

It was now or never. He reached for the horn, his hand shaking so violently that he almost lost grip of it three times. It seemed as though all the strength in his body had dissipated in that instant. His whole body felt numb as he raised the horn to his lips, his trembling arm feeling as if it would fall off any instant. He mustered what diminishing strength he had, placed his lips to the horn and blew. Shrill and baneful was its voice, a high-pitched scream that seemed to set Lee's insides ablaze and made the dragon release a roar of pain. His knees were the first to give away, then his legs, but even as he knelt to the ground he continued to blow. As the already dark world blackened around him he continued to blow. As the dragon's thundering roars grew more and more muffled he still continued to blow. The dragon had opened its mouth, unleashing its bright orange flames upon the woods, setting the ancient pines ablaze and filling the air with ash and smoke, turning it from dark gray to black. Yet he remained resolute and kept blowing, as the flames surrounded him, just as they had before. By the time the smoke had cleared, Lee was on its back and it let out another roar which echoed across the mountains. For the first time in perhaps centuries, perhaps millennia, or perhaps in history, the night was exposed to the sound of a dragon.

## Why Do We Not Love?

*Islamic Kasim Tuet Memorial College, Manaf, Saaliha – 18*

The boy stumbled, getting accustomed to his new body. He was a Creating spirit, and a young one at that. Trying to experience life from a physical body for the first time; one he would later wish he didn't have. He looked around and blinked several times. He brought up his hands to his face and touched his hair. His eyes lit up and he laughed in happiness, blissful in his ignorance. I wish I could help him.

The boy ran through the streets in the little town in the mountains of Huangshan, its whole expanse clearly visible from my vantage point. It was cradled amongst the mountains as if a mother holding her baby, whose snow capped head offered a beauty that hid the horrors within. The sun was retiring after a long day of work and people quickly ran to their homes, yearning the warmth of a fire. Winter was in full swing.

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Lili

I was sitting by the fireplace and warming my hands, humming a tune to myself. I jumped when the door opened suddenly, but seeing Su-yuan, I sighed in relief. I waited. She didn't immediately close it like she always did. I squinted when I saw a shadow move behind her. It moved a few steps ahead, the light from the foyer falling unto it

and I realized it was a boy. He was short and had chubby cheeks. It seemed like he was younger than me.

I looked back at Su-yuan, and found her tossing wood into the fireplace. She then removed her coat and draped it on the only chair in the room, one she says is only for 'adults'. Su-yuan was like my mother, she took me into her house and took care of me. But she doesn't like to be called 'mother', so I just call her by her name.

I looked back at the little boy. He was still standing at the entrance and looking around. I wish I also had a body like him and all the other kids in this village. Su-yuan says I will get one soon, and I wonder when. I ask Su-yuan if I can talk to the boy and she lets me. I was happy, I could make a new friend now. Sometimes, it gets very boring with only Fangying, because she sleeps too early and doesn't always come to play with me. But she was my only 'friend'. I'm not sure what that means but Su-yuan once said that a friend is someone you never leave. She said she was my friend too so I should never leave her. So now I think the boy needs a friend too.

I went to him and gave him my hand, introducing myself. He said he was called Dan. We became friends.

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Purebloods. They were the people of this land. They could be Creators, Nurturers, Healers, basically anything depending on their clan and spirit animal. But a pureblooded one. They are impeccably talented in their niche. But you could find people all over the world engaged in different professions like this. What makes them special? To elucidate, when purebloods go to the human realm, they always end up widely admired and well renowned. They are called 'celebrities' there.

But one may wonder, why might they move into the human realm, when this is where they belonged? Well, they actually escaped. Looking for justice. Looking for a land where they were viewed for their talents and not their clans. Some purebloods moved out in the past, but it happened in masses after the witch's curse.

I thought back to when it happened, my mind rekindling the memories. Among these clans, there was the dragon clan that was considered superior. They were the rulers of the land, the royals, the privileged. Their spirit animals were dragons and they are descendants from dragons that lived eons ago. It is believed that dragons mixed with the human race over the years to survive and eventually became human like. They were unnaturally strong because of it but they had also been able to summon fire from their hands. So why can't they anymore?

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## Lili

I was glad to finally come out of the house. Su-yuan rarely lets us out. She says it's not safe. I looked around, seeing a lot of people. I don't know why but they never looked at me. When I walk past them, they look past me as if I was invisible. I saw the houses preparing for Christmas. Their decorations looked very beautiful. We stopped at a shop and Su-yuan told me to wait outside.

Next to the shop was a beautiful house. I looked inside and there seemed to be a girl my age. A woman hugged her. A man gave her food. They must be her 'mother' and 'father', her 'parents'. I don't really know what that meant but every child seemed to have them. When I looked at the girl smiling so happily, I also wanted 'parents'. But Su-yuan says some children don't get to have them. I looked at the girl's clothes. She had a furry coat on and slippers with socks on that looked so warm. Su-yuan says it was also for 'adults'. I wanted to go inside and be their friend.

They looked so happy. I almost went up the steps and then remembered. Su-yuan says that we must never speak to the villagers. Even the children. She says they are dangerous. I once asked Su-yuan why and she says it's because we are different.

I looked around again. I saw Dan and Fangying. I raised my hand and waved excitedly. Had Su-yuan allowed them to come out too? I went to them and noticed that they didn't have socks too. I once asked Fangying if she didn't want to be warm and wear socks. She had told me big and strong girls didn't need socks. But when I looked at her, it seemed like she did need socks.

The three of us planned to walk around the street until Su-yuan came back. We walked for a bit and ended up near the base of the forest, one that Su-yuan had forbidden us to go to. But Fangying said we could go in a jiff and return, it won't be a problem. That she's a big girl so she could protect us. She says we don't have to tell Su-yuan. We go in.

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The enchanted trees of this land. They stood tall among the mass of pine trees in the forest. They represented each clan. Each tree would glow their own color when a pureblood of a specific clan got within a few feet of the tree. Whenever someone went to the forest, I could see a faint luminescence of a specific color seeping through branches and to the expanse of the sky. But one color I hadn't seen in a long time; the color of the Creators; green. I never again saw it coming from the forest after the witch's curse. There were no pureblood creators after all. Which is why I was alarmed when I saw it again. It went as soon as it came. I hurried to see and understood. Those were the three spirit children. The boy I had watched get his new body just recently, was there too. They were children of

Creator spirits that escaped to the human realm after the witch's curse. They didn't have their own bodies since their parents escaped too late. They must've had these children and then died or abandoned them.

Su-yuan in reality was a contemptible woman. I saw her scheme in the human realm. She got the spirits of young children who were left by their parents from the creating clan and gave them bodies from the human realm, and brought them to this town. One out of the two children didn't have a body yet so people couldn't see her. Su-yuan was planning to get the girl a body too and send them to work to get her money, pretending they were her children. They didn't even have proper clothes for the winter or a warm bed to sleep in.

I wish I could go down and stop her. I knew something like this was going to happen sooner or later. If anyone else had seen the green flash, it's over for them. The townspeople were not yet ready to welcome the Creating clan into the land. They're in danger.

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### Lili

It had been several months since we'd come back from the forest. Fangying was right, nothing happened. I guess going into the forest wasn't dangerous after all. But I wonder where Fangying went? A few weeks after we had returned from the forest, she had gone out to play when Su-yuan wasn't there and never returned. Su-yuan was furious when she returned, asking us where she went, her anger still not diminished. I wanted Fangying to return too.

I looked over at Su-yuan and Dan. Su-yuan was comfortably sleeping, wrapped up in a blanket while Dan was curled to a ball on the floor. I looked over at the windows to see moonlight streaming through the small gaps of paper Su-yuan had pasted over them ever since Fangying had left. She never let us go out after that and seemed scared of something I didn't know of.

I made sure they both were sleeping and quietly tiptoed to the door. I stepped out, closing the door behind me. I was going to look for Fangying. I walked down the streets for several minutes, not knowing where to go, when something caught my attention. I stopped at the base of a huge house, the house where I had seen the girl with the warm clothes and a 'mother' and 'father'. What caught my attention was that the door was wide open. There were red flowers at the entrance and people walking in. I walked up the steps. Near the entrance was a picture frame of the girl I had seen that day, a candle placed in front. Since a lot of people were going in, I guess I could too.

I went in and saw people sitting in a hall. Finally, I recognized two people. The girl's 'parents'. But they looked different. That day they were glowing and today they both had swollen red eyes and sunken cheeks. I exited the hall and was looking through the rooms when I saw one open with a large, shiny black box inside. I went over and gasped when I recognized the girl inside. It was the girl I had seen that day. But she seemed to be sleeping. Why was

she sleeping in a box? It was covered with a shiny white cloth. I shrugged. I guess it was warm and comfortable there. I had an idea. I could possess the girl. Just for a few minutes, to know what it's like. Then I would leave her body and go back out to look for Fangying.

I went inside the girl. I looked at my hands and body. This is how it feels to have a physical body. I thought I should try walking. As I was getting used to the new body, I heard a scream behind me. I whipped around to see a woman, mouth agape in horror. Why was she looking at me? It scared me. I tried to leave the body but I couldn't. My heart dropped. Does she know I'm someone else? Was she angry?

I bolted past her into the street. I needed to ask Su-yuan what to do. I ran and ran and finally reached the familiar little house. I threw the door open and shook Su-yuan with urgency. "Su-yuan! Su-yuan! Help me! I can't leave this body! I think they're coming after me!" Su-yuan bolted up and looked at me. "Su-yuan, it's me, Lili. I'm inside her body", I explained. Su-yuan's face had gone white and she was frozen. Next thing I knew, the door burst open and someone held my face forcefully and held a piece of cloth over my mouth. The world blackened and I fell into oblivion.

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The Witch's Curse. That's when our town changed. When dragons lost their special power and purebloods escaped.

You see, the dragons thought simply belonging to their clan immediately entitled them to power over the lands and no one dared speak up. Until the people from the creating clan rose. These people consisted of anyone that was involved in the creative arts. Their niche became more and more prominent within that time, especially with the rise of art appreciation in the 18th century. They were widely recognized for their talents, everyone wanting to be privileged to have 'creators' create something for them. The creators used this opportunity to request equality among all clans; now that they were up against the Dragons. But that didn't sit well with the hyped dragon clan. It soon

turned into an ugly war of fighting for power. Ties were broken, people died, the town was in shambles. The ruler took to the witch of the town in desperation, the only one with the power to stop it. She made her decision.

She cursed the Creators to become spirits and the Dragons to lose their ability to summon fire from their hands. And that's when people moved out.

It is believed that the majority of the creating clan escaped into the human realm before the curse was brought into action and some who had already become spirits also escaped. Since dragons once lived in our town, a lot of tourists from the human realm come here to see the place out of curiosity. You could see that most of the outsiders who came here were actually artists or poets. That was because they were either children of one of the pureblood creators who escaped before the curse, or children of one of the humans who were possessed by one of the spirits that escaped. They may not be aware of it but their souls are drawn here because the call of creating was in their blood.

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### Lili

I woke up in a cold sweat. My body was aching so much. It never hurt when I didn't have a body. I realized my hands were tied behind my back. I looked around the room. I saw Dan and Su-yuan also sitting on either side of me with their hands tied. We were in a room with no furniture. It was quite dark and my eyesight was blurry but I think I can see Fangying sleeping in front of me. My heart swelled in happiness. "Fangying!" I called out. Fangying didn't seem to budge. I peered closer to see that her skin looked ashy and lifeless. I felt drowsy and I passed out again.

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### Lili

I woke up to find me and the others at the center of town, on our knees, someone forcing our heads down. Why wasn't Fangying with us? I peeked through the hair around my face. A crowd had formed around us. Suddenly, people parted and made way for a few important looking people. It seemed like they were Dragons, perhaps they were the ruler of the lands Fangying had told me about. "They are from the Creating Clan!" someone screamed, pointing at us. Everyone gasped and backed away. I then recognized the 'mother' of this girl's body I had borrowed. She met my eyes and fell to her knees, letting out a shrill cry and sobbing uncontrollably. She collected herself and asked Su-yuan, "Is this my daughter?". Su-yuan shook her head. "She's a creator spirit. She possessed her and now can't get out"

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Why was our world like this? Why were we divided among people sharing the same land? Why do we always find reasons to fight? Why do we not love?

Regrettably, I was one of the Dragons when I was alive, who hated The Creators with every fiber of my being. I let someone's clan be the first thing I saw before I saw them as a person.

But it was ironic that purebloods escaped to the human realm in search for justice only to find they judged people bases on color of their skin and religion there. How absurd is that? It seems no place is free from corruption.

Now that I could never go back, I want so bad to go back and tell them to stop. Tell them to be united. Tell them how much they'll regret when they've lost their time on Earth, just like me. I wish someone could tell them.

But that day, things changed. The parents of the little girl who had tragically died took in Lili as their own. Everyone was against it, telling a creator had no place in their town. But they were adamant. They said they would take this as a sign from the heavens above at having a second chance with her daughter. What difference did it make what clan she was from? She was just a child after all. They adopted Dan too. Fangying never returned. Apparently when the green flash lit up the sky that day, the palace guards had seen it too and abducted Fangying to question her. They treated her so badly because of her origin, she eventually died. They had asked her where the others were. And that's how Su-yuan and the kids were found. Su-yuan was taken to the prison on command of the mother who adopted Lili. Justice was served only because it was requested from someone from the Dragon Clan.

The woman accepting a Creator as her child was the first step towards change. Now that I had seen a positive change, I could go back to rest in peace. The town was glowing red preparing for Chinese Celebrations. A new start was to come.

## Like Tying a Noose to a Sprout

*Kiangsu Chekiang College International Section, Takajitsuko, Mion – 16*

*It was dynasties ago when a goddess of an unknown mountain wished to bear a child of her own, however, her little bundle of joy was nothing but an act of treason in the eyes of the powerful deities of the sky— punishable by abolition.*

*Her promised child was delivered to her unsuspecting husband Wang Lu Wu (鹿无).*

*The husband waited for many moons with nothing to show for her love. And 9 years have passed until his prayers were answered; in his rice field floated his beloved's long braided hair. Blinded by grief, he took a leap from her favourite tree, her remnant embracing his neck...*

There has been wild whispers of the wind, whaling about the likelihood of another war.

The West and the South are neck to neck— claiming a patch of cave mines that possess sacks full of luminous rocks. I wonder if they would vulture away elders and children to draft this time. This is nothing new to men but I could never understand.

I am a wandering god. For moons now, have I rustled through wilting bushes and skipped over rocks. I carry with me an imprinted woven rag full of herbs and straws. I have slept on this mountain's peak and sang to the trenches. I

have smelled every flower as I pass the tenants. But lately, something has spiked my interest. As I travelled to the south, an ominous scent wafts aimlessly—

I wandered around flat lands, soon enough, a narrow slither of bald ground paved a path. I looked back to see fireflies and the stars courting each other, not a single cloud in the sky, it's already a tranquil night. I rub my eyes and proceed. And there it was, a white, worn down house. There were no fences, shelters for horses or piles of straw. Only a smeared clay stove and dry planks leaned on the side walls. *Did I get the wrong place?* I nestled down outside the door and chewed some straws. It's nothing worth gnawing on but the hint of game draws me back to it. It's as if I am feasting on the essence of this mountain. I listen to the strums of my straws and crinkles of the leaves; time passes slowly when you try to find a new melody. To a minor mountain god like myself, the sound of rivers streaming is heritage— coursing through my vessel.

I hear a thud. Like hooves on sward. A clink follows, it has no rhythm. The unsettling harmony— the discord of sounds and smells are making me nauseous. What could make such a noise? I muffle my ears with my imprinted rag and stare as another four leaves hastily make their way down to the house. I feel a brisk wind caress my back, and a hand.

In a fraction of a second, I am off the ground. I can see my legs dangling. I flail with all my strength. My rag falls. The hand jolted. I kicked the air. I kicked again, against something firm. I fall. I bend my knees. Push up, clutch both my fists; lower my stance. I exhale carefully. And I glare at it...

There, a lanky old man with sparse wavy hair, wheezing. Waving both his arms as he falls onto his knee. I gingerly lower my fists and interrogate him. He scratched the top of his head. He coughed, then pointed to himself and said 'Wang Bian Wu(蝙五)'. Pointed to the house and then to himself. *Does he think that I am incapable of understanding this language? Me?* I whip my woven rag and collect my herbs and straw. He shuffles around, then paces into the house. He croaks, "shelter" then signs me in. I feel something burn up my throat and head. But I swallow, rub my temples and invite myself in.

The place is disappointing, it looks plain. I sweep the house for anything obscure things, nothing. There are bags of soil, chipped bowls, woven hay—a rest area? And a fireplace with a pot attached to the low ceiling. It's warmer here. The sound! What was it? I examine the man as he advances around. He approaches the bags, seizes a handful, cuts some hay, then throws them into a bowl. *Is he, going to eat that?* He notices my glances. I warn him not to eat it. He pauses then lists—"Mat, sleep, dawn, work". I could feel my eyebrows being loomed. I throw myself next to the fire and doze off on my elbow.

I wake up to a jarring quarrel of sounds. An unknown silk sheet draped and slipped off of my limbs. I wobble behind the man who seemed to be working with soil again. He's chirping, but from his lips— a melancholic melody. It's odd, it's like I've heard of it before. How can such a gravelly sounding man muster a performance like that. He notices me and approaches me.

"You have wavy hair and weed coloured eyes, just where did you come from"

I say, "From the West", he coughs and stiffens his lip. I pull him out of the door and point in the direction of our shadows. He faces the West for a while. I could see his skin wrinkle near his jaw. And his eyebrows inch closer to his lids. He inhales sharply through his teeth. Then goes around the house and tosses me an axe, points at several logs and disappears into the woods. I did not see him until the next dawn.

I wake up to the same silk sheet slipping off my elbows. I rub my eyes and a vision of the man ogling my rag entered my eyes. *Why would he need my rag?* I place my hand on my knee to prop myself up. He places his hand over his eyes and hums the melody. He then erects himself and slowly moves towards the fireplace, so I rush to sleep again. "I will give you another five so get up, eat this, rinse your face and cut more logs. There are more silk sheets hung

outside, the sheet is— rag, outside, hung, sleep.” Then I hear his steps, reverberate away from the pavement. I blink at the ceiling. *Why so choppy? I’m being deigned! So why do I find it endearing...*

The same burn from yesterday seemed to have torched itself in my chest now, there’s a ringing in my ears.

I scarfed down the thick paste of rice, dunked my face in the nearest pond and started to get to work. As I chopped some logs I thought of my father. I knew my father’s love, I know he loved everything she loved, but he loved her more. The legend of the unknown mountain never knew— of its irony. He was one of her tenants that could have been her saviour. But he prayed to the skies, day and night; through caramelising blood splatters to the migration of halcyons. The legend never knew that the tragedy was not in the leap of Wang Lu Wu, but was where he placed his faith. He never in the course of my short existence spoke a word to me, *if I had said something would it have changed?* I am out of wood.

I feel obligated to make sure there is nothing odd around this house, I gather dirt between my toes as I manoeuvre around the back—side of the house, every step I take, it feels as if I am sinking. But there was only a lofty pot. I run back to gather the planks that I made, and stood on it. It is full of water, and duckweed. *What a coincidence...* I fish them out of the water and toss them onto the concave hardened mud, *that old man can eat this*. This time, I would wait for him.

It was a couple hours before the candles all burnt out, the door creaked open, I could hear the soft sound of his footwear being dragged across the floor, it’s sporadic. *He is ageing but there is no need to start so early*. I hear something bash against the frames. I rush to the door.

Like a squashed frog, the collapsed body of the old man filled my vision. He smells like blood. I heaved his body onto his side of the house. I notice wrappings on his right thumb and leg. I judiciously removed the ones on his leg as there were grime smudges on it.

It’s mangled, it’s as if a god played some sick trick on him, turned his leg into a deer’s. I look at my own legs and back at his. My eyes are clouding. I can’t breathe. *What is this, why is this, this is, it’s disgusting*. I tug on my hair, and hold in a gag. *Try, do something*. I prop myself like I would have this morning and yanked out herbs from my rag. *What do humans use for legs? Can they eat and heal? Can they grow it back? No, if humans could then he would have grown his back years ago*. I slap my herbs onto the leg and rub it in. The man’s limbs jerk. He opens his mouth and spoke faintly,

“Go to sleep, no cry, fireplace, go.”

There is a tight squeeze in my chest and my eyes widened until they almost rolled out. I step away from the man and crouch in front of the fireplace. *Would she have felt this way if she saw him like this?* I glare at the slowly oscillating metal pot with the duckweed I prepared.

*This is the first man, who has offered me a home, other than him. I will not let this man end the way he did. I am better than she ever was.*

From that day on, I tried harder to initiate dialogue with Bian Wu. I threw away the boiled duckweed and started to boil some herbs. He responded to his name and he gargled the words— logs, work, sleep continuously. And eventually added the word rice. I would listen to him trying to finish his “whistling” and watch him cry out at night. I maintained this routine until one day, he pointed at the bags of soil he seemed to be working with. I mimicked what he was doing on the first dawn I spent here. I forced my hand through the bag. He seems to be taken back. *He must be impressed*. I grab a handful. *It burns! This isn’t soil*. I fling the substance into the bowl, some scattered and the remains fizzled and burst.

“Gunpowder” he murmurs.

I furrow my eyebrows.



“You wouldn’t understand, but maybe I can voice my concerns.”

He pats the ground next to him, with his disfigured hand. I wince at the sight but I sit beside him. He wraps my hand with a slither of silk.

“It’s a long story, I used to live in this house with a beautiful wife and ardent son. He was like a little chick, following his mother everywhere to watch her make tapestries. It was our main income.

So, it became difficult to make ends meet when she went missing, only to be found chewed to death in a village rice field at the foot of the mountain. My inventions could barely get us a handful of rice. Until some merchants offered me a chance when they came to inspect our loom. I bit into it without a second glance. I started to develop weapons. However, my son found my inventions distasteful and left for the West, where he swore would live a better life weaving like his mother.

He was a queer child. Sometimes, I could still hear him tweeting on about his mountain friend; the mist and trees that played hide and seek, the wind that played tag. If I were to tell him that I was making something that could rupture a boulder, he would probably send a fist flying at me. You know son? I was relieved when I saw that imprint on your rag, it’s something that parades our lineage. I hope he sold it for a good price. I digressed, right, the artillery is called can—“

He kept going until his eyes gave in, I could see the sun peeping, from under the door. *What a foolish man he is.* Hours have passed but the wound from the gunpowder doesn’t seem to fade away, it remains a burnmark.

*I will be back by noon.*

As I descend the mountain, I notice that I could no longer deftly skip past the rocks. I am grunting and my hands are palpitating. *It must be that gunpowder, I feel jaded.* I try to wipe off beads of sweat and fatigue clinging onto my eyes. I finally see horses and fences but the sun is irrigating the top of my head. *It seems that I’ll be returning later than noon.* I look for the biggest house of the village and pry myself in. A swine like man with sleeves of luminous rocks catches my attention; I seem to have caught his too.

His foghorn voice booms toward me.

“What the hell do you want brat, if you’ve got no business don’t be wondering in here, this is my territory you got that? If you don’t want to be chewed up by the dogs, scam!”

I pick up a rock, clench it, then hand it to him. I walk towards the centre of the village where there are plasters of missing person’s posters, head hunter bounties and maps. He follows me as if he’s a devotee, frankly, it doesn’t feel bad. I point at the borders of the West and the South. I unwrap my marked hand and thrust it in his face. I carefully imitate the way Bian Wu speaks.

“Gunpowder”, it slithers onto my tongue.

He flinches and quivers. I could see my silhouette is his rooster eyes. It looks like he was able to comprehend it.

“Young sir, we simply cannot abandon the war. The West is also sure to be preparing to raid the mines, we have already confirmed boulders of jades, you see? That could be our fortu—“

*His squeals are unbearable.* He sucks in his saliva and covers. There are other tenants passing by, gawking at him. I pick up pebbles, rocks and earth, and shower them through my fingertips. The tenants rallied around and started scouring. All of them, tongue-tied, on their knees and hands. I could see my shadow; casting on their backs. *Ants with a grain of rice.*

*I know what I must do. It's funny, I never thought I'll be seeing the sky deities again, at least this soon. And to be barging in wearing my mother's footwear.*

I decided to take a long walk back. I recite the legend of the unknown mountain. It's a tragedy that brought nothing to its tenants, except me. In a couple of seasons now, none of the valleys will echo their names. Maybe I was destined to do more than wander around— repent? It's hysterical. It's another cloudless evening, and the cruel sky seems to have no bounds. The moon beams at the grass and paints them with glint, what can the merchants want more than this. I stand in awe and caress the grass. It is just as smooth, *they could give you more than those mute rocks*. If I could offer them the scintillating calligraphy of the mountains, would they have given 'weeds' a chance? I wonder, *if I had reached out to them, would they have given me a chance? Ah this must be desire*. I shake my head and face my demise. The bald path faces me silently and solemnly. I hold my breath and greet the door.

*Has this house always looked this lonely?*

I enter the house, it's still toasty. I start to steam the rice. I wash the roots I plucked from the village and chucked them into the rice. It should be ready by tomorrow.

*He doesn't seem to have woken up once*. I picked up Bian Wu's roughened hand. I don't know why, but the sight of it makes my eyes cloud. I let out a faint whimper.

"Lu Lu, did you have a bad dream?" he slurs.

I can't help but chuckle. I could feel my hands tremble, so I placed his down. I could feel my eyes dripping. *Bian Wu ah, you remind me of a character in a legend. He left before me. If you ever get to the clouds, please, find him and talk to him. Please, tell him that you love him and the fallacious legend with him will be overwritten.*

"I-.", I cock my neck up to the ceiling like a hungry baby bird and muzzle my mouth. I stayed kneeling next to Bian Wu until I could feel a cold snail's trail on my face. I propped myself up like I did any other day. I fold my rag and leave it next to Bian Wu's head. I creak open the door and invite myself out.

***"It was dynasties ago when a wandering god wished to stop men's quarrels. The wise god was exasperated with the repetitiveness of men's futile wars. He gave up eternity to provide them equally with what he saw was fitting. Legends say, several boulders of jade were found resting all over the mountain. And the wandering god watches over them. I wonder if he's succeeded in protecting his mountain. Do you remember the name of the mountain?"***

## Tales from China's Magical Mountains

*Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Chan, Yu Wing Jaelyn – 17*

The world shuddered like some great beast rising from the bowels of the earth.

Strong oaks swayed violently, their branches stripped of their lush greenery. Their trunks bulged unnaturally, spasming as it swelled and flattened, the trees doubling over as if in pain. Still air bloomed into an unexpected wind, whirling into wild gusts. Wild weeds burst out of the soil, splitting fresh flowers down the centre in a macabre display of destruction, they raced to fell the trunks of the oaks who seemed relieved to be put out of their misery.

The world unmade itself.

And all the spirits could do was watch. There was nothing they could do.

The younger ones clung to the elders and wept as all they knew flew by in an instant. The elders who had seen this only once or twice in their existence bowed their heads and waited for it to pass.

Nature was caught in the throes of birth. With no regard for her other children, she pushed on, and what was made in her womb fought harder, fought harder against the all-mighty grasp of an unwitting mother's blind love.

While the middle and lower mountains were ravaged, the upper mountains were quiet, quiet with a silence that was made rather than natural.

Nature retained some of her mercy, granting peace to the white laden cliffs, signalling that her would rise from snow and chilled air.

Those born from lesser elements of the coldest season, such as an iced dewdrop on a crocus or the dusting of frost on a branch crouched at the edge of the precipice. Their gaze was drawn to the only thing that moved in the midst of stillness: a winter willow that arched over gracefully, its leaves quivering with the force Nature imbued it with.

The ice crystals on the willow scattered into the snow.

One by one, at an agonisingly slow pace. The whisper of solid ice sliding into the snow hummed in the silence that stretched for miles.

One, two, five ice crystals fell.

More and more tumbled to the ground, the tree bucked wildly as shards fell like hailstones. Nature yielded to the unrelenting force of birth, the wild winds from below plunging into a storm that shook the base of the mountains.

A boy. No, a girl. No, neither. A being was more appropriate, rose from the ground in a curl of white mist, hidden soundly under the curtain of iced willow leaves. It curled in on itself, the tree and the being both sighed collectively as Nature finally let it slip from her womb.

Those from the lower mountains slumped against each other, grateful that Nature's cycle was over. Those gathered at the mountains edge waited, waited with bated breath as they looked down at the now inconspicuous willow. The tree had served its purpose, Nature had no use for it anymore.

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Lily-white hands grasped the supple branches, slick with melting ice. Then a head, trailing with hair the colour of smoke, ducked out from under the rapidly shrivelling leaves. It tilted up to look at the world beyond and the crowd gasped.

Their eyes were the shade of wet raven feathers, a face framed with a web of ice, plum and mulberry dusting under its eyes and on its lips. A haunted tired face, shocking some of the more timid spirits who hid behind the ones that stood firm.

A brave winter being, born from the scatter of snow under a sparrow's wing came forward and reached out a hand. "Welcome." His pearl grey hand shook, as did his voice, because all of Nature's children were like the sun, glowing with her blessing, with gaits that mimicked the dance of leaves in a spring breeze.

Not this tired melancholic creature who could barely lift their head.

Gauging no response, he extended his hand again, the awkward quiet weaving around them as the newly birthed being lowered its head and tucked it between its knees.

Those born of the upper mountains looked at the scene distastefully, exhaling at the maddeningly boring scene in front of them. The male winter being's companion stepped forward to brush away the snow gathered on his shoulders. "Come, what's lost will remain lost." She led him away, taupe fingers entwining with grey ones.

The others clucked their tongues and strode away, muttering under their breaths that this tremendous storm was all for nothing.

---

As the crowd dispersed, a being born of a fertile patch of soil only 3 millennia ago ducked her head up from behind a rock.

She shivered, arms wrapping tightly around herself. In an attempt to escape the ravage below, she had run to the snowy cliffs, narrowly missing the storm. Striding forward, she lamented the loss of warmth but as her eyes zeroed in on the hunched over winter being, she thought to herself, she might make a friend despite the circumstances.

The young being directed the earth to carry her towards the creature that now hunched in on itself, arms crossed and face pointed firmly downward, it knew it was different and unwanted.

She calmed the rolling earth under her feet and eyed the bent over being. “Hello.” She said, her teeth chattering.

They whimpered and burrowed deeper into themselves.

“I’m Lai, what’s your name?.” She offered, sitting down next to the unnamed being. Lai was careful to leave some space between them, it was rude to intrude on someone’s personal space.

No response once again.

Lai didn’t mind, she continued. “I saw them, you know. How they acted around you. That’s just unkind. They have no reason to judge you and well, yes you’re probably different. All of us are different. Being different is not wrong, am I talking too much? Sorry. It happens.”

The winter being cocked its head up, showing Lai a sliver of its face.

Lai ventured on bravely, gazing far off into the distance because she knew that direct eye contact would spook her possible friend.

She talked of how she never truly understood winter since she was born in the cusp of summer and fall. She talked of mulled colours of fall and the brightness of spring, how the world was bathed in golden light each and every morning and how the whistle of the streams through the mountains sounded like a melody.

The winter being slowly showed its face, bit by bit, and by the time the sky was a mix of pink and orange, Lai had forgotten how cold she was and met her soon-to-be friend’s eyes for the first time.

Her breath caught in her throat “Hello…”

“Sheung.”

“Huh?”

“My name.” Sheung timidly stuck out a hand towards Lai, ducking their head shyly.

“Sheung.” Lai repeated thoughtfully. The name ran off Lai’s tongue like it was music and Sheung wanted to hear it again, how such a simple syllable could sound like a symphony.

She shook Sheung’s hand. “Hello again.”

---

From that day onwards, Lai and Sheung were inseparable.

The two explored the domain of Nature’s blessed land together, learning of their mountain paradise above the clouds.

In the highest mountains, those from the ice and sleet lived, where the snow fell in both light drizzles and heavy clumps, colder than anywhere else in the nature-made fortress.

In the lower mountains, those born of the earth and air lived, where soil was fertile and weather was milder, chilled because even the lowest peaks soared halfway into the sky.

Those born of water lived in the middle mountains, sleeping to the trickling of rain and waking at the lively beat of the streams. Water flowed from pool to pool, into a great waterfall that dropped into the world below.

Where one was, the other was usually close behind. A flash of coiled dark curls and green skin demanded the appearance of the slower, stiffer stride of a pale skinned being.

One day, while dangling their feet precariously off a cliff side, the very same where she observed Sheung's birth. The usually reserved winter being reached over and patted Lai's cheek.

"Kind." Sheung murmured.

The early morning sun rose behind them, spinning in whorls to arc off the icy mountains, clouds dissipating to welcome the stream of light. Every tiny freckle on Lai's face was lit up, the darker green dots crossing her nose like the stars at night.

In an act of surprising boldness, Sheung took hold of Lai's viridian cheek and planted a quick kiss on the earth being's lips. When they pulled apart, Lai looked momentarily startled, but she had the strongest urge to do it again.

Sheung bit their lip hopefully.

So Lai kissed them again. Again, and again and again.

---

Aside from their new found happiness, Lai tried her best to show Sheung the extent of their ability, which was difficult because Lai was of the earth and earth was definitely different than ice.

Lai piled snow into a small clump and nudged Sheung's elbow. They were gazing at something and took a while before greeting Lai with a sheepish smile.

"Shape it with your mind, uh, think about what you want it to look like?"

Lai tried to explain it, but the feeling of warmth gathering in the soles of your feet and sprinting like a feather in the wind was hard to fully explain. She did want Sheung to live vicariously through the wonderful feeling of knowing one's inner strength, but Sheung needed to find their own.

The two of them stared at the snow.

Lai brushed a lock of hair behind Sheung's ear tenderly. "You can do it."

---

Hours passed.

Those of other winter affinities stopped to watch, to snicker at Lai's useless ministrations and cruelly mimed the unsure hand motions Sheung waved over the pile of snow.

The pile that didn't budge once.

"Useless." A winter elder born of a blizzard muttered as they walked past.

A pair of gossiping beings from the same frozen lake chattered. "For one with such a strong birth, we expected more." The one with blue tinged skin sighed mockingly.

"What do you expect? Her companion caressed her spine, trailing frozen dewdrops on the bared blue skin. "Look at them, they don't belong here. Nature wasted all her power on Sheung."

Lai growled at them, shocking the pair to scramble to their feet and flee the scene. She turned and caught sight of a frightened Sheung, whose lip wobbled in frustration. Lai turned and scooped Sheung up. The winter being didn't even resist, crumpling like a crushed leaf in Lai's strong arms.

"You should all be ashamed of yourselves." Lai growled at the twittering crowd and walked off, cradling the trembling Sheung in her arms.

---

“Is there any way to help them ?”

When Sheung finally closed their eyes from exhaustion, Lai ran off to the only elder who looked at them with sympathy rather than disgust.

“Little soil,” Elder To ruffled her short curls. “There’s nothing we can do, no one can change the fundamentals of Nature.”

“What of the world below?” The question sailed quickly past Lai’s lips, the sheer audacity of this forbidden topic shocking the both of them.

“No, Lai.” The elder’s face darkened. “What’s down there is long gone, you’ll be walking into a wasteland.”

“Is it worth a try? I thought.....well... I heard that powers don’t exist down there.”

“They don’t, but Lai, do you know suffering? Do you know strife? The world below is full of that.” Elder To toyed with his nut brown beard as he mused.

Lai scoffed and crossed her arms. “I don’t care. Tell me, are there really no powers? No one to laugh at Sheung when they can’t manipulate the snow?”

“Yes, there are no powers, Lai, don’t tell me that you’re thinking of...that...” He gestured downwards, even speaking the words out loud was taboo among the mountain folk.

Lai nodded determinedly.

Elder To bowed his head. “Nothing I say will sway you then. The journey will be hard and the consequences will be dire. Good luck.”

Lai got up and turned on her heel without a word, her mind was set.

---

They left when the night descended over the mountaintops.

Lai held on to Sheung as they ran under the blessing of moonlight. Their feet barely touched the ground as Lai called to the earth to aid them.

In a blur of light speckled umbra, the snow laden cliffs disappeared behind them. The pummel of water masked their footsteps as they ran by the rivers of the middle mountains.

Lai stopped them, taking two people with her affinity could be exhausting at times.

The moment they exited the gap of the lower mountains, what greeted them was truly a wasteland.

Hanging hanks of willows swept the ground dully, the shrieking of dry leaves scraped resoundingly across the land that looked as grey as the sky. The once greenery was abundant but shrivelled beyond recognition.

From where they looked, their old home was shrouded in the clouds, the beginning of dawn dusting the mountains with a coating of amber light. It looked ethereal, like some far away paradise. In the midst of this musing, Sheung walked off to examine one of the millions of dying plants.

Lai watched in mild disbelief when they stretched out their hands, brow puckered in concentration as they waved their hands experimentally over a yellowed leaf.

A bright glow wafted over the plant and it was coated in frost, the thirsty leaves nestled happily in their icy coating. Roots that poked out of the soil tiredly sank into rest for the first time in their existence.

“Oh Sheung...” Lai tried to summon the earth to take her to Sheung, but nothing in the ground sung to her palms.

Shaking her head resignedly, Lai walked the few steps and took Sheung’s pale hands.

“There was power in you, all along...”

Sheung tucked their cold forehead against her neck.

“Thank you.” They whispered.

What are you do—”Lai never got the chance to finish.

Sheung took a deep breath, arching their back and standing straighter than they ever did before. They raised their hands.

And the world flooded with a blinding light.

---

Lai raised her hands to shield her eyes, but as she looked down, a sheen of white blanketed the grey earth and now it was safely under a layer of snow. The world which once trembled with a dying fit heaved a breath of calm. The cold would give it time to heal, and it would bloom soon enough.

Lai took her gaze away from the glowing world around her and met Sheung’s hesitant smile. They reached for her but gasped and fell to the ground.

Sheung’s lips which were a shade of mulberry turned white, their limbs spasmed and frost raced from the tips of their toes to shroud their body.

“Sheung! What..Sheung!!”

Lai screamed, shaking the body that grew colder with each passing minute, as if it wasn’t cold before. Her hands burned from clutching Sheung’s shoulders, the biting chill clawing at the skin of her palms.

Something tugged her back gently, prying her hands away from Sheung.

“*Let go.*” Lai heard in her mind. The voice sounded old and young all at once, grating but beautiful. Lai knew it was Nature speaking to her.

*NO.* She thought, claspng Sheung’s body tighter to herself. Sheung gasped again as the frost reached their waist.

*They were born for this. They were always meant to create something strong.*

*WHAT DO YOU EVEN MEAN? THEY COULDN’T USE THEIR AFFINITY UP UNTIL THIS MOMENT.*

*Lai. They weren’t meant to be up there. They were born to save this world.*

*NO. This isn’t true.*

*When the sun comes, it will melt the ice, the plants will receive water and sun. Sheung’s life force will ensure that they are taken care of. There is no winter beneath the clouds. Sheung is the vessel of winter. They are Winter.*

“What?” Lai breathed aloud, looking into the face that she had fallen in love with a million times over.

Sheung exhaled softly, the frost now at their neck. “Lai,” They looked up at her, voice breathy but a serene smile tugged at their lips. Lai met their gaze, “Tell me it doesn’t hurt.” She murmured lowly, meeting the eyes of her beloved.

“No.”



Lai laughed humorlessly. “Good.”

Sheung offered her a smile again, they weren’t worried, they knew they would meet Lai again, maybe as a slumbering breath caught in Nature’s throat to be reborn together.

Over frost, came a quick layer of ice, then they melted into the ground, until Lai was holding nothing but splintered ice fragments.

Sheung was gone.

---

Lai crumpled to the ground and sobbed.

After what seemed like millennia, she got up, wiping her tears and turned to return to the mountains.

If she stayed a second more, she would have witnessed the first fall of snow across the world beneath the mountains.

She didn’t miss it though.

The snowfall caught up with her, dusting her hair, crowning her brow with light kisses. She shook them out, chuckling despite the tears clouding her vision. Snow flecks danced across her cheeks and took her tears with them. A familiar voice spoke, echoed by the soft thumps of snow upon the ground.

*Thank you for loving me enough to let me go.*

## Huangshan Remembers

*Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Lam, Tsz Hei Errin – 16*

Huangshan was mighty once, a monument to the gods, a testament to the power of nature. It has been sheared, shaved, shamed; green verdure bullied into conformity, imperfections stripped off with clinical disdain, the mountain itself drowning in layers of cold concrete.

Huangshan remembers.

Green fields grew around it wild and untamed, tall blades of grass swaying contentedly in the light breeze. They were too beautiful, too delicate, too easily shredded by the cold detachment with which machines ripped up the turf, poured grey cement down, and smothered still-breathing soil.

People came to it on pilgrimages, traveling by foot from a long way off to join the monasteries in their persevering pursuit of knowledge. Dead. All dead. Replaced by roaring vehicles hurtling towards it on hard cement roads, jostling each other to get there first and disgorging tourists milling around its base.

At its feet little sprigs sprung into grass and seedlings sprouted into trees. All along its slopes wayward flowers pushed their way through cracks in the rock to grow and prosper, generations of plants now ground into so much dirt beneath a plastic boot, too downtrodden to live again.

Animals leaped about everywhere on it, dogs romping on the flatlands, foxes trotting around gently tilting trees, goats grazing grass on steep slopes, a few tigers roaming the upper reaches. Full of life for a fleeting instant, then gone, their splintered bones scattered on the mountain’s peaks, red-stained bullets glinting in the sun.

Monasteries were built high up overlooking the heights, echoing the light tread of quiet monks over worn paths, their solemn speech, their respectful reverence. Their scrolls of paper lasted longer than they did. Now disordered lines of people tromp heavily on cement, tourists demanding impatiently that others move faster, loud automated voices cramming people into sky trams.

Floating clouds wreathed around its tall proud spires and floated dreamily in the sky, a mystical barrier between sky and ground. Now the cars belch fumes into the air and grey, dust-blackened wisps hang dully around where steel has been hammered into rock, anchoring the cable cars that bulldoze through the remnants of clouds.

The sky used to be blue, the sun used to shine strong and bright, and warm golden light would illuminate the entire mountain. But beneath the flashing glare of the cameras, it sees with blinding clarity that the sky is hopelessly dim, the air choked with dust and dirt and grit.

Humans, animals, plants – all ephemeral. The mountain remembers with envy those who came and left this world so quickly, because Huangshan is eternal and endless and everlasting, but so hopelessly trapped by its permanence. People all over the world are watching as Huangshan breathes its last.

Yet no one will care.

## Wedding Vow

*Singapore International School, Foo, Kyan Matthias – 16*

*This is my side of that story:*

Dear Future Husband,

Do you remember the time we met at the mountain?

A smile touched the edge of your lips.

However, I was not smiling.

The end of summer signaled the end of an era.

14 years ago, I met you at the gates of our kindergarten, and I remember our first day. Sitting at the back of the classroom because we were shy, and the teacher repeatedly calling your name to sit still, I found that funny. After about the tenth time, I laughed out loud, and the teacher turned her gaze on me. That was the first time you heard my name, and you stifled a laugh with a vengeance.

Kindergarten quickly became high school. Old friends left and new ones came, but strangely you still stuck around. One day, I received a note in my locker. It was from one of our mutual friends, and it said that you liked me a lot. I confronted you to confirm it and what I heard in return astonished me. For over 4 years I didn't know how I was so oblivious to it! I didn't think of myself highly then, but when I found out, it turned my life upside down. I

took the news badly and became obsessed with my appearance, especially around you. My self-esteem skyrocketed, but myself consciousness did too.

I really tried to avoid hurting your feelings, not because I cared about them, but because I saw myself in a different light after that. I was a pretty, smart, kind and mature woman, not some petty, stubborn little girl that many people still saw me as.

Over the next few months, I racked my brain trying to figure out a solution to the problem. On one hand, I was flattered, but on the other I was very embarrassed. I had just turned 16, able to drink or drive in many countries. Surely, I would be able to manage a boyfriend, right?

There is no way you don't remember the day I asked you out. There weren't any sunshine and rainbows, but in hindsight I thought it was perfect. It was similar to one of your favorite football expressions, "on a rainy night in Stoke" I think you described it as after, but until now I still don't get the humor of that phrase.

It was a rainy day, overcast with clouds and the sky brandishing an apocalyptic hue of grey, but I finally mustered the courage to ask, and if I didn't get it over with that day, I may still be single.

After school was out, we went to a crowded Causeway Bay. I wrapped your head in folds of thick cloth and I eagerly dragged you along with me through narrow passages and steep stairways up to a rooftop of a dilapidated, old shopping center overlooking the sprawling metropolis below. I took off your blindfold and let you take in the sight. Still adjusting to the light, you muttered curses underneath your breath. Once you could see clearly, I couldn't wait any longer and blurted out: "Do you want to be my boyfriend?"

"What?!!"

Taken aback, you pondered for a moment. After the tense silence, you said yes. I made sure you wouldn't regret that. Over the next one and a half years, we formed many great memories together, and I would never forget any of it.

The last summer break we had together was bittersweet. High school had been super stressful, stocked with assignments, tests and deadlines. Break spelled the end of that; however, university was in 2 months and we applied to different schools on opposite ends of the planet. You got accepted into KAIST for aerospace engineering, while I got into Columbia Law. Although I was proud of you for getting into your dream university, I really hoped that maybe you would've gone to NYU instead to be closer to me. Selfish, I know, but I was really scared especially since Korean girls are super pretty and smart and thinking about them made me shudder in jealousy.

And as you said goodbye at the airport gate, I didn't understand how you could have a smile on your face, as internally I was breaking down. Recollections of the nights we shared rushed through my mind, as I tried to hold on to the last bits of you I had. After you had walked in, I couldn't keep up the act, and promptly broke down in tears. I made the long journey home sniffing, scrolling through old conversations telling myself everything was going to be just fine.

I reached home depressed and weary. I cleaned myself up, quickly changed into my pajamas and got into bed. It wasn't particularly late, but I just didn't feel like doing anything, so I turned on some Netflix and I chilled for a while. By myself. Right before I knew it, I fell soundly asleep.

About an hour or two later, I was abruptly woken up by Mother. She was like, "Baby, look at the news! Father is on it today!". That is interesting, I thought as I turned on the TV. There I saw him. Father doesn't usually talk to the press, so I think it was just because he didn't want to disappoint the pretty reporter lady. As he was telling the news reporter how he'd stumbled upon his most recent success, it was interrupted by a "Breaking News" broadcast. A commercial plane, originating from Hong Kong had disappeared somewhere over the Chinese mainland. The lack of details meant that I disregarded the announcement.

Knowing my luck, there was a voice in the back of my mind that told me something was wrong. In search of more information I went online.

10 minutes later I found myself booking the first plane ticket towards Hangzhou.

On the way to the airport for the second time that day, I frantically surfed the web for hotels, but to my dismay, they were all fully booked for at least one month. Luckily, I had brought sufficient funds for a week's worth of expenses, so I went to the largest convenience store that the airport had. I was pleasantly surprised by what I saw. There were multiple parallel aisles fully filled with traveler-friendly products. I felt like a kid in a candy store again ... mainly because there also was a lot of candy! I bought a bunch of protein bars, ready meals, and a lot of water and also hurriedly purchased some camping equipment. I was immersed in the bliss of shopping for a bit too long, and lost track of time.

"All passengers heading to Hangzhou please go to your gate now!", the PA system blared out. Everything immediately snapped back into focus, and I realized that my flight was about to leave. I ran faster than I ever have before, rushed through security, and only just barely managed to get on my flight.

The flight was nothing to write home about, just a stressful 3-hour flight. I lay on the window, looking out at the clouds below. I tried to relax myself by thinking happy thoughts, but the idea of you bleeding out somewhere on a mountain, chest penetrated with burning shrapnel, I just couldn't stomach it. I asked the polite stewardess for an airsickness bag, and proceeded to violently throw up into it.

Landing at Hangzhou Xiao Shan International, I got off the plane and immediately hitched a ride onto the bus straight for the mountains. The bus ride was somber, and to distract myself from worry, I decided to take a nap, anticipating that I may not be able to sleep once I started my search. The sun was setting in the distance like in a beautiful painting, a reminder that darkness lay ahead.

Huangshan, or "Yellow Mountain" in English, is China's most famous mountain range. Being the savvy sightseer that I am, I had always dreamed of visiting its lovely peaks and taking in the spectacular views. You, on the other hand, did not like nature in general, and for some reason that I could not comprehend, would rather stay in the hotel. Like, what's the point of travelling if you only stay in hotel rooms? Ironically, you got your chance to see the grand mountains.

Arriving at the base of the mountain complex, it was empty. I was on the last bus from Hangzhou, therefore the peaks were pitch black and invisible. Coupled with the deafening silence of the parking lot, it gave the mountains a mysterious and ominous vibe. Since it was late, the entry gates and the cable cars were out of operation, which

meant I had to make the long journey into the wilderness on foot. I was not the most athletic person, but I enjoyed long walks, so I was optimistic. It was the only positive I could think of. The rest of my willpower and determination were dead set on finding you.

People may think I am crazy.

Malaysian Airlines Flight 370, Air France Flight 447. Disasters like these usually result in enormous loss of life, so when I read that it was your flight that crashed, I felt like I died. The world was meaningless without you, and I promised myself I would do anything, even sacrifice my own life for yours. However, I read online that modern plane accidents have a high rate of survivability. That gave me some much-needed belief, and the tenacity to be willing to sacrifice my life and money to go on a hopeless mission to "save" my loved one. There was no guarantee that I would even find the crash site, much less find you on my own.

I snuck past the seemingly haunted entrances, with imaginary officers watching my every move, shaking their heads in disappointment. Every little creak and squeak that eked out froze me into place, frightened that someone would come and catch me as I was squeezing through registers and climbing over gates. After the painfully slow operation just to enter the closed tourist trail, I spotted a red danger sign on the map near the trail. It showed that the Mushroom Pavilion was shut down for at least a month starting from today, citing "maintenance". Using my expert detective skills, I decided that it was probably the crash site of the plane.

Finally, a sign of hope. I quietly thanked God, and delved into the unknown. Being as stupid as I usually am, I forgot to acquire a flashlight, so I could barely make out the trail as I made my way up towards the peaks. It made the already exhausting journey ten times more dangerous, and I had to go slowly in order to stay on the trail and not fall into some random crevasse and die a painful death. Maybe it wouldn't be bad if that happened. I would've been relieved of my misery and we could become the next modern Romeo and Juliet. But I felt in my soul that you were still alive, and needed me, the brave damsel, to save the knight in distress.

I reached an intersection. It was impossible for me to discern which direction was which as I couldn't see any signs showing the way to anything. In total darkness, and feeling fatigued and distressed, I decided to set up shop and sleep for however many hours until sunrise.

I woke up to strange, faded music, and opened my eyes to probably the most stunning scenery I have ever witnessed. The sky was purple, as night was slowly being suppressed by dawn. I turned around and was speechless. The rays of light emanating from that grand sphere of fire, too blinding to directly look at it. It was like the Sun was the emperor and I was a lowly peasant, honored just to be basking in its glory. Instantly, I felt energized and bright, ready to continue my quest to conquer the impossible odds and attain my bounty (referring to you). With the sunlight acting as my guardian, I was finally able to see the large wooden sign standing confidently not too far away, and began the second leg.

The second leg was considerably better than the first, and I could feel like I was actually making progress. The pace was much better as well, and it felt less steep when you could see the top of the slope right there in front of you, just willing you to eclipse the challenge set. The trail overlooked a large valley, but since it was autumn, the bottom was enshrouded with wispy mist. It fed the curious being inside of me, what could be down there? How would the people underneath the mist ever see the picturesque mountains up here? They are missing out on a lot.

Not before long, I reached the currently closed Mushroom pavilion. The entire sheltered area was closed off to all visitors, brandishing the candy cane livery of the authorities spelling “危险” or “Danger” if you are a tourist who is incompetent enough not to know Chinese (I'm talking to you!). Still standing on the trail, you would not have suspected anything was wrong, but once I climbed under the red tape, an alarming sight greeted my eyes. It was a mess. Directly below the pavilion, the smoldering wreckage of the plane was there on full display. A wave of sorrow washed over me, but I needed a better look, so I took out the rope I bought from the airport. I tied it to the stone railing, climbed over the edge and began to scale off the cliff down towards the debris. I walked through the ash-stained passenger cabin, a shell of its former self, to try and find anything that belonged to you, or that signaled to me that you were alive. If not, I would be heartbroken. What was once a beautiful cliffside, covered in an assortment of flora and fauna had transformed into an unrecognizable desolate wasteland. I began to shed one tear. One tear became two, and then three, four and then more. I picked up a broken bracelet, near a seat which was completely ripped into half. I recognised it at once, it was my first anniversary present to you. That was the point where I couldn't contain my raw emotion anymore. As salty tears were flowing down my pink cheeks, I held the bracelet close to me, internally screaming at God.

“WHY DOES THIS HAVE TO HAPPEN TO ME”. The sharp end of the still-broken bracelet pierced my shirt and scratched my skin.

“OWWWWW!” Unexpectedly, the pain was beyond excruciating. I looked into my shirt and saw a jagged line, as if someone had used a red pen to draw across my chest.

An obnoxious voice echoed across the vast realm: “Oh! No wonder I recognised that bag. And that voice, why do you always have to be so loud?”

My head swiveled around.

(CORRECTION:) Now I have witnessed the most stunning scenery in my lifetime. Up in the pavilion, was a face I'd thought I'll never see again. You, in all your majestic humbleness, standing there, without a care. You smiled a little bit when you saw me, exactly the same expression as the last time I saw you.

Pure happiness poured out of me as I hastily climbed back up the rope. Upon reaching the top, I jumped into your arms, sobbing jubilantly. I engulfed myself in your warm embrace, holding on as tight as I could. The reunion was sparks flying all over the place again, like an old couple rekindling their lost romantic fire.

The years following that incident, I became increasingly protective over you. Me almost losing you just increased the burning need I had for you, and this time, I really could not bear to lose you. Through the highs and lows, I stuck through it all. Since we experienced the lowest of lows, there was only one direction left for us to go: Up. I enjoyed that thought, and relished the future challenges we would have together.

That was the point in time I realized I wanted to spend the rest of my life with you. I risked death chasing after you all the way up to the peaks of the highest mountains, and the lowest of valleys. After that, I think you know

that I love you, and I will never leave your side. I will be your right-hand woman and your partner in crime (however I hope we don't actually commit crime).

So yes, I do remember the time we went to the mountain.

Love forever and always,  
Your Future Wife

*Now, we are all gathered here today to celebrate the confirmation of love. The husband and the wife have both declared their vows to each other, and we will now consummate the marriage.*

*Do you, the groom, take the bride to be your lawfully wedded wife, and never leave her in times of trouble and sickness, and share her successes and achievements, until death do you part?*

*"I do."*

*Do you, the bride, take the groom to be your lawfully wedded husband, and promise to always keep him company, improve him as a person, and continue on his legacy, until death do you part?*

*"I do."*

*Well then, with all the power vested in me by the Catholic Church, I declare your marriage a long and happy success, and pronounce you wife and husband. As per special request, the bride, you may kiss the groom.*

*"Gladly"*

## The Mountain Village of Golden Paintings

*St Joseph's College, Mach, Ka Wing Ivan – 16*

My story took place during the Spring and Autumn Period, in the country of Chu.

I was a poor painter who wandered from village to village, barely getting by selling paintings. I was approaching what seemed like just another village high on a mountain. I was told that it was wealthier than the others, so perhaps they would be more generous.

Walking up the well-worn path, the start of spring greeted me with the sweet smells of blossoming flowers. Chrysanthemums weren't my favorite, but their presence was pleasant. It was a lovely sight.

I had expected these sights, having had similar experiences in my travels, but what I didn't expect was being faced with the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. There was an otherworldly aura surrounding her, with her black, pearly eyes under her curved eyebrows. Her straight hair rippled in the wind like a current in a river. Clothed in a simple, flowery white dress, she stood perched on top of a boulder, hands clasped in front and one foot in front of the other as she posed in front of another painter. The painter, on the other hand, was not as neat of a figure, but her artistic skills were something else. Her hands were swift and flexible, and as I watched ink flit across the canvas, it looked more like mist slowly unveiling a morning scene than rigid lines being added to paper. It was such an enchanting moment, I preferred not to disturb them, so I backed away.

Who were they?

"Ah. You must be talking about Li and Shui Xian." The burly innkeeper's eyebrows scrunched up upon my mentioning the two women. He wasn't particularly happy before, but now on his face was an ominous frown. I sensed heads turning towards me, but when I looked behind me, people snapped back to their own food.

“What’s wrong? Is the pair a forbidden topic?” I asked.

“No! We haven’t...they never caused any trouble here. They are special people, that’s all.”

“Really? What makes them special?”

“Why are you bothering me about this?” he grumbled. “Oh, well, no matter. They live at the peak but come here every spring when the flowers are blooming. Hold up, your food should be ready.”

It was a little odd that he didn’t want to talk. I noticed the innkeeper was shuffling uncomfortably and the table behind me had gone a little quiet: They were chatting quite audibly about crops, then fell silent when I mentioned the pair. They must be really special.

Looking around the inn, a certain painting caught my eye. There she was, standing in a different pose, in a different scene than the one I just witnessed. The finished work was astoundingly beautiful. I had yet to see any painting style like that in front of my very eyes. It was a stark contrast to what I had seen from master painters whose styles were, in retrospect, rather rigid.

The innkeeper came back with my order. “Is that one of their works?” He gave a curt nod. “That’s absolutely unlike anything I’ve come across! I am not fit to call myself a painter! Who’s the one that paints?”

“Li’s the painter. Shui Xian is the pretty one.”

I enquired if they stopped in the village. The innkeeper explained that they would finish a dozen paintings, working overnight before coming to the village and selling them to passing merchants, who would buy them at premium prices. Common assumption was that the paintings were to be resold to the rich and people in power. I finished my dinner and paid the innkeeper a few copper spades. I was running low on money, barely enough to weather a week. I went around asking if anyone wanted a portrait, but they declined. If I didn’t move on, I would be penniless, but I decided to stay to have an opportunity to talk to Li, to become a better painter, and to finally escape my wandering ways.

During my stay, I suddenly wondered, “Shui Xian must have a lot of admirers.”

“Indeed,” replied the innkeeper. “At first, all the men in the village were in love with her, but she ignored all their advances and was fiercely protected by Li, who beat anyone she thought undeserving of Shui Xian.” He then leant in. “No one has won her heart yet.”

I gave him a funny look. “Are you egging me on to flirt with her?”

“No, no, just letting you know.”

For some reason, everyone in the village was getting agitated. As I wandered around the village, they were huddled about chattering. Anticipating something. At the same time, I was getting odd stares from them, and all day I heard hushed whispers behind my back. Was I special? I had never had so much attention in my five years of wandering. Maybe it was related to Li and Shui Xian?

The next morning, I was woken from my slumber by a racket outside. Yawning, I peered through the window and saw Li outside. Around her were strange men, with exotic jewellery, luxurious clothes and horse carriages parked beside them. Traders! They were yelling high numbers and were yelled back higher numbers. I noticed a burly swordsman laying on the ground.

Incredibly, the paintings were so valuable the men would stoop to robbing to get them. Despite the commotion, Shui Xian was calmly sitting behind Li on a bench, as if she was still posing for a portrait. Amongst this chaos, she still kept her cool. That was amazing. I dragged a chair to the window, hoping to wait the chaos out. A crowd had gathered beside the town square, chattering with glee. As everyone watched the bargaining back and forth, it was apparent Li was clearly in control of the situation. The merchants were compromising a lot more. It was an hour later when they finally reached an agreement. Li handed over the paintings, and the merchants handed over a flour sack

filled with gold. The crowd cheered as the traders went down the hill. Suddenly, Li reached into the sack and tossed the gold out.

I gave out a yelp of complete surprise. The villagers greedily rushed to collect all of it. Their struggle for gold reminded me of ducks gathering around thrown grain. It was a swarm of euphoria as gold showered them. Some had prepared bags, hoisting them above their heads to catch the gold. Some were quick and carried the gold in their hands. The laggards attempted to steal from the other two groups, pushing and shoving for the remaining pieces.

Afterwards, the duo went around the village, taking things from people who already had their payment in gold. Still, that act was overwhelmingly generous. They just wanted herbs, medicine, and fruit. The most expensive thing, snake venom, was barely worth a single gold coin. I went down to meet them in the evening, when they strolled into the inn.

“Are you Li?”

“Yes. That’s my name. Is there anything I can do for you?”

I tried to buy her dinner, but she had a free meal already. “You can take Shui Xian’s serving, she’s not hungry.”

Giving thanks, I went on to tell her my life story, as she listened in attentive silence. There were people also celebrating at the inn and they were also listening intently.

“...and fate has led me to this,” I concluded, and pointed at the painting. “The most beautiful style I have ever seen. Can I be your apprentice?”

“Apprentice?” There was a small smile on her face. “Usually, people ask about Shui Xian.”

I glanced at ShuiXian’s stone cold face. “My dedication is to art.” There was a murmur among the crowd. From their reaction, they did not expect this.

Li stood up. “You are a unique person. I respect you. If you are to be my apprentice, you must push aside material things.”

I gave my last few spades to the innkeeper and reported that I only had my paper and brush pen with me.

“You may abandon those too. You will have new brushes.” I obeyed.

With a grand smile, she pressed her hand on my shoulder. “From now on, you will obey my every command. I started training at a young age. You have a lot to catch up on, don’t you think? You will not challenge me from now on. This is your choice. Do not back away from it.”

I swore on my mother’s life. “You are doing well. We will embark on a journey upwards tomorrow.”

I was touched as the crowd at the inn cheered for me. For some reason, they were invested in my following her up the mountain. The next morning, she told me to carry their bundle and follow her. The village waved goodbye, and I set out with hope.

The bundle was surprisingly heavy, as if it were filled with stones. By sunset, my legs were straining from the weight. “When will we arrive?”

“Patience. We will reach the place tomorrow afternoon.”

“Could you help me with this? I can’t handle it.”

Li looked at me condescendingly. “Are you giving up already? You have been given the amazing opportunity to be my apprentice, and already, you are unable to handle a task for more than a day. Do you really have what it takes to accept strict discipline? I have to keep my head clear, to not get lost, and Shui Xian is not strong enough to carry anything. Do you want to strain her?”



I kept forgetting that Shui Xian was behind me. During the hike, she was emotionless and silent, donning a stoic glower. Why was she like this? She did not react when I asked to be Li's apprentice. She did not waver when faced with possible bandits. She was cold towards my strenuous task. I questioned if she had a soul.

They say that the eyes are the windows of the soul. When we finally stopped that night, we made a small fire and settled down. Shui Xian did not even sit until Li told her to. I leaned closer to Shui Xian, and she made no motion to back off. I was right in her face, yet she did not focus her eyes on me, just staring straight ahead. But I did notice that her pupils were moving, slightly jolting, darting minutely. She could see; she had a life force within her. Yet I still felt there was something innately wrong with her.

"Do you like her?" Li asked out of nowhere.

"Although she is the most beautiful woman I've ever seen, she scares me. Can you tell me what's wrong with her, Master?"

"Maybe when we get to my cottage, I'll show you. It can't be explained in words."

I woke up at the crack of dawn. I rose from where I slept and looked around me. My sight was heavily obstructed by the surrounding mist. As I sat still in the sullen silence, I checked on Shui Xian and Li. Shui Xian slept sitting, leaning on a tree, while Li slept in a curl, muttering something under her breath. Curious, I crept closer and she was muttering about how she was hungry. I decided to get some fruit from the bundle.

As I was peeling an orange, Li began to stir. I offered her a piece. Noticing the peeled orange, her eyes widened, and she leaped up, tackling me.

"How much food did you take out of the bundle?" she demanded.

"Master, it was just one orange. I didn't intend for you to be angry!"

She looked at me in disgust. "We didn't come down here for food we couldn't get on the peak of the mountain. We can only eat this once a year, and you dared touch it? You have had the luxury of enjoying such food before you came."

"Master, I was tired from all that hiking. We have not eaten since yesterday. Please allow me to have just one orange."

She gritted her teeth. "Fine. You can have half an orange, and then we shall quickly move on. Shui Xian! We're about to move! Wake up!"

ShuiXian's eyes fluttered open and she stood on command. I thought it was strange, but I just wolfed down my half orange and moved on.

My muscles were still aching from yesterday's hike, and the path felt steeper than ever before. Li kept telling me that using exhaustion as an excuse was an insincere way to avoid training. I protested, "But I don't see how sheer strength is needed in art."

After a moment's pause, she said, "Maybe I should start teaching you my techniques. As you know, the most important sense for painting is sight. You need clear sight to observe the scenery around you. That's what separates me from others," she remarked. "I use all my senses."

I was filled with skepticism, but I had tremendous hope she was sincere. "How?"

"Well, to compliment my sight, I have a strong sense of smell. Do you smell the faint tinge from this leaf I'm holding?" I shook my head "The aura of an object can be envisioned by the sense of smell. The faint smell of trees in the background is fresh, and my magical techniques can paint it."

For a moment, I forgot about the huge weight on my shoulders. I had risked my very livelihood for this, and I wanted to believe what she was saying was true.

“Third,” she continued, “I use my sense of hearing. Right now, I can hear a wild hog in the distance. Can you hear it?” I shook my head. “After hearing the birds chirping, I can use my techniques to paint that, too.”

“That is incredible! You sound like you have actual magic!” Back at the inn with the old painting, I could imagine the sparrows chirping away. I still did not understand how I felt it, but I could. If Master could really teach me, I was on my way to glory.

Snapping out of my daydream, we arrived at a cave. I now knew something was wrong, as it looked like the dwelling of an animal.

“The greatest of all, is the sense of taste,” Li was talking behind me. But her voice was changing. I slowly wheeled around with a hint of dread and watched in horror as Li’s whole body was changing. Her nose shot forward and her eyes moved out to inhuman angles. I toppled over, screaming at the top of my lungs as Shui Xian’s bones started to crack, her figure twisting like a man of straw, and she let out a disgruntled moan, the first sound I heard coming from her mouth. Li was covered in fur, showing her true form as a nine-tailed fox.

“Specifically, the taste of human flesh. Welcome to the foxes’ den.”

She leaped towards me, claws wide open. With some quick thinking and brute strength, I threw the bundle in front of me. Miraculously, I did it in the nick of time. As she was recovering, I took out the snake venom, and sprayed it into her eyes. Li let out a screech, clawing her face. I grabbed a nearby rock and smashed her head repeatedly. I winced for every hit I landed, reminding myself this was not cruelty, but self defense. After a series of disgusting wails, she finally fell silent. For good measure, I hammered the body a few more times, and ransacked the den. Inside were jars of unknown substances, a few daffodils, human skulls, and some miscellaneous items. I finally found a knife, and, with trembling hands, went out to sever the throat and hack the bone where the skull was connected to the spine. When I was done mutilating the head, I sat down, bawling my eyes out. It was unmanly, but I didn’t care. There was no one else to see. That thought reminded me of Shui Xian. Searching her clothes, all I found was a withered daffodil.

It was surprisingly easier to come down. I must have been a mess, with blood stained on my shirt and my face still shocked from the horror. The villagers carried me forward and the innkeeper sat me down. I blurted out everything: how Li tried to pin me down with exhaustion, how she was a fox-spirit and Shui Xian was, as her name suggested, a daffodil, and how I was nearly eaten.

“I think that Shui Xian was just a projection of her fox-spirit’s innate human beauty.”

The crowd took in all this in silence. Then someone yelled, “Don’t let him leave!”

I was pinned down by several people and tied to the chair. “What! Why? I am the victim here! I did not murder an innocent woman!”

The innkeeper mused, “You have ruined the village’s source of income. We were provided riches we could not afford.”

“And you killed our source of gold,” said an old man. Just moments ago, I could not imagine that man with a knife. “All we had to do in return,” he croaked, “was to ignore them luring young strangers with beauty. No one would look for a wanderer in a small village like this.” A tear dropped from his eye. “We cannot forgive you for this.”

I cried for mercy, but it was no use. The whole village was riled up, chanting for my death. I could only watch as the knife plunged into my heart.

## The Message of the Mountains

*St. Margaret's Co-Educational English Secondary & Primary School, Pang, Adina – 18*

The beeps of cars, the forceful clicks of high heels marching, the rings of phone calls were deafening; the scent of coffee, being so thick and heavy that one could visualize the drooping syrup and cream settling at the bottom of a mug, only made boredom in the office air even more sickening. Chan exhaustedly walked down the streets, each step dragging her an inch farther from home.

“...perhaps, you can consider, leaving the office for a while.” As she gazed motionlessly at his guilty complexion, Jeremy only avoided her direct stares by brushing his long, pale fingers in front of his face. Finally, after a decade of silence, he finally let out a long sigh and said, “you’re now excused”.

“...so finally she’s leaving...”

“Oh, can’t you at least show a bit more sympathy?”

Giggles.

Soft whispers brushed past her hair as she walked out the executive office. What seemed to be like light feathers, only turned out to be the quickest blades that slit bare skin wide open.

“Those witches!” she thought, as the sharp cackles lingered in her mind.

The sun sank like a dead animal thrown into the water, smearing the surrounding sky with that same dark redness. “And so is my heart.” Chan thought to herself.

The fact is, that in the past 6 months, Chan hadn’t been able to produce quality work that readers could be satisfied with. No matter how hard she typed and typed, holding open those blood-shot eyes, her column was only greeted

by increasing criticism day by day. She felt her inspiration drying up, even though it used to overflow like the Nile river.

After walking aimlessly, Chan stopped by a poster displayed on the glass door of an oriental tea house—on it was a misty mountain painted in black, green, and yellowish white. Amid the dark swirls of pine trees and dense clouds was written: ***“Find your purpose...”***

“How am I supposed to find inspiration with this sort of toil?” Chan, the old lady, was gasping for breath as she hobbled up the hills. She ought to find the hut she was to seek refuge in before the air fogs up and gets chilly. Just when she was gathering momentum, a flash of a purple light caught her attention. Before she could get a clearer view of it, she stepped on a slippery rock and,  
“Ahhh!!!”  
She fell off the cliff.

“Look at her. She’s got neither calluses nor scars on her hands and face, and she looks as sick as a cancer patient. Is she really fit enough to be here? I bet she’ll collapse after her first training session.”  
“Shhhh! You don’t say that about a lady! Didn’t Shi Fu warn you about judging a book by its cover?”  
As the whispering voices surrounded her, Chan opened her eyes. What came in sight were three young, curious faces—all studying her with undivided attention. It took a full second of silence for them to realize the returned consciousness of their subject of investigation.  
“Shi Fu! Shi Fu! She’s awake!”  
They immediately bounced away from her like they were avoiding a grenade and out into the yard. Not knowing what had happened, Chan looked around, and she found herself in a room of tatami. Opposite to her was an open veranda that led to a yard of bamboo.

“How many times have I told you? To find peace within, you must start by...”  
A calm, slow voice outside approached from outside.  
“So you are awake.” The owner of the voice presented himself as a snowy bearded, slender old man in a white robe and a bun on his head. No doubt, he must be Shi Fu.

“I don’t know how I got here, but thank you for saving me. I was actually looking for a hut to settle down and to rekindle my inspiration...” She reached for her bag, trying to dig out the flier she picked up.  
“And so, here you are.”  
“Wha—”  
“Mother nature knows; thus, she led you here —just as you willed. She has prepared three lessons for you.”

The first day of training started before dawn. Chan, unable to keep her eyes open, was dragged by two other apprentices.  
“Wake up, sleepy head! You won’t make it to the end of the day if you start the day so drowsily.”

Amid the white, misty air, the four of them maneuvered their way up into the pines and climbed up the scale-like rocks. Chan stretched her hand into the blank whiteness. She could see nothing— not even her fingers.  
“Speed up! Or we’ll be late!”  
“But what if I slip and fall?”  
“If you believe that you won’t fall, then you won’t! Hurry!”

Awaiting them at the waterfall above was their Shi Fu, who had finished his morning meditation.

“Eleven, twelve... thir...teen..., mph!” with 5 bricks tied onto each of her feet, Chan was told to walk across the bamboo forest and back, raising her knees with each step.  
“I can’t do it anymore.” Unsurprisingly, she gave up.  
“Keep going! Shi Fu said you need to discipline your body with that strong mind of yours.” The youngest-looking apprentice passed Chan as if the bricks on his feet were pillows.  
“Uhh, I’m not here for *mind-and-body unity*.” Chan groaned sarcastically, “why do I need to do all this anyway? What is this supposed to do with gaining inspiration?”

“Having warmed ourselves up, now let’s get ready to begin our training for the day.” Just when Chan was finally about to reach the finish line, she heard what Shi Fu said to his apprentices. She nearly collapsed on the spot. This was only the beginning.

“All the way, all the way! Don’t give in, Chan! Discipline... discipline!”

“Breathe. Feel the fragrance of the air flowing into your nostrils... filling your lungs. Listen to the voice of Mother Nature and find your inner peace.”

“If you don’t want those bats to get you, you’ve got to focus. Now, gather all your energy.

“Urgh!!!”

Weeks passed until one day, Shi Fu assembled the four of them on a sharp peak. Unveiled in front of them was a sea of impetuous clouds.

“Today, I’d like you to have a deeper interaction with Mother Nature. Remember, you ought to be humble.”

Chan couldn’t believe her eyes as she watched the apprentices jumping into the sea of clouds one by one.

“Anything is possible in this masterpiece of the creator. Now, go on.” Shi Fu gestured to her to follow suit.

To Chan’s surprise, she didn’t, but was caught and lifted by the dense white substance. The flow was calmer and gentler than it seemed, with the addition of a pleasant coolness. “This is amazing!” She exclaimed: her eyes were filled with a glow of excitement—which had been absent for some time. The new sensation exhilarated her like a child on her first dip into a pool. She suddenly felt so special and so proud. None of the things she viewed as valuable could be exchanged for this.

As they floated along the cloud stream, they found themselves near a waterfall. It was also then that the airflow changed abruptly. Left, right, up, and down, that even the much more skilled and experienced apprentices found it tough to keep their balance.

"Whoa—oa—whoaaaa—" Chan's eyes were spinning; she didn't know how or why but, before she knew it, she was being tossed around by the mischievous clouds.

"heeheehee..." and did she even hear giggles?

Luckily, she grabbed a hold of a nearby tree. However, she soon began to feel the soreness exploding in her shoulders, her arms, and hands.

“I’d love to test how far you can go with that confidence of yours!” the same playful voice that came from the giggles reappeared.

Yet, all she knew what to do was to glue her hands onto the tree like a flag on a pole. She looked over her shoulders—there were only dark silhouettes of pine trees, phantoms within the white tsunami. She was certain that once she let it go, she’d be farther blown away: miles away from where they started and away from any place she had grown familiar with. Her heart froze with fear.

“Help!” she finally yelped. With all the previous confidence evaporating into the waves, Chan took notice of the birds that flew past her: their wings opened like airplanes. Though barely moving, it did the job in carrying them on a smooth ride. She then glanced back at her freshly—calloused hands—those were from honest, solid hard work put into the previous training sessions.

“How many more times am I stubbornly going to place my pride and ego above all else?” Recalling the many unpleasant clashes she had at work, she slowly shook her head with a smile. At the next breath, she let go of herself and surrendered to the vast stream of clouds with open arms.

Once again, to her astonishment, not only did she not tumble headfirst and sideways, but she gained stability with so much more ease—since the flow did all the hard work for her—and all she needed was glide to her desired direction.

“I think you can now move on to the second lesson.” Shi Fu smiled as he received Chan upon her triumphant return.

Shi Fu took the foursome to a place named the “Drunken Rock”.

“Back in the Tang dynasty, poet Li Bai spent much of his time in this spring during his stay in Huangshan. He drank, he sang, and even danced.” Shi Fu told Chan as he bent down to cup a handful of the crystal-clear water that ran through the mossy granite, and he motioned her to do the same. “People say that this was the very spot where he gave birth to the beautiful language he created in his magnificent works.” Chan closed her eyes, eager to find any spark of inspiration which the water may bring. After a few breaths, she frowned. No, this isn’t working.

Midnight, the moon shone with motherly tenderness on her lonely children. For an instant, Chan was lost into her gaze upon it, and, in a corner of her heart, she was intoxicated by that moment of tranquility. Having heard her companions falling soundly asleep, she padded barefoot out into the bamboo forest.

Her purposeless night walk led her to a steaming pool of water. The melodic sound of the hot spring purred softly in harmony with the humming of the crickets. Chan touched the bubbling water with the tip of her toe: it was warm. With a heartfelt gratitude, she soon immersed herself into that warm embrace.

The moist scent of pine leaves was comforting, and Chan felt all the fatigue dissolve and the tension within her muscles evaporate; she entered that state of resonance with nature. Just as she was about to be taken away into the land of dreams by such a relaxing sensation, the purple light appeared. This time, Chan could follow its every movement, and she watched it meander through the air until it landed before her knees.

Before Chan knew, she was surrounded by a dense white fume, and by the time it faded away, Chan no longer was in the mountains: there was a potted cactus, and a black, cozy leather chair—vintage but comforting—she was at her office! It seemed, however, emptier than usual. She moved on, and there was everyone assembled in the glass-walled meeting room.

“But her column is really on the decline...”

Chan could feel her heart skip a beat.

“I want to respect her will and wait until she makes the decision herself. I’m sure she’ll eventually do what she believes to be true to herself.” And there was Jeremy.

“I must admit she does have fabulous language, but it’s the core... anyone can tell that her content is bland and dull.” It was one of the women that mocked her earlier.

“Well, we all need time to rejuvenate...”

“But our budget...”

“I don’t mind being in a small deficit. I owe her more than anyone for what she did for our magazine...”

Oh, Jeremy! Chan feels a pain in the left side of her chest. “Why are you being so *stubborn*? Even *I* agree with what the rest are saying.” She murmured.

Is this guilt for Jeremy and his company? Or bitterness, for her under-performance? The sentiment of disappointment that faded throughout her stay in the mountains suddenly burst out as a starved lion would out of its cage.

Chan glanced around as she felt a gentle pat on her back.

“It’s okay.” Then appeared the purple light, which transformed into a translucent, feminine spirit: plump, but with a pair of soft, moist eyes and a rosy complexion which depicted the most benevolent and embracing existence Chan could ever have imagined.

“Recognition, trust, capability, and talent,” she said, “I can see that deep down, these are the things that you’ve been pursuing.”

Chan nodded. “But, these are the things you possess. Your capabilities are recognized, and you are well-trusted.”

The spirit smiled. Her mild but pleasant scent of night orchid eased the restlessness in Chan’s heart like an invisible hand.

“Be grateful, as you are blessed...” Her soft, silky palm stroked Chan’s face. As the last tip of her finger left her chin, the spirit vanished, and Chan found herself back under the serene moonlight.

“And so I am...” Chan gazed at her reflection on the moon-illuminated water surface. A tear dropped, forming a ripple in the mirror.

That night, Chan was awake with an overflowing nirvana. The nocturne of the crickets never sounded so beautiful; she gazed idly at the blinking stars, and blinked back at them, “Ah, why haven’t I ever realized that life was so beautiful? Thank you, Mother Nature! How I want to stay like this forever!” She thought.

At daybreak, when the apprentices came as usual to wake Chan up, to their surprise, what they found was only her neatly-folded futon.

“Shi Fu.” As soon as he opened his eyes upon concluding his morning meditation, Chan, now filled with renewed spirituality, approached him. Shi Fu looked upon her with those piercing eyes.

“I feel more than ready for our third lesson. Is it going to be another life-changing adventure? Perhaps, I might even be lucky enough to witness the Buddha’s Halo?”

“*Somebody’s* never been so keen on training before. Could you be possessed by any sort of spirit?” Shi Fu gave a small laugh at Chan’s dramatic change.

“Perhaps...” Chan’s dark eyes shone with the radiance of the morning sun.

Shi Fu smiled, you’re free to go home now.”

“Wait, what?”

“Off you go, and be helpful.”

“But Shi Fu, what do you mean? Don’t we have another lesson left to go?”

“That is correct.”

“Then why—”

“Shi Fu! Chan is gone! Chan is—Oh.” Before Chan could say another word, the other apprentices arrived, dumbfounded by the rarity of the spectacle before them.

Shi Fu said, “Chan, your good companion, will be leaving by sunset. Prepare all that she’ll need. You are all spared from training today.”

“How can they do this to me?” Chan asked herself this question again and again. After she followed her friends back to the hut, she then locked herself up in a dark room.

“Why doesn’t Shi Fu allow me to stay here like the others?”

Just when the indignant Chan was about to submerge into the old cycle of self-criticism, she heard the flapping of wings and the squeaks of the bats hovering above her. As they began circling above her head, Chan froze, and her fingers tapped anxiously, “Ok, calm down. Focus, and they won’t bother you.” She took a deep breath, and shut her eyes even tighter.

“Regardless of the reason, just be grateful for what I’ve received...” Inhale...

“But... why?” Exhale...

“Indeed, it’s been a great blessing.” Inhale...

In the darkness, Chan prayed and meditated. As if untying a knot, she remembered all the joyous treasures she received during her stay. Then, slowly, this intertwined with the happiest moments of her life.

She opened her eyes.

“Looks like I hadn’t the need to come here. You’ve solved it yourself.”

“Shi Fu!”

“As soon as I arrived in this broad and mysterious land, I knew I had a mission here. I felt that calling.” He continued.

“Well what is it then?” Asked Chan.

“It is to stay here, and to guide the lost, to enlighten the dull, and to help them realize their purposes. But you,” he paused, “you’re different. When I saw you, I knew that you were meant for something grander. Nature gave me that same sign. So, what is *your* calling?”

Chan stayed silent. Despite her conscious resistance, the image of her ‘typewriter’ appeared, and this journey was about turning inspiration into language and art.

“Here’s Mother Nature’s third lesson for you—and it ought to be challenging, yet it shall be by far the most fulfilling one as well—now, with that humble and appreciating heart of yours, return to civilization and make your very own contribution. Respond to that calling.”

Chan’s story above was just an example of the many artists throughout history who have gained their inner strength and inspirations for their future masterpieces. One day, when your spirit encounters a drought, come on a lonely pilgrimage to Huangshan. Here you may be intoxicated by the purest, dew-like spring water that cleanses and nourishes the worn souls, or you may resonate with the delicate languages, which came from the deepest sorrows of

those before, engraved on a pillar-like pine tree. The mountain may feel inclined to take you on an unforgettable adventure. Perhaps, as you proceed with your journey, you may also spot an elegant hut, which awaits to reveal the greatest missions its next visitors are destined to embark upon.

## A Game of Prophecies

*St. Paul's Convent School, Wan, Jasmine – 16*

*Xia Feng*

“Your smile should be sweet and genuine. You look as though you’ve eaten a sour pear.” Xia Feng’s mother scolded.

Xia Feng’s face hurt from all the smiling. The time had come for the Emperor to choose yet another bride, and her family hoped that Feng could get into the Emperor’s good graces. It was a pity to the Xia’s however, that Feng was not fit for life in a palace.

Traditional Chinese culture wanted Feng to be three things – obedient, quiet and beautiful. Feng was none of these things. Every night, she slipped out of bed to practice sword fighting in her backyard. To her family’s dismay, Feng was loud and brash. She spoke her mind, and she didn’t care about looking pretty, or cooking or cleaning.

Just then, the temple bells started to ring. Feng’s mother frowned.

“We’ll practice later. Let’s see what message the Seer delivers first.”

Feng rolled her eyes. The village seer was an old man with a long, white scraggly beard. Although he was blind, he claimed to have the power of ‘invisible sight’ and was able to predict the future by giving prophecies. The villagers trusted him wholeheartedly, but Feng thought that the seer was crazy. In her opinion, prophecies and predictions were useless. They led to nothing but trouble.

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“Oi! Ping! Why are you dawdling? Get to work!”



Ping flinched at the sound of his brother's voice. He hurriedly stuffed his book back down into the hole where it was buried. Brushing aside crops, he arranged mud on top of the hole so it looked nice and normal. Definitely not where a book was hidden.

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"Look. This time I won't tell Ba. But the wheat isn't going to sit there and reap itself. Pick up your sickle, harvest the grains, and maybe if you have time you can read."

It was unfortunate that Ping did not belong in a family of scholars. No, his family had been farmers for generations. Yet, Ping was everything a farmer's son was not. Instead of being rough and manly, Ping preferred sitting by his mother's side and listening to her stories of Huangshan – the Magical Mountains, and the creatures that resided there.

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“I knew you were special, my boy! The gods have smiled down upon us. After you go on this quest, slay the beast and save the village, you’ll become a hero! This would be good for our farming business. Who knows? You might even become rich!”

As his family busily contemplated reward money, Ping felt someone staring at him.

Whipping his head around, he saw Xia Feng. She had cocked her head and was looking at him, seemingly assessing his every move.

He gave her a tentative smile. She did not return it.

Feeling embarrassed, he walked back home with his family, thinking about how he was going to survive the quest.

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It was early in the morning. The rooster hadn’t crowed, and the sun hadn’t risen.

Yet, here she was, hacking away at shrubs with her sword.

Wen Ping was behind her, clutching his satchel glancing around nervously, as if the beast was going to appear any second.

Yesterday, they had started to climb up the mountain. The village seer had told them to find a mystic poet on the tallest peak, who would lead them towards the beast. So now, they were trying to find the poet, but so far there was no one on the mountain except for themselves.

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"Master Li, Master Li! You're my hero! I've read all of your poems – I can't believe I'm seeing you in person! This is a dream come true!"

Feng couldn't care less about Li Bai's poems. Ping and her didn't have time. They'd already spent too much time on Huangshan. They had to find that beast before it was too late.

"Master Li. My name is Xia Feng, and he is Wen Ping. We would like to humbly seek your advice on where the beast is."

Li Bai seemed to look at her for the first time.

"Ah, yes."

He didn't speak for a while. Feng tapped her foot impatiently.

Li Bai closed his eyes in deep thinking. Just when Feng thought that he had fallen asleep, he snapped his eyes open.

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And she was right. The answer fit! Ping grinned as Li Bai inclined his head, signaling that they were correct. "My second question is, what is always in front of you but you cannot see it?"

Ping thought in vain. Next to him, Feng was also frowning her brow. What could they not see, yet was right before their eyes?

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"The dragon's not here. Maybe we should continue to walk south" she broke off as Ping made a weird noise.

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The dragon looked up at him, and snorted. Little puffs of air came out from her nostrils, and Ping couldn't help but smile.

In front of him, Feng had brandished her sword.

"Ping, run. I'll handle this."

Ping gulped.

"Feng, wait. What if we don't have to kill the dragon?"

"Are you crazy? If the dragon doesn't die, the villagers die!" Seeing Ping's stricken face, her face softened.

"Look, I know that you don't want the dragon to die. But we don't have any choice. Now, on the count of three—"

"Can't we just find a solution that doesn't involve dying on both sides?" Ping interrupted.

He shakily walked over to the dragon. Heavens, it was even larger up close. Reaching out a trembling hand, he placed it on top of the dragon's snout.

"See? She's friendly and harmless. Feng, I don't think she would attack our village."

Feng's face was a stony mask. The dragon ambled closer to her and pushed her nose into Feng's face.

"Gah! Get off me! Ugh, fine. I won't kill you. But Ping, how are we going to tell the village?"

Ping wasn't sure yet. "We'll cross the bridge if we come to it."

He looked deep into the dragon's eyes.

"Do you promise not to destroy our village?"

The dragon cocked her head, as if she seemingly understood. Then she gave a large snort.

Feng laughed. "I'm assuming that means yes."

The dragon's eyes glinted as she looked at them. Then, her jade colored wings unfolded, incomparably beautiful to any jewel on earth. She gave one last snort of goodbye, and then took flight.

Ping covered his eyes as leaves and twigs swirled around them. When he opened his eyes, the Great Dragon was just a speck in the golden clouds.

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### *Xia Feng*

Feng had been too enthralled by the dragon to notice the changing scenery.

As the dragon took flight, Ping had closed his eyes, but she strained hers open, hoping to catch every vision of the Great Dragon and commit it to memory.

After the magnificence of the dragon, Feng didn't think she could take in any more beauty, yet Huangshan's sunset proved her wrong.

The sky had turned a burst of crimson. The clouds dipped all around them, rosy with hues of gold. Just towards the west, she could see the sun, a blazing orb setting just between two peaks of the Mountains.

Next to her, Ping lamented.

"When I first came on this quest, I just wanted to leave. Now, all I want to do is stay here forever."

"You could always ask Li Bai to adopt you. I'm sure he'd be willing to oblige."

Ping lightly punched her in the shoulder.

"In all honesty, I don't think I can return to life as a farmer's son after this."

Feng understood. There was so much in the world to explore. She didn't want to go back to her village and experience the same routine over and over again.

But her family needed their daughter, and Ping's family needed their son.

She nudged Ping.

"Who knows? Maybe the village seer would give us another quest."

Ping's expression was unreadable.

"But what if he doesn't?"

Feng wasn't sure either. She took one last look at the sunset.

"We'll cross the bridge if we come to it."

The two then began their slow descent back down the mountain, expressions of reluctance and wistfulness painted on their faces.

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Unbeknownst to them, a certain poet was watching the two from his alcove, and whispered,  
*“Go forth children, and live your lives,  
Drifting like clouds, the wanderer’s mind  
Appreciate the sunset, heart of your old friend,  
Until Huangshan hears and beckons you again.”*

## **A Game of Prophecies**

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“We’ll practice later. Let’s see what message the Seer delivers first.”

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“I was working! I was – um – checking the quality of the soil—“ Ping trailed off, once again regretting his choice of opening his mouth to speak.

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"Feng, wait. What if we don't have to kill the dragon?"

“Are you crazy? If the dragon doesn’t die, the villagers die!” Seeing Ping’s stricken face, her face softened.

“Look, I know that you don’t want the dragon to die. But we don’t have any choice. Now, on the count of three—“

“Can’t we just find a solution that doesn’t involve dying on both sides?” Ping interrupted.

He shakily walked over to the dragon. Heavens, it was even larger up close. Reaching out a trembling hand, he placed it on top of the dragon’s snout.

“See? She’s friendly and harmless. Feng, I don’t think she would attack our village.”

Feng’s face was a stony mask. The dragon ambled closer to her and pushed her nose into Feng’s face.

“Gah! Get off me! Ugh, fine. I won’t kill you. But Ping, how are we going to tell the village?”

Ping wasn’t sure yet. “We’ll cross the bridge if we come to it.”

He looked deep into the dragon’s eyes.

“Do you promise not to destroy our village?”

The dragon cocked her head, as if she seemingly understood. Then she gave a large snort.

Feng laughed. “I’m assuming that means yes.”

The dragon’s eyes glinted as she looked at them. Then, her jade colored wings unfolded, incomparably beautiful to any jewel on earth. She gave one last snort of goodbye, and then took flight.

Ping covered his eyes as leaves and twigs swirled around them. When he opened his eyes, the Great Dragon was just a speck in the golden clouds.

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*Xia Feng*

Feng had been too enthralled by the dragon to notice the changing scenery.

As the dragon took flight, Ping had closed his eyes, but she strained hers open, hoping to catch every vision of the Great Dragon and commit it to memory.

After the magnificence of the dragon, Feng didn’t think she could take in any more beauty, yet Huangshan’s sunset proved her wrong.

The sky had turned a burst of crimson. The clouds dipped all around them, rosy with hues of gold. Just towards the west, she could see the sun, a blazing orb setting just between two peaks of the Mountains.

Next to her, Ping lamented.

“When I first came on this quest, I just wanted to leave. Now, all I want to do is stay here forever.”

“You could always ask Li Bai to adopt you. I’m sure he’d be willing to oblige.”

Ping lightly punched her in the shoulder.

“In all honesty, I don’t think I can return to life as a farmer’s son after this.”

Feng understood. There was so much in the world to explore. She didn’t want to go back to her village and experience the same routine over and over again.

But her family needed their daughter, and Ping’s family needed their son.

She nudged Ping.

“Who knows? Maybe the village seer would give us another quest.”

Ping’s expression was unreadable.

“But what if he doesn’t?”

Feng wasn’t sure either. She took one last look at the sunset.

“We’ll cross the bridge if we come to it.”

The two then began their slow descent back down the mountain, expressions of reluctance and wistfulness painted on their faces.

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Unbeknownst to them, a certain poet was watching the two from his alcove, and whispered,

*“Go forth children, and live your lives,*

*Drifting like clouds, the wanderer’s mind*

*Appreciate the sunset, heart of your old friend,*

*Until Huangshan hears and beckons you again.”*