

Fiction

Group 4



Flamed

Diocesan Girls' School, Fu, Cheuk Yiu Tiffany - 15

Summer, 1900

I. Ignite

Hand on the mosaic, fingers tracing the rings, shrouded by turquoise. Hear the voice of nature as it calls upon the soil and clay to blend into the concoction seamlessly.

“Home,” she exclaims.

Darkness engulfs the dingy surroundings, and the nightly air strokes her cheeks as she rummages through the remains of the cavern, and grins, relieved. Flames light up the shallow scene from the small torch that she holds. She points the torch at the upright center and sees the Buddha's statue sitting in the exact position, comfortably enrobed in a vibrant shade of red.

To look at him in the eye, to feel the tranquillity that the Buddha himself has bestowed upon those that devoutly follow his guidance, is a relishing act. Her eyes glow as she confides in his majesty. And she utters a deep sigh and murmurs, in silence, a prayer:

I have come. From the depths of the deep seas and the brilliance of the skies, I have come. To avenge, to obtain, the lost, the forgotten. To serve the erudite which lodge in our paradise. To comfort the awakened scrolls and fantasies, so they shall endure no more, the disruptions of the Earth, and rest, undisturbed by passers-by, in peace.

The flames ignite, bright as diamonds freshly extracted from a prospector's mine, and the complex is now warm, animated, the liveliness of the cave restored once more.

II. Illuminate

And she stands on the ground, barefoot, the legs seeping into the sand. The clouds soften her green robe as her hair illuminates, flaring like the flames from the torch that lights up the cracks on her cane, yet they are no match for the cruelty of the dry, barren land. And he stands, opposite, his lustrous brows raising, and the forehead crumples, boiled and darkened, like medicine that gets bitter. The long, piled-up streaks of silvery hair complement the sea-blue silk that wraps his body, and the cold drops of sweat drooping on his shaven face are the tears that have once dampened his skin and replenished his soul.

“Child, why are you here, in the middle of the night, engrossing yourself in the desert?”

Wang, I know who you are, and in my most innocent dreams, I have witnessed the sly movements of your shadow. I saw the flames flicker - and I knew that one day, you would come, and I shall have to conceal the knowledge that the treasures of this very cave have of the world.

“Shi-tan, please listen. The fruit of the world lies not in seclusion, but, rather, in sharing and endless inquiry.”

To share is to burn. To conceal is to illuminate. Wang, oh, Wang, I will not be fooled - for with the twitching of my fingers I can deduce that you have been tracking me down, endlessly, day and night, and the trails of coal I have left along with me must have inspired you to intervene in my daily preservation of the grotto.

See the eerie twinkles of the stars that seem to be harmonizing with the roaring of the flames, like a lion shaking his mane, and shriek, like the mirroring of a child's ghost, all veiled by nature's despair. The fabricated confidence in her eyes divulges her apprehension, her fear.

“Shi-tan, do not perceive me as your competition. I am an old crippled priest, and my mind does not contain the agility to surpass your excellence. I only wish to preserve this historical wonder as a person of culture.”

It appears that we have different interpretations of the word “preservation”, Wang. Wang, you, as a Taoist, could never comprehend the righteousness of the Buddha and the riches he confers on us. As flawed followers, we learn to practice revelation but not to disclose his secrets recklessly.

“As if the legendary cavern is a secret itself?” Wang makes a satirical remark.

She ignores him, her head tilted towards the entrance.

My family has kept the map inside a small compartment for a millennium. Generation after generation, we have sworn on our lives not to succumb to the complex or revive the out-moded art. It stays hidden, Wang. It always will be.

The priest recites the words with his crooked, shriveled lips. Beat by beat, rhythm to rhythm does he listen and remember them by heart, letting out a vile smile, “To be obliged to your family's will is merriment, but to secrete the truth out of selfishness will only bring karma. So stay vigilant, Shi-tan, for I know where the entrance lies since you have just emerged from it.” He chuckles.

You may have found the entrance, Wang, but you cannot exploit it.

He makes no reply. Shi-tan stands as a fully-composed Wang ambles away, limping in the process. The flames in the torch radiate, and the whole ceiling of animals and small dots gleams, in ferocity, in anger, in hatred, for she understands that Wang was not deceitful in his response, yet she has fathomed out his reasoning. And she condemns it and demeans it.

It shall not happen.

The flames illuminate and guide Shi-tan into relieving her doubts. She looks up onto the night air, and the constellations are now delicate swarms of fireflies, glowing faintly. She has discovered her desire for victory in protecting her only property, and she beams, determined and fearless.

III. Burn

It is morning. The sun coruscates through the celestial skies, and the sweat drips, drips, and drips. Shi-tan washes them away while bundling up her hair with a piece of smeared, stained cloth.

Yearning, she enters the cavern, dashing into the shallow interior, the winds puffing, puffing, and puffing. But luckily, the torch stays intact, and in turn, the fire burns rapidly, intensifying, unable to be extinguished.

Barely six hours have passed after Shi-tan's counter with Wang, the old rural priest who always makes an effort to deceive by his decorative language. Not a good lad, indeed, her father has advised. Her teeth chatter at the thought of him sneaking into the cave and claiming all of the catches. Interestingly, the Taoist has used valid reasoning to explain his actions; it makes sense, but she still chooses not to accept such a notion.

Sharing is pivotal in determining one's morality, but in the case of the Mogao caves, it simply is not viable to share. Perhaps the familial traditions she has been following may have confined her beliefs, but she cannot possibly be sure of it as she ponders.

She strides into the cave. And there lies the Taoist, carrying a bag of calico fabric, a devilish, infuriating smile sewn on his face, his fingers on the parchment, rubbing the surface with so much force. Her eyes widen in appall as she witnesses him grasping hold of a scroll, extracting its beauty, and devouring the rich unknown embedded on its skin.

Her eyes burn, the fury inflaming, fierce as an emperor rapaciously ordering the beheading of his disloyal servant. The prophecy she had devised in her dreams when she was a wee toddler is becoming true at that instant, and so are the rest of the thoughts she has had in mind.

Thief - hands off the manuscripts! Let them lay on the ground, and let them rest. It was fate that our ancestors abandoned the art, and as its guardian and a hero, I must play a part in this play and cast you away from this defunct luxury.

No - how dare you place your hand on the eye of the Buddha -

“ - And you call yourself a hero. For centuries this library of mystery, the door that would uncover the secrets of your own blood, your own history, has been hidden, buried, and vanished from all of China. And yet you fail to recognize the significance of unveiling it.

“If you were the guardian of this cave, you would have gladly left it upon your discovery and kept it untouched for years, but you still come back every day.

“For what, child? What desire do you plan to fulfill?”

To avenge my family. To carry on the mission that my deceased ancestors have spent their lives fulfilling. Their bodies lie under the sand of this very cave, intricate as it seems, but I will not let you, nor anyone else, not even the English investigators, enter what rightfully belongs to me.

“Aha! A selfish soul avenges itself, and you are no exception. And one day, we shall call you Shi-tan, the Buddhist that capitulates to the roots of evil that linger in her twisted malice.” He switches to a milder, more lenient tone. “Child, I have kept my eye on you, and here I plead for you to tamper with your folly. Re-interpret your selfishness, and let the adults handle the work.”

The cave feels damp as if it is raining. The turquoise of the walls turns grey, and the teardrops ricochet as Shi-tan enlarges her eyes in disbelief. She startles the statue, the figure she has been worshipping piously, and the clay on the already half-demolished wall dissolves from its ornamented coating. It crumbles.

The interior is monotonous, dull, shrouded by soot, and Shi-tan simmers and squeals, crying out from her heart, shredded into fragments. She broods over the words of the old priest, which abruptly shatters the image in front of her, the self-image that she is keen to retain. She has fallen prey to his deceit, and her mind explodes in a frenzy as she sobs and pants, running out of time to deliberate: How is an uneducated priest so all-knowing? Is he a prophet? What is he?

She yells and screeches, and the thoughts cease to circulate.

But selfishness will not stop me from taking care of what is mine. And your words do not stop me from controlling what I rightfully own. Only I should be able to access this marvel, for I am the blood of the first guardian of this very cave! Leave, now, leave!

The torch, it burns, the fire ablaze. Shi-tan snatches the bundle away and tosses the crimson spear towards the unarmed soldier, the unarmed foe. Her eyes show no sympathy as she pleases herself with the colossal burning of the fires. The flaxen bag drops from Wang’s shoulder, and its exterior falls apart before the manuscripts gain a tint of coal, extinguished within the blink of an eye. He ensconces himself onto the ground, as the scrolls exist no more.

Wang stands on the floor, his worn-out robe slightly burnt, but he grins, “By avenging your hatred, you have destroyed what you have desperately yearned to defend.”

She stops moving. Her eyes soften, and time freezes, shrinking into the frame of a waxed stamp. The aggravating sense of guilt permeates her heart. Overwhelmed by an inundating

amount of wet tears, she falters and escapes from the massive treasures, now carcasses. She leaves the torch, still burning and luminous, and bolts out of the cavern, sniveling as she becomes aghast by the terror she has inflicted on the place she has once called “home”.

Flames, they burn and bellow; even with the Taoist’s water supply the well, they will never wither, as long as the ferocity is still prevailing. And as Shi-tan realizes that her battle would end in defeat, she flees into the unknown - a decision made on a whim.

She sighs, repenting.

Summer, 1908.

IV. Extinguish

“Cave 17, the Library Cave”

Hand on the statue, fingers tracing the patterns on the altar, shrouded by a fresh cover of oil. She is delighted as she finds the turquoise soil and clay enlivened, revitalized by the sunning from the scholarly investigators of ancient Asian art. All seems tranquil, including Shi-tan herself, who tries to immerse herself into the vibrancy of the complex during this secret but unexpected visit.

Covering her whole body with a black velvet piece of cloth, Shi-tan picks up the torch with the hand on her right, now extinguished, perpetually. Her mind runs through the former power and glory of the torch, which has almost burnt down and demolished the massive rediscovery of this eternal paradise.

The sun rays brighten the sacred surroundings, and the winds from the past stroke her face. She can immediately interpret the omen - the excavations have freed the caverns. She kneels in front of the altar, imploring a halt in the sufferings of the once impulsive adolescent. To fearfully stare at his presence, to feel the daunting intimidation of the twinkle of the Taoist that lies in the statue’s tinted eye, makes her agitated, restless. She spots a label stuck underneath the altar:

“37. Marked by Stein. I thank Wang the Abbot for his service.”

The adult, who at one point has been tempted by the delicacy of her desires, is now weeping at the sight of how things have marvelously changed in the cavern since her departure. She murmurs, in silence, after a whole eight years, another prayer,

I have returned. From the muffled parts of the bamboo grove and the ambush of my deepest desires, I have returned. To reflect and contemplate on my fury, my angst.

And I look into the chambers, the scrolls stored safely within in remorse, for I have failed to serve the erudite and comfort the awakened by lingering in my own temptations. And perhaps the act of sharing the treasure with the world and letting it take note of its power is not detrimental after all.

The flames finally extinguish after years of repentance and reflection. Shi-tan is now warmed, recognizing that the complex has been embellished and blossomed under the guidance of Wang and the western scholars, and the wonder, the Mogao Caves, are zestful once more.

Tales from the Mogao Grottoes - The Guardian's Tale

ESF Island School, Tsai, Maddie - 14

366 CE

Someone is calling, a warm voice with an echo that seems to reverberate through my mind. My senses gradually clear and the fog seems to lift. I can feel every bone and muscle in... a body, my body? I will myself to move, but find that I can't seem to control my muscles. Where am I? What is this? The echo grows louder, and abruptly I'm aware of a pull tugging from my core. For a brief moment, I can feel myself moving, though not of my own accord, and all of a sudden, I'm blinded by a bright gold. I can see! Once the light has faded I take in my surroundings. Green grass sways with wind I cannot feel, and small waterfalls sparkle with light I cannot see. Right in front of me, a pond covered in the soft pink of lilies. The garden, for that is what it must be, is silent for all but the bright gurgling of the water. It finally occurs to me to take a look at myself. I give another attempt at movement, and this time, my muscles comply. Uncurling myself from the heap I had been in, I peek over the pond. For my efforts, I'm greeted by the sight of a beak and a bright red crest. Cautiously, I let my wings spread out on either side of me. My plumage is breathtaking, made up of bright royal blues, scarlet reds, emerald greens and warm honey golds.

"Phoenix." A voice shakes me out of my awe and I startle, letting out a sharp caw.

Turning, I'm faced with a serene face looking down on me from upon his lotus, around his head a golden halo.

Instinctively, I bow my head respectfully. "Buddha"

His hand reaches down as he strokes my crest. "Rise." I lift my head and he smiles gently before he begins to speak.

"I have brought you here to fulfil a great duty that will help many in their journey to enlightenment... to be a protector and a guardian of the Cave of a Thousand Buddhas. The good monk Le Zun will be the beginning of a divine site that will lead those seeking awakening and freedom from the shackles of suffering, and you, my dear Phoenix, shall watch over his work and look after this holy spot."

Somehow, I know what I will say without even thinking about it. This is my purpose. Taking a deep bow, I utter words that seal my fate. "It would be the highest honor to take on this great responsibility Buddha", and with another tug, the garden around me falls away.

394 CE

The prosperous city of Dunhuang sprawls beneath me, as I gracefully glide under the sweltering sun. I can see the tiny white specks of caravans making their way across the sand, heading towards the oasis for the weary travellers. With a flap of my wings, I fly south east towards the caves.

Le Zun had died years ago, but his work lived on. He'd been on the pilgrimage to the Western Paradise when he'd stopped by the Dachuan river, where I found him. I'd watched as he took gulps of water to quench his thirst from the long journey, and rested on the shaded river bank at the foot of the Sanwei mountain. As the final rays of liquid gold spilled over the summit of the mountain, we were graced with the vision. Maitreya Buddha beamed down at

us, surrounded by a thousand Buddhas, right palms raised. Heavenly music seemingly played from nowhere, and fairies danced about in between, basking in the golden light. Le Zun had silently kneeled in reverence as a tear rolled down his cheek, vowing to establish a sacred place of worship for the Buddha. For the rest of his life, I would observe as he would work tirelessly to build the first cave into the cliff opposite the site of the holy vision, filling it with depictions of his blessed vision.

Nearing the grottoes, I can see another monk making his way towards the mountain. Swooping down low, I follow him as he reaches the sandy river bank. The sun is quickly setting, painting the sky with fiery hues. I hold my breath as the monk looks up just as Le Zun had. The fading sunset turns iridescent, and the mountain glistens and sparkles from a light of unknown origin. Again, Maitreya Buddha appears in a resplendent golden aura, still smiling down at us as his left hand rests on his crossed legs. The light shines, luminescent, on the cliff opposite, bringing the monk's attention to the depictions Le Zun had left behind. Just as soon as he turns, the dazzling light vanishes. Surviving in nothing but a mere memory deeply engraving itself into the monk. This monk was filled with the same wonder I'd seen in Le Zun, and I knew he would continue the former's work.

907 CE

The sun is peeking up over the mountain, and the first rays throw the cliffs into a warm glow. The stories of the two monks' visions have spread across the nation, and people from every station and every region now come and visit. I've watched dynasties come and go, as the number of caves grew exponentially. Layers and layers of sandstone chipped away under my vigilant eye, generations of men and women travelling thousands of miles from their homes to visit the divine spot. Over a thousand caves were added to the original, each elaborately decorated and painted with care, filled with scriptures and sculptures, and walls covered with murals.

I spy a small group of monks carrying armfuls of scrolls make their way to the caves, along a familiar path walked by millions before them. They enter through the first cave, which has been made into a multiple story temple with bright red roof tiles that remind me of my own feathers. The caves have never been more alive, and with them, me. With every new cave that is built, I feel my energy grow, tied to this blessed spot. No matter which dynasty it is, I will continue to look over my caves, respecting the promise I made ever so long ago.

1640 CE

I'm tired. It took a good couple hundred of years for me to notice, but I can feel it now, weighing down my very soul. The duty that was bestowed upon me has made me weary, and the caves have been forgotten by all but a few. I should have realised when the construction of caves stopped. The road that used to bring thousands through my dearest caves now brings a few local monks on a good day. Dunhuang has been reduced to nothing more than a small village, a far cry from the prosperous trading hub it used to be. It's funny how time works, those minute changes that you disregard, until it's too late. Many of the caves have been abandoned, deemed as too much trouble for the small group that still visit. Perhaps this was always going to happen... I am well over a thousand years old. Every day, I grow weaker, clinging on to the last shred of hope that the caves will be revived. I know that no such miracle will happen. My fate has always been tied to the caves, and now that they have been deserted, so have I. Flying into a cave, I quickly find a small nook that seems around my size. I settle into it, tucking my head into my faded feathers and closing my eyes. Everything feels so exhausting... I can feel myself slipping, further and further. Feeling the tug, as I did all those years ago, I surrender.

1900 CE

There's a voice. It pierces through the haze that dulls my mind and my awareness floats back in bits and pieces. I haven't awoken in two hundred years, why now? Looking around, I see nobody in the cave that I'm in, but there's definitely someone. A scratching sound reaches my ears, and I trace it to a small crack on the wall. Who's behind it? I fly through the wall and finally find the source of the sound. It's owner is a man in his 50s, wearing loose fitting robes and a cap to cover his shaved head. A holy man then, I realise in relief. The cave I had been in was blocked with sand, and he was scratching away at it using a small shovel. This was unusual... in my semi-conscious state I'd been aware of people coming and going, but none of it had been enough to pull me out of my torpor. What was so special about this man?

1909 CE

Betrayal, and anger is all I feel. I'm burning with pulsing hot rage as I watch the man that had woken me, load cart after cart of documents. The precious documents! I knew he didn't understand the significance, being illiterate, but to blindly give it away, all for a couple dollars? They are not his to give! Each manuscript, so carelessly stacked onto the rusty trolley, feels like a brutal stab through my breast. This is not leading holy men to enlightenment! This was sacrilege, desecration, of work so tirelessly worked on by monks! The thieves in question not only clearly know nothing about the contents of the documents they have taken, but hope to use it for their personal gain! I watch in silent horror as paintings around the caves are taken down and thrown into the carts, along with textiles and sculptures. This cannot be. I must be in some sort of nightmare. Filled with grief, I let out a loud cry that won't be heard, I feel a tear trace it's way down my face. I'm hopeless, unable to interfere, unable to turn away.

1939 CE

It's happening again, soldiers jeeringly vandalizing yet another precious mural as they joke with each other. They had been stationed here some months ago, this small group of young men with cruel faces. Within a month, they'd tired of their card games, and turned to destroying various statues and artwork. I no longer feel anything towards them. Numb. This isn't new. After the first betrayal, a stream of other thieves and vandalists had passed through, each leaving a permanent scar of what had been lost. Murals stripped from walls and statues carelessly broken. I had watched each of these being created, the long hours of hard work, the effort and love poured into each and every piece. All to be destroyed within minutes. Is this my fate? To watch, as all that I had once watched grow and prosper be ripped away cruelly?

Present Day

The caves have survived, and so have I. Thankfully, a small group had come in not long after the soldiers had left, for once with no selfish intentions. After poking around the caves, and what seemed to be many observations, a steady flow of people had arrived. While not particularly holy men themselves, they worked hard at repairing and protecting the site, and I give them my gratitude. From then on, there was no more destruction. People began to come through the caves again, this time not for enlightenment, but out of appreciation for the caves themselves. The caves will never return to the divine beacon of holiness that they once were, but for now, they are safe, and no longer mine to protect. The thought is strangely calming, I think, as I close my eyes for what is hopefully the final time.

This Promise I Hold to My Grave

ESF King George V School, Zhao, Rou - 14

“I'll tell the stars about you.” – B.K.

Winter, 1937

Dig your crystalline legs into my punctured veins. Trail your tapering fingers down my gushing, soaking veins. And come. Place that bloodstained palm of yours against the veil of my shuttered lids. They flutter. Once, twice.

Are you a thing?

Inhale,

exhale.

A something. A parasite that haunts the ridges and crevices within me, that even I have not explored? Or are you just this: A monster of memories. Burgundy wine I savour on my tongue, until you are bleeding, poisoning, blackening my blood. Till I am giddy and sweet with the mere taste of your nightmares and your dreams. The memories you send crashing wave after wave into my fevered brain.

And the dreams come like wildfire. A disaster born of cerulean lightning and smoking wood, that razes through all my defences until I am left gasping and short for air.

I see dunes. Sweeping whales of molten gold beads that plunge and rise, perhaps with the wardrum beat of footsteps that tread the barren land.

Wind, the hissing of sulphurous flames. Scorching, crackling, rubbing sand against sand until all the melody that is the air, rings with the death rattle of the desert.

The visions trickle, slowing. Stops.

Tap, tap.

It feels out its new conqueror, its foe. This nightmare, this memory, this secret of mine. It fingers the bumps and sloping grooves, the gyri, sulci of my brain.

Pushes.

And all of a sudden, I see stone. Gouges carved into cliffs, they would one day stroke the stippled sky.

I see vermillion, slate and the verdant green of forests that paint whorls and spirals, colours long faded into the sepia of photographs, yellow, bruising with age.

I am thrashing, writhing, squirming in my sleep, choked by blankets I hold with bunched fists and crescent-moon nails that tear and tear.

When I finally open my red-rimmed eyes, I can still taste the metallic bite of blood, welling in the back of my stone-cold throat.

“More of those dreams again?”

I stretch out my limbs as I contemplate the words, wrap my blanket tighter, tighter around my bony shoulders. “Last night, I saw something new for the first time,” I reply slowly. “For the past month, its all been the desert, you know? The dunes, the sand that goes on and on and never ends. The same dream, over and over again. I don't mind it, but-”

I hesitate, and it is a question mark, a period, or perhaps an ellipsis that taunts and lingers. My friend sighs. “You don’t get it? You want to know what’s going on?”

When I tilt my head in acknowledgement, her arms come to loop around me, and we are content to hold each other for a while.

“Well? What did you dream about then? Last night?”

“Caves.” I reply instantly. “Like a large ant’s nest, all peppered with these huge holes. It was all over the cliffs, and there were these beautiful paintings.”

The secrets I glimpsed night after night were as much a part of me now as all the uncharted stars to the moon. The stinging, salt-soaked wind to the brine of the sea. Clotting blood, lattice of veins, they spell out my breathless dreams.

The way the sun had hit the cliffs at just the right angle to spill the amber lustre of sweet light. The way everything soon became drenched and coated, bathed within the colour of freshest autumn leaves.

It was as if everything had been spun from spools of thread stolen from the finest wisps of clouds that had once adorned sunsets. Threads of marigold petals strung in silken garlands. Of freshly spilt honey, sticky and wild which twisted, wove and embroidered all that touched the wandering eye. “But it was so pretty, August.” I chew on the inside of my cheeks. “You don’t understand.”

My friend inclined her head towards me, and when she spoke her eyes are latched upon mine. “And what did you say the dreams were like? The thing that gave you those dreams?”

Like spirits. Like ghosts, monsters. It had a physical presence, pressed tight against my waxen flesh. Barely sealed within me, threatening to erupt, reach arms strung with intestines, claw itself out my gaping mouth.

Like something hid within me, stole every *pump pump* of my telltale heart, snatched at every thought, every colour that shot, electrical, tingling through my splintering, fracturing skull.

And every night, the *thing* feeds me. Stuffs rotting roses of desert-world dreams into my restless sleep, until I am eroded, whittled down, all strung together, rickety. Me with my sack of sagging skin and bones, I dance on its gilded strings.

I smile. “It’s nothing, really. Just a headache, now and then.”

Her eyes are searching, seeking, are they pleading? I’ve played this game for far too long. In the end, all that August can do is give the sad little laugh of a friend who had long learned you. All about you. Your machinery, every oiled cog and gear twisting, turning, what makes you *tick tick tick*. Who had long learned to strip through every little lie you wove, deft cut by cut. And who gripped my hand now because we both knew of the sleepless, spinning nights. The smoke-throttled dreams, restless murmurings, they wrack my sweat-drenched body.

All of this, I hide.

The next time I see August, there is almost nothing left of me. Hands locked around my chest. They squeeze and squeeze as if I could push it down. Just push it down, restrain this monstrous thing that feasts inside of me.

Is it my heart that’s beating? Is it me that closes my tired eyes now?

You or

me?

It has grown persistent. Gnawing from inside this home it has made, coiled and meshed between my blood-soaked organs. It rears and shakes, sends wave after wave of dreams.

They come prowling deep in the middle of the night, bullet after bullet, you strike my weathered flesh. You fog up my vision until my eyes are watering, and my heavy breaths escape my pursed lips in ragged, choking hiccups, scraped out from somewhere within my clogged up, smoke-filled lungs.

Over and over again, the visions whirl through my head.

August rushes for me, cradles me against her. “Hey, hey. Are you okay? Juliette, hey!” Her fingers knot through my sopping, tangled hair. “I’m here, I’m here, okay? Hey, hey, it’s okay. Is it your dreams? The beast?”

My fingers form claws around her wrists, and I clench them. She winces. Doesn’t draw away.

I hold her, she holds me. She is real, real, real.

Fake.

Fake?

Real. August is real. She’s here. I’m here.

I listen as she begins to speak. Regain myself with every lilting note her petal-soft voice forms. She strokes my feverish head, speaks in undulating streams as if her words can patch these oozing, hidden blisters that paint me inside and out.

“Do you want to know something that might cheer you up? Yeah? Yeah? Okay.” She croons to me, stitches her words like a lullaby. “Well, I did some research after you told me about your visions, and I found your dreams in the newspapers. Do you know it? They’re called the Mogao Grottoes.” She wipes my blood-stained lips. “The Mogao caves if you will, and it’s surrounded by miles upon miles of desert.”

Inhale, exhale. The beast loosens its chokehold on me.

“Some people are calling it the land of dreams. It was discovered a few years ago.” She smooths my jagged fingers until they are limp. Laces her own ones through mine. “But a lot of the caves have been vandalised, damaged, things stolen from them.” She falters. The beast falters.

Her eyes are the softest of blacks when she entangles them with mine. “I think you should go, Juliette.” It’s there, snarled within the tug of her lips, drowned within the sugar of hope. “Maybe it’s the source of your monster. Maybe all of your visions and nightmares.”

What a dangerous thing it is, hope. “Maybe.” I fight to regain my voice. “Maybe it’ll make it all go away.” For once I allow myself to dream. “Maybe I’ll get better.”

She rests her cold, cold forehead against mine.

When I speak again, there is only me. Just me, lying here, monster be damned. “I won’t be gone for long.”

She bites her lips. “Promise?”

I smile. “I promise.”

Spring, 1937

Cloaked within these angel wings of night, we travel. Your haunting voice is the chorus of asteroids. Of incandescent meteorites and comets swirled within the frosted haze of galaxies, nebulae, stars. You sing, and you are the phantasmal caress of gold-veined ivies that engulf, play tic-tac-toe across my stone foundation.

You are everything gone rotten in this world. You are a beast shrouded in beauty, and you are a festering, oozing wound that can only cause pain, pain, pain.

Yet still, I follow you.

My stumbling legs walk this path you trace for me. Follow you as your voice rises into a crescendo.

The world is my compass, and you are pulling me, tugging me, onwards due north.

Are you still my parasite? My infection, my monster, my secret?

But as we pass through sleepy villages, twining wires strung with homespun garments.

As we trek across unbroken, windswept mountains of sand painted sanguine by the glow of the setting sun, you have been my only companion. And as we finally breach the line of the known and the unknown, I step willingly into the oblivion of my most insidious dreams, the figments of my broken, fractured imaginations.

I feel nothing from you now, my night-horror. Nothing except for thirst, and wanderlust.

Nothing but a bone-deep tug of longing.

Is this your home?

My footsteps echo. They patter, fall, fold against the rough-hewn stone, like raindrops disintegrating into soil. If I strain, quiver my nostrils, it's almost as if I can smell it, air redolent of sweet petrichor.

But there isn't, I can't.

I march blindly into the unfathomable bellies of these ancient, mammoth caves. It's too dark for my naked eyes, but not for yours.

I heed your call, follow your steadfast lead. And like this, you guide me, nuzzle me. You nudge me gently, so gently.

Labyrinths and labyrinths, I leave my mark upon the dusty ground.

Is this what you wanted all along?

You were never born of rage, were you? My monster, my sweet, you couldn't help it.

Hiraeth: a homesickness for a home you can't return to.

But you're home now. You are placated. Content. You sit me down, and we wait.

For what, I do not know, but I place my life within those bloodstained palms of yours that I used to fear.

Mirrors. Spreading, fracturing gossamer strands of silk cobweb light. They split in all directions. Upside down, wrong way around. You turn, turn, turn the wheel of this sinking ship.

And so, like a mirror, I fall asleep and wake up to dreams.

Where have you brought me?

I am soaked in colour. The world unravels, spools of thread around me, and I see porcelain, begonia, and seafoam. Orchid, lilac, deep lavender. Sapphire and steel, conflated into swirls of a watercolour painting.

Murals cram every last inch of bare rock, and it is as if I could glide here, perhaps I could fly. Stretch out my arms and touch worlds with both outstretched hands.

Galaxies filled with fairies and bodhisattva and buddhas, they are all within my reach.

There is history spidering, leaving ripples, conchoidal fractures in every painstaking piece of chipped stone and sunburnt paint in this cavern you brought me to.

But you ask me to run, and if I did, rose petal smooth skin crumpling, creasing,

weathering within the space of a prolonged sigh, I would finally understand. I would see the garish blood-red of graffiti lacerated, scratched across your tumbledown home.

I would see men and women dressed in midnight. They steal handfuls of bygone times, pocketful by pocketful, till one day, there will be nothing left of these ribbed walls you used to dance within.

Everything that serenades you and your brethren. Everything that breathed of your past and present and future. Sepulchral banners, statues, timeworn scrolls, they will melt into greedy hands.

And is this why you've brought me here?

Who are you, my dearest of nightmares, what do you wish me to do?

Are you a phantom? Monster? Guardian, knight of these palatial caves you call your home?

The ocean's smooth glass, gentles them. The incessant *drip drip* of fitful rain can leave its mark upon even the most stubborn of cliffs. And so, time will do the same. Time will coax spring shoots from arid grounds. Time will wrap plaster after plaster across all of our gashes and wounds. Time will heal this ruined species of us. Even I couldn't see the good that you were, until it was far too late. Until I was already drowning, and only then did I plead and call. Only then did I come running, flailing for you.

Decades, centuries, however long it will take, life will never stop its ceaseless pendulum sway.

When the next fortunate person arrives, they will dig past choking sand and rock. They will find this. These caves that encompass time and space, that loops with the deftness of arteries across cliffs and desert land. They will treasure this. They will collect fragments, and rebuild these walls, these interwoven stories of yesteryear, of your ancient times, of history.

So, I will bleed for you. I will reach my hand into every fissure. Every piece of stardust, ripped tissue, beating organ of mine, until I am laid bare, stretched inside out beneath the infinite night sky of your gaze.

Take me, consume me, head over heels, I tumble. Do what you must do. I'll sink into your arms; let you count my dying breath. *Thump thump* of my heart as it strangles in this chokehold, this bruising force I hold against myself. And in the end, all that I am.

All that is left of me is a dreamer, entrusted with this promise I hold to my grave.

I release a vacant sigh, and around me, the walls begin to crumble.

We sink. We fall.

We are forgotten.

Enlightenment

ESF West Island School, Tsang, Eric - 14

Rebirth.

Harmonious, sonorous thoughts echo through the chambers of the clay halls, complementing the immense silence that pervades the static air. As the rest of my limbs stir into an unmoving consciousness of the caressing hands, I feel the light strokes of bristles moisten my eyelids, and I observe the demure smile of satisfaction unfurling on the young monk in front of me, which hastily dissolves into a solemn look of appreciation as he effortlessly suppresses his fleeting swell of pride. Briefly, his subdued eyes flicker with effulgence, meeting my gaze, ever warm, ever serene, ever sunny. Acknowledging my existence, he remembers his purpose and quietly slips away, his fingertips last to leave the touch of my palm. ‘Thank you,’ I thought, the undulating whisper of gratitude rippling from the core of my heart, glowing a sharp, hidden shade of red, extending to the end of my palm... But the wave never came into contact with him, nor did it manage to flutter away and escape from my stonelike, earthen body.

Sat firmly cross-legged, eyes closed in a meditative pose, with my right palm held facing forwards, I am unable to see or move, and a few loose rocks gather in the alcove I am placed in, causing slight discomfort. I simply rest above these superficial fragments of the mind, my steadfast demeanour as placid, as contemplative as ever – I have overcome suffering long ago, and I am free of desire, or the need to move or see... In an instant, Buddhas see all, Buddhas know all.

It was in that timeless moment that I gathered I was a reincarnation of Buddha, part of a realisation of the vision seen by Le Zun the Buddhist monk. A thousand Buddhas had appeared before him here in the desert, bathed in golden light. But why? Why did that vision occur to him? It couldn't have been a figment of his starved mind, imagination... So what purpose do I have here? Did I not resolve all of my karma in the previous life, liberating myself from its perpetuation? Why have I been reintroduced to the cycle of rebirth? The illustrious spirit of the Buddha is eternal. I am eternal.

My hair is tied into a bun. Draped over my shoulder is a piece of clay fabric, laced with jewels, extending to cover my whole body. Intricate, cloud-like swirls are emblazoned into it, resembling the sinuous streams and serpentine winds. The luxurious alcove behind me is lined with gold-plated tiles, a mosaic of rich, vibrant sheaves of wheat that join at the top, with a plethora of clay ribbons surrounding me that twirl away into the walls. Dense geometric structures of gems weave the upper part of the corridors, twining and spiralling up into the domed roof of the imposing apse. Candles placed carefully by the walls cast a soft, golden hue onto the Buddhas, dyeing the room an ever-changing tint of orange, just the way Le Zun had envisioned it. Meticulous, dynamic paintings of Buddhist figures fill the remaining part of the walls, each one uniquely identified, possessing a crystalline quality, depicting the transformation of the mind as enlightenment approaches.

Sat in a semicircle beside me are other Buddhas, some female, some male, dressed differently, with the same alcoves but different resting positions, more subtle, less dramatic, but just as luxuriously placed nonetheless. We must be extremely revered to be enshrined, elevated like this. I paused for a moment, wondering if the fellow Buddhas beside me were wondering about the same things as I was. I willed myself to elicit a response from them,

willed them to respond, however their emotions were just as locked behind the facade of their indifference as mine were. For a moment, I thought I saw the stormy seas of the mind through the empty stare of the Buddha far opposite me, then realised that it was merely a mirage I had constructed of the torch fire reflected in its eyes. We remained just as unwaveringly composed, just as pacific, our everlasting, serene smiles and sunny eyes revealing everything and nothing about us at the same time.

Our faces answer all questions. Our thoughts punctuate them.

The pilgrims and monks below us are just as composed as us, eyes closed, mouths drawn, sitting or kneeling, hands rested on their laps or held in a fist in front of their chests. Their thoughts are ablaze, however, allowed to run freely in the caves. Perhaps this is an indication of their restlessness, that they are yet to achieve nirvana... A sea of thoughts emanate from these people, flowing rhythmically to surround us, conducted brilliantly by their collective mindfulness. Boundless, righteous thoughts freed from ill-will, liberated from sensual desire. What a shame these pilgrims and monks are currently unable to gain insight into this strangely comforting, ethereal music! Yet why does this feel so comforting, to be in the presence of imperfect beings? They idolise us, we are their objects of worship.

One of the aspiring Buddhists before me, a young boy trying to let go of his angst, finishes his meditation practice, and lifts his gaze to meet mine. Immediately I sense something disappear, and a tiny bit of the shimmering lustre that enveloped the room drifts back to him. A cold glint of disappointment and chagrin settles in his pallid eyes; he shrugs his shoulders and channels it away.

‘I felt nothing...’ he thinks, holding back his bluster with a contemptuous tranquillity.

‘That is exactly what you should be feeling...!’ I thought, glaring back at him with as much vigour as I could muster, the sheer frustration of helplessness tugging at my leaden face. Somehow, the message seemed to register, and a soft fulfilment finds and imparts itself to him as he walks off.

‘Please guide me to Buddhahip,’ another one silently wishes, aiming her infinite, intent stare fixedly at me, sending an unexpected chill into my stony, hardened heart as I contained a rueful laugh, knowing that my impenetrable facade would fall before fiery eyes could melt an inch into my icy walls.

‘I wish I could...’ I thought, ‘But you’ll have to guide yourself.’

‘Perhaps Buddhahip isn’t at all what I believe it is,’ she thinks. ‘Is this a doubt that I have in Buddhist teachings...?’ Brooding, discordant thoughts appear, visibly staining the pleasant, melodious atmosphere. Tucking herself back into a cross-legged position, she turns her elbows upright, cups both her cheeks with her palms and rests her sagging chin on them, her lower jaw hanging slightly open, pensive but hopeful.

She looks around and redirects her concentration at me, checking to see if her thoughts had any impact on my expression. Relieved, she continues meditating.

Buddhas see all, she wordlessly chants with fervour, Buddhas know all.

And with that, she melts back into the orchestra of subtly unspoken prayers.

‘But Buddhas don’t feel all...’ I thought to myself. ‘They merely fade into nothingness.’ I start to notice the imperfections in the room, stark and distinct as they cast a striking contrast to the perfect chorus of thoughts. A blemish on the porcelain vase beside me, a crack in the clay walls, the last unfinished paintbrush stroke and slight fracture by my elbow. Unperturbed, I conclude that these mistakes were made by humans. Humans, who have not transcended time and space. Humans, who have not achieved nirvana, and are still prone to distractions and errors.

Observing the serenity of the room, I realise I am not needed. Slipping out of the cage I am put in, I let my mind adopt a state of formlessness, reassured our followers have everything they need. Devout pilgrims and monks arrive and go. They blur into nothingness as I fade away from the realm of perception.

Awakening.

Time presents itself to me when I return; I am not interested. Nothing has changed in me. I remain just as rock-solid, just as sturdy, my smile and gaze just as revealing and unrevealing as before. The glorious music and visible tranquillity that I experienced before still reign in this cave, and this cave is still just as popular with our fellow Buddhists, however there exists an evident lack of hustle and bustle that intrigues me. The music I heard before is now of a different calibre and tune – still as harmonious as before, but no longer as rich, no longer as vibrant and bright, and more of a subdued quality, as if they were naive children who matured to be more accepting of the inherent suffering of life.

I spot the woman from before, wan and faltering, peering in from around the entrance, an aura of emptiness surrounding her. She stares into my eyes again, a sharp, piercing, sweeping, expectant stare. And surprisingly this time I find myself being the one who tries to gain insight into her. I bore through her inky, swirling marble eyes and tried to navigate through her pitch-darkness, but there the entrance was locked tight, and I could not wander any further into the garden of her heart. No indicator, no key I could use to peer into the depths of her being. Her cold, ebony eyes would forever be shut away from the world. Only the facade of her withered self could be observed. She had attained nirvana, I realised. The gain in the strength of her mind had come at the cost of her emaciated body. One more ascended spirit soon liberated from death... and life, I thought wistfully.

Absorbed in my own thoughts, the harsh cavity of inaudibility amid the peaceful harmony recedes, swallowed. When I bring myself back to my senses, she is no longer there, yet I know she always will be. Even as my right arm remains outstretched forwards, with my palm pointed firmly towards the sky, I heave a sigh of weariness.

A jewel tumbles from my clothes, dislodging a small chunk of my thigh before falling to the ground with a distinct clatter that reverberates across the room. And although a few of my followers soon come to my aid and fix it back in its position, I am left to question my timelessness.

I never see her again. As the days come and go, more and more of my aspiring Buddhists turn out like her – they achieve the highest levels of concentration, freeing themselves of anything the mind can conjure, thus achieving nirvana. One by one, the thought musicians bow out, stars who shine with rising vivacity and splendour until they vanish, halting in an abrupt finale, never to be heard again.

In the languid silence, I reflect on how the boy felt before he left, instilling a thought that nags me – is Nirvana really what we are after? At the highest levels of concentration, we can peer into the thoughts of others while attaining utmost control over ours... we rid ourselves of the desire to feel. I recall the cold, stony glare of the woman, the metamorphosis that she underwent in the path to enlightenment. By freeing ourselves of dissolution, are we essentially robbing ourselves of the capacity to feel? Are we robbing ourselves of warmth?

I observe the Buddhas sitting beside me, a semicircle of stillness, an ironic sangfroid that reflects nothing of the turmoil caused by the violent tempest in my stone-cold heart.

I wonder if I still retain the purity that I possessed.

The fire in the torches snuff out with no one to maintain them, and eventually just a pure darkness reigns, accompanying the tremendous silence that pervades the static air of the caves. Perhaps this is the true meaning of timelessness – to have every moment of time with you when it has no meaning – time has no effect on the quiescence and constancy of these picturesque caves. Time presents itself to me; I listen, for it is my only companion.

Humans aren't eternal, I remind myself.

These caves are eternal. I am eternal.

And with that, light engulfs the ashen room.

Not the natural, flickering flame of the torches, but rather a harsher, constant, stark white glow.

There are men. They are not here to practise Buddhism. They speak a foreign language.

A brew of their desire and wonder congeals to smother the clay halls.

'Look at what waits for us here,' one of them says, tantalised.

'I can't wait to bag these riches,' another one says, a look of treacherous lust in his malicious eyes.

I shut myself from these abominable horrors.

They walk towards me.

They put their hands on me.

They climb upon me.

They sit on my lap.

They point something at us, a camera, I gather from their thoughts. A contraption that captures time itself. They smile, a cloying smile, directing a bright flash of light at us, and I feel a tiny portion of myself being drawn out into the camera.

They disappear, leaving nothing but darkness behind, yet I know they will soon return to satisfy the rest of their desires.

Tired of my inability to react, and uninterested in the ill intentions of these men, I remain aloof and let myself be at peace, undisturbed.

Incessant chatter and vague discussion fill the room, buzzing with eager anticipation, a knotted, ravelled mess of audible dissonance impossible to untangle. I can make out the disparate voices, however I am familiar with none, and cannot identify the voices from the rapturous cacophony of sounds. A crowd of people are gathered in an orderly fashion at the entrance, drowned in jarring jets of brilliant, potent light. The jewels on the cloth draped over my shoulder have been replaced with newer ones, I notice. The robbers before must have stolen them. My knee has healed. The portion of the garment on my lap has been replaced as well. And the paintings on the walls have been redrawn.

A small boy is let in and excitedly approaches me with curious fascination. Tiptoeing gently, eyes open wide, he stands a metre in front of me and bends his head back upwards so that he can take in my full figure and height. 'Wow...' He thinks. I'm flattered. Walking over to my feet, he hugs me with ardent zest.

'Aww...' his parents say with an emphatic wholeheartedness. They take a device out of their coat sleeves and direct it at my naked self. Stinging rays of white stab into my raw body, a thousand blinding needles trying to penetrate into my core. Reflexively, I direct a pulse of energy into my arm in an attempt to shield the boy before noticing that the boy seems to be immune to the lights. My outstretched palm forms a perfect barrier between the lights and my face, but that doesn't stop a dozen streams of myself from flowing into their cameras.

My right arm shivers momentarily from the quake, a shudder that happens just as the boy jumps to throw his leg over my thigh, and I suddenly become aware of a fatigue, a

palpable lack of strength that I am certain wasn't there before. Hanging from his leg, the boy curls his lip in determination, tenses before he arches his back, lurches around his waist and pulls himself up with a swift jolt. Grasping at my left elbow with a powerful leap, he secures himself by hooking his wrists behind and lacing his fingers together. He performs a graceful acrobatic swing and deftly flips himself onto my lap.

It takes a couple of moments for his parents to stop cheering. Their jaws slowly drop in a fit of apoplexy, arousing animated, transient mirth.

Thrusting himself up, he reaches for my shoulder and climbs up. Now we are level. He heaves a sigh of relief and closes his eyes, sitting down and wrapping his legs around my arm. We observe a sense of togetherness as he opens his eyes to meet my gaze.

I am touched.

All around us, there is commotion and mayhem, an utter barrage of noise. Pandemonium reigns around us, but I am convinced it won't puncture our safe bubble of sweetness and soundness. The boy is just as calm as I am, reassuring me.

'Let me see you whole...' he thinks, and there is nothing I can do as he begins to shuffle backwards to my palm. Already I feel him sliding out of the reach of our safe bubble, and my arm emits an unsettling creak. It weakens steadily, significantly, something that would be an impossibility if my strength hadn't been sapped to a crisp by these cameras. I shake wildly, trembling, unable to gather the concentration I need to isolate my mind and body from this chaos. An intense blow of shock finally cracks my face open as a silent cry emerges from my heart, sending billows of exhausting emotion rippling away into my arm, down through my palms into my fingertips and into the boy, but it never reached them, for down on the ground, tainted amid havoc and confusion, lies my arm and the boy, clung to each other, shattered, inseparable.

My contorted eyes skit over a floating canvas, tracing a frenzied flurry of images on the overpowering white, my mind a glittering, dynamic, ethereal palette. My dazzled eyes clouding with whirling haze, I lose the canvas in the vortex of white and soon every bit of colour washes away, leaving it blank.

Enlightenment.

It is only when the last of me is drawn out into the unrelenting cameras that I realise my end was never near.

My clay body and the cameras, I realise, have granted me a separate identity as a timeless spirit.

I am everywhere, but not a Buddha. My gentle, reserved smile manifests into a wide grin. Emotion floods back to me. Buddhism, attaining Nirvana and enlightenment, is a pathway from life out of suffering, liberating us from... Life. Life inherently makes us suffer, makes us cold, hardened, stony. The path of Buddhism merely enlightens us.

Eternally.

Hollow is the Echo within my Shattered Heart

Maryknoll Convent School (Secondary Section), So, Audrey - 15

Empty lays the space beside me, for the one hundredth night in a row.

It's been such a long time, brother. Why haven't you returned?

He said he'd be back in eighty-four moons, so we held an honorary feast for him that night, in celebration of his feats. Our entire family was here, hoping for his return. I mean, who wouldn't want to witness the return of a war hero, who had trod through mountain and sea, valley and cave, to bring glory for our country?

Under the bright moonlight, we anxiously anticipated his return. For a while, nothing was heard aside from the games of the children. Then, in the distance, the sound of slow trotting was sent into my ears, growing louder and louder as the figures of some men on horses appeared. I looked past our parent's shoulders, heart racing at an astronomical speed, fuelling up the smile growing on my face. I raised my arm to wave eagerly at the men, calling out my brother's name.

Normally, he'd wave back, yet there was no receiver to my greeting, only a few heads hung low. Perhaps he was tired, or maybe even shy to see so many of our family gathered together for him. He was always the shy one amongst all our siblings, even though he was the second oldest after me, and the only boy in our generation. He may not have been the man our father expected him to be, but this breakthrough he made to prove him wrong most certainly left us all proud, especially me. Ours will be a family of honour now.

Being too absorbed in my pride for my brother, I failed to notice that the horses had already arrived by the gates of our family home. I didn't see the way our parents' faces twisted as they searched frantically through the few horses for him. I missed the part where the men took off their helmets, lowering their heads in sync at our family. I never saw them retrieving a pile of blood-stained, tattered armour from a bag on a horse, handing it back to our parents. Only when the loud impact of a crash was heard, bowls shattering, pots clanging against the floor did the proudness I held dissipate, shattering with the fragments on the floor.

"Grandmother!"

Mother's voice shot out from the crowd of family members. Pushing away everyone, she dashed towards grandmother's body, lying on the floor amongst the shattered fragments. Placing two fingers at her nape, she leaned against grandmother's chest, eyes wide in fear.

"Lian, come over here and help me carry grandmother into the house!"

Only just having recovered from the sudden happenings around me, I stared mindlessly at my mother for a few seconds before registering her command. I mouthed a small "okay", preparing to make my way over.

"What do you mean my son is dead!?" My father exclaimed from behind me, and all seemed to stop at once, glueing my feet to the ground.

My mother kept on calling for me, yet all her words seemed to muffle as the overwhelming sound of "dead" echoed throughout my ears, turning my body into paste. I turned around shakily, the scene of my father, eyes wide with disbelief, along with the rest of my family staring at the man at the gate came into my eyesight.

As I waddled my way over to my father, I heard my mother utter something along the lines of “useless daughter” as she called over my other sister to assist her. I stood unsteadily beside my father, my young sisters trailing after me.

“A cave collapsed, crushing a few of our men, sorry.”

Everything after those words were said are all but faded to me now, yet it’s all mashed into one gigantic ball of denial. My brother is a strong person, how could he have been crushed by a rockslide? He was just supposed to prove his worth to our father, not end up dead for it.

Days have gone by since we last heard of you, and in that time, grandmother has passed away as well, presumably from shock. Father and mother seem to have recovered quickly from the deaths of two of their loved ones, yet a strange, heightened sense of anger seems to radiate from them everyday.

Even now, thinking that my dear brother was dead is a pain. I know he’s gone, but how could I believe that without having seen the corpse for myself? The words said by those men on that night tug on my heart constantly, violently pulling on it, as if alerting me of its strangeness. Something about their tone just never sat right with me, yet I could never directly put my finger on it.

He might’ve been erroneously pronounced dead, there must be a truth being concealed from us.

Yet when I bring this up with our parents, father would say I’m disillusioned, and mother would say I’ve been possessed by a demon. They want me to get married to a man who can provide for our family, now that the only young man in the family is dead.

How could they have gotten over that tragedy already? Does their not heart ache for the loss of a son, whom they have worked hard to raise over the years? All I want to know is the truth, do they not want to know the truth? They never brought his body back, so there must be a chance that he is still alive, no matter how slim it is.

I can’t stand knowing that he may be out there, alone and abandoned by us. I can’t stand knowing that my brother, if dead, is not buried honourably, and his corpse is just out there rotting in the wind, being eaten by horrid animals. And for this I need to find him— no, I must find him.

Silently slipping out of my bed, I caught a glimpse of my parents sleeping peacefully across the room, the youngest sisters huddled on their bed and the older ones on another bed. Careful not to make any noise, I quickly yet softly tiptoed out the bedroom, gently closing the door behind me. The cave they claimed my brother died in was just 2 hours away from home if I walk. It was somewhat long, but it didn’t matter, all that did was the truth.

I ran along the path towards the cave, each thud of my footsteps bringing me closer to the truth. The night wind howls, sand and dirt blowing into my face. I recall running on the same path as a kid with my brother. Back then, life seemed much simpler, just two kids running to have fun in a cave.

Tears started to prick uncomfortably at the corners of my eyes, but there was nothing I could do about them aside from running towards the truth.

I hurriedly sprinted across the uneven roads, through sharp blades of grass and under long tree branches. My legs started to weaken from the wounds it sustained, especially as the cold night wind slashes bits of dirt and sand into them, but I could not stop, I had to make it to the cave they said he died in.

It’s strange, I think to myself as I fall on my knees, gazing at the cave entrance in front me. Last time I came here was when I was a child, playing with my brother. Yet now I’m here, as a grown adult, trying to piece the truth of the death of my brother together.

Mogao Caves, it seems we meet again.

As soon as I could stand, I leaned against the cave walls and hobbled my way through the passages in the cave, lantern in hand. Nostalgia accompanied with tears flooded through my mind, as the scene of my childhood playground came into sight. Even now, after so many years, I can still feel the excitement my young self felt as she hid within passages, waiting for her brother to find her.

I can still recall the time we made bracelets out of cloth I stole from our mother, slipping them on each other’s wrists, promising to never take them off. I pat my right wrist gently, feeling the shape of a bracelet on it. I held on to it tighter, in fear of losing more of him.

“Oh, that’s still here.” I muttered to myself, wiping away the blurriness in my eyes.

A painting on the wall, created by my brother and I years ago. Our parents stood smiling at the centre, with all of our siblings by their sides. It was a stupid tradition, coming here everytime father and mother had a new baby just to draw it on the wall, yet my brother persisted and now we’re here.

“Lian, run faster,” he would say. “We need to get back by sundown!”

“You run too fast, Liu!” I would reply while huffing like a dog in summer, “Why do you need to do that stupid tradition anyways, father and mother have children too much, can’t you just wait till they finish having children before drawing them all at once?”

“The caves are fun, Lian, and this is the perfect excuse to come back to play!”

Everytime, after he’d drawn our newest addition to the family, we’d play for hours, running through the caves, trying to catch each other at every turn. Our laughter echoing endlessly throughout the hallway, only ceasing when we’d collapse to the ground, exhausted from the fun.

Usually, we’d end up getting home late, for time seemed to go faster when we were having fun. Father would reprimand us, but to us, the fun was worth the scolding.

Perhaps I shouldn’t have complained so much when we went to the cave, or perhaps I should have ran faster on that journey. Maybe then I could have spent more time with my brother, maybe I would’ve treasured my time better then.

Wrapped up in my forgotten memories, I let my body wander off through the cave, moving about subconsciously. The cave around grew darker despite my lantern, and eventually I hit a dead end.

Hopeless about ever finding anything about my brother, I turned away from the cave wall to leave, yet when I took one step forward, the tip of my foot met something sharp. Directing the light from my lantern to the floor, I saw an unforgettable sight.

A pile of white powder-like dust, lying beneath a few shattered bones, laid out in the shape of a human body.

“Eek!” I squealed, stumbling backwards against the wall, away from the horrifying skeleton which laid before me. Why would a skeleton be here in the cave, especially one that is shattered...

My thoughts came to a halt, a dooming sense of realisation dawned upon me. Lips tightened and teeth clenched, I inched closer to the bones, kneeling down to find the missing key of any hint of identification for the corpse. Surrounding its left wrist was a simple cotton band, the same one I made for my brother in the caves years ago.

He’d never take it off... was this his end?

No, it can’t be, it couldn’t be. He was a noble man, how could he have suffered such a dishonourable end? I slammed the ground beneath me, peering into the darkness behind the skull’s eyes, as if hoping for a response.

It's empty eye sockets stare back at me, drilling deeply into my disillusioned soul, dissolving all the doubt I had surrounding my brother's inevitable death. As reality sets within my slowly collapsing world, a repressed string of tears begin pouring out of my soul.

He can't be dead, but the evidence says otherwise. Still crying my heart out, I grasped the thin bones of what remains of my brother's hand, hoping to feel the same warmth I felt from them all those years ago, yet what appeared in his right hand was not warmth, but a single, crumpled sheet of yellow tinted paper, its corners dry with dark coloured blood.

Recognising the penmanship on the paper, I frantically started to scan through every line closely, desperately hoping to reconnect with the dying spirit of my dearest sibling.

"Used as a scapegoat, I cannot believe it.

I thought we noble men of war were supposed to stick up for each other, protect each other like brothers, so why was I unanimously chosen to be everyone's scapegoat? Did they forget the importance of righteousness, in favour of wanting to survive? Was my life just a spare, an replaceable one at that? Or was it because I was in your way, protesting against sacrificing one of our brothers to the enemy for our safety, that you all decided to get rid of me?

Fair enough, I never meant much anyway.

I was always the shy one in my family, not manly enough to fit society's expectations. Unable to fend for myself and stand strong, I was always hiding behind someone, acting as a submissive follower, not one of leadership.

I have always been the failure of my family, so I knew I had to change.

This war we fought, I scrambled to sign up as a soldier. I thought that perhaps if I'd come out alive from it, I'll be considered a hero, one deserving of glory, and maybe then will my family finally acknowledge me and praise me for all I'm worth.

My family bearing wide smiles, happily welcoming me back into the warm, homily embrace of my home. My father patting me on the back, my mother wrapping me in a tight hug. All my young siblings cheering for me, Ah Lian telling me that I've grown. These scenes appear vividly before my sight, yet I suppose they will all remain a fantasy, now that I've practically been left to perish in this horrid cave.

It's funny, I used to call this cave my second home. Many precious childhood memories were birthed here, and now, it is the prison in which I will take my final breath. I would've loved to revisit the hallways Lian and I explored as children, maybe even catch a slight glimpse of our family painting, but I supposed that will never happen now, since my torturers crushed both of my legs.

It's strange, my legs might have been crushed and mauled into dust, my entire body might have been slashed relentlessly, yet all this suffering could barely compare to the pain in my heart. The disdain burning through my veins, repeatedly telling me that I'm worthless, that I've disappointed all of my family for letting myself be taken away by the enemy, essentially submitting to them.

Whatever, shut up. I'm going to die anyways, the thoughts of my family matter not to me now. They never cared when I was alive, why would they care if I died without bringing an inch of honour to them.

Ah, I suppose Lian would care though, she was there to raise me when our parents did not. My fondest memories were of her, of us just being children together. I've missed having such a supportive sibling behind me constantly.

I have no regrets, I've lived up to myself in my lifetime, and that's what's important. Yet I still wish I could've at least made Lian proud in my lifetime. Perhaps I already have, but with the person I was, I don't think I did.

Sorry, dear sister.

I—"

A smudge of blood on the last sentence ends the letter, yet my tears do not cease, they only flood out harder at the unsaid thoughts behind the letter.

He has always made me proud, how could his perception of his own self be so warped from reality? He never needed to prove anything to me, all that I wanted was for us to be there for each other until the bitter end.

"What did he ever do to warrant this tragic end!?" I screamed between sobs, at the sky that I could not reach nor see. "Why did we treat him this badly!?"

Blurred splotches of red appeared before my eyesight, scenes of our childhood danced within my vision. I could see the way he smiled at me as we drew the last sibling on the wall. I could see the misery in his eyes when our parents called him profanities, saying he was "unmanly". I could hear my past self telling him that it was just the way of our parents, never offering him true comfort and solace. I can now envision the betrayal of his brothers, who had fought together with him, their faces blank as a sheet as they sent a fellow comrade to their death. I can feel the pain my brother felt when his legs were crushed, not for the loss of his legs but for the honour he'll never bring to his family. I can understand the despair behind the crumpled paper in my hands, the betrayal eating him alive as he struggles to express his final thoughts.

We were all his betrayers, his murderers, whether we intended it or not.

I collapsed to the floor, flailing my arms around destructively, wanting the world to just shatter and fall upon me. But no matter how much I wish, the world around me will not stop, it continues to mock me as I lay shattered beside all that remains of my brother. Grasping the bones of his right hand, I turned to my side to face the death in front of me.

I can hear our child selves laughing at their games, lying down together in blissful exhaustion. Now, I hear my endless stream of sobs echoing through the room, us lying broken in despair.

Bloodstained is the hand that holds my brother's. In her unstable, mistaken mind, a killer she has become.

The Strength of a Blessing: A Ruminantion

Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Yuen, Leyan - 15

Perhaps, he thought, perhaps he could help.

Self-mummification was a growing phenomenon among bodhisattvas. Mountains of research scattered around his room, studies he'd kept safe from the others, almost a forbidden practice. Self-mummification would preserve a pure soul, a life of immortality waiting to be lived; a blessing from the Buddha all in itself.

There were plenty of meditation rooms at the Library Caves, he knew, and a wise premonition told him it would be a center of cultural ruin, defamation, and irreversible damage. It was all he knew to fix it.

Rays of silver reflected from the rough bamboo scrolls: an anomaly of unfulfilled prophecies he would yet to make. Its words were long etched into his mind, recitals held every minute of the day while he refused food and water, insisting the Buddha's blessing be sufficient for him to survive as long as he needed.

It was almost time now.

He was frail, cheekbones showing in place of his nutrition, and halfway dehydrated. His robe was loose, the knots needing to get tighter and tighter so it wouldn't fall off with a step of his feet.

His hands were shaking as he slathered cedar-brown clay onto his body. Stencils of seated Buddhas covered the room, he noticed, as he tried not to focus on the fact he was going to bury himself alive.

It would be worth it.

Asphyxiation was a more violent experience than he thought it would be. He held up the belt and looped it around his neck, careful not to touch any of the wet spots of clay that hadn't dried yet, breaking the crusting clay on his skin. Trembling fingers rested on top of his knees as he felt his throat constrict, dots creeping into his peripheral vision, blots of ink on a clean parchment.

He was trapped now.

“Go, go, go, let's go!”

He didn't know how long he'd been in the chamber. Decades, centuries of silence was now infiltrated by a blinding light of torches in calloused, scarred hands, teetering between a long lost savior or a final debilitating strike further into the dark.

Khaki coats flitted across the pathways, sharp rocks on the sides of the cave abrasive against poorly manufactured cotton. The shuffling of feet, and the distinctive metal clicks of a rifle loose from its holder.

People had long since grown out of a simple game of tug-of-war. A bitter yearning of conflict yet again, history repeating itself with the relentless manipulation of Father Time, a

snake's tail unable to escape from its own clutches. The Civil War was coming to an end, yet the proverbial phoenix would rise from the ashes eventually.

White, blue, red. White, blue, red.

They flocked into the caves and paid no mind to the damage caused, nor the lone statue watching from afar, hiding in plain sight. The worst of it hadn't started, but every scrape, every scratch, every bump was acerbic to its skin. Injury after injury built up, blood flowing into its lifeless veins and pulsing erratically each time they pushed through.

Then the hammers hit.

It was excruciating pain, it quickly learned, that smote its heart with lightning, its lungs constricting uncontrollably, but the faceless kept going. Fractures in the Mogao Caves, fractures in their wretched morality, with no care in the world, none for the sacrifices they left in the dust of its sanctuary.

In its head, scraps of silver cloth were ripped apart, fragments of light reflecting in every direction, almost mirrors, streaking its vision with blinding rays.

How could you do this?

It was a different sort of wreckage altogether when he finally awoke once again. This time it felt the pain of separation, the twisting in his stomach indicative of a void, lost forever and sucking the joy out of it like an insatiable black hole.

The man in front of him wore a large rucksack, carrying all sorts of mining and survival gear. The words “Warner, Langdon” were sewn onto the hem of his bag.

His eyes glittered with wonder as he stared at the room – or was it greed? – and at the murals, the statues, near-identical yet irreplaceable. A tentative unbuckling of his rucksack, as if one forceful movement would send the rocks tumbling over his head.

Each invaluable he removed, flesh peeled apart off of its crusted skin and left welts, bruises unseen by any outsider under the guise of mud left to dry for too long. Its eyes suffered a dull ache, a slight sting. Closing its eyes was not an option; it'd inadvertently chosen to learn the unadulterated truth as a trapped soul. Blood would be free-flowing if not for the fact it was dead.

Time warped around it as the man – Warner, Langdon – unraveled stone after stone, piece after piece, skin after skin. Searing pain set its body alight with a spark: certainly the most alive it'd felt in a while. For a moment, there was nothing but white, silver without the glamour, piercing its eardrums as torment was the only thing left.

It remained transfixed even when the tapping of footsteps faded into the distance. Accompanied by a cheerful whistle, a signal for success with no indication of awareness for the detritus Warner had impaled onto the lone corpse.

All he'd ever wanted was to prepare for the sake of humanity, preparing to protect all that he loved and all that he did not. That was all he knew how to do, what he persevered for when no one else could.

He wanted to appeal to the masses, be the voice of their light and guide them towards the right path.

The Buddha would no doubt be satisfied, he had thought. And he would be behind it, be the sacrificial lamb for the kindness in people's hearts.

Was I too late?

Tremors coursed through the statue. Yet, stubborn fingertips, wrinkled with age and long-awaited decay, still held onto a single silver thread of faith.

A gloved hand clasped onto a silver locket. Billows of smoke rose above the hills.

Excavating the cave was a risk, and he tried not to imagine what it would be like buried alive under merciless stone. He had no choice, a product of his circumstance; an empty, woolen coin pouch hanging from his trouser pocket was quite telling.

At least he had his locket with him.

He flipped it open in a practiced manner, and an old woman with her eyes half-closed in the ghost of a smile stood in the image. In her arms was his own youthful visage from when he'd graduated high school. Those were the good days -- once carefree, before the Lugou Bridge Incident.

It hadn't been long since the photo was taken, yet looking into the glass cover felt like an invasion of another timeline, an alternate world where innocence remained untouched.

The rest of the crew entered the cave in a lazy trudge under the bare sliver of 5-o'clock sunlight.

He knew full well the Mogao Caves were a historical wonder, plenty of murals and statues waiting to be found and recovered and reclaimed. Invading it like this made his heart sink.

This was pure conjecture, he told himself. There had to be a good reason why they were heading towards the dark.

A click on his helmet flickered a small light onto the rugged surface. The faint outline of his grease-smudged palms was dim under his nose if he squinted.

The grotto was a maze, each unsuspecting door a portal to worlds and dimensions and universes. A spark of familiarity struck in his mind, each neuron firing and colliding at a lost memory that wasn't his.

He'd reached the epicenter of his curiosity in the form of a small room. Fully painted, murals covered the walls and finally peaked at the roof, highlighted by a circle of triangles and lines. Under the dust he imagined the vibrancy of cobalt, vermilion, viridian.

Depictions of ancient figures were plastered across the walls and carried with their daily life with a certain resplendence like it was glowing, with happiness, in the downpour of cement. His gaze swept across these paintings and took in every detail, even the gritty textures that had resulted from the years and years of wearing off, revealing the sand and the stone underneath.

Oh, but it was a glimpse into what could have been.

'Hello?'

He couldn't have heard that.

'Hello,' it said again.

At the center of the room was the meditating statue of a monk, a haunting, troubled peace in its eyes. He stared.

"Who- What?" He raised his chisel in front of him, a trembling defense, a tentative leg forward.

The statue stared back at him, eyes wide and unblinking. Something captivating about those eyes held him in place and petrified him with a desperate plea. 'Please,' it said, and his grip on the chisel shifted imperceptibly, 'I don't have much time.'

It was the quivering croak in its voice that convinced him.

There he was now, suddenly in the position of a retired bodhisattva with a hard clay crust unrelentingly clinging, growing on his skin. Nothing budged when he tried to move, yet the view of the outside world was clear as day.

Was he dead?

The scene unfolding before him struck him with estranged familiarity as he was surrounded by yelling and khaki and red and blue and white. Flashes of different memories, completely different moments left him with a wide-eyed strain on his head, and suddenly he could feel so much.

Soldiers.

Lightning.

Warner, Langdon.

Unwilling betrayal.

A zephyr of time flurried past, leaving him in the aftermath, but he stood, immobilized against waves crashing onto the shore and fracturing the cliffs with a loud crack.

'You were the first.'

The old monk's voice grew sentimental, emotion unforgotten throughout the decades. It would smile if it could, but not without a desolate glint in its eyes.

The statement was a wisp of air drifting in his head. He was still stuck to the ground, his feet suddenly becoming heavier with the memories the monk had given him, one for the price of eternal agony.

Yet another unspoken, unanswered prayer hung in the air.

"I have to go," he sputtered, and the light flickered. He didn't dare look the monk in the eyes.

A pause. Suddenly he could move his legs again. 'I know,' the monk's voice echoed from the distance of a long tunnel - did he imagine a sob? - 'go, then, young one.'

It'd lost grip of the last filament, silver that lasted for centuries living the final moments of its waning. Now, he was ready.

Was it worth it?

No, no, it wasn't.

Trust, misplaced, gave the monk's lifeless silhouette a strange sheen where its eyes should be. The monk sat with copper palms meticulously placed, fingers pointed upwards, a fruitless attempt at finding its last salvation. A final, futile sacrifice to the Buddha.

It was its choice to end up like this, after all. It was idealistic once, aiming to redeem the good of humanity; silver threads delicately woven to form a cape, a symbol of heroism, fighting, fighting for the better.

It was until the light completely faded from the room that the excavator stopped walking.

A swirl of memories in his head, "please" and "I don't have much time" and "don't leave" brought to the forefront, memories that weren't his, that never meant to be his, he convinced himself.

There was a commotion outside the cave now, muffled yells reverberating in his ears. He knew they were looking for him. A stern telling-off he already knew would come out of his other ear.

Bile danced at the back of his throat.

The voices were getting closer as reality set in, yanking him from spiritual stupor, and he snapped his head towards the monk, finding no longer the bronze gleam.

Hands grabbed at him before he knew it, dragging him out of the cave. But he only had eyes for his own oasis, at the coruscating springs he went to think; at the neighborhood park, the tinkling of laughter he never scraped from the concrete; at the home he imagined his mother would be, knitting in her chair, a warm meal waiting for him on the kitchen table.

...The good of humanity. What's it to you?

The sun was too much for him now; he'd gotten accustomed to the dark. He stared blankly at the tattered miner in front of him.

"Can't believe you're alive," he heard, "Was finding you for days, your mother was so worried—"

You could make a run for it right now.

"I lied to the sergeant about searching for you and everything, we can't afford to lose more—"

What would you even do? How could you ever make it better?

"—people, you know how worked up Zhang always gets when new reinforcements arrive—"

You couldn't do it. You would never have the power to stop it.

"Hey, wait, are you—?"

That crippled him, hands falling in place onto his head as ones of similar contour did so many years ago, burdened with the light.

And in the corner of his eye, he saw a flash of silver.

Fading Footsteps

Pui Kiu College, Ngai, Ngo Nam Markus - 15

People die, kingdoms fall, aeon passes. All the traces that remain, are all written on an ancient paper, or a fragile pottery, so that their tales shall live on until the end of times.

Silky soft winds blew passed me, leaving a delicate trail of youthfulness on my rough skin. It's not everyday that the wind blows this gently, in the other days, the wind would have brought some pointed sand and scratches them all over my face. Though I do not have any complaints, it is already lucky enough that there is wind on this terrifically hot day. The sound of the delicate wind is covered by the creaking sound of the wheels on my cart and the sudden groans of my mule. The tea in my cart leaks a slightly bitter smell, but is quickly carried away by the gentle wind, it is a shame that I could not brew the tea and heal my dry throat, but the thought of brewing tea was quickly blown away with the wind when I thought of the money I could earn after successfully transporting tea to a nearby village.

There's still a long way to go. I patted my mule and gave him half an apple to keep him going. It's difficult to walk on a small sandy trail while pulling a cart filled with tea for days. The soft wind soon transformed into a cold breeze, the blazing sun soon turned into the lifeless moon. It's about time I find a shelter where I can pass the night, we'll have to go through dunes tomorrow, so it's best to settle down and have a good night's rest. While I was looking around to find a shelter, a peculiar rocky surface imprinted on the side of a hill caught my attention.

Upon further inspection, the rocky surface has a structure merged into it, layers upon layers of what seems to be an ancient pavilion-like structure, with an inviting grand entrance that has lost its original colour, its original glory. I did not have any second thoughts before deciding to settle there for the night. I tied the leash of my mule on a nearby fence post and walked inside the darkness of the mysterious structure.

I took out a lantern and lit the candle inside, the warm sensation had relieved me from the freezing night, and the darkness was slowly eaten away by the candle, revealing the bare details of the interior. There are hints of plantation on the cracks of the wall, and the dry dirt floor makes a crunchy sound every step I take, and the sound of water leaking from the rough stone ceiling, dripping on the dirt below can be heard rhythmically. It must have been centuries since the last person went in here. I walked further inside and found out that the structure, which turned out to be a cave of some sort, is arranged in chambers and chambers, almost like a lost dungeon.

Each chamber that I walked into, there's potteries with diminished patterns laying on the floor. They were indistinguishable from the dirt they sit on, some with a large amount of dust and mold, some with cobwebs and moss, some are shattered, all their sharp pieces scattered across all four corners of the room. There seems to be words and pictures imprinted on the pottery, and some even were carved onto the walls, but I could not comprehend the meaning of them. Intrigued, I kept on walking from chambers to chambers, hoping to locate something valuable I could sell.

It was bright, sharp light rays piercing my pupils. I got up from the ground, picking up my wooden staff in an instant and faced my enemy once again. “Remember, you need to keep your balance when striking.” A young lady holding a bamboo stick reminded me, “It will be the end of you if you trip and fall during a battle.” I tighten my grip on my wooden staff, the sunlight is blinding, but I ignored my disadvantage and got ready for another attack. I dashed towards her, and swung my wooden staff with force towards her, but she blocked my attack. I instead aimed for her legs and swung, but my attack was once again repelled. The blinding sunlight had caused me to lose vision of her, and I had no choice but to swing fiercely at her general direction, but none of my attacks had managed to hit anything. Then out of nowhere, I felt a sharp pain on my chest, as if something had struck me, causing me to lose balance and fall onto the ground once more. “You performed better this time, but you’re still no match for a bandit if you meet one in the wild.” She held out her hand to me, “Thank you, Fei” I said, as I reached out to grab her hand.” She pulled me up and said “You should go now, you know you can’t be seen training with me. A monk like you aren’t supposed to learn things like this, and I shouldn’t either.” I picked up my wooden staff, then waved goodbye to her and left. For a monk, I’m rather curious, and I always wanted to explore the world around me.

As I walked out to the bustling street of Khotan, my eyes swept across the shops to see if anything caught my eyes. “Hey old pal,” a familiar voice called out to me from the town gates, “are you going back to the Grottoes?” I turned my head to find a town guard speaking to me, he was an old friend of whom I used to play with when I was younger. “Hey Xing. I was about to, though I have not found anything worthwhile to write about.” He chuckled in a mocking way, and said “Oh I bet you’ve traveled through the seven seas and the whole world is just so boring for you. Just look around while you’re strolling back, and you may just find something that interests you.” “Yeah, yeah.”

I hate to admit it, but he was right. I’ve never seen this flower before, so I quickly tried memorising its appearance and its distinctive smell, then strolled back to my original destination. There it is, with all its glory, the Mogao Grottoes. The sharp, distinctive colours are in total contrast to the dull rocks it’s mounted to, just like a gem hidden in a geode. I walked towards the entrance in awe, even though I have travelled here constantly, I still admire its beauty every time. I greeted the monks standing guard on both sides of the entrance and walked in. Sculptures and poems laying on podiums in the entrance chamber had my gaze gravitated towards their beauty. After walking through a few chambers and admiring the delicately carved pottery on display, I’ve reached the library of the caves. As I sat on the ground, I took some blank scrolls out, I gently dipped my quill into the ink jar and started writing on it. I tried my hardest to recall every nook and cranny of the unknown flower I had encountered on my way and documented it into the scroll. After I was satisfied with the documentation I made, I handed the scrolls to the library keeper and once again left to explore more of the vast outside world.

I couldn’t find anything valuable, but at least I still have shelter. I sighed, as I continued walking deeper into the ruins. I came across a barricaded door, which looked very old and fragile, I grabbed onto the wooden barricade and pulled, and it fell off without me breaking a sweat. The room of which it had covered was very different from all the chambers I have been in. Usually, a chamber is small, with cobwebs and shattered pottery all over the dirt floor. This one however, was much larger, and it almost seemed more organized and cleaner compared to the messiness of the other chambers.

After sneezing a few times due to the dust that was unveiled when I entered the room, I walked around and saw rows of bookshelves, and most of them were filled with books and scrolls. It almost seemed like it was supposed to be a library. I picked up a scroll laying on the wooden ground, the ink was fading, but I could still somehow make out the intended words. “A newly discovered flower: Orchid.” I flipped through the scrolls and on the last page, I saw “Written in the Buddhist year 1550”, which roughly translates to the year 1006 AD, and it’s now almost the 1900s. So this library goes a long way back.

I walked around the entire library to make sure there were no threats present, and decided to spend the rest of the night in the library. I took out some books and laid them onto the cold and dusty wooden floor, then laid on top of them. The hard book covers are far from comfortable to sleep on, but at least it’s better than sleeping on dirt. Out of curiosity, I grabbed one of the books and took a look at it, “The fall of the Khotan Kingdom”. I flipped through it and found out most of the pages were empty, and the handwriting on the first few pages were difficult to identify. Perhaps whoever was writing this was in a rush?

It was a beautiful sunset. I brought Fei with me to the Mogao Grottoes, even a person as serious as she was, I still noticed her eyes opening wider than before when she saw the entrance. “Say, I’ve heard that the guards in our hometown were training for war.” She told me while we were walking inside the caves. “Why would they start training all of the sudden?” I was confused on why she brought that up. “There were rumors of war. A great invasion of our hometown.” My facial expression did not move even the slightest, and I said with confidence “Then the Khotan Kingdom shall repel that invasion like we always have.” Fei sighed, and we fell silent for the rest of the walk.

I sat down onto the floor, back leaned against the wall while holding an empty ink jar and a drained quill. The library had an especially lively figure this day. Staring off in the distance, small and young monks chased each other around bookshelves in light steps, chuckling and laughing in delight. While heavy scrolls and books lie against each other on top of bookshelves, bearing the hefty sensation of noblesse. I turned my attention to a blank scroll, I fumbled with it, while thinking about what I should write. Fei could see through my thoughts like an open book, and suggested “Perhaps we should go for a scroll in Khotan and you may be able to get some inspiration.”

The streets of Khotan are as bustling as ever. At night, you could see lanterns hanging from the houses, like fireflies hovering over the sea of people, and every single one of them looked ever so lively. The sound of price bargaining, chattering and laughing has become music to my ears. I’ve never realized how much the world is revolving round and round behind your back, but from the sheer sight of everyone present, it’s easy to imagine that everyone has their own story. The moon hangs high in the sky, while I struggle to fight my tiredness. “Rare to see you wandering around so late.” said a familiar voice, which turned out to be Xing, the city guard. “It’s dangerous to go back to the Grottoes this late, it’ll be bad if you encounter bandits. How about staying the night in my house?” My mood brightened as I saw an old friend, and I accepted his generous offer. I waved Fei goodbye and watched as her silhouette blends into the crowd like water dripping into the ocean. I followed Xing to his home and spent the night there. I laid onto his wool mattress and my consciousness slowly drifted away.

My back hurts a little lying on the books I used as bedsheets, but I didn't mind. It was really quiet, like the silence before the storm. I glared at the ceiling, its cracked surface served as its record of surviving through the years. As I looked at the corner of the room, a dim glow caught my attention. It was a shattered wine cup, with jewels which had lost their true colours etched onto the sides. I sighed, and proceed to lay down and close my eyes.

It was dark, blinding blackness crawled into my eyes. Muffled sound was filling my ears, but I couldn't quite make out what it was. I opened my eyes, the darkness in the room remained, it was still midnight. I got up to my feet and walked towards the front door. All of a sudden, two armed men barged into the house, they were equipped with spears. I dodged out of their sights and into the shadows under the dining table. I held my breath as footsteps echoed around the room, until the ominous invaders' polished, bloodstained armoured legs halted right beside me. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I noticed the unfamiliar badges attached to their armours. In an instant, a spear impaled through the table and barely scratched my left ears, I held back my urge to scream and watched as the spear was extracted. The invaders spoke to each other in a foreign language, and silent followed. Momentarily, they turned around and left through the busted front door. I halted and observed the front door, making sure that the invaders are not returning, then crawled out from under the table.

In shock, I quickly ran out the front door, and a horrifying sight had unfolded. It was still midnight, but the whole town was brighter than the blazing sun. A sea of flames had engulfed the entirety of the kingdom. On the streets, there were nothing but soldiers laying on the floor, lifeless. In the distance, a few townsfolk were being hunted down by enemy soldiers. The subtle crackling noise of fire burning was overwhelmed by the united sound of soldiers yelling an unfamiliar army motto, with unseen flags waving blocking the view of the night sky. Terrified screaming can be heard from a distance. I dashed back into Xing's house, attempting to find him, but soon noticed a small, sliced open note laying on the spear-impaled table. I pieced the fragments of the notes together and make out the words. It reads "Morning pal, the army ordered us town guards for some urgent business while you were asleep, I heard some outsiders were causing trouble. Anyways, I've prepared some food on the table for you in case I am not back when you wake up." My heart skipped a beat when reading the scroll. I had to find Fei.

As I dashed out into the dead-air filled street, and quickly navigated towards her house, while staying out of the enemy's sight. When I arrived at her house, the only thing that greeted me was ashes. They kept on blowing past me from Fei's once called house, now an inferno. My heart sank as I saw Fei's only shoes were left in front of the front door, untouched after last night. I was devastated, yet I could not bring myself to tear up. I had no choice but to leave them behind, I had to warn the other monks of the horrifying news.

I sprinted and sprinted, without looking back, nor did I look around and see if I caught any attention, I just kept on running, out of my once called home. I could not bring myself to imagine what had happened to all the lively people I had seen just yesterday, living out their normal lives. After what seemed to be aeons, I had gone far enough from the kingdom to hear silence once more. I looked back, the distant kingdom had become ashes, no sign of glory, no sign of legacies, only ashes.

I let out my breath of relief when I saw nothing had happened to the Mogao Grottoes. There were still guards standing outside of the entrance, unaware of the storm that was

coming. I spread the news of the collapse of the Khotan Kingdom, and everyone did not believe me until they went outside and saw it with their own eyes. We had to leave before the storm arrived eventually, which meant we had to leave it all behind. We have decided to barricade the library and so the records of Khotan and all of us could live on. As they were doing the hard work, I sat down once more and wrote a short record of the fall of Khotan. Not long after, we had to hope for the best and leave them behind. I looked back at the Mogao Caves and its fading glory, hiding away in the shell, and looked in front to find a new home.

I woke up from a long slumber. As I slowly walked back out the ruins, I glanced at the remaining artifacts, unscathed or in pieces. Perhaps all of them contains tales from the past, containing all the joys and all the despair. As time passes on, their tales loses colours and were buried by layers and layers of dirt and cobwebs, losing any traces for their existences along with the passage of time, like a grain of sand sinking into the desert, merging together until they are lost and forgotten. Perhaps that was the cruel fate of history. I casted my thoughts aside as I left the Mogao Grottoes behind and ventured off into the dunes.

Beauty Beyond The Art

St. Paul's Co-educational College, Wong, Cheuk Chi Cherry - 15

They held a secret for 1656 years, waiting to be discovered.
It was a long wait. And a long story.

Part I: The Spirit

1900 A.D.

I screamed in anguish. We all did. Callous elements!– The wind cut through our fragile skeletal bodies, diminishing our white auras; the floods drowned our souls and suffocated us; the forest fires – our greatest fear – trapped us amidst murky smoke, blinding us, and the sparks of fire sizzled our throats, the crackling of the fires burning our mentalities away – it was horrible.

Elements were the only thing that could harm us, yet they hurt us hard. We had been human, after all. Humans were always vulnerable, down to the soul, even after death.

We checked each other. Most of us were recovering from the blizzard that occurred the week before. And mourning.

It was a complete whiteout. The caves were entirely enveloped in snow. The temperature dropped to negative. The snow piled up against the entrance, a thick heap of bony white, too thick for any spirit to see through – we wouldn't risk floating through – the possibilities of getting stuck within the snow were too high – besides, even if we left the caves, there would be a wintry snowstorm out there, waiting to engulf us – and we would be like pigs for slaughter, sliced through a million times until we...

Dismantled. That's the word. The demise of the soul.

So we allowed ourselves to be locked inside the caves with no air. Couldn't hurt, we thought at first. Spirits did not need to breathe. But our skeletal structures turned increasingly transparent with the cold. It wasn't long before it was reported that a spirit from the adjacent cave – cave 16 – had fallen apart.

Dismantlement was always horrifying to watch. The cruelest death of all.

As a human, even when you knew you were going to die, you would still have hope. Some tiny bits of hope, from all the religions and fiction inculcated into you during your life, that death was not the end of all. You could dream and imagine what lay beyond.

And yet the demise of the soul is the denotative meaning of finality. The body has worn out, and now it's the soul's turn. The skeletal structure of the spirit becoming too thin, too diminished, too colorless, too trivial to support its existence. And the day comes when the mists of the spirit split apart and diverge, fading into dust. The spirit will never reach enlightenment. The end of all. Endgame. It is ended by the nature of the world. It has lost, and the end dominates it despite its unwillingness to go with it. The darkness encases it, but it can do nothing.

This was never supposed to happen. As spirits, we were supposed to reincarnate and relive until we became enlightened. It was the way of Buddhism.

We thought everything would be good after the intervention of Yuezun the Great and the Thousand Buddhas in 366 A.D, with the gateway secured and tied down. But reincarnation stopped again eventually.

We found the reason here.

The gateway was gone.

All of a sudden a high-pitched squeal pierced through the air.

Cave 16.

I hesitated, wondering whether I should intervene.

No, don't go. Another spirit caught me. *You can't fight the murals.*

I looked through the crack in the wall at cave 16 and glowed in despair.

We should never have come to the Mogao Grottoes.

Part II: The Mogao Caves

You once adorned us with murals of the utmost elaborateness that depicted the tales of Buddhism, filling us up with sculptures of worship, scrolls of literature, and textile embroideries, and we were honored as the natural beauties of Buddhism. We served faithfully as shrines for meditation, worshipping, and pilgrimage, protecting the sacred art and intersecting cultures along the Silk Road with our bodies throughout decades. You enthralled us with your capability of the infinite creation of beauty. We were proud of you.

We reached the apex during the dynasty you called 'Tang'. The female empress handed down the edict to construct two of the largest Buddha statues within us – amazingly exquisite, ornamented with patterns, gleaming with golden glory –

It was our climax. Our last triumph before the downfall.

The Silk Road fell into decline as you all resorted to the sea routes for trading. We were forgotten entirely. You dumped us out of your lives like huge chunks of toys you have finished playing with.

The scorching sand poured into our mouths day after day, choking our throats and burying us. The wind was brutal with us, eroding our faces and planting holes in our bodies. Acid rain melted right into us, peeling off our skin as we stayed put, agonized. Our jaggy structures dissolved over time. We mustered all our strength to keep ourselves from collapsing, always believing that you would come back for us one day.

You did not.

We started collapsing.

Stressed from spirit to body. Drained of vigor and energy.

We collapsed, one by one. The ones left were heavily bruised. There was only one thing they could do to survive.

1600 A.D.

Chang Jia ventured into the Mogao Caves, instantly amazed by the delicate murals portraying Buddhism. But there was something eerie about its beauty.

The caves grew dimmer as he trekked further. Specks of dust covered the ground. Cavities came into view. The wind howled softly, sweeping through the holes of the eroded walls. His head ached. Maybe it was the cold. When was the last time someone visited the place? He held his hand out and the murals seemed to glow... with life.

A low moaning sound rang out and Chang Jia spun around. 'Who's there?'

More moaning. The sounds grew louder, echoing around him, a series of elongated groans. Then someone – no, something – wept. It seemed very close.

Chang Jia examined the murals carefully.

The images were moving.

Terrified, he sprinted back the way he came, only to find more cavities, and more eroded walls – everything looked the same, more murals and more paintings, where was the light, the outside world he had come from – his head ached more, and more-

The ground opened up beneath him.

Spirits of the dead.
Humans of greed.
We will not forgive. Any of you.

Part III: Wang Yuanlu

1900 A.D.

Come to us, Wang.

The Mogao Grottoes.

I could hear them.

They called to me.

I thought I was hallucinating at first, but as I drew closer to the Caves, the sounds amplified from a group of whispers into a noisy series of howls that thundered into my eardrums – the Caves, they were lonely, they were livid, why, why, why-

Something snapped in me and I fell unconscious.

The spirits of the dead blared at me-

Help us reincarnate!-

Find the gateway!-

Restore the caves!-

Help us!-

Human-shaped paranormal misty creatures with white auras covered in horror, staring at me with petrified looks – then I realized they were not staring at me – I looked behind me to see a crack in a cave wall, disclosing an adjacent cave in which the cave murals shimmered with color as they began to... consume.

A misty creature was lying on the ground, its aura reducing rapidly as its white light was absorbed by the murals. It shivered and let out an inhumane shriek-

An eruption occurred and the creature burst into fragments. The world was clouded with white mist before it all evaporated in an instant, leaving nothing but dust and grime.

I sat up. Trembling, I held my hand up to my face. It burned with heat. Beads of sweat rolled down my forehead.

A dream.

I turned to leave.

A blockade stood before me. I swiveled around to see another blockade in front of me. The blockades inched closer. The dusty cave creaked with cacophonous sounds.

The cave was moving?...

‘Calm down!’ I shouted.

The blockades stopped moving. It was official; the Caves were alive...

Restore us! The Caves demanded.

‘Fine!’ I yielded. But what if the dream was real...

‘On one condition: Promise that you’ll make the murals back off!’

The Caves did not speak.

I made the fair assumption that my spirit would not get consumed.

Part IV: Narrator

Once upon a time, the gateway to the world of reincarnation moved arbitrarily across China, abstract, torn between universes, and new souls that arose from their human corpses could only chase after the gateway helplessly. It became impossible to reach the gateway. The spirits of the dead could only hover around China while tied down by karma. The excruciation was overwhelming. Reincarnation was impossible.

Yuezun was born gifted with the ability to hear the spirits. They cried. And cried. Day and night. Grousing and screeching and yowling and crying.

He had to help them. He let the Buddhas guide him.

Dunhuang.

Peerless place. And what to do there?

Build the Mogaoku.

For thousands of years, the Mogao Caves dutifully bound the gateway. It was first contained within the first cave erected. As more caves were built the gateway moved across them, but never beyond. The spirits were finally able to locate the gateway amongst the caves, guided by the movement and flow of the mural images which illustrated the way to the gateway, and enter the stage of reincarnation.

Yet as the Silk Road became inactive, the caves were forgotten by humans, and they began to wear away. The elements punched through the caves relentlessly. One by one the caves collapsed, their impact cracking open the doors of other caves, one cave in particular, long before it was even discovered-

And the gateway slipped free of the Mogao Grottoes.

The Caves were enraged. Their mandate made no sense anymore. Reincarnation was once again disrupted. And they themselves were dying, both physically and spiritually, with the lack of preservation and attention. The coming of Wang Yuanlu, another rare human born with the same gift as Yuezun gave them hope, and they thought they would be saved. But Wang couldn’t. He simply restored the Caves at their demand. Never did he listen close enough to the spirits’ sufferings. Never did the gateway touch his mind again. Never could he understand.

He was just the second.

The third had to be better.

Part V: Ka Han

2022, London

‘The Diamond Sutra discovered back in 1900 in the Mogao Grottoes of Dunhuang, China is reported to be stolen from the British Library...’

I ran at full speed into the library piazza as the guards scurried after me in hot pursuit, the legendary piece of work I’d taken bumping against my back in the interiors of my backpack.

All of a sudden, a row of guards popped up from behind the shrubs lined around the piazza around ten feet in front of me, blocking my way. I pulled my hood down a bit to shade my face in the dark. Lunging forward, I jumped two stories high and sprang up a column. The guards bellowed, astounded.

I melted into the dark and flew with the wind.

The cycle of reincarnation has stopped for too long.

I couldn’t let them wait any longer.

1035 A.D.

'The Tanguts are coming!'

'Ka Han, we must go!' Bo Shan urged.

'But the manuscripts! And the Sutra! What if the Tanguts destroy them with the caves!

And the gateway! If the caves are destroyed the gateway will be free!'

'Ka, for the twenty-first time there's no gateway, now let's leave!'

'You go first! You'll never understand!' I yelled back, rushing into the caves.

To find the gateway you had to follow the murals.

Holding out my hand against the murals, I closed my eyes and a vision dominated my mind. The murals on my left were moving, swirling with colors, a mix of diverse cultures. There was no time to examine the beauty. I swept my hand across the murals as I headed left, the images continuing their moving illustrations. I made a few more turns.

The scattered caches of manuscripts. The stacks of paintings. The sculptures.

The Sutra.

Cave 16. The images froze. I opened my eyes. I had reached my destination.

All of a sudden the walls of the cave began to move. I looked on in admiration as the Caves worked busily. A stretched block of rock in the shape of the door cut itself out of the wall, shifting aside to reveal a small, concealed chamber. Oh wow. Immediately I chucked everything into the cave.

A small hiss arose from behind me. I felt a swell of relief as the cave lit up with light, signifying the presence of the gateway. It was here. The murals were accurate, thank the Buddhas.

For a moment I was very still. Then I rolled out of the chamber and the door sealed into the wall, locking the gateway inside.

This really was necessary. Even if the Tanguts decided to destroy every cave they saw, they wouldn't find the chamber.

A hidden library of Buddhism. And a gateway to reincarnation. What a fascinating trove of treasures.

'Thank you. I'll come back later!' I called to the caves and jogged out.

Since my first sight of the Mogao Grottoes, I knew they were different. I wasn't sure how, but I just knew. Then wherever the murals moved, I began to sense the gateway's existence.

And I finally understood where my intuition came from.

Secrets were not that hard to see; you just had to understand.

I strode out into broad sunlight to see Bo Shan waving at me a couple of meters away.

I rubbed my eyes and ran towards him. Just then a Tangut soldier dived out of the sand right behind Bo Shan and raised his sword.

Gasping in panic, I leaped forward just in time.

The blade cut my throat.

Part VI: Ka Han

2020, The Motto Grottoes

Ka Han. *We know what you have become.* The Caves bellowed.

'The damned, the undead, whatever you want to name me. On the bright side, as part of the dead, I am finally able to talk to and help you all. I can hear spirits as well. Benefits outweigh drawbacks.' I said boldly.

We remembered you as a charming girl who dreamily talked to caves. And look at you now-

'In my 987 years as a vampire, I spent 900 years holed up in the West adapting to sunlight and the last 87 reintegrating into the society-'

Outrageous!

'I did not drink anyone's blood. Instead of trying to accuse me why don't you look at yourselves! Your mandate! To protect the Buddhism artwork and contain the gateway-'

Don't – mention – the word!

'Grow out of it! Just because the gateway escaped doesn't mean you need to act sullen and everything-'

We were abandoned by humans for centuries! Crushed by the elements! Our bodies, torn to pieces! Do you know how many of us collapsed-

'And that gives you the right to absorb the spirits of the living? Chang Jia? I did my research before I decided to come back here! And the spirits of the dead? Instead of encouraging them to find the gateway out in China, you lured them in here! You let the murals feed on their spirits to maintain their colors! I heard cave 16 was a hotspot-'

For survival-

'Wang Yuanlu has been restoring you all since the 1900s. Yet you continued to exploit the spirits of the dead, if not the living!'

The gateway is still missing!

'Mogaoku! What's the point of your mandate of containing the gateway?'

Reincarnation-

'For whom?'

The Caves fell silent.

They understood.

Sighing, I took the Diamond Sutra out of my backpack. 'With the gateway out in China, it'll be much more difficult to track it down. But family tracks family.'

How are the Sutra and the gateway related?

'They both cut through the world.'

Silence again. They didn't understand. It was fine. They could think about it.

I had one more surprise for the Caves.

I took a deep breath. 'But I won't bring the gateway back, Mogaoku. I'm going to destroy it.'

What are you playing at!

'It's time to reform reincarnation. Why can't reincarnation be more straightforward? Why do we need a gateway anyway?'

Ka Han... The Caves sounded desperate. *The gateway is said to be created by the Buddhas themselves. You'll risk your life destroying it.*

I had thought of that before.

And yet... no human could feel or track it, and the spirits were enervated by the murals.

It had to be me.

'I never intended to come back alive. I came here to say goodbye, Mogaoku. Remember your other mandate. Keep the artwork and murals well. They may not be used for finding the gateway anymore, but beauty is never there for nothing. Otherwise it's not beauty.'

Why are you doing all this, Ka Han?

For the greater good.

Epilogue: Narrator

Once upon a time, the gateway to the world of reincarnation moved arbitrarily across China, abstract, torn between universes, and new souls that arose from their human corpses could only chase after the gateway helplessly. Reincarnation was impossible.

But one day the gateway was destroyed. Reincarnation was changed entirely into what it was nowadays. The spirits of the dead were able to go straight into their new bodies. They could be here leaving a new corpse while simultaneously entering the body complex of their new life form. A reform in Buddhism. The spirits were saved.

It was said at the spot where the gateway was destroyed the police found the stolen Diamond Sutra, tucked safely inside a backpack that sat in the middle of a pool of crimson blood.

The Caves had one more secret.
 Their greatest secret of all.
 The gateway did not just lead to reincarnation.
 It led to one more place, hidden to all but those worthy.
 Nirvana.
Ka Han.
Speak to us.

Beyond Faith

The British International School Shanghai, Puxi Campus, Chen, Yu Chi Charlotte - 14

Dunes. Sandy, mysterious, and constantly shapeshifting. Some days, I would sit on the steps of the Mogao caves, mesmerized by them, watching a delicate dance of fleeting glory. They seemingly appeared out of nowhere, shaped by the harsh winds, then slowly vanishing back to the ethers from whence they came. Sometimes I wondered if we were all like those shapeless dunes: existing, fading and finally reincarnating back into the world, carrying a past in those sand particles.

But a past filled with what? Regret? Mistakes? Unrealized dreams? Did our existence hold any meaning if not to live out karmic lessons bestowed upon us by the heavens? Perhaps the sun was getting to me today. My mind often wandered far when unattended.

It was time for me to return to my duties, I thought. The caves weren't going to clean themselves. I took another look at the ever-changing dunes and started back towards the cave entrance. My tattered robes dragged behind my feet. I was still reeling from the sin I had committed, and as I walked, I felt the sand beneath my feet berate me, harshly. But still I held my prayer beads with I hope.

The cave's shadows embraced me, and a sense of chill crawled up my spine. As did my betrayal, I thought to myself. Following the meandering path, I arrived at one of the most prized chambers in the cave. The colourful drawings carved out stories that had been foretold a million times before. Among the stories of the past stood eternity in the form of a statue of Buddha. The crinkle in the corner of his stone eye gleamed with benevolence, while his eyes, filled with mirth, glanced upon me. His smile seen a thousand times graced my furrowed brows. Lighting the incense, I let the calming scent fill the cave with a sense of serenity. I kneeled upon the thin cotton mat, seeking redemption.

"Buddha," I whispered inside my head, calloused hands pressed together and head in a deep bow. "What is my purpose? How shall I redeem myself? Please lead me back onto the correct path," I begged. In the darkness with eyes closed, I felt the silence around me hum and murmur. It was unbearable. I bowed my head three times, and finally stood up, the gentle rustle of my flimsy cotton robes unsettling the silence.

What fate shall befall me? I awaited an answer.

Taking my broom made of coarse straw, I swept the cave floor. The debris gathered in a small trembling bundle before they were separated, like lost leaves floating away on the breeze. Battling the work of humans was easier than battling that of time and nature. Gradually, time wins, carving its footprints everywhere, I thought, with an underlying murderous intent in the wind. Time takes its toll, and with mighty thumps, they collapse to the ground in heaps of weeping sand, I said to myself. It was how nature brandished her own weapons.

Being alone in the sandy desert made me contemplate everything I knew about life. When I thought of nature being a brazen, ruthless equalizer, I believed that even she wasn't the most dangerous aspect of life. I believed it was the human heart.

When I was a young monk, I had come across these caves by accident. The journey was much more challenging than I thought as my food and water supply were running low. On one chilly night, I realized that I was lost. Falling into despair, I slept under the embrace of three large boulders, shaped like a crescent, which casted a long shadow from the alabaster moonlight.

The next morning, I woke up with a dry throat and a gritty taste in my mouth. The heat from the blazing sun had a great effect on me, and within a few hours, I was suffering under its heated gaze. My vision was hazy with occasional black spots tainting the edges of my vision. Under the effects of the blinding sun, I had a thought: I was enduring a test from Buddha. The supreme being was teaching me a lesson: one of anguish and one of normality. I accepted the lesson with open arms, and soon collapsed in the sand. It was soft and welcoming, filled with warmth. I lifted my eyes to the sky in an attempt to spot Buddha. However, there were only stark white clouds above me. I closed my eyes.

Without warning, a vision appeared from the sand dunes. The magnificent upper body of Buddha sat gently in front of me, his wise eyes gazing down on me with kindness.

Lifting a finger, he pointed in a certain direction, and suddenly, a large rock burst forth from the sand. It shook the ground around me, and as sand flowed out from the gaps and hollows, I realized that it was a mountain, with hollows that were tinted with wonderful colours. More seemed to emerge, as sand filtered out of the caves, like a stunning waterfall of golden light.

Alas, the land stopped shaking. I was a mess of tears and shock. Rubbing my eyes, I looked forward; yet there was no Buddha, only the magnificent caves fully intact. I ventured in and discovered a closed room, containing precious relics and ancient artifacts from centuries ago.

I found shelter in the caves until I was ready to move on. Miraculously, the town centre of Dunhuang was close, and within a few hours, I had found the temple.

I excitedly told the masters about the cave, and led them there. They all fell into a gasping bundle of disbelief, saying that it was ‘a gift from Buddha,’ and left me to manage it.

A few years had passed and the caves started to become an excellent site for meditation, as various monks reported to have almost ethereal realizations there. The increase in numbers, however, caused my supplies to diminish quickly, and when I sought help from the masters in the temple, there was no response. Soon enough, I became very poor. I had thought about selling the relics in the secret room, but doing so made a heavy dollop of guilt coat my heart.

Then one day, a foreigner named Aurel Stein came to the caves, mesmerized by the artifacts there. He came from the Silk Road to trade and had heard of the wonderful things offered in the caves. He offered an extremely low price for the items, yet I was hesitant. I had asked for a higher price, but he had declined, saying that there was no one who would propose a higher price and I’d be lucky to take him up on his offer.

“Judging from your condition right now,” he said with a heavy accent, “you seem to be in need of money and support.” His lips stretched into a sly smile. “Would you reconsider taking my offer? It would be beneficial for the both of us.” Something clicked in my heart, and a sense of defiance and bravery overtook me. We completed the deal.

Watching Stein load the camels with bags of ancient relics, my body felt numb. It was as if each artifact carried with it a spirit. It was the spirit of Buddha in its many incarnated forms. They didn’t want to leave this place. It was their home after all. And me? I sold them at the first opportunity I had, my selfish human heart forgetting my promise to the holy one. I realized then what sin I had made. It was my greatest offence for which I had no defence.

The empty cave seemed to fill me with loneliness, creating an infinite echo of guilt. The sound of wailing spirits and the memory of the scornful gazes of the monks pierced my heart: I did not deserve the kindness and acceptance of Buddha. Still, my faith clung to me. I knew there was a reason for this.

A gentle tapping interrupted my reverie. It was a cotton shoe, the soles thumping against the rock. I raised my broom in alarm, afraid that it was a thief likely thinking it was easy to steal precious artifacts from a cave guarded by a weak monk. I was quite relieved to find that, instead of a burly thief, it was a young monk, naive and faithful to Buddha. He wore light grey robes with a white undercoat, and a pair of black cotton shoes that were dirty and muddy. In his brown eyes, I seemed to find my old self: a young monk with no greed nor sin on his mind.

“Welcome,” I said, voice harsh and dry. I hadn’t seen another person for a very long time, and the company of the young monk gave me immense joy. I gave him a light smile, in an attempt to make him feel comfortable. “I am the guardian of these caves,” I said, putting my hands together in a praying position in front of my chest. My heart clenched and it thumped unbearably in my chest. My bowed form, I imagined, was now vulnerable to any criticism or disrespect. I could feel the curious stare of the young monk, yet I could not sense his intentions. I was only a few inches taller than him, though his proud stance seemed to tower over my slumped body.

Quite hurriedly, the young monk returned my gesture. With a respectful and almost relieved smile he said, “Master Wang, is it? May Buddha shine on your whole family and pray to accompany you forever. Thank you for accepting me, master!” The sound of his voice was crisp and filled with youth – the promise of better days.

“My utmost gratitude for your blessing, child. How did you know my name?” I said, with an uncertain smile.

“Ah...,” the young monk seemed to realize his own mistake. “I-it was just a simple guess!” His gentle laugh, filled with faultless innocence, convinced me. A silence hung in the cave for a few moments before the young monk spoke again. “My name, which was given to me by Master Wu, is Ming Jing.” A heart as clear as a stainless mirror, I thought to myself. “I’ve heard about these caves a lot,” Ming Jing continued, “My master said that these caves are calming and silent, and if one meditates here they will gain more knowledge, as if they could arise from mundane thoughts! I should thank you once again, master. I never thought I could experience such intelligence in this world!” The young monk’s eyes shone sincerely, a child-like amazement in his brown eyes.

I could not help but smile at the emotions lighting up his face. He was a genuine child, and I believed that his master had indeed taught him well. Shuffling slightly, I set my broom down against a pillar.

“Your sincerity has truly touched me. Do you want a tour around the Mogao Caves?” Ming Jing’s eyes lit up immediately, and he nodded, his eyes glittering in excitement. I chuckled at his childishness. Turning so my back faced the young monk, I treaded onwards, my footsteps faltering slightly, until I heard the soft thuds of cotton that followed close behind. Satisfied and relieved, I continued to walk, the slow snaps of my torn shoes contrasting with the warm thumps of his leathery sandals.

We walked through the meandering pathways and I could feel his curiosity and excitement as he looked in awe at the intricately designed statues and paintings kept hidden inside the

belly of the beast. I remembered feeling that way once too, but somehow my guilt still riddled my body.

I introduced him to different rooms and their uses, and the child soaked up the knowledge like a sponge. Nevertheless, his wandering eyes and the anticipating glint in his gaze made me wonder: was he here for a reason?

Finishing the tour, I led him back to the entrance. The child looked a bit slumped, as if he had something to say.

“Master...” the child finally said, “What about the secret cave...?”

I looked at him incredulously. He knew about the secret cave? Ming Jing looked at me apologetically, his cheeks a rosy red. “Sorry, Master Wang. I heard there are a lot of ancient relics there, and I wanted to have a glimpse! Actually, don’t mind me.” He laughed again, but this time more of an awkward and forced one.

“Well,” I swallowed thickly, “I guess I forgot about that.” I stood up again, visibly shaken. I led him into the deepest parts of the caves, where torches set the air ablaze with its flare.

The amount of voices in my mind began to increase, it was both a spiteful murmur and a hateful wailing.

Liar! Thief! Where do you think you’re going? Come back here!

Their hollow echos still terrorized my mind, keeping me hostage. I was constantly trapped in this cycle of torture, their gnarling hands grabbing at my ankles, their pronged teeth etching painful marks into my brittle skin. I shuddered. Did Ming Jing know about my past mistakes? He must know. Then why isn’t he showing it?

Perhaps he’s a messenger from Buddha, sent down to kill me? Yet that seemed impossible! My thoughts were running far from me at this point.

No, he can’t possibly be a killer. His confident navigation, sure-footed steps, and eyes filled with recognition said otherwise. I finally halted my steps, turning around to face him.

“Child...,” I hesitated, debating whether I should inquire about such things, “Why have you come to this cave?”

Ming Jing gave me a puzzled look. “To meditate here and become closer to Buddha, master Wang.”

“Yes, I know that Ming Jing. But did you know about the horrendous things that I’ve done?”

There was a pause, heavy with my anxiety.

A short laugh erupted from the young monk’s throat. “Of course I knew! It was a very famous story among the young monks at our temple.”

Again, the silence hung, and I stared, astonished at his reveal. If the child knew, why did he not speak in low, hatred-filled voices? Why is he not throwing spiteful glances? Fear ensued my heart, and I took a faint step back. Was this child truly as untrained as he seemed?

“Why did you come here then? I could have tainted you with my evil!” I exclaimed.

“I do not believe that you have sinned, Master Wang.” Ming Jing regarded me with seriousness. I looked at him, confused. “What do you mean?”

“I believe that, even though we have to endure suffering to become closer to Buddha, there is suffering to an extent. Your suffering has already been over, however to you, it is still there.” He paused, glancing at me, his dark brown eyes now an infinite pool of knowledge. “You have put this suffering upon yourself, Master. Suffering is not always what others inflict on you, you could cause your own suffering as well.”

I caused my own suffering? Could it be true? The epiphany finally dawned on me – all of my earthly suffering, all of my self-realized agony, was of my own accord. I held myself prisoner for so long without seeing the truth of it.

“Is that true?” My voice trembled as I slowly took in the information. “What had happened to me so far... could’ve all been an illusion? All I had to do was to believe and forget, and Buddha would release me from my sin?”

“Yes... if you want to put it that way,” Ming Jing looked at me, eyes firm. “It could be hard for you to take it in, but it is the truth you seek.”

I felt the air around my being stir, the voices in my mind clawing desperately to keep me bonded to that prison cell I created in my own mind. Yet, there it was. The truth of it all. Life was about suffering, but the suffering was caused by my own need to be free. And now I knew what had to be done. I had to forgive myself. And so I did, for my actions, my self-imposed suffering, for all the pain, guilt, and mocking words and stares. The excruciating shrieking increased, wails of agony and false accusations ringing in my ears, yet with my willpower, they gradually returned to silence. Peace and clemency, like never before besieged me, tossing me into a warm embrace.

And so I found my life, beyond my faith and beyond the ever-changing sand dunes.

Epilogue

Master Wang entered the Dunhuang Temple and slowly stretched his legs after a long journey. It had been months since his visit with Ming Jing and he decided to find him at the temple to thank him again for his wisdom.

He found his way to the main building, passing rooms of silent monks with their heads bowed in prayer.

“Thank you for accommodating me, Master Hu. I’ve come to see one of your wise monks, Ming Jing,” Master Wang said, putting his satchel down on the ground.

“We are always happy to welcome a fellow seeker of truth here. Now, as for Ming Jing, I will take you to him right away,” Master Hu motioned for him to follow. They walked down a long corridor to a large chamber. Inside were statues of Buddha as well as other notable monks. They came to a statue of a smiling young man.

Master Wang looked at the familiar statue staring back at him and then read the engraving: Master Ming Jing.

“I don’t understand, Master. Where is Ming Jing?” Master Wang looked puzzled.

“Ming Jing was a great monk at this temple. In fact, he stayed here his whole life until he died about 100 years ago. But don’t worry, his legacy will live on forever.”

Ancient Memories

Ying Wa College, Cheung, Ka Yui - 15

27-09-1337 23:51

The flaming moon hung over the silent sands.

“I dreamt of the blood moon rising...”

The crimson eye was barely visible through the heavy, sombre clouds that dominated the skies. Dim scarlet beams escaped from the narrow vents few and far between; they were much welcomed, for a menacing lighthouse in a time of anguish is better than none.

“Calling from the netherworld...”

Surrounded by the ill-natured creation was a cluster of crumbling structures of rock-cut gravel and cloudy glass planes. Gentle fingers brushed the latest layer of soot and cobwebs away from the window and wiped them on a cracked wall. The hand was soft, unlined, with four vicious, erubescant lines criss-crossing over the palm, three of them short and horizontal, the last cutting from between the second and middle fingers to the fragile wrist.

Hard, anthracite eyes stared out of the tiny opening. Oh, how they used to love those endless flaxen sands, and these homely caves called home! Before the sickly trader from the Tianshan Mountains brought the plague, and soon there were no traders at all...

“Softly the vespers cascade to me...”

The gigantic knells in the chaitya struck nine times, thrice and thrice and thrice, each more stately and imposing than the last. They were meant to be tranquil, to soothe and to comfort, but surrounded by a world of red and grey they inspired fear.

The solemn elegy must be echoing in the enormous hall by now, yet he heard nothing. Were the curtains of ash blocking the passageways too heavy? Or were there too few voices left to be heard?

“Come dance, come take —”

A violent cough wrenched Jian-Qing’s head in the opposite direction.

“Sister?”

“I’m fine — you used to love this piece — remember —”

“You used to sing it when I was younger...”

“When you couldn’t sleep,” she finished, gasping for breath. “Do — Do you still like it?”

“Yes.” His hands were already reaching out to the naphtha lamp on the bedside table, and with deft fingers he felt and poured in what little oil that was left.

A soft yellow glow illuminated the room. He washed away the thick garnet stains on the threadbare bedsheet with murky grey water and opened the door, bringing the wooden bowl with him, now ornamented with swirls of blood.

“Where’re you—”

“I’ll be right back.”

The door offered a mournful creak.

Yet Jian-Mei passed away in the same night due to what would later be known as the Black Death, which would then spread along the silk road to the western world, killing two-thirds of the European population in the 14th Century. Jian-Qing could not even bury her, for the pus from ruptured lymph nodes in the final stages would be sure to infect him. In

the coming centuries her body would become little more than a collection of bones, forever forgotten amid the dusty ruins of the Mogao Grottoes.

The twelve-year-old left the caves of death alone the same night, carrying nothing except for an oilskin bag filled with fresh water, the trusty camel Hu-Ga who was triple his age, and an old, dusty, weighty scroll of ancient glyphs he had found in a cave about to collapse three years ago. It was a dictionary, he had decided, but even after exploring two-thirds of the caves in Dunhuang, he could not find one single hint of the ancient language it depicted. It was nothing but instinct that prompted him to bring it along.

And so in the drowsy predawn hours the last living person who once lived in the Mogao Grottoes left his home, to journey along abandoned tracks to the fabled lands of the East. Had it not been for the darker blood beneath the blood moon, the once-glorious Mogao Grottoes would be beautiful again, silhouetted in a brilliant red that smiled gently from above and brushed the hushed sands in delicate touches.

28-09-1337 03:14

Jian-Qing heard the figure long before he saw it. It was the same sizzling sound when Jian-Mei cooked salmon with olive oil bought from Arab traders on that simple, bent sheet of cast iron they called a pan.

He walked towards it in ginger steps, weighty soled boots sinking into the ankle-deep soot. He stopped before a river of sluggish, drying water; so did the figure, so did the sizzling, abruptly on the opposite bank.

Jian-Qing studied the figure with scrutinizing eyes. It wore a tattered silhouette of dark imperial purple, tall and thin like a dying cypress, almost invisible in the weary grey background. The face was wrinkled with age, and the hooked nose reminded him of a magister who visited the town once. To his disappointment there was no enticing aroma of fried fish.

The focus broke, and he realized that her eyes were doing the same. He took an involuntary step back, nearly tripping over a particularly tall mound of soot.

“Boy,” the old woman hissed, with the voice of a coiled cobra. It *withered*.

Jian-Qing stood still.

“What brings you here, to this land of death?” she continued.

“Water.” His voice was softer than he wanted.

“There is... no... water! No longer!” she laughed. It was a disgusting cackle, one that chilled him to his bones despite the suffocating atmosphere.

“Who are you?” Jian-Qing whispered.

“Oh, don’t start asking me questions. What’s that you’re carrying? Let me have a look,” she smiled, broken yellowish teeth glittering under the ember sky. With not a single twitch of her hand Jian-Qing’s scroll flew into her palm, curling itself around her fingers. The old woman studied the text with furrowed brows, and barely minute passed before her face lit up and she exclaimed, “Ah! Ancient necromancy! How wonderful!”

She took her time to read through the entire scroll while Jian-Qing stood trembling, and continued, “I am kind and forgiving, especially to dear young children like you. I shall make you an offer. With the magic inscribed on this ancient text, I can bring a loved one back from the land of the shadows — but you and the person revived must be sent forward to the future. And the only possible way for you to return — is death.”

Jian-Qing was already heads over heels in reverence and thankfulness.

28-09-2337 03:14

An arc of blue fire lanced down through the graphite sky, so bright and high above that the entire night sky became as bright as molten iron; there was no telling where it came from. It was as if the entire world was set on fire, every single trestle and silhouette illuminated by the sudden flare. At that very instant came the thunder, the roar of a drum leagues in diameter, echoing across the horizon, resonating in Jian-Qing's tiny bones.

The cackling storm of energy and flame struck down, smiting the barren desert from across the horizon, bathing it in a torrent of dazzling, blinding light. It was a brilliant longsword stronger than the toughest steel. Smoke erupted from the multiple craters, dense and black and rising like giant mushrooms. Within seconds one had grown doubly as tall as the tallest mountain Jian-Qing had ever seen, and doubly as monstrous. From the heavy opaque greyness spit the pungent smell of burning and wicked chunks of quartz and stone, screaming at the velocity of a longbow shaft, rocketing into dense clusters of human bodies in a deadly hail.

Terrible shrieking screams sounded as people realized that there was nowhere to run in this battlefield with no cover, caught between the incoming fire in the front and the darts of stone and smoke coming from behind. Death ripped into the nearest backs, tearing through skin and muscle and breaking bones. For the first time the peaceful sanddunes of Badan Jilin were stained with red, flowing crimson that seeped beneath the ground.

When blood started splashing the last sense of restraint and good logic vanished; all that was left was the primal instinct to live and the simple emotion of fear. Humans, clothed in khaki, with strange buckets inverted and covering their faces, carrying long metallic objects Ling-Ping did not know, slammed into one another, running down those unfortunate enough to be caught in the path and too weak to resist. A particularly bulky one rammed into Jian-Qing, head against his chest. The young boy dodged backwards by instinct, but he could never have anticipated the tiny shard of steel that sped past him and landed behind his heel. He felt his sandals catch, then more savage impacts pounded his sides. Whether they were sand or flesh or shells, he could not tell.

Jian-Qing tried to stand, but the throbbing threatened to cover his sight with a screen of red. He sat up instead, but that hadn't been pleasant either.

At the edge of his flickering vision he found one familiar figure, in the light-coloured linen shirt smeared with dirt, prying a metal stick from the limp hands of a fallen soldier. She did not waste time looking around and ran towards the west as everyone else did, towards the falling sun gazing mercilessly from above, towards the Mogao Grottoes he had wanted so much to leave mere seconds before.

Jian-Qing followed.

11-03-2345 05:02

Tunnel 230-9c was far from the only path to the library cave, operations base to the Coalition 17th Division. All these were a part of an intricate web of underground shafts and cavities called the Mogao Grottoes founded in 336 C.E. by the monk Yuezun. In the next five hundred years pilgrims and traders gathered at this key junction of the Silk Road, building more caves and creating sacred art and literature, before it fell into gradual decline and disrepair in the 14th Century. Exactly one millennium later the Mogao Grottoes found their worth again, this time as an underground stronghold of the Coalition in the Uprising of Artificial Intelligence. The complex network of tunnels were further developed, reaching an astonishing number of over 600 kilometers, sprawling beneath the chilling Badan Jilin Desert.

Coalition officers poured into the Library Cave in a steady trickle from every single tunnel in the region, and soon the snug chamber was filled, with sixty-three cramped into the muddy chamber. Most sat on the floor, while the guards either manned the battle stations or stood next to their commanders. None of them seemed to mind the dust, and few bothered to keep themselves clean, for obvious reasons: They were dressed in brown combat tunics regardless of rank, expecting to get dirty.

In the next few minutes, the officers settled themselves in a ragged semicircle around the stage. It only took a few seconds for the brief silence to give way to noise again, this time the tap-tap-tap of hard leather boots on gravel. To call it a stage would be an overstatement, for it was little more than a raised rectangular dais less than thirty centimetres in height left behind by the pilgrims fifteen thousand years ago, and a wood-and-plastic lectern a metre taller near its front, this one installed by the Coalition. Both were equally dusty as the myriad of ancient paintings and religious scriptures engraved on the walls.

The man ordered the only chair in the bunker brought to the dais and sat. It did not matter whether he stood or not; the lectern was taller than him either way. He took all the time to make himself comfortable, styling his long snowy beard and sipping leisurely from a cup offered by his guard. When he was done he finally spoke, slowly and calmly in that gravelly voice of an old marshal.

“Repeat after me: As a soldier of the Coalition of Human Nations...”

22-09-2345 15:44

The camera swiveled around, its dark eye fixed on the darker figure beneath.

It was a hazy one at best, the image it captured. That had nothing to do with the quality of the lens — these minute surveillance devices could hardly afford the luxury of plastic shells. And even if it could, the tiny dribble of groundwater would still be more than annoying.

It would have captured no image at all, if not for the fragile sphere of amber from a fluttering torch, held steadily at chest height as it inched forward. There were two things it outlined, each featureless as the other: the harsh, stark space of the tunnel, supported by slabs of hardwood amid the clammy dirt. And the harsh, dark form of the silhouette, making its way through the stale air.

“What is this? I expect better from you, Jian-Qing.”

“I did all I can. Communication tunnels are too cramped to install anything but XC-03s.”

“At least you had the sense to use one with infrared equipment. Turn it on.”

“Yes, Master.”

Colour began to appear on the inky output, red and yellow and blue and purple. The torch was red, with the area around it fading gently into orange and yellow, then the blue of the tunnel. The figure was yellow, bordering chartreuse. The only unexpected detail was a straight, slender strip of indigo, slashing abruptly down from the figure's waist to the ground.

“What is that?”

“Master?”

“The purple line.”

The boy did not reply. They were standing before a set of monitors arranged in a neat semicircle on a large desk, each of the screens displaying a similar image of underground

tunnels. There were chairs, a dozen of them and all vacant, but both of them chose to stand. Apart from these there were no furnishings of any sort save several computers and simple stationary. Everything from the monitors to the walls were white, a brilliant white, polished and flawless to a fault. Had there not been a complete lack of windows, or had the only illumination not been a series of fluorescent tubes on the ceiling, the white might have been elegant; now 'static' and 'artificial' would be better adjectives.

"Yes?" the woman pressed. Her uniform, her stripes of a lieutenant, her featureless mask which covered the entire face except the narrow eyeslits, were all in a flawless white. The voice and slender form seemed to be that of a young adult's but Jian-Qing knew she was no human. *Had I not surrendered at Jiuquan, I would not be selling information to a robot for my life. But it is too late now, and I'm committing a crime against humanity.*

"It's probably a katana, considering the blade length. Longer than your typical ceremonial saber, shorter than European longswords."

"I see. And who in your precious Coalition carries a katana?"

"Quite a number. Honestly cannot tell for sure."

"You know that's not the right answer."

Jian-Qing grimaced.

"Thank you for the reminder, *Robot*. I'm aware."

"Then give me the right answer. *Human*."

Jian-Qing stumbled backwards as if he was struck by a whip, stabilizing himself with one hand on the desk. He hated the robots all the more for taking his mask away when he was captured mere months ago. This made his facial expressions all too visible. *Vulnerable*.

"Lieutenant Jian-Mei, most likely. She always wears a jian instead of firearms."

"Then why 'cannot tell for sure' just now?"

"Many low ranking officers carry blades. It might just be someone else."

"Human, where do your loyalties lie?"

"To the Federation of Artificial Intelligence, now and forever."

"Jian-Qing, It's not that I don't trust you," her voice softened. "It's just that you did serve the humans before."

He wanted to throw up.

The robot produced the first item that was not white from a zipped trouser pocket. It was a small handheld device with an antenna, crimson in its entirety. There were some two dozen buttons arranged on its surface, with a miniature joystick at the top. A detonator remote.

"It's already connected to the XC-03. We cannot let such a perfect chance to assassinate a human officer slip through our fingers. Here, do the honors."

Jian-Qing took the remote from her hands. He knew exactly how this thing worked. One click on the top right button, and it would be over. They would be back together, in the old Dunhuang Caves they loved...

Fiction

Group 5



Mirror Mirror

ESF Sha Tin College, Yu, Vivian - 17

In Shazhou, the bustling city center of Dunhuang, was an antique shop tucked in a corner of the frenetic city's heart. Passers-by typically took little notice of its unassuming storefront. Only visitors of a particular disposition, possessing discerning taste and often wealthy, would push open the double-doors of Yuehai Antiques.

Yuehai Antiques' location in Dunhuang meant that its proximity to the Mogao Grottoes served as a backdrop of intrigue for the antiquities displayed within, even if few items were actually treasures looted from the caves. All manner of curiosities were displayed – scrolls looted from the Library Cave, ceramics once used by eminent figures including emperors, poets, Peking opera singers, even a wooden stool that had supposedly once been graced by the buttocks of Marco Polo when he stopped at Mogao on the Silk Road.

One evening, a young man was keenly examining the wares displayed under the warm lantern-light. He heard a voice from behind him, and turned to see a woman who now stood next to him.

“May I help you?”

Ouyang Yuzhui, the owner of Yuehai Antiques, was a well-known figure in collector's circles. She had inherited the store from her father and prided herself on being an archivist beyond compare.

The young man, dressed in a Western-style overcoat, pushed up his glasses before pointing to the bronze mirror he had been studying prior. He said with a polite smile, ‘I'm rather fascinated by this exquisite counterfeit.’

In a nation whose people relied on commerce and artisanship for their livelihood, this was no statement to be taken lightly. It was a threat to Yuzhui's scrupulous collection of antiquities, for it implied that she had erred. This particular bronze mirror was one of the few artifacts that did hail from the Mogao Grottoes, a fascinating ‘magic mirror’ that behaved as though it were transparent. A British researcher had sold the mirror to her father decades after it had supposedly been taken from Mogao by explorers in the nineteenth century. Her father had haggled relentlessly to acquire the mirror, which he identified as being from the early Yuan period. This young man's accusation was a direct attack on Yuehai Antiques' reputation as connoisseurs of quality and an offense to Yuzhui's father's memory.

“Oh? What makes you so sure it's counterfeit?” challenged the owner.

She knew there was only one way to save face and salvage the esteem of Yuehai Antiques; she must find a way to sell this mirror to the young man.

The mirror was of fine make, with an intricate design of the Eight Legions cast in a wheel design on the back of the circular mirror. A gleaming red jade bead sat in the center, attached to a gold tassel that had been restored by Yuzhui's father.

“Miss, may I ask that you demonstrate the mirror's ‘magic’ for me?” asked the young man.

Yuzhui narrowed her eyes but complied, pulling on a pair of gloves and carefully removing the mirror from the glass case.

The mirror's ‘magic’ was that when a light was shone onto its surface, the decorative patterns on the back of the mirror would be projected out of the reflective side. This

phenomenon intrigued scientists for centuries until finally it was discovered that these mirrors were not transparent at all. The designs on the back were cast first, before the stresses of shaping and polishing the mirror caused the thinner parts of the decorative side to bulge outwards on the reflective side. Thus, minute imperfections of the reflective side perfectly matched the patterns on the back and projected the whole image when brightly lit.

Indeed, now that Yuzhui pointed a torch at the mirror, the fierce, penetrating images of the Eight Legions were projected onto the wall; Asura, the three-headed, four-armed demigod, Naga, the half-snake half-human, to name a few. The mirror itself was palm-sized, but the illusion projected was currently magnified to more than a meter wide.

“Herein lies exactly why this mirror is a counterfeit. The Yuan Dynasty to which this mirror is dated was a period of political turmoil. Naturally, every court was infested with spies. During this period such mirrors were often used to convey secret messages. Words were etched into the reflective side so that, along with the back design, messages would be revealed when a light was shone onto them. Because these messages were absent on the back design, no suspicion would be raised. So, such mirrors were generally cheaply made. This tassel,’ he continued, pointing to the red jade bead upon which hung the gold tuft, ‘is a contemporary addition. Jade would have been too valuable for one-use secret message mirrors, no?”

“That is an unfounded generalization,” said Yuzhui. “This mirror contains no secret message – by all accounts, it was owned by nobility, for whom...”

But even as she spoke she realized the answer. She had been about to say that a rich person might have owned a mirror with a jade bead. However, in the Yuan Dynasty, glass mirrors were being imported from the West, and mirrors for daily use by aristocrats who could afford jade would have been fashionable glass ones, not bronze.

“As a historian yourself, I'm sure you realize this discrepancy,” said the young man with a genial smile.

The store-owner stood a little straighter. “This is where you are wrong. While that may have been the case in the capital, this mirror is from the Mogao Grottoes, not the royal court. There is a very good reason there is a tassel on the back.”

“Oh?” said the young man, who held about him an infuriating air of pedantry.

Yuzhui narrowed her eyes and began to tell her story.

Long ago, a weary explorer wandered the deserts of landlocked Gansu in pursuit of greener pastures, for his village had been struck terribly by drought. His star map had led him only to more bleak dunes, stretching as far as the eye could see. Countless days and nights passed under the scorching sun in biting, cloudless air, and still there was no end in sight to the endless barren dunes.

The explorer's tent was pocked with holes from sandstorms, and his water flask was empty. Despairing, once night fell, he collapsed into the pale, shifting sand and wept, but he was so dehydrated that no tears came.

When he looked up, piercing through the velvet black of night was a dim yellow light at the base of a distant dune, akin to the sparkle of a gold coin. With every remaining drop of willpower he had left in his trembling limbs, the explorer drew himself up and continued to traverse the sullen sea of ashes. The golden sparkle grew brighter as he drew nearer, pulsing and twinkling. Thoughts of treasure, gold hoards or gemstone vaults, crossed the explorer's mind, lending him the strength to keep moving.

At last, he reached a dilapidated temple built into the side of a sheer cliff. The golden glow was stronger than ever, seeping through cracked, dust-matted windows and spilling out in sunbursts through rotting wooden walls. When the explorer pushed open the ruined temple doors, there was no treasure to be found. The glow emerged still, from a crack in the side of the temple built into the cliff, illuminating the neglected temple altar. A gentle push revealed that the wooden wall was false, collapsing in a burst of dust and splinters to reveal a gaping cave mouth, into which the explorer stepped, all fatigue forgotten.

As the explorer went deeper, the golden glow only grew stronger, at every corner he turned, every narrow tunnel and damp cavern he traversed. The golden light bathed him in sun-like warmth, forcing him to squint. He was now convinced that some sort of lucky star awaited him, having fallen to the earth by happenstance to cast its glow across the desert.

Brighter still the golden light grew, such that the explorer could no longer keep his eyes open. Sensing that the source of the light was right around the corner of this next cavern, the explorer produced a bronze mirror from his traveling pack, turned around, and used it to peek around the corner without blinding himself. He continued to walk, facing backwards, using his mirror to follow the light. It had grown so brilliant that the bronze mirror was heating up, the surface warping, forcing the explorer to hold it dangling from the tassel attached to the center to avoid burning his hand.

Upon entering the final cavern, the explorer was greeted by the sight of neither a star nor treasure. As the caves opened up out of the mountains into the desert once again, there sat a magnificent, giant bird, golden from tip to toe, whose feathers glowed in such a dazzling blaze that night had turned into day. The leviathan bird, startled by the explorer, drew its sweeping wings up and, in a gust of wind so forceful that the explorer was pushed backwards, took flight. He watched in awe as the bird soared elegantly into the sky, its glossy train of tail feathers twinkling with a jewel-like glimmer.

As the bird soared higher and higher, its graceful, distinguished silhouette was overtaken by the glow of its plumage, so that it was indistinguishable from a star. The explorer, deeply stirred by the sight he had witnessed, stood still in contemplation for many moments, after the glow had long since faded and the night was once again black.

The giant golden bird had left behind a single golden feather on the floor of the cavern. The explorer picked it up and immediately set to work, fletching the feather into the shaft of an arrow. Stepping outside the cavern exit, he drew his bow with the arrow that bore the golden feather, aimed straight up at the midnight sky, and fired.

The arrow bearing the golden bird's blessing glowed brightly as it arced through the sky, glowing still where it landed in the far, far distance atop a lofty sand-dune. Once more the explorer set out, following the glowing point. He was once again exhausted, but persevered, dragging himself across the arid plains of dust. He was now close to the arrow he had shot, yet saw nothing at the dune it had landed on. With a final desperate effort, he hoisted himself over the last ridge and looked down on what lay beyond.

A lake glimmered with the light of the first rays of dawn across its surface, surrounded by reams of lush grass and dense forest. The oasis stood out beautifully, a gem studded in the inhospitable desert landscape, promising fertile land and bountiful harvests.

“Imparted upon the explorer was the feeling described in Tao Yuanming’s poem, *Peach Blossom Spring*: ‘After a great many steps, a breathtaking scene appears before one’s very

eyes,’” finished the shop-owner. “The fable continues that the explorer marked the oasis on his star map, returned to his village, and brought his people there, to what is now known as the Crescent Lake. The caves he passed through were likely early iterations of the Mogao Grottoes.”

“So you see,” she said triumphantly, “In this local fable, the explorer’s mirror was struck by light so strong it burned his hand to hold the metal, so he held the tassel. This myth was told in an age where it was common for bronze mirrors to have such beaded tassels.”

The young man adjusted his glasses once again. “Interesting,” he said. “But I raise you this: the Mogao Grottoes were carved into the mountains prior to the proliferation of trade across the Silk Road, along which Buddhism was imported to China in the Han dynasty. Your fable could not have been contemporaneous, because the golden bird in the story is likely—”

“—the Golden-Winged King of Illumination,” finished Yuzhui.

“Who is a mythological figure derived from Garuda, a deity from Buddhist mythology. Your legend seems to tell the origin of civilization around the Mogao Grottoes, before which only religious men and scholars inhabited the caves. While a fine story, I must now tell my own, to explain how this could not be possible.”

“By all means,” said the shop-owner.

“You see, the legend of the Golden-Winged King of Illumination, or Jinchi Dapeng Mingwang, was that it was a magnificent bird of prey who hunted evil dragons. Every day it would eat one dragon-king and five hundred poison-dragons. Eventually, the negative energy and karmic debt it accumulated from the evil it conquered burned it away from the inside, leaving behind only a pure crystal heart.”

“The Peng bird is oft depicted as a demon-turned-Buddhist guardian who sits above the Buddha’s throne.” He pointed to the bronze mirror once again, indicating the bird deity Garuda within the Eight Legions.

“But this legend about evil dragons is not native to Dunhuang, because dragons are good creatures in Chinese mythology – auspicious symbols of prosperity.”

Now Yuzhui hummed in consideration. “‘Peng’ is indeed speculated to be a corruption of ‘Feng’, or the phoenix, who is often paired with the dragon in imagery.”

“Is that so? That strengthens my point. Legends of evil dragons, including those that the Golden-Winged King of Illumination hunted, could not have existed in Dunhuang as early as your myth purports. It must have been created much later, making its credibility for customs surrounding bronze mirrors questionable. Unfortunately, folk legends are often such – they are poor temporal indicators.”

“When are legends ever created in the same time period they are told?” challenged Yuzhui. “How would a storyteller sound talking about events that happened last week? Of course the legend is more recent than its setting. We do not examine myths as bastions of factual credibility. I have not proven beyond a shadow of doubt that all mirrors in the Mogao Grottoes had tassels – I have merely presented evidence that there exists precedent for craftsmanship in that style. Your Garuda myth mentioned crystal hearts – here is another story for you, one of my own. I hope that it will illustrate to you the power of stories.”

Yuzhui ducked behind the counter and pulled a mahogany drawer open, where she kept small goods that had been reserved or for other reasons could not be sold. Removing a velvet box, she pulled the wrappings away to reveal a golden filigree hairpin in the buyao style of the Western Han dynasty. Nestled in azure kingfisher feathers lay a sparkling ten-sided diamond that cast iridescent rainbows when hit by light.

Yuzhui held it up for the young man to see. “I sold this to a youth who wished to gift it to his girlfriend. I told him its origin, which was that it had been made in the 60’s as an

imitation prop, but was of fine quality nonetheless. Two weeks later, a young woman came into my store with this very hairpin, wishing to sell it to me. What happened was—”

The bell hanging from the door of Yuehai Antiques rang out.

“Welcome to Yuehai Antiques. Feel free to have a look around.”

“Actually, I’m not here to buy,” said the young woman, a harrowed expression crossing her face. From her pocket she removed a handkerchief, in which was wrapped a golden hairpin with a large diamond in the middle.

“This was given to me by a man who was pursuing me. He said that it belonged to a princess of the Western Han dynasty, and that if we looked into the diamond together, we might see extraordinary things. But when I look into it, I only feel uncomfortable. It’s beautiful, but I feel nothing for that man... and I can’t help but think the rust on the pin looks like blood. He said it was the crystal heart of a phoenix, and that it could... reveal one’s true heart’s desire, or... something. Please, just take it off my hands. I am not concerned about how much money it is worth, though I am sure something like this is priceless.”

“It was not,” concluded Yuzhui. “The young lady named me a price ten times higher than what I had sold it to her unfortunate suitor for. I had to tell her she had been lied to and that this pin was no priceless artifact. She was even happier to part from it after that.”

Herein was the power of stories. This young man before her seemed not to understand that a counterfeit’s physical value was, in fact, quite similar to that of a genuine artifact it imitated. Factors such as craftsmanship, quality, and material aside, the true worth of relics lay in their backstory, in the tall tales woven around objects that were, at the time of their creation, ordinary. Else if the young man had a mind to do so, he could have ground the worth of all the goods in Yuehai Antiques to dust. Who would buy the string of pearls if they had not been burial goods for a nomadic queen? Who would be interested in the broken guqin if it had not been the instrument on which the original Three Stanzas on Plum Blossoms had been composed? Who would look twice at the tattered scroll if the text within was not in ancient Khotanese?

Long-dead, time-worn legends were revived by oral tradition, elevating the physical husks in which they were held to priceless. Exotic curios were easy and cheap enough to produce, but the true challenge lay in weaving a spurious tale to breathe life into the object.

“I see,” said the young man simply, a small smile playing on his lips. “In that case, please allow me to buy this exquisite fake.”

The shop owner sighed. “After all this, you still think it is fake?”

The young man smiled, and indeed seemed happier than he had been since entering the shop and exchanging stories with Yuzhui.

“Of course. After all, that story I told about mirrors containing secret messages? It was nonsense. Nonsense I just made up.”

Mind Palace

ESF West Island School, Eyunni, Gayathri - 16

Darkness.

I want to run,

Far away wherein

Solitude.

One blessing I may count.

I closed my eyes as I walked in. The smell of agarwood hit me almost immediately. I stretched out my hands and felt the chipped and textured walls. I tasted the sweet and dusty air as it filled my lungs. I slowly opened my eyes, and once they had adjusted to the darkness, I looked at the mural in front of me. Fluttering ribbons of blue and red, adorned with simple gold jewellery. *Feitian*. A flying *Apsara*. I turned around to explore the other mural, but quickly stopped myself. I had a task to complete. In this cave I stored my childhood. My earliest moments. I rummaged through the contents trying to find what I was looking for, but to no avail. As I stood in frustration and cursed the inadequacy of my previously devised methods, I heard a low, deep voice. I stopped and listened. There was no source, the voice was everywhere. It was intangible. As the volume grew, so did my fear. Brewing. “Mama?” I called out. The voice stopped. I took one last look before closing my eyes again.

In an instant I felt the warmth of the old but functional electric heater next to my bed. As my shivering slowly died, I fell back into the same irritation I felt before this yet again futile attempt at entering the cave. Why couldn’t I remember?

“I don’t need your help.” I snatched the book from his hands, underestimating its weight and stumbling slightly.

“Ignorance is fickle.” He shifted his gaze from me to the window, mirroring the shift in conversation. “Do you want to be left in the dark?”

“It’s a new moon today.” I said, tightening my grip around the book.

I turned my focus too. The dark sky was empty, except for a small spot of brightness. “Venus,” he said, as if on cue. “did you know that she could fly, escape from mortal sight and shift her physical form to other beings?”

“If a mortal being was given these powers...” I paused, turning to face him. “They could escape death.”

“How’s your mother?” he asked, looking as if he knew the answer but was waiting to see what I would say.

A bird cried in the distance. *A raven*, I thought, placing my hand on the cold window sill. The raven continued to call out, until it seemed as though it had lost its will. Once silence had resumed I turned back to face him, but he was gone and I couldn’t say when he had left.

Most people choose their house as their locus. But the obscurity of my childhood created a murky medium to dwell in doubt. I needed to see. The agony of a lost memory blocks all reason to a point of madness. I could not stay here. I had to find an outlet; a clear path where I could organise my thoughts. So I chose the Mogao grottoes or caves. I remember my first visit. At first I found them almost boring. Hours of staring at paintings, carvings and murals. But slowly I started to lose myself. I divulged into the beauty of the area. I felt as though I had received a glimpse of the diversity of cultures that had bestowed their creations here. “This is a special place,” my mother told me, as we walked out of the final cave. “It shows us evidence of the evolution of Buddhist art, and thereby, the evolution of Buddhism itself.” She looked as if in a trance.

I wasn’t really listening. I was preoccupied by something else. “Mama, who’s this?” I asked, pointing to a tall statue of which one of the hands was broken.

“Do you remember the statue that was cross-legged in the last cave?” she asked. I nodded. “It’s the same person here,” she said.

“How come they look different if it’s the same person?” I asked, picturing the previous statue.

“The last statue was built at a time when the nomadic Xiongnu people from the north were in control of the area. You can see their artistic influence, as the statue is sitting cross-legged, which was not traditional at the time.” She paused to make sure I was listening. “This statue,” she continued, pointing to the statue in front of us, “dates to the Tang dynasty. At that time, the statues started to show more characteristics of the Chinese style. The plump faces are full of expression. Do you see that?” She turned to face me now.

I stared in wonder at her vast knowledge. “Who does the statue depict?”

“Maitreya,” she answered. “He will come in the future and teach pure Dharma.”

Dharma. I had heard that word enough times to understand what it meant. The caves were filled with symbols of Dharma. Of righteousness. The caves would be my place. I had made up my mind that day. I started building. I started with *id* – the primitive and instinctual part which contained hidden memories. Then *superego* – the moral conscience. And finally *ego* – the realistic mediator between the other two.

*Rays,
Not of hope,
But of satisfaction,
Simplicity,
I start to doubt.*

“Oolong or Earl Grey?” I asked, dangling the two tea bags in front of his face.

“You need closure,” he said, taking the Earl Grey from my hand.

I laughed. “Have you been reading up online about PTSD?” I joked.

He wore an expression of careful guilt. I shook my head. “How can I have PTSD, when nothing even happened?”

He shrugged again. “You’re the only person that isn’t convinced.” He looked at me challengingly. “And how come you don’t remember? You never forget anything.”

That was true. I had, as people would say, an “eidetic memory”. Photographic even. My

brain had a one way entry, nothing ever left it. But I had closed that gateway. We both sat in silence for a few minutes while he steeped the Earl Grey, reminiscing about those young years when I would do memory tricks for fun, harnessing the talents of my brain that others only dreamt of possessing. But those days were long gone. It was like I had closed that chapter. I looked up at the old wooden clock hanging solemnly on the wall. I hated those devious hands, which would only move in one direction. *The arrow of time*. In space you could move backwards and anti-clockwise, to undo your actions. In time you couldn’t.

“Maybe it’s time to visit your caves again,” he whispered.

I poured myself a cup of tea. I took a sip. The bitter-sweetness of bergamot coated my tongue, the warmth trickling down my throat. I felt the ice that had frozen my mind slowly melt. “Too much sugar,” I said finally, as he always sweetened his tea. “I prefer the Oolong. It’s a tea fit for an empress.”

“Did the empress have a good memory too?” He wasn’t going to give up.

I laughed a little and placed my cup on the table, trying not to make a sound as the delicate porcelain touched the fragile glass. “I can’t get into the caves,” I sighed. “I forgot how.”

This was a lie. I had actually already gone once, but only to one cave for just a few minutes, and I didn’t want to feed his idea about my supposed mental illness.

“What about the book?” He tilted his head towards the windowsill, where the huge book waited to be opened.

I shrugged, tugging at the strings of my jacket to tighten the hood. A brisk, icy wind had filled the room. I could hear the rustling of the leaves on the chrysanthemum plants in the balcony. “Why did you plant chrysanthemums?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” he said unenthusiastically. “they looked nice I guess.”

I could see he was irritated with the change in topic. “They’re a symbol of death you know,” I looked at him intently.

He frowned at my statement, but looked anxious for me to answer his previous question. I didn’t really feel bad though. I wasn’t in the mood to have this predictable conversation. “You could grow lilac ones,” I said, walking precariously towards the balcony.

“Answer my question,” he said, growing increasingly impatient.

“I don’t know,” I said, picking up a yellow chrysanthemum that had fallen on the floor.

“I’m going to visit my mother,” I said finally.

He frowned but didn’t say anything, and as I left the room, I wondered why he didn’t.

*How
In this world,
Of imperfections,
Unforgiving.
Can I stand?*

I remember the day vividly. I was sitting on the cold, stone floor of our humble living room, reading *Great Expectations*. I had already read it before. I was reading it again not out of interest, but out of boredom. I felt a sense of comfort in the fact that I knew what was going to

happen. My mother walked in after coming back from work. It was strange but she never told me what her job was; only that it required her to visit many houses and work for long hours. “I told you not to sit on the floor,” she said, placing her coat on the table, “You’ll catch a cold.”

I rolled my eyes and moved to the sofa. “I got something for you.” She removed a large book from her bag and placed it on my lap.

The Method of Loci. “A maths book?” I looked at her and frowned. “We learnt about this years ago.”

“Not that loci!” she laughed, taking the book and opening it to a page she had bookmarked. “It’s a memory technique.”

My ears instantly sharpened. I took the book from her hands and scanned the page. “A memory palace?” I asked.

My mother nodded. “Might be useful for you.” She handed me my sweater from the floor. A pretty pink woollen one that she had knit for me a few years earlier. Knitting was her secret talent. She would spend the weekends knitting hats and sweaters and would give them to all the children in the neighbourhood, taking nothing in return. I took my jacket from her hands reluctantly, and slowly slipped it on, my eyes still on the book.

I was in cave 158. This was where I kept sensitive information, mainly passwords. This cave was one of the finest *Nirvana* caves at the site, where the *Nirvana Buddha* was the theme of the cave. I observed him carefully. The great prince Siddhartha, who had all the pleasures and riches of life. I pictured the heart shaped leaves, the outward reaching branches and thick trunk of the Bodhi tree, under which he gained enlightenment. The Nirvana Buddha was in a reclining posture, different from the lying posture adopted by the dead of the mundane world, indicating that attaining Nirvana was different from normal death. I wondered at that moment, whether I would attain Nirvana in this life. Would I be able to let go of all worldly desires? Could I detach myself from attachment itself?

*If
Mercilessly,
I am thrown,
Broken,
By the devil's command.*

“I visited my mother again.” I fiddled with a loose string of my sweater.

“You did?” he asked, looking at me with suspicion.

“She gave this to me.” I took a small brown paper pouch from my pocket and placed it in his hand, which was cold and stiff. “You need to start wearing gloves.”

He smirked and carefully opened the pouch. “Money plant?” he asked, emptying the seeds into his hand.

“*Ficus Religiosa*.” I said.

Ah, he mouthed. “Did your mother physically give this to you?”

I frowned. “She couldn’t have figuratively given it to me could she?” I was confused and a little hurt. This phenomenon of doubting my stories of encounters with my mother was occurring more often. “She thought I could do with some enlightenment in my life.”

“Enlightenment doesn’t come by itself,” he said. “You have to gain it.”

“I know.” I wanted to change the topic. “Have you planted the lilac chrysanthemums yet?”

“Where’s the space?” he laughed.

I walked over to the balcony. I felt a sharp coldness as my bare feet left the carpet “Can I take one?”

He shrugged. I chose a pot with white ones. Just as I was about to pick it up, I suddenly felt dizzy. The world swirled around me as a vision entered my mind. “White dress...” I whispered, gasping for air. For a second I thought I would faint, but after a few seconds I stabilised. I had a pit in my stomach as I walked back into the room. “White dress?” he asked, studying my face as he was looking for something. “Were you at a wedding?”

“A funeral.” I said. “White is the colour of death for us. We wear red at weddings.”

He seemed to suddenly become more alert. “Whose funeral?”

I shrugged. “I can’t remember. But I remember all the other details.”

This was true. I remember the silent car ride, my uncle at the wheel. My sister was too young to understand what was happening, so we had to make up some story. But even after racking my brains I couldn’t remember who had died.

“Have you been into the caves yet?” he asked carefully, not wanting to tip the boat.

“There’s nothing wrong with me.” I was angry this time, but deep inside I felt that something was indeed wrong. I never forgot anything, what was different about this?

“I’m going to talk to my mother.” I said, picking up my things and walking towards the door. “Maybe she will know.”

“You may be surprised,” he said cryptically.

In the moment I was too preoccupied to react. But that night it kept haunting me like a stalker that was always lurking in the shadows. Why would I be surprised? What did he know that I didn’t?

*Tears.
Not of sadness,
Of fatigue,
Abandoned.
My search decays.*

I closed my eyes again. Slowly I entered the cave I had been reluctant to enter. Beads of cold sweat appeared on my forehead, my knees shaking slightly as I opened my eyes. I didn’t want to come to this cave because I had lost my memory of it. It was as if a chunk of my palace had collapsed and now it was a void. I knew of its existence but not of its contents. Many times in the past I had tried to enter this cave, but something would stop me. As I looked around, I tried to find something that could possibly trigger my memory. The first three walls had paintings that didn’t stir any recollection. Just as I was about to lose hope, I turned to the last wall and... there. I looked at the statue in front of me, cross-legged, intelligent and peaceful,

and remembered my mother's explanation many years ago. This was the last cave I had visited with my mother. *Maitreya. He will come in the future and teach pure Dharma.* Suddenly the floodgates of my memory opened. This is the cave where I stored everything related to her. But why had I forgotten about it? Suddenly in the shadows I noticed a figure slowly walking towards me. I recognised the long, straight hair, the small stature and the distinctive pointed nose. "Mama?" I stood in confusion. "What are you doing here?"

"I've been here for many years," she said softly. "And you've been visiting me."

I stood in bewilderment. The reality of my world had just disintegrated into chaos. "Do you not remember?" she asked.

The words were already ingrained in my head. "I came here looking for answers."

In that moment it occurred to me that I couldn't have completely forgotten some memories, there was a reason my instinct brought me to this particular cave. A part of me must have held onto the memory. Entropy. The chaos could only increase, not decrease. I realised now that it was always there, just lost in the maze of the caves. But it was broken into fragments that were waiting to be put back together. I looked around and watched as the pieces slowly assembled. *The white dress.* Now I remembered. "Did you plant the fig tree?" my mother asked.

I nodded but was distracted. "How come I don't remember coming here?" I asked in frustration.

"You were living in the moment," my mother answered, her eyes soft and gentle.

It was as if the frustration that radiated from me melted as it touched my mother.

"I was living a lie." I seethed. "Why didn't you ever tell me?"

"You weren't living a lie." she walked closer to me and placed my hand in hers. "You just hadn't accepted the truth yet."

Hot, angry tears rolled down my face. Slowly, that anger turned into sweet sadness. I held my mother, not wanting to let go. "Maitreya." she said once my tears had seized. "He is here."

"I thought he would come in the future." I said, looking up at the statue.

"These are *your* caves, *your* locus." She put a warm hand on my tear-stained cheek. "The higher power exists eternally in our minds."

I must have fallen asleep in my mother's arms. When I woke up I found myself back in the comfort of my bedroom, with a raven feather in my hand.

One.

Element of surprise,

To lighten,

Brighten,

These tedious days.

That evening I visited the memorial hall. I wore the same white dress I had worn twenty years ago. As I knelt down, I closed my eyes. *Samsara.* The cycle of birth, death and rebirth. To free our souls from this cycle we had to attain Nirvana. I spoke to Maitreya that day. He sat in front of me, cross-legged, and suddenly my doubts dissolved.

Instead of white chrysanthemums, I offered fig leaves. My mother had attained Nirvana.

The Monk and the Mogao Grottoes

Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Lam, Errin - 17

WHAT IS YOUR PURPOSE?

"I had a vision of these caves," The monk laid a hand on the wall. "Of a thousand Buddhas swathed in golden light."

THERE IS NO BUDDHA HERE.

"There is not." Said the monk thoughtfully. "But there could be."

The monk's name was Yue Zun. *Yue* meant joy, and *Zun* meant nobility, and the cave had never seen a human like him.

The travellers that passed through were few and far between. The cave gave them the shelter they sought, tucking them into its nooks, standing resolutely against the lashing winds and the seething sands. Because what was a passing storm? It had calmly watched seas rise and skies fall and the land freeze over and burn anew, and it was unscathed but for the slow weathering away of the stone. A thousand years and more it had stood, patiently allowing the wind to scrape and scratch and slice with tiny grains of sand that threw themselves over and over against the rock, steadily hollowing it out.

The cave did not mind. That was nature.

Humans did not stay long. Most simply wanted a shelter for the night, and the cave did not fault them for that. It understood the primal, animalistic instinct for survival. It was practical.

Yue Zun's decision to stay was not.

He was a devout Buddhist. Over his yellow *zhiduo*, which pooled on the ground now as he knelt, he wore a dark *kesa* that wrapped around his left shoulder. A string of wooden mala beads was looped around his wrist.

The cave did not expect him to be there when the sun warmed the stone the next morning. But he was awake at first light, and already moving with purpose.

WHAT ARE YOU DOING?

"I shall make this a place of worship. This is a beautiful place, and there is beauty in faith." The monk was mixing water into dry dyes. "Have faith, friend."

The cave did not move, but the sands shifted in its wake, grains swirling gently on the ground. It did not consider itself a beautiful place; it was but a splotch of slate grey against a dull, barren landscape. It understood the state of existing. It understood the real, the material, the tangible. It did not understand faith.

GO HOME, CHILD. THERE IS NOTHING FOR YOU HERE.

"There is always something if one is looking."

YOU SEEK YOUR GOD. YOU CANNOT FIND A GOD IN AN EMPTY STONE CAVE.

"My God is anywhere I look for Him," replied Yue Zun. "He is wherever I pass on His teachings."

Hours later the monk stepped back from the wall, setting the brush down. Buddha smiled down now, the paint still wet as the Yue Zun brought his hands together in prayer, the

beads of his *mala* slipping between his fingers one by one in a steady rhythm. The cave was soundless save for the gentle scrape of wood over skin.

It was a hundred and eight beads before the monk opened his eyes again. The cave waited, not out of any sense of faith, but respect for the ritual.

THAT IS BUT A LAYER OF PAINT. IT IS EPHEMERAL. FLEETING. A MERE SANDSTORM WILL EVISCERATE IT.

“I shall paint more.”

YOU WILL NOT ALWAYS BE THERE TO PAINT MORE. IN A CENTURY IT WILL CRACK AND PEEL AND FADE.

“Then I had better find someone to be there.”

The next one was Fa Liang. The cave watched in bemused acceptance as the two monks dug shovels into a weaker area of rock, chiselling the stone loose. “Have faith.” Said Yue Zun, wiping sweat from his brow. “There will be many more caves like this one, all in their own time. I have seen it.” He said, and he sounded so sure of himself that a gust of wind swept like laughter through the cave.

Together they dug an entirely new cavern connected to the cave, and set up burning incense. They prayed. They meditated. One taught the other and the next day the roles of teacher and student would be reversed. Days passed, weeks passed, and more people came. They came slowly, like the trickle of a small brook, and Yue Zun took them all in.

The cave had not had this many visitors in a long time.

Yue Zun taught his new students patiently, preaching his values. He spoke of gods and ghosts, of death and reincarnation, and the cave listened. It did not have much else to do. As the number of people grew, the number of paintings on the walls grew. A few grew into dozens, dozens into hundreds. They dug another cavern. And another.

All that sweat, and for what? The water of their life seeped into the dry air, into the parched ground, and the sands shifted and swirled. The cave – caves? – had never seen a God. It had never seen their Buddha. How strong was this belief, to draw people here in the masses, like moths flocking to the light?

Yet they toiled, and for each person that came, the caves gained another painting of their God. Some were beautiful and some were not, but all were sincere. And when hundreds grew into a thousand, the caves lost count. It was surprised so many people had come, that so many people could believe in a shared concept for which it could see no proof.

WHY DO YOU BELIEVE?

“That is the secret, I think,” said the monk. “We do not have to see it to believe it. That is what it means to have faith.”

But faith was useless, the caves reflected. Faith was a concept, intangible and untouchable. They erected a God. They praised him and worshipped him. When their skies darkened, they prayed to bequeath false optimism upon themselves. They imagined him in the place of stars, and they liked to think that his light guided them when they were walking blind across the unforgiving desert.

But the pilgrims persisted, and the caves looked upon its inhabitants with a sort of bemused tolerance. The sound of scraping beads became a constant in the low murmur of conversation that drifted contentedly through the caves. They planted crops, the toughest vegetables that could grow in this harsh climate. What resourcefulness, to be able to nurture life even here!

Then a dust storm came and ripped all the plants up by their roots, bashing them against the dusty ground while the pilgrims huddled within the caverns.

“It is alright,” Yue Zun said calmly when the storm was over and people looked to him for guidance. “We can regrow them and plant them in a more sheltered area.” Once he was alone, the caves spoke again.

WHY DO YOU WANT TO STAY HERE?

“Look around.” The monk’s voice was placid as he rearranged his *mala* beads. “Look what they have built. Look how they are so willing to rebuild and recover. They stay for faith. So do I.”

And they did rebuild. They rebuilt and expanded, digging more caverns and filling the grey stone walls with light. Several groups of pilgrims left. The caves wondered vaguely with a stirring of sand if they had gone off to seek better prospects than a life pursuing faith, but then monasteries sprung up around them and although Yue Zun never left the caves, he sent pilgrims to visit them.

Scrolls piled up in caverns, the art and literature all made by people worshipping the religion. They made more paintings and inked scriptures onto the walls. Yue Zun wore an easy smile when he taught the ones who wanted to learn. There were people next to him, teaching and learning in tandem. They wrote poems, they made art, they believed, and every day the golden sun rose on a thousand Buddhas.

There came a time, then, when Yue Zun had to leave. Because he was human. He was ephemeral and he was fleeting and so was that very first painting, but his belief was not.

I THINK I HAVE FAITH, NOW.

“That is good, old friend.”

Fiction

Group 6

The Chocolate Key and the Mogao Grottoes Tale

Hong Kong Red Cross John F. Kennedy Centre, Chan, Pang Sang Isaac - 11

Iszaman was near the city of Mogaozhen zip-lining in the mountains and exploring bamboo forests on his off-road 4-wheeler. Iszaman is a superhero and explorer who can survive in the desert because he has reptile skin.

After a long day of excitement, Iszaman was at a restaurant having a cup of mint tea, chicken kabobs, flat-bread, and roasted chilli. The waiter gave him the bill. He noticed that under the bill was a note that said,

“Help us! In the bathroom, behind the toilet is a box. In the box is something you need to go to the Mogao Caves. Please help us! They’re taking everything!”

Iszaman stood up and went quietly to the bathroom. He searched behind the toilet and found an ancient-looking box filled with chocolate! Iszaman took a large piece of chocolate and broke it open. Inside, he found an old key that looked like it was 1500 years old.

Iszaman looked around for a camel. There, 100 metres from him was a group of camels that were wild. He ran up to his favourite one and climbed up on top of the camel and yelled, “Move!”

After a long, hot day of riding, Iszaman and his camel were tired. On the horizon were the ancient Mogao Caves surrounded by desert. He continued to the caves to sleep for the night.

Iszaman woke up in the middle of the night and noticed the camel was gone! Someone had stolen his camel. He noticed another camel with a man holding a knife coming towards him.

“What are you doing here?” asked the dirty looking man.

“I am exploring the Mogao Caves looking for snakes in this area. I am a snake collector,” replied Iszaman.

“I will leave tomorrow,” promised Iszaman.

“You better leave,” warned the wicked man.

The next day, Iszaman was exploring the caves. He found the man stealing the statues, gold, silver and sparkly gems. Iszaman became angry at seeing this.

He turned a secret knob on his belt and yelled, “Power of Snake!” Iszaman turned into a snake and slithered towards the man.

“Oh, my goodness, a six metre, blue snake!” yelled the man. He pulled out his large knife. He tried to stab the snake. Iszaman, the blue snake quickly wrapped himself around the nasty man and squeezes. The man cried and dropped his knife. Iszaman let the man go as he ran away in pain.

“Iszaman, thank you for helping us,” said the large, turquoise statue behind him.

“Wow, a statue that talks!” replied Iszaman, surprised.

“You have protected us from the thieves. As a reward, we will allow you to go into the Chamber of Chocolate,” said the statue.

Suddenly, the ancient key flew out of his pocket onto the large, stone table. Behind the table was a six metre, wooden door. Iszaman took the key and put the key in the keyhole. Suddenly, the door opened. In front of him, Iszaman saw a cave full of different shapes and sizes of chocolate.

Iszaman ate all the chocolate and he said, “It is tasty”. Then Iszaman was full of power

The Adventure of the Magao Grottoes

International College of Hong Kong, Bridgeford, Hana - 11

It was the sunrise. An explorer was walking in the desert. The sand was cold and soft. She slowly trudged along the sand. On the horizon the sun was setting and she found sand footprints left in the desert. The explorer continued walking through the desert. She felt good about the adventure ahead.

The King has set many explorers the challenge to find the famous missing pearls from the Mogao Grottoes.

The race was on to find the pearls within the grotto. How would she be the first to find the golden pearl's deep within the Mogao Grottoes? Poppy knew they were deep inside the grotto but how was she going to find them?

Poppy raced through the caves. The corridors were dark and long. She saw huge statues and carvings around her. Poppy saw the pearl she was excited to be the first. As she was leaving the grottoes she heard a sound. It was a prince. The prince was also looking for the pearl. The prince stole the pearl from the explorer Poppy. Someone wrote a letter and sent it to the prince exposing the details of where the stolen pearl was so that he could find them first. Poppy was scared about the pearls being stolen from her and thought the challenge had failed.

When she set off on the King's mission Poppy was well prepared as she was afraid that something would go wrong. She took out a bottle of sleeping potion from her pocket. The potion was made of sleeping leaves, jumping night, water and deadly leaves. Two drops of this magical potion will put a person to sleep immediately and slowly die. Poppy followed the prince and poured the potion in to his water bottle. He took a sip and he fell asleep. Poppy took back the pearl and escaped the Grottoes.

As she arrived outside the Grottoes the King was waiting for her ready to crown her the winner. The King was happy to have the pearl and Poppy was happy to win the race.

The Adventure of the Magao Grottoes

International College of Hong Kong, Chung, Karson - 12

It was 3:30. An explorer was walking in the desert. The sand was soft. He slowly trudged along the sand. On the horizon the sun was setting. He followed the sandy footprint left in the desert. As the man continued to walk through the desert, he felt proud about the adventure ahead.

The King had set Hank the challenge to find the treasure. Hank knew it was deep inside the Mogao Grottoes but how was he going to find it? The race was on against Pirate Bruce. Who would be the first to find the treasure deep within the Mogao Grottoes?

Hank saw the temple as he walked towards the Mogao Grotto.

It was opened.

The temple has 8 floors. Each floor has stairs. Under the temple was a red door and he opened the door. He opened the huge door and he saw a corridor. The corridor looked like a bright cave. He crept into the bright corridor.

As he entered the next room he looked around for the hidden treasure. He saw a gold buddha in the hidden treasure.

Hank picks up the treasure and he heard pirate Bruce

Say Aha! Hank felt scared.

As he enters the next room he looks around for the hidden treasure.

Pirate Bruce grabs a treasure. Hank was afraid but he shouted

"Look over there!" yelled hank.

Pirate Bruce looked away and Hank grabbed the treasure back. He ran away.

Hank felt excited and opened the treasure box. He saw silver jewelries inside the box. He brought the treasure home.

The Adventure of the Magao Grottoes

International College of Hong Kong, Law, Wai Lok - 12

It was 8:30. An explorer was walking in the desert. The sun shone upon it. He walked along the sand. On the horizon, the sun was setting. He followed sandy footprints left in the desert. As the explorer continued to walk through the desert, he felt excited about the adventure ahead.

The King had set Hang the explorer a challenge to find the pearl. Hang knew it was deep inside the empty Mogao Grottoes, but how was he going to find it? The race was on against Hang with Hank, another explorer. Who would be the first to find the pearl deep within the Mogao Grottoes?

Hang saw a temple as he walked towards the Mogao Grottoes. It was scary. Outside, the grottos were empty. The temple had 8 floors. Each floor was terrifying. Under each floor was a red door. Hang opened the door. He opened the red door and he saw light coming from the path. He crept into the terrifying caves. There was a door at the end of the corridor. Hang opened the door and saw a long staircase. He walked on it and he was scared. His legs were tired in distress from climbing the staircase. After he climbed to the top, he saw scary murals and statues around him. The statues were colourful, but scary. He was scared.

Later, he heard a sound coming from an area. He went there to see it. When he got there, he saw the pearl! Hang was excited to take it home. Hang jumped on to the stone and grabbed the pearl. Hang went back up. He was very excited to show the king that he had got it.

Oh no! Hank appeared from under the arches.

“I am finally here!” said Hank. “I am going to take your treasure.”

“No, please don’t take my treasure!” cried Hang.

Hank grabbed a sword with his bare hands. Hank took Hang’s treasure and attacked him. Hang was very mad and furious with Hank. He attacked them back and took his treasure back. Hang took the sword from Hank and sliced him. Hank died. Hang ran out of the Grotto.

Hank was very happy to have his treasure back and he walked lots and lots of miles on his way home. When he returned home he went to the palace and gave the treasure to the King. The King was very happy and thanked Hang for finding the treasure.

The Adventure of the Magao Grottoes

International College of Hong Kong, Mohinani, Kimberly - 12

It was 6.30 in the morning. An explorer was walking through the desert. The sand was yellow. On the horizon the sun was setting. He followed some sandy footsteps. He slowly trudged along. As the man continued to walk in the desert, he felt excited about the adventure ahead.

The King had set Hank the explorer a challenge to find the golden treasure. Hank accepted the challenge but how was he going to find it?

Hank saw the dark caves as he walked towards the Mogao Grottoes. It was a huge cave. Outside it was a beautiful cave. He opened the door and it was dark. When he opened the door he felt happy. Light was coming from the roof. The corridor was gloomy like the mornings. There was a door at the end of the corridor. The boy felt excited. He was about to find the golden treasure. As he entered the next room he looked around for the hidden treasure. He saw lots of statues. He heard footsteps. The explorer was looking for the missing treasure. The boy found the golden treasure. He looked at the rock.

Oh no, something happened. He looked for the golden treasure. He dropped the golden treasure. He had to get it back! The explorer climbed down the hole and grabbed the treasure. He climbed back up with his hands. Finally he got out.

Hank escaped the cave with the treasure. He felt happy. The King was happy. The explorer became famous!

The Adventure of the Magao Grottoes

International College of Hong Kong, Overholsen, Kenzo - 12

It was nighttime. The explorer was walking in the desetre. The sand was hot. He slowly trudged in the sand towards the horizon. The sun was setting. The explorer followed sandy footprints that were left in the desert. As the man continued to walk through the desert he felt sad about it. He felt happy. He felt angry about the adventure ahead. The Queen had set Kenzo the explorer the challenge to find a gold medal. Kenzo knew it was in the Mogao Grottoes but how was he going to find it?

Kenzo walked towards the Mogao Grottoes. As he walked it was sunny. The temple was inside the mountains.

On each level was a man hiding inside a hole. Suddenly, a monkey landed on the boy's shoulder and led him into the cave. Inside the cave there was a bridge. He went into the corridor, ran up the stairs. As he entered the cave and saw a buddha.

In the cave, he saw the treasure. The gold medal was in the rocks. Kenzo saw a monster, he climbed up to the top of the mountain.

The Adventure of the Magao Grottoes

International College of Hong Kong, Ransom, Jake - 11

It was the afternoon. An explorer was walking in the desert. The sand was hot. He trudged slowly along the sand. On the horizon the sun was setting. He followed sandy footsteps left in the desert. His feet felt roasting in the hot sand as he continued to walk through the desert he felt proud about the adventure ahead.

Sam, the explorer, met a boy called Jeff as he walked towards the Mogao Grotto. Jeff challenged Sam to find bitcoin and gold. It was in the Mogao Grottoes. As he walked towards it he saw that the temple had 8 floors. Each floor 6 windows. Under the windows was a red door. Sam opened the door.

He opened the huge door and he saw bright light shining. The corridor looked like a tunnel. He crept into the dark corridor towards the beam of light. He had to search for the gold. He walked into the next room. It was dark and there was gold all around him. He had found the gold.

Sam opened the door to leave and he saw a ginormous buddha laying down on a wooden bed. As he started to walk towards the buddha he heard footsteps. He turned around and saw the buddhas were come alive. Sam ran as quick as he could. He saw a big drain at the end of the door. He jumped inside the drain and quickly locked the drain door as the buddha was too big to follow him. Sam escaped with the gold through the drainpipe.

Jeff was waiting outside the temple for Sam. He was excited to see the gold. Sam and Jeff used the gold to buy Bitcoin. Finally they were rich!

The Adventure of the Magao Grottoes

International College of Hong Kong, Tong, Josiah - 12

It was 6:30. An explorer was walking in the desert. The sand was soft. He slowly trudged along the sand. On the horizon the sun was setting. He followed sandy footprints left in the desert. As the man continued to walk through the desert he felt proud about the adventure ahead.

The King had set Hank the explorer the challenge to find the gold. Hank knew it was deep inside the Mogao Grottoes but how was he going to find it?

The race was on against Marisa. Who would be the first to find the gold deep within the mogao Grottoes?

Hank saw the blue sky as he walked towards the Mogao Grottoes. It was large. The temple has eight floors. Each floor has windows. Under the window was a red door. Hank opened the door.

He opened the huge door and he saw a corridor. The corridor looked like a mountain. He crept into the short corridor. There was a door at the end of the corridor.

As he enters the next room he looks around for the hidden treasure. The explorer found the missing treasure. He walked down the rocks and sees the treasure box. The box is hidden in the snow.

The treasure looked like colourful candies. Oh no! Something has happened. The box is stuck in the snow.

'Oh no!' said Hank.

He pulled the treasure box out of the snow using his hands. He felt very happy and brought the treasure box and shared it with his family.

The Adventure of the Magao Grottoes

International College of Hong Kong, Vora, Jaanav - 13

It was a boiling hot day. Jake was walking in the desert, the sand was like fire, he slowly trudged along the sand. On the horizon, the sun was setting. Jake followed the sandy footprints left in the desert. As he continued to walk through the desert he felt excited about the adventure ahead.

Yesterday, Jake was told of a mysterious treasure in the Mogao Grottoes along the famous Silk Road. Like many explorers, Jake was tempted by gold, god, or glory. The idea of gold hit him. He must find the secret treasure in the Mogao Grottoes but where would it be?

Jake saw the sun rising as he walked towards the Mogao Grottoes. It was humongous. Outside the giant tower, the temple had eight floors. Outside each floor was a ginormous red door under a tiled ledge. Gently, Jake opened the door.

As Jake opened the huge door he saw the narrow, endless, slippery corridor that looked like a cave. He crept into a dark hallway with beams of light seeping through the rocks and sand. Another door was at the end of the corridor. Behind the door was a huge statue. The huge statue looked like a giant buddha lying down in front of a crowd. Behind him was about a hundred people carved into the wall. He heard some air whistling through the gaps. He moved the statue of a buddha to the side so that he could get through. At the end of the corridor, there was a diamond cat statue in the middle of the gold coins and jewels everywhere.

When Jake took the diamond cat suddenly something terrible happened. Right after he took it, the stone under the diamond cat moved a gigantic ball which came to try and kill him. Then whatever he was holding on to, to get away from it slipped. He had to make a huge hole to escape. He tried to get out but he could not get out. So there were three holes, only one could let him out and two would lead him to death. The middle one is the one he went through and he came out with the treasure.

He walked 1 kilometre, on his way home, Suddenly 50 native archers popped up and started to try to kill him to get the jewels and all the treasure. Then when he arrived home he went straight to bed because it was pitched dark outside. After he went to bed an archer tiptoed through his window to take the treasure back to the Mogao Grottoes. But Jake caught him and choked him to death. After that he kicked him out of his house and grabbed the diamond cat from his hands. He put it in a safe place in his house. The treasure was safe and Jake was rich.

Warden of Eirene

St. Stephen's Girls' College, Siu, Natalie - 13

If you know of the mouth of the Earth, the one which devours many players in the game Life, you'd also know of the **Warden**. The Earth is ours as much as she owns us. She has taken care of mankind and the civilizations which came before us. Yet as we failed her, ruining her landscape as other species crumbled around us, evil began to rise within the Earth's core. It tunneled out, creating passageways that led many to their demise. It was said that the Earth still wanted mankind to survive, but the evil within her was gatekeeping her, and like a prisoner **Warden**, patrolled and kept her true intentions to let mankind survive, even if it meant killing her, contained within a prison called 'Pandora's Vault', a cavern that looped on forever and ever, the exit nonexistent.

The Warden is who controls the cave mouths that so many fall into, and it chooses to devour those who fall into his mouth, which are cavern mouths humans in search of riches and wonder wander into, just to meet their demise.

However, recently, at least to the **Warden**, humanity began the process of fracking, taking its precious children to the surface, to be burnt, destroyed and transformed into childish toys of creatures long ago. Nevertheless, humans kept on sucking all the lifeblood from the Warden, which in turn allowed the Warden to see the Overworld, the land above darkness.

The Warden's children were made of oil, a substance reeking of darkness and evil, a chemical that fueled the Industrial Revolution and the eyes of a blind demon. Shulk sensors form within oil barrels, listening, and most importantly, watching us all. As oil spread around the earth, the shulk sensors kept watching, and monitoring humanity.

Many who had been in search of salvation for the Earth ended in a quick death, painful but fast for lasted only a second, a fleeting vision that flew through their lives before they floated into unconsciousness. History always repeats itself - foolish adventurers trying again and again to defeat the Warden - all attempts ending in demise.

You were one of the few who knew of the Warden's danger, and you will be the one to stop it. There was no doubt in your mind, you would be the one to finally put an end to the Warden. Hopefully.

As you follow the trail left by the foolish adventurers before you, you spot an oily streak, dark as the void, on the deepslate floor: *you were repeating history you knew it but you can't stop it happening again* Immediately, it noticed your staring eyes burning into it, and it, similar to how a large slug would, slid down and away, edging you onwards into the shadowy void of the cave. In the darker, gloomy crevices of the cave, you see shulk sensors, waving their tendrils above, below, just everywhere. Every footstep you took left an echoing clomp on the cavern floor. Cursing your decision to wear heavy soled boots, you make your descent into your likely doom, placing torches to light your way, hoping they wouldn't burn out by the time you left, if you even managed to survive: *you ignored the little voice in your head that knew you wouldn't survive.*

You were tiptoeing down the slippery slope of the cave, when you felt a sharp pain near your foot, and you let out a cry of anguish. Luckily, you had just stubbed your toe on a protruding dripstone stalagmite. But as you steadied your footing, your eardrums seemed to shatter, as an ear deafening roar circled though the enormous cavern.

The cool, damp floor came up to meet your back, as a loud CRASH rang out though the cave. You scanned your surroundings for danger once more, and saw, ahead of you, the Warden. Scrambling to your feet, you dashed to the side. However, the Warden did not move towards you, but towards your footsteps. As still as the stone surrounding you, you tried your best to stay silent, as the Warden headed in the direction of your previous fall.

As you silently curse your decision to wear boots once more, the Warden slowed its movement towards you, and seemed to be rapt in thought. Out of the corner of your eye, you spot tentacles waving, the very tentacles attached to shulk sensors. You were done for.

Those same tentacles you gave little thought to before now grappled you, as they snatched you up and away into the ceiling. You begged to whoever holy that you wouldn't be impaled by the dripstone stalactites you spotted earlier, and Lady Luck seemed to answer your prayers, and you were rammed into a fairly smooth ceiling.

Lady Luck didn't stay to watch the battle, however, as you were immediately released by the tendrils. Everything was still a blur as you fell from the ceiling as those adventurers before you fell from grace, and the floor came up to meet you once more. You hear glass shattering, and your phone felt like it was in pieces, inside your pocket.

You felt warm liquid pooling around your body, and you smelt blood. The heat was comforting in the cold cavern, as you felt like it was freezing. Perhaps it was, but you didn't have much longer to live.

The Warden, hearing the loud CRASH of your fall, charged towards you. You had no energy to move, or motivation to dodge. You simply lay there, not even making an attempt to roll over, as the Warden slammed into you and you bounced off the wall again. Your eyes fluttered open for the final time, and then shut, to stay like that for an eternity.

History itself will not repeat, but it rhymed.