

Fiction

Group 3



The Mystery of the Buddha Visions

Canadian International School of Hong Kong, Kay, Heung Ching Jasmine – 11

It wasn't until 1960 that the Chinese government decided to take a special interest in the legendary Mogao Caves...

It all started when I volunteered me and my friend, Mei, to go to the Silk Road and retrieve artefacts from the Mogao caves. It was because I had a bunch of weird dreams about Buddhas. Plus the Mogao grottoes were known as the temple of a thousand Buddhas.

So I had a lot of strange dreams about Buddhas. Buddha eating fried noodles, Buddha driving a car... You get the idea right? So weird. Mei and I are both archeologists for the same boss. When our boss introduced the Mogao caves to us, I knew we had to take the mission.

Maybe I can snoop around the temple while finding artefacts and find out why I'm having these visions!

On the way to the grottoes, Mei was really mad at me. When I rode my camel close to hers, she steered hers away! She was practically ignoring me! Sheesh.

'This isn't so bad. If you think about it, it's like an adventure,' I cleared my throat and spoke dramatically, 'It was 1960 in Silk road, China. And we are on a quest to collect the treasures of the legendary Mogao caves.'

Mei scowled at me, 'It is also super hot out here. I wanted to research the Great Wall of China. You should think before you act, you know?' I frowned, she wasn't wrong. She wasn't the one with the weird dreams. We continued the journey in silence.

When we arrived at the Mogao Grottoes, we immediately started scavenging through all the sandstone caves and tunnels. And to my surprise, everything was in ruin. We retrieved torn paintings, broken vases and cracked Buddha sculptures.

Oh yeah. I have to investigate the source of my Buddha dreams!

I peeked at Mei. She was concentrated on fixing a broken relic.

Yes! I can sneak around on my own!

I put down the sculpture I was holding and slipped out of that cave, abandoning my task. I speed-walked and poked my head into every cave.

Anything about Buddha? No. Is it just me, or is this super weird? Isn't this place supposed to have a lot of Buddha-related stuff? You know, also being called "Thousand Buddha Grottoes"? Well, there are 491 caves in this place. This is going to take me foreeeever.

I glanced inside another cave. Just some more vases and paper.

Wait!

I stopped, doubled back.

Is that a tapestry of a thousand Buddhas on the wall? Ooh.

All right, this was definitely a sign that I had to check out this cave. The tapestry covered half of a wall. This was so cool... until I tripped on a large rock and scraped my knee.

Ouch.

I put my hand on the wall to stable myself, but my hand went through! Huh? There was no wall under the tapestry!

I slid the silky tapestry to the ground. A secret cave? Whoah. I was itching to go in and explore. But... I just remembered what Mei told me. That I had to think before I act. Ugh, fine. I ran back to the cave where Mei was.

'Where were you?' Mei eyed me suspiciously.

'Never mind that,' I said, 'I have an amazing discovery you have to see!' I grabbed a lamp, pulled her arm, dragged her to the tapestry cave. I showed her the secret alcove. She was so not expecting that.

'What? Huh? How?' Mei stammered, looking shocked and confused at the same time.

'I'll tell you later,' I replied quickly, 'But first, let's go through that cave!' I lit the lamp and we ducked into the cave, both nervous about what we would find inside.

I hope there are no dead bodies! What?

THEY FREAK ME OUT.

The dimly lit cave was full of paintings, jewellery and vases. Everything was so perfectly preserved. Wow.

'Are you seeing this Mei?' I gasped.

'Yeah...' She replied, stunned. We moved towards the artefacts and examined them. I lifted a vase, and underneath was a scroll?

Wait whaat.

The paper was surprisingly thick. It was covered in dusty characters I couldn't decipher.

'Mei!' I called to her, 'I found a scroll. Could you read this and see when this was printed? Maybe it's older than the one from 868 AD.' Mei nodded, took the scroll from me and started trying to read old Chinese. I took the chance to search for Buddha stuff. I looked at the paintings on the walls. It had dragons and Buddhas and, um, is that my boss?

Eating fried noodles and driving a car?

Wait.

WAIT.

Does this mean that our boss is actually Buddha in disguise?!

'Ugh,' Mei said, 'I'm fluent in reading old Chinese characters, but these words are all jumbled up!'

Hmm... The book wouldn't have random words without a reason... or the paintings.

I paced up and down. Suddenly, I stopped. That's it! These paintings show things we have now, cars and fried noodles, but they didn't have those at the time they made the paintings. So they must have known about the future! The words could be modern Chinese! But they sure don't look like the words I read today. So... maybe we need to read the words from left to right. Instead of top to bottom. That's how we read modern Chinese! I told Mei and she read the scroll again. Her eyes widened with surprise. I'm guessing it worked.

'What is it about?' I blurted. I peeked at the scroll behind her shoulder.

This is what it said:

I saw some monks taking advantage of traders coming through the caves and stealing their valuables. And I wrote this just after the monks became corrupted. I hid this scroll where the crooked monks hid the stolen treasures. Whoever uncovers this scroll, please return these valuables to China and let these caves be protected and cared for. Protect the caves, whether it is the outside or inside. Knowledge is yet to be discovered.

From, Buddha

Whaaat. MONKS were the ones who hid these treasures?! And they were STOLEN?! BUDDHA wrote the scroll?! This is waay too much to take in.

And why was "inside. Knowledge is yet to be discovered." on a different line?

inside. Knowledge is yet to be discovered.

Inside. Knowledge is yet to be discovered.

Inside, knowledge is yet to be discovered.

Ohh. It's like a secret code! But inside where, knowledge is yet to be discovered? Discover what? Why would Buddha write this in the scroll? Oops sorry. I meant, ON the scroll.

Wait.

Inside the SCROLL, knowledge is yet to be discovered?! Is that why the paper is so thick? I carefully ripped the side of the paper in half. It tore a bit, but it's ok. I gasped. Ink words filled the halves of the paper.

'MEI,' I yelled, with my eyes still focused on the hidden writing.

'What is it,' Mei groaned and walked over. She saw what I was holding and her jaw dropped. Her brows furrowed.

I am Buddha. I am god, and I can see the future. And yes, I know that you are reading this. I also knew that you would find this cave. Both of you have good souls and you must promise that whatever you read in this entire scroll has to be kept secret.

I was your boss the entire time. I gave one of you a weird dream similar to the painting of me eating fried noodles and driving a car. I forgot who I gave it to. All mortals look the same to me. I told you about the Mogao caves, knowing that you would volunteer for this mission. Like I wrote on the un-hidden scroll, "Please return these valuables to China and let these caves be protected and cared for." Do what I instructed you to.

From, Buddha

'What does he mean by "all mortals look the same to him?!" Mei ranted. 'And he didn't instruct us to do anything! He just told us to care for the caves and return the valuables...'

'Shhhhh!' I said putting a hand on Mei's mouth, 'I wouldn't keep talking if I were you. He IS the god.'

Mei scoffed, 'So? He can see the future! He probably already heard me say this already.' I ignored her and went back into my thoughts.

So...the dream he gave me was all part of his plan? That's... actually very smart. And unlike Mei, I know what Buddha wants us to do. Since we're archeologists, we can put the treasures into a museum or something. And we can't protect the caves on our own. We need to show the Chinese government how amazing these caves are. I mean. These ARE China's historical structures!

After that expedition, the Caves became a national heritage site. The government should thank me. I'm still waiting for it. I also deserve a pay rise...

Find Your Name

Canadian International School of Hong Kong, Waters, Juliette – 11

The dark embraced me like a star fading into the blackness of space, my last real thought was of the rock crumbling beneath my feet and throwing me into an endless abyss...

Catherine

Two years ago, after my parents died, my world collapsed. I ran aimlessly and eventually found myself falling into a pit. While that might sound horrible, it was the best thing that ever happened to me because through the experience I came to realise the meaning of life. Which I won't tell you (*insert evil laughter.*)

The Nameless

I awoke to the black of endless night and felt someone's eyes piercing through the darkness scrutinising my every detail. The feeling grew as I stood up and faced the direction of the glare. "I know you're there," I said fiercely, "reveal yourself!" In response, tongues of flame leapt up around me, burning down to ashes almost as soon as they had grown. I felt the gaze leave me and I was once again isolated in darkness.

Catherine

The day I arrived, I awoke to a beam of light. What really snapped me awake were the flames that surrounded me. I didn't scream like you might expect. The flames died and I fell onto the floor. I wasn't hurt in the slightest. A small figure appeared above me and spoke three words, "We must talk."

The Nameless

The next time I felt the presence of those eyes upon me I just managed to croak the word "Please" out of my mouth. The world was disappearing before my eyes, the last of my life force draining from my body.

Catherine

The figure above me was a boy of eleven years old, with a pixie-like face. He introduced himself as Robin before transforming into his avian namesake. I followed as he flew down a dark corridor.

We arrived in an underground meadow, bustling with activity. In the meadow, children of all ages were immersed in combat training. They wore blood-coloured robes with bamboo poles for weapons.

Robin, having changed back to his human form, elbowed me back to reality. We continued on to another chamber where I found myself confronted by the eight figures in their pale red robes.

One of them said in a deep voice: "Catherine, you are the newest member of the Mogao society. We are forever dedicated to keep the artefacts of the Mogao Grottoes safe from humans. We hold secrets in these caves that could both revolutionise and destroy the world."

I nodded, unsure what to do.

Robin dragged me from the chamber.

After a pause, I asked him "How did you get here?"

Robin replied "I was born here, but they make you do the trials when you're six."

The next day I was welcomed to combat training. I wasn't the most practised, but I was gifted, disarming every opponent I faced.

During lunch on the last day of my first week, a message blasted into my eardrums: "ALL TRUEBORNS TO THE HALL OF SECRETS".

My new friends from my dorm got up and I started to follow them. They noticed and Robin said "Trueborn means born in the society"

I just said "Oh. See you later."

I felt a furry nudge against my leg. I looked down at my feet to a tiger cub, jade with blood-red stripes, staring at me longingly.

I picked her up and said "I'll be yours, if you'll be mine" and she tilted her head as if to say 'sure.' I laughed and put her on the floor. She ran ahead of me chasing a butterfly. I ran with her and the worries of my world disappeared.

I wasn't waiting in the dorm very long before my friends reappeared. I whistled for my new companion and said "This is Ella."

It was late, but we stayed up for a while talking. I felt part of a family again.
In the morning, I awoke feeling refreshed, but found myself all alone except for Ella...

The Nameless

When I woke up my head felt like a bag of sand, but my body was warm. I realised I was on a bed of flames! A nearby voice said 'Good you're awake. Who are you?'
I started to stand and said "I can't remember...just that I'm looking for my sister."
I looked around the cavern and saw a girl about two years younger than me, with dark brown hair and hazel eyes. She was accompanied by a massive jade-coloured tiger that was growling protectively.
She said 'I'm Catherine, this is Ella. We're alone.'
Ignoring her comment, I asked "Where am I?"
She replied 'The Mogao Grottoes...and there is no way out'
I told her "I know how to get out, but I'll need your help..."

Catherine

Today was more eventful than all but my earliest days after my arrival nearly two years ago.
I came across a human girl barely clinging to life, who claimed to know a way out of the caves. She told me how the Grottoes were created by a mystical monk capable of wondrous things, recorded in his journals.
Apparently one day long ago, eight mysterious beings in red robes appeared before him. They promised the monk eternal blessings for his family if he promised to keep his discoveries from the human world. He agreed, knowing that humans weren't ready for his creations. He helped the eight create a society safe from humans.
When I asked what was wrong with his creations, the girl replied, 'The monk was able to generate unlimited energy that could be used to create terrible weaponry.'
She continued, 'Only a member of the Mogao society can open the portal. We have to find the journal, so we can escape.'
I looked up determinedly and said, "Let's blow this joint."

The Nameless/Maddie

Before starting to search for our exit, Catherine declared 'You need a name. How about...Maddie?'
"Thanks, I like it."
Gently I pulled an ancient map from my pocket, and asked "Do you know a way to...here?"
Catherine studied where I had pointed on the map and said, "Yeah, I think so."
We journeyed for hours before entering a dusty room, but there was no sign of a book.
Catherine slumped down to the floor, and she spoke with a quaver in her voice 'I had a sister...my family were on a plane that crashed but I survived. I ran from the wreckage, and fell into the Grottoes.'
I asked "How long have you been down here?"
She whispered in response 'two years.'
Suddenly, I felt a weight materialise in my left hand. I nudged Catherine with my elbow. I heard her gasp as she saw the journal.

Catherine

I took the book from Maddie's hand gently, opened it and read.
The flame of hope that had burned up died, I told her. "It says only the Mogao bloodline may exit."
Maddie tells me she is certain she is of the Mogao bloodline, but she would not leave me.
I interjected that "You must go, no one deserves to be trapped here."
Maddie embraced me tightly and said. 'I will never forget you. Even if I never find my sister, I am so happy to have met someone as amazing as her...'

Maddie

There is no chance I am leaving Catherine behind. In my head, I repeat that mantra in an endless loop.
On our walk back to pack some supplies for my departure, I noticed her anklet. I have a feeling of recognition as I study the indents and curves of the anklet. I try to grasp onto it but it disappears into the recesses of my brain...

Catherine

Well I guess this is it. Saying goodbye to the first person I've met in two years, and a real friend too.

We're sitting on the rock in the cavern once again. I say "Well this is goodbye."

Maddie nods solemnly. Ella pawed at Maddie sadly, and I opened the book and began to chant.

*"The bloodline of the Mogao grows,
if one is found you will know,
reach all in place of snow."*

I looked up and saw a red glow swirling on the wall, forming some sort of portal. The shape of the portal reminded me of my anklet.

I watched helplessly as Maddie said 'Goodbye Catherine' and stepped into the portal.

A tear journeyed down my face. Alone forever...

Maddie

In the last moment before I disappear in the warm glow of the portal, my memory returns like a wave of knowledge crashing into my brain. Hardly able to stand straight, I manage to whistle for Ella.

Ella seemingly understands my intent, and whams into the back of Catherine and into the portal. I hold onto her tightly and we fall into the red glow as the light fades into darkness. At the hands of darkness, we fall into a strange new place, ready to take on our next adventure, sister and sister together again...

Nine-Colored Deer and Me

Canadian International School of Hong Kong, Yim, Chun Hei Jessie – 11

During my Easter break when I was in grade three, I went to Dunhuang to see the Mogao Grottoes. I knew I would never forget that trip. On the 11th of April, I had just come back from visiting the massive landmark. Throughout the entire adventure, I was petrified by the thought of the ancient walls crushing me. On the walls of the caves, there were paintings and sculptures of mythical creatures and beings, such as the magical deer and the giant buddha. That evening, I was in my hotel room reading a book which I had just bought from the souvenir shop. The book had magical creatures and included Flying Apsaras, but my favourite story from the Mogao Grottoes was the story of the Nine-colored Deer. The story felt so realistic with all the descriptions used.

When I flipped through the pages of the book and found my favourite story of the nine-coloured deer, I felt a weird force entering my mind. Suddenly, the fur of the nine-colored deer in the book glowed so bright that it lit up the whole room. I looked at the deer and then back at myself. I knew what I wanted; I had to venture out in the night to go to the caves and find the nine-colored deer. I left right when the sun disappeared from the horizon. There was no one roaming around anywhere, so I crept out of my bed and went to find the legendary beast.

In the streets I walked, staying in the shadows. Slowly as I approached the caves, I was confused. I did not know which cave the deer lived in. So, I walked around and looked for the right grotto. And then a bright light flashed. The little light shone bright. I hid behind a bush looking for any guard here. But the streets were still empty, and the only light came from Cave No 257. I slowly crept towards the cave.

I sneaked into the cave, hoping no one would see me. Then a beam of light struck into the cave. I heard from the distance the two guards were talking. They came towards me.

They started to shout one after the other, "Is anyone here?"

I stopped at once and tried to be as still as possible.

Within a second, the second guard shouted again, "Is there someone in here? We are coming and will bring you to jail if you don't show up."

They continued to murmur as their sound grew louder.

The first guard commented, "Who could be in there?"

Then the second one said, "I don't know. Let's find out."

Slowly, they approached the cave. I was so frightened, I was frozen at the spot. Sweat was running down my spine. I knew I had no hope of surviving this moment. I knew that when they came in, I would be sent to the police. The longer I waited, the more tension grew inside of me.

When the guards were about to discover me, I disappeared into the shadows. I could not feel myself at all! Was I dissolving? A very strange light came out behind me and dragged me into the walls. There was a bright, but vague object in the middle of all the light. It was not a person, but it looked like something I read in my book. It was the...nine-colored deer! I was delighted to see it, yet I felt a weird stillness in my body that I could not move even a muscle. I screamed at the top of my voice, but nothing came out.

At that moment, I thought that I would be stuck in this wall forever. I observed the cave and I could see that the guards were confused. I looked at the guards and they looked at me. They had no clue it was me. Was I invisible? I looked at myself from the puddle on the ground. I was on the walls of the cave!

The guards murmured to each other, "I swear I saw somebody moving in here."

"Did you see a shadow moving in there?"

"I reckoned there was somebody in there."

Slowly they left me alone in the cave wall.

Once they left, the cave was dark again. But a speck of light came from the other side of the wall. The nine-colored deer galloped across the ground and touched my head. I was so excited and soon I was able to move every muscle in my body. It felt like a miracle. The deer held my arm and dragged me through the wall. Throughout the wall, I saw all the scenes from the book happening in front of my eyes.

Then the deer waved at me to follow it. She pointed forward and disappeared into the wall. I started to walk along, then she ran out of the wall and picked me up and threw me across the walls. I flew through the caves and landed right on the wall of the Nine Layered Tower. Over there, the giant buddha looked at me stone-faced. Once the deer flew into the room, she soared straight into the buddha's body and disappeared. I ran into the spot where she vanished but my attempt was in vain. Just then, there was a low but heavy voice that came above me. I stared up and saw the buddha looking at me. It waved and said "Nice to meet you." It sounded like a giant monster talking at his highest pitch.

The buddha waved and touched my face with its stony but smooth fingers. I looked up at him and smiled.

Then I asked him slowly and nervously, "Do you know where the deer is?"

The buddha smiled gently and whispered, "I am the deer."

I was so excited and I ran over to hug his giant leg and lay on it. The buddha smiled peacefully and reached for me, picked me up with his rough hand and patted my head. He lifted me up so high I could touch the roof of the nine-layered tower. I kissed his hand softly. The buddha was ticklish and moved his hand away.

I stayed still for a second and then I started to fall backwards, tumbling through the air. My body felt light. As I plummeted down, I closed my eyes to avoid knowing this may be the last minute of my life. The cave floor was hard and rough. If I fell onto the floor of the tower, everything may be over. I said goodbye to the world one last time and closed my eyes, knowing it is all over. But to my surprise, when I landed on the ground and opened my eyes, I did not see heavens but I saw the deer underneath me, laying on the ground. It felt as if she was lifeless. I was confused until I realised the deer saved me from my death. I thought she was going to leave the world until she smouldered and was there standing up straight like nothing had ever happened. I looked confused, but the deer put her head down in apology for letting me fall all the way down. I lifted her head and smiled, "It is okay to make mistakes. We are all safe now. Don't worry too much."

The deer nodded in agreement, and walked close to me and whispered, "Yesterday is controlled by our fate and it was destined. Tomorrow will come from our luck so everything is possible."

The nine-colored deer smiled and knelt down to give me a little bottle with nine glowing colours in it. It was a magical keepsake that will remind me of this moment forever.

The sun started to shine from the horizon, a little glimpse of light shone down. The deer looked around and said, "It's time for you to go, your parents are waiting."

She lifted me on her back and flew through the midnight sky. I looked around and saw the sun rising. As soon as I was in my room, the deer waved goodbye and left me in the middle of the bed. Within a minute, my mother's voice interrupted my sleep, saying, "Wake up sleepy head. Or you will be late for the plane!" I rubbed my eyes and saw myself in my room, I thought, it had to be a dream. That is when the little glass bottle shone by the side of my bed. I knew the deer was right, everything is possible and magical.

The Qilin's Guidance

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Heewon Chang, David – 13

The Mogao Caves. Everyone knows about them. Everyone wants to see them. Everyone wonders how they came to be. You probably do too. You probably scoured the internet looking for the answer. You probably found that a monk named Yue Zun had a dream and started constructing the caves. He was then joined by another monk named Failing. If you dig a little deeper, you might have found that before Yue Zun's dream, the caves were used to accommodate monasteries and served as spots of meditation for hermit monks. All this is true. Well, partially. Nothing in the modern era is 100% accurate. Science has flawed the minds of people, leading them to disbelieve the true story. Scientists and historians call supernatural events coincidences, or erase them from history, but this manuscript will complete the true story.

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It all started with a dream. Yue Zun was on a journey for inner peace and was on the Silk Road, walking to Dunhuang to meditate. About halfway there, he had a dream.

Yue Zun was standing in an endless field of black. Something caught his eye. Light. It showed a small cave, a doorway that lead to further abyss. Yue Zun felt drawn to it, like his heart was made of iron and the cave a magnet. Almost unconsciously, he walked into it. The dim light barely allowed Yue Zun to see.

A sudden movement caught Yue Zun's eyes and he quickly whipped his body around, looking around in nervousness. Then, he saw it again. A silhouetted figure jumping up onto a high platform. Yue Zun gasped, cautiously taking a few steps back. As he tried to look closely at the figure, light exploded in the cave. In front of Yue Zun was a giant statue of Buddha. Light emanated from its golden body as it sat quietly. It had an expression that felt like a mix of melancholy, slight amusement, and peace.

On top of the statue was a scaly, horse-like figure with antlers and a face like a dragon – a qilin. Its scales were the colour of the clear sky, and its beard rippled even though the air was completely still. Its antlers were golden and shined in the light.

The qilin peered down at Yue Zun. Its pensive gaze seemed to penetrate into the deepest parts of his soul. As Yue Zun looked up at the majestic creature, frozen in awe and wonder, a flash of gold caught his eye. He pulled away from the regal gaze of the qilin and looked around. He saw countless smaller statues of Buddha. Divine light seemed to radiate from them as they sat cross-legged with the same peculiar expression on their gracious faces.

Yue Zun gaped in wonder and awe. The qilin gazed deeply into him again, "This is your duty." It did not move its mouth as it spoke. The words sounded like rushing water and wind-chimes.

As Yue Zun blinked, the scene around him rapidly changed. He was back outside the cave. However, it was not dark anymore and the sun beat strongly upon glittering sand. He quickly recognized where he was. Multiple caves lined the cliff of sandy stone in front of him. The Mogao caves. The destination of his journey. However, the inside of the caves were vastly different from what he had imagined. Instead of empty, dusty caves with thin, worn carpets covering their floors, the caves had beautiful and intricate carvings and statues of Buddhas. Murals lined their walls and showed scenes of war, everyday life, prayer, and the lives of deities. As Yue Zun looked around the caves, his vision started to dim. Soon, his entire world goes black.

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Yue Zun groaned as his eyes slowly peeled open. His movements were heavy as he groggily pulled himself off his mattress, getting ready to continue walking. As he rolled his mattress up and tied his belongings to a wooden frame that he wore on his back, he realised he felt different. Why did he feel satisfied? Why was the constant feeling of finding himself and his destiny gone? As he pondered, it struck him. The dream. The qilin, the statues, the cave. His duty! He had finally found how he could fulfil himself.

He started walking along a wide, pale road with a new, energetic light bounce to his step. He used a crooked wooden stick to support himself and the weight of his few worldly belongings. Dunes of sand rippled beautifully around him and birds of prey circled in the air. Glistening sweat dripped down his bare head.

After a few hours, the temperature began to rise. A dry wind started to encircle Yue Zun as huge amounts of sand lifted into the air. Realising that a sand storm was about to occur, Yue Zun pondered about his dream. If he was going to die already, why did the qilin show him what he was supposed to do? Surely this was just a test. Yue Zun was determined to push through this hurdle. He covered his lower face with his robe and tried to push on. Despite his best efforts, Yue Zun was unable to move forward. His weak and exhausted body slumped to the ground, unconscious.

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For the second time that day, Yue Zun peeled his eyes open. He was leaning against something and the sun was still bright. He patted his hands free of sand and wiped the sweat off of his brow. As he got up, he looked around.

He was clearly in an oasis of some sorts. The area was bustling with activity and palm trees dotted the sand. Despite the colour and life of the scene, one seemingly dull and boring landmark piqued Yue Zun's interest. A set of caves along a cliff that seemed strangely reminiscent of the Mogao caves. As he walked closer to them, the resemblance only grew. Maybe they were the

Mogao caves! Maybe he was already at Dunhuang! No. That was impossible. He was still at least a week away from the Gansu province, let alone Dunhuang itself.

However, when Yue Zun finally stood in front of the caves, there was no denying it. These were the Mogao caves. Bustling monasteries stood a short walk away from them and about a dozen monks sat in the caves, meditating. Yue Zun walked along the cliff face until he found an empty cave. Yue Zun laid down his mat and perched on the floor. As he sat cross-legged, he attempted to push out all of his outward thoughts and focus on his heart. Peace settled through his body and stress flowed out of his body, like water breaking through a dam.

As Yue Zun tried to still his mind, soul, heart, and body, he was suddenly interrupted. He could not keep calm. An overwhelming sense of guilt washed over his peace as a picture of the caves in his dreams imprinted itself onto his mind. No matter how hard Yue Zun tried, he could not get the image out of his head. As he grasped his head in confusion and frustration, he realised that he was doubting his duty. Despite his dream and magical transportation to Dunhuang, he was afraid of his seemingly overwhelming task and doubted whether he was really meant for it. He had no money, no tools, no connections in his immediate vicinity, and almost no food. How would he be able to carve such immense statues or paint such elaborated murals?

Suddenly, Yue Zun felt a presence beside him. He squeezed his eyes open as sky blue filled his vision. He leaned back and opened his eyes properly to see that the qilin from his dream was right in front of him. Its body lightly swayed as it breathed calmly and its grey-green eyes lifted Yue Zun up, seemingly sucking all of his stress away like a child drinking from its mother's breast. "We transported you through hundreds of kilometres, saving you from starvation. Do you not think we can help you through all of your trials? Do not doubt what we have told you," Its clear voice seemed to wash Yue Zun and its ever motionless mouth seemed to twitch into a slight, compassionate smile.

A gold light filled Yue Zun's body as he stood up. When he touched the walls of the cave, the gravel seemed to bend like clay. Colour filled what he moulded exactly as he wanted it and his arms felt empowered. After just a few hours, he had finished his first cave. It was alluringly beautiful, like a mountainous view.

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The truth is hard to find. You probably won't believe it. If you cannot believe it, then I am obliged to quote another story that was made into a piece of fiction. "Think but this and all is mended: That you have but slumbered here while these visions did appear."¹

¹ Quote from William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

¹ Quote from William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

The Mogao Grottoes

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Jang Abergel, Lili – 13

Hi, my name is Madeline and I've never really been the type to try new things. So when my mom suggested leaving our house on the coast of California, I was hesitant, to say the least. For most of my life, I've been handed things. My dad is the CEO of some big company, and my mom is a health mogul. But I've always been quite lonely which is why I've decided to go with my mom for a month to explore the Silk Road. My mom has been begging me for years, no time like the present!

As the plane takes off, I feel my mom give me a tight squeeze on my hand. "You're going to love it!" I let out a sigh and roll over in my seat resting my head on the window letting myself drift to sleep for the duration of this 14-hour flight.

I run to my grandma who is waiting outside the airport doors and give her a big hug, as she catches up with my mom I pack our stuff into the trunk of her car and climb into the backseat.

As we're driving I seem to get lost staring out the window.

"Pretty great isn't it?" my mom says while smiling.

I don't let her see my excitement as I shrug and roll over to the other side resting my head against the car door and end up falling asleep. When I wake up my mom and grandma are taking our bags out of the trunk, and I get out of the car to bring my stuff inside. She pushes the doors open and I make my way up to my room.

I hear my mom knock on the door waking me up from my nap, "come in," I say with a yawn as she comes down and takes a seat on the bed.

"You ready?" I pick up my phone to check the time, 8:48 AM.

I'm half asleep as we drive up to remnants of the Silk Road, we stop at vendors as my mom buys dried fruits and beautiful fabrics, she gets carried away in conversations with people she knew as a child, she tells me she's going to get something to eat with an old friend, a 3-minute walk from here, "if you don't want to come, stay near, do not go where you can't see me. got it?" she says. I roll my eyes and walk away.

As I get further and further away from my mom and higher and higher up the cliff I feel the breeze getting stronger and my feet start to ache. "where am I?" I say to myself, I can't see my mom, heck I can't see anything.

"Welcome to the Mogao Caves. And who are you?" a raspy voice says from behind me, I jump. An old man sweeping the front of what I can tell is a cave looks back up at me, "so? who are you? no one has been here in years!" Slightly yelling but still calm, he takes a seat on the steps and I slowly walk towards him.

"I'm visiting with my mom but I got off track..." I say whilst picking at my nails.

"A tourist huh? we don't see many of those anymore. They ruined our caves and destroyed our artifacts," he says

The door frame is covered in radiating gold and the murals on the wall tell stories. Although it does look quite run down, it's still breathtaking "wow...this place is amazing!" I say in excitement.

"Used to be better, when this wasn't known to...outsiders."

"So what happened?" I ask him, he leads me into the cave, and gestures towards a bench. I take a seat, nervous yet anxious to know more.

"Hundreds of years ago these caves were filled with happiness, people would gather to hear old tales and feast, until one day they were discovered. They not only stole our treasures but our ancestors' dignity. Hopefully one day, all that was stolen will be restored," he says to me with a look of such sorrow I thought it would start raining.

"So where is everything now? The treasures I mean." I ask him with genuine curiosity.

“Most have been put in museums or are kept in homes of those rich people, using our culture as their decoration” he lets out a long sigh and stands up. “Well thank you for visiting but you must leave” he says to me with the same look of sorrow, he's probably right it's getting late and the last thing I want to do is make my mom angry. Before I leave I ask “what will happen if I help you restore the cave?” his eyes seem to light up, “happiness and life will be restored to the province.”

I get back to my grandma's that night and I'm finding it very hard to sleep. I see my grandma's light still on so I decide to go ask her about this. She's reading a book sitting in an old rocking chair, “grandma?” I whisper, “oh! Yes dear, what's wrong?” she says with a concerned face. “Oh nothings wrong I just have something to ask, do you know anything about the Mogao Caves?” I say, she looks shocked. “You take these and bring them where they need to be.” She passes me a dusty box from underneath her bed, “do NOT mention this to your mother.”

The next morning I tell my mom I'm going out for a run and ask her to drive me up to where we were before. She was skeptical but she did anyways and told me she'd pick me up in an hour.

I brought the box to show the man and we opened it in the temple. It was filled with stories about the cave and those who once lived there, but at the very bottom of the box were instructions, the man read them aloud, “when this box is discovered, letter number 52 must be published around the world, and the emerald stone which is engraved at the top of the mountain the mogao cave rests on; must be put back to the Buddha's eye” he says in absolute shock. “We must do it” I say, he nods in agreement.

I'm on my way home and I have letter number 52 with me. We've decided to part. 6 months to complete what needs to be done then meet back to see if it worked. I talk to my grandma and she says she'll find some excuse to bring us back here.

As we got on the plane back home I can't help but feel guilty for not telling my mom, but I did what I had to do.

I'm visiting news outlets and journalists nearly everyday and I get them with this story nine times out of ten. This went on everyday for 6 months straight until the entirety of Los Angeles knew.

All of the sudden I come home and our bags are packed and my mom's waiting by the door, “grandma's sick, we're going back” she says. I really hope this is her “excuse.”

As we pull up to her driveway I get out of the car and give her a hug, she pulls me closer and whispers “do what needs to be done and my health and happiness will be *restored*” a word that seems to become far too familiar. I grab the letters and all of the things I printed from the news outlets and stuff it in my bag. “mom! I'm going for a run!” I yell, I see her give me a slight nod, so I leave.

I walk back up those steps that seem so familiar, I see the old man in the same place as he was when we first met. “Did you complete the task?” he asks eagerly. I nod, and he gives me a look which I believe is him telling me he did too.

He pulls out a beautiful emerald stone from the box I gave him a couple months ago and we walk into the temple. “Open the letter with instructions, we must burn it” he says. I pull out a match from my pocket and light the paper on fire as he places the stone in the eye of the buddha.”

The ground starts shaking but stops just as it begins, the old leaves start to fly away with the wind and the cave murals seem to dance. “This is amazing!” we say at the same time. “Thank you for this. You have given us the magic back,” he smiles and I start to head back.

Walking home, the people are happier, the plants are fresh and the fishermen seem to be bringing in plenty.

When I get back to my grandma, both her and my mom are overjoyed. “I'm not ill anymore!” she says overjoyed. We embrace, and I'm grateful.

The Blind Leading the Blind

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Kinjo, Yushin – 14

Micky was standing near the main entrance of the Mogao caves when he heard from behind the approach of brisk footsteps. Beside him, Kauai quietly shuffled his feet.

“Mr Chen?” came the expected voice. Micky turned and nodded.

“You are a bit earlier than expected... but that’s not a problem of course. And this must be your special friend, Kauai.”

Kauai gave a soft, guttural bark of agreement.

“Pleased to meet you too, Kauai! And of course you, Mr Chen. My name is Oscar, I’m your guide,” he said, extending a hand that Micky immediately clasped.

“Wow, that’s amazing!” Oscar exclaimed. “Naturally, we have obtained permission for your guide dog to accompany you into the caves, and I’m thrilled to tell you that we have also authorized you to touch the exhibits.”

Over the next ten minutes, several more people showed up. Including Kuai, there were 9 people in the group. When they finally entered the Mogao caves, the cool, musty air heightened their excitement. Oscar began to speak in a loud clear tone about the majestic artworks – Buddhist statues, colourful etchings and murals – that now surrounded them, his voice punctuated by the reverberating tip–tap–tapping of Micky’s white cane.

Presently, a middle–aged woman and her docile husband came over to Micky.

“Hello,” said the woman, who had a sharp voice. “I couldn’t help but hear your stick. What brings you here? Can you really enjoy all this beautiful ancient art while being blind?”

“Well yes. But I use different senses. For example, my stick – as you say – helps me understand the layout because the sound bounces off the surroundings. It’s kind of like how a bat uses echolocation,” he chuckled.

The woman pulled a sour face. She was about to reply but was interrupted by Oscar inviting Micky and Kauai to approach a sculpture that the rest of the group had just been gasping over. Micky approached the exhibit with Kauai, laid a hand on it and began to walk around it, feeling and absorbing the form and texture of what he quickly perceived to be a sitting Buddha.

Micky heard the woman muttering to her husband. Then she began to loudly quiz Oscar. “Won’t he damage it? Can I touch the sculptures as well?”

Oscar said, “I’m afraid not, Mrs Lau. It’s a special dispensation for Mr Chen.”

Mrs Lau tutted rudely and stomped to the back of the group, dragging her husband with her.

After a few hours of exploring, Oscar’s narration had dwindled to just a few quiet comments here and there. But now he interrupted their reveries with an announcement.

“Sadly this tour has to end here. If you want more information about the Mogao caves after we exit, feel free to...”

At that moment, Kauai started to bark tumultuously. Micky knew something was wrong but before he could react Kauai wrenched free of his leash, dragging Micky to the rough stone floor. Kauai was now running around the cavern. Mrs Lau started to squeal, which distressed Kauai even more. Oscar ordered them to stand still while he tried to calm Kauai down. Eventually, Kauai got tired and Oscar fetched him back to Micky, who was back on his feet, unhurt but feeling somewhat dazed.

Suddenly, everyone froze as a great hissing sound started up high above them. Tilting their heads upward slowly, the stricken tourists saw the cavern's roof undulating, before it slowly began to descend like a vast black carpet. Sensing their rising panic and quickly assessing the danger it posed, Micky calmly shouted, "Everybody be calm! It's just bats. They are not dangerous. Something has startled them, that's all."

The dense cloud of shrieking creatures streamed away into the unlit recesses of the rear of the chamber until everything was eerily still. It was a brief respite for then the ground started to shake violently, the lights flickered and stones from the ceiling began tumbling down. Everyone instinctively covered their heads, but it was over in a couple of seconds. They were in near darkness, but for a couple of lamps that flickered near the entrance, which was blocked. Someone in the group began to sob.

"We're trapped!" exclaimed Mrs Lau. "If it wasn't for that dog we wouldn't be in this mess," she continued vehemently.

"How is it his fault?" asked a tall man who had been silent and preoccupied during the tour.

"If his poorly trained mutt hadn't started running around the place we would be above ground already."

Micky interjected defensively, "My dog would never do something like that normally. Kauai must have sensed something was wrong."

Ms Lau was disgruntled but stayed silent. Oscar seized this chance to gain control of the worsening situation. "Let's not blame each other; instead we should figure out a way out of this cavern."

The group seemed to agree with this. They started to give their opinions on what to do next, coming up with various ideas like digging out of the cave, shouting for help or trying to clear the stones that were blocking the entrance. While they were debating, Micky stood there quietly.

"Hey, blind man! Are you awake? Why aren't you trying to help us think of ways to get out?" Mrs Lau demanded bitterly.

Micky calmly put his finger to his lips.

"Don't you shush me you, half-wit!"

"I was just trying to listen to the echos, to hear if there might be another way out."

Mrs Lau scoffed and walked away as Micky tapped his white cane. Meanwhile, some of the group were trying to remove stones from the entrance. A few others were starting to get annoyed by the lack of help from Micky and voicing their agreement with Mrs Lau that Micky had somehow gotten them trapped; in fact, everything Micky had done and said was now abhorrent to them.

It was now evening. They knew this because the tall man had some battery left on his phone. The rest had already drained their batteries trying desperately to get a signal. Mr Lau reflected gloomily that they wouldn't have to spend long in the dark caves before any sense of time deserted them. Everyone was fatigued from moving stones. Their hopes were getting lower as not a dent had been made on the mountain of fallen rocks. They all looked woebegone, but they had no choice but to continue.

As another of the big stones was being lifted, a snake slithered out and attempted to bite one of the tourists, but Kauai pounced and bit it, immobilizing the beast. After this, Kauai was praised for his bravery and thought highly of. "Maybe your dog isn't that bad after all," said one tourist to Micky.

Suddenly the tapping of the cane stopped. "I think I've found another way out of this cavern."

Kauai may now have been a hero, but the group were still dubious about his master. "We have no choice but to listen to Micky. Let's just give it a try," reasoned Oscar.

Micky started walking, tapping his cane once more. The group followed reluctantly, for he was leading them into the dim rear of the cavern, where the walls rapidly closed in until they were in a twisting series of passageways like a mine. After they had turned

in different directions a few times, Mrs Lau shouted, “Why did we trust him in the first place?” No one answered, which enraged her, but she had no choice but to follow. Micky eventually stopped at a dead end.

“What are you doing?”

“The exit is here,” said Micky.

Mrs Lau blurted out, “What did I say? I knew we shouldn’t trust a blind man!”

There were loud sighs and some turned away, while Kauai set to digging at the wall. All eyes turned upon the dim figure as he dug away with feverish paws. A chink of light appeared, then another. Oscar crouched beside Kauai and began tearing handfuls of rubble out, uncovering more inviting rays of light. Several others joined in and soon they had dug out an archway, rugged yet beautiful, for it glowed and thus promised the way to civilization. The weary 9 tunnel rats plus Kauai scurried through the opening before anything else bad could happen.

Once through, they saw they were in a well-lit wide corridor. They all celebrated in merriment.

Then Micky heard a hush descend on the group. Someone cleared their throat. “We are so remorseful for what we said earlier. We hope you can accept our apology,” said Mrs Lau. Some of the other tourists agreed vigorously, adding, “Sorry, sorry!”

It was finally time to leave. Some said their goodbyes while others went away subdued, still recovering from the stress they had suffered, but all of them were grateful that they made it out of the cave. As they were all leaving one by one, Oscar tapped Micky on the shoulder and quietly remarked, “Out of everyone here, you are the only person with their eyes open.”

The Alluring History of the Mogao Grottoes

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Lau, Marcus – 14

A blistering heat scorched the frail, debilitated monk. As he tramped across the yellow and arid wasteland of sand, Yuezun rued the day he departed from the relative safety of his monastery. It was an asylum and a tranquil haven in the Gobi desert. However, the monk spotted a remote outline of the verdant Mingsha mountains, which reinvigorated him. This incentivized the monk to toil through the final agonizing miles to his destination. After hours of relentless hiking, Yuezun finally arrived at the cliff of the Mingsha mountain. Ridden with fatigue, the monk instantly fainted on the rocks.

Divine, radiant light encompassed the monk, jolting a flabbergasted Yuezun awake. Amorphous figures began to form from the luminescence, resembling spiritual deities. The supernatural beings illuminated brilliant golden rays, like the light of a thousand suns. The deities proliferated in number, and the sapphire blue sky was enveloped by a massive congregation of golden buddhas. The vast assemblage, numbering thousands of deities emitted a final, profuse supernova of light and instantaneously dissipated into the atmosphere. To Yuezun, the message of the vision was unequivocal – this location was to be a holy shrine, dedicated to commemorate the divine occurrence which the monk had just experienced...

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In the year 366 AD, a Buddhist monk known as Yuezun ostensibly experienced an apparition. According to legend, this vision consisted of a thousand golden buddhas shining on the cliff of the Mingsha mountains. This formation of summits is located in Dunhuang, a region in China's Gansu province. Consequently, Yuezun was inspired to carve a small cave, designated for meditation, prayer, and worship. This meditation alcove would eventually develop into an intricate network of grottoes and caverns, known as the Mogao Caves. The community of monks which came to reside in the Mogao Caves initially created crude Buddhist statues and rudimentary mud paintings, to be utilized for decoration and worship. However, with subsidies procured by enthusiastic Chinese aristocrats, the Mogao caves flourished, and the simple mud paintings transformed into superlative works of art, providing visual representations of various Buddhist legends, fables, and deities.

The Mogao caves were strategically situated on the Silk Road, the renowned ancient passageway connecting Eastern and Western civilizations, which further augmented the prominence of the Mogao caves. Consequently, this diverted many monks, ambassadors, and pilgrims to the grottos, which resulted in the further expansion of the population around the Mogao Caves. Additionally, the aforementioned location of the Mogao Caves allowed thousands of documents to be traded on the site. The accumulation of these manuscripts allowed a massive library of information to concomitantly form alongside the collection of art within the Mogao Caves.

Due to factors such as the regional hegemony of the Chinese Tang Dynasty, the increased ubiquity of Buddhism, and the popularity of the Silk Road, these grottoes ascended to their apotheosis during the 7th to 8th century AD. During this golden period of the Mogao Caves, many forms of Buddhist art were produced in these grottoes. One prominent masterpiece created was a 116 foot-tall statue of Buddha, adorned with various heavenly symbols, a chivara (a traditional Buddhist cloth), and enveloped by religious incantations inscribed on the walls. The statue sits in a cross-legged position, a traditional Buddhist meditation pose known as Padmasana. The monumental and lavish structure was commissioned by Emperor Wu-Zetain in 695 AD and was part of an initiative spearheaded by Wu to propagate Buddhist religion across Asia.

Another resplendent work of art is the stark red mural in cave number 275. In this artwork, pure-white supernatural deities angelically hover over the mythical and venerable King Sibi (situated in the center of the mural), who was the monarch of an Indian empire. Utilizing Yun-ran, a primordial Indian shading technique, Buddhist artists of unprecedented talent have meticulously illustrated this Buddhist fable. In this tale, two Buddhist deities, named Indra and Agni, morph into a hawk and dove respectively. In disguise, the hawk proceeds to chase the dove. Feigning desperation, Agni sought asylum near King Sibi. The hungry hawk demanded that King Sibi allow it to eat the dove, lest the hawk die of starvation. To alleviate the hawk's hunger, the benevolent king sacrificed his flesh instead of the dove. This tale depicted on the mural is a quintessential example of art within the grottoes, which is predominantly oriented around the Buddhist quest for enlightenment, as well as the rigorous process required to obtain this state of spiritual purity.

Dozens of horses gallop in tandem across the Gobi desert, saddled by valiant equestrians wearing glamorous crimson red and black armor. The riders ruthlessly massacre their hapless enemies, who were attempting to make a futile escape. Concurrently, this triumphant formation hoists General Zhang Yi Chao's emblem, portraying a celestial object illuminating the yellow banner with obsidian-colored rays. Although artwork in the Mogao Caves was mostly centralized around Buddhism, some artworks also depict various secular occurrences. The aforementioned mural, situated in cave #156, depicts a triumphant battle during the late-Tang dynasty, where General Zhang, obliterated the Tibetan Empire in 848 AD. In commemoration of this battle, monks painted murals of this heroic individual in the Mogao grottoes.

From elaborate statues of Buddha to lavish murals, it is indubitable that the 7th and 8th centuries was the zenith of Buddhist art in the Mogao Caves. What could result in the demise of these grottoes?

After the 9th century, the prominence of the caves rapidly diminished. One of the factors that contributed to this decline was the gradual obsolescence of the Silk Road, caused by the implementation of sea transport. It was a substantially more cost-efficient means of logistics, which rapidly became the principal trading method between China and the outside world, thereby deeming the Silk Road nugatory. The curtailment of traffic on the Silk Road led to the gradual isolation and depopulation of the grottoes. Moreover, the withdrawal of Chinese forces from Dunhuang resulted in a power vacuum, which was rapidly supplemented by vehemently anti-Buddhist entities, such as the Islamic hordes, Mongols, and Tibetans. Subsequently, these tribes violently persecuted monks in Dunhuang. Knowing that destruction was imminent, the surviving monks stored numerous written manuscripts inside a hidden cave. The Mogao Caves would remain all but deserted throughout the following millennia ...

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It was another ordinary day for the simple and hermetic Taoist monk, who resided peacefully in the Dunhuang caverns. Wang Yanlu was repainting the murals in one of the dim, small, and musty grottoes. The monk let out a plaintive sigh. For years, he had attempted to repair the deteriorating, millennia-old system of caves. However, the strenuous repair efforts were gradually wearing Wang down, leaving the monk exhausted after relentless toil, day after day. Lost in contemplation, the monk inadvertently rammed into the cavern wall, jolting him back to his senses. With his head ringing in pain, an aggravated Wang struck the wall with his fist, which unexpectedly crumbled; revealing an archaic and aberrant door. Deciding to investigate, the monk apprehensively eased open the peculiar opening.

The entrance gave way to an immense cavern. Beaches of ornate jewels, emanating light, populated the opulent cave. Exuberant murals, embroidered with fine silk, were plastered on the cavern walls. A myriad of imposing and gargantuan statues, resembling various powerful deities and mythical heroes, were present throughout the cavity. Finally, an innumerable quantity of books formed an ancient library, containing centuries of accumulated knowledge and wisdom. Filled with euphoria, an awe-struck Wang fantasized about the riches awaiting his discovery. His rigorous efforts of restoring the Mogao Caves had finally borne fruit...

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During the late 19th century, a monk named Wang Yanlu attempted to restore the dilapidated grottoes. While repairing Buddhist artwork in cave #16, Wang uncovered a hidden room. It contained approximately 50,000 manuscripts and artworks concealed by Buddhist monks in the 19th century. Buddhist prayer books, Confucius and Taoist manuscripts, governmental and administrative documents were among the constituents of this gargantuan cache. Furthermore, Wang recovered the Diamond Sutra, a preeminent Buddhist book dating back to 868 AD, which is considered one of the world's oldest printed manuscripts. However, the discovery of this hidden library attracted a multitude of European expeditions, under the leadership of individuals such as Aurel Stein, to the Mogao Caves. These expeditions looted numerous ancient manuscripts and art. Additionally, theft and vandalism performed by local citizens and soldiers were also rampant during the early 20th century, and various manuscripts were periodically stolen from the caves. This period was a tumultuous era for the grottoes.

Although these caves have faced significant threats, the brobdingnagian trove of manuscripts, murals, and sculptures remains miraculously preserved. In 1987, the Mogao Caves were deemed a UNESCO world heritage site. Today, it is also an acclaimed tourist destination, attracting millions of visitors annually. The grottoes allow us to acquire a comprehensive insight into ancient Chinese and Buddhist culture; and after eons of neglect, degradation, and marginalization, the Mogao Caves have finally obtained the recognition and acclaim they deserve.

A Journey to Connection

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Lau, Miley – 12

Xiu Ying was woken by the sound of pots clanging noisily in the kitchen. She glanced at her mirror and was greeted by her reflection: black raven curly hair, with eyes the color of soil taken from her mother. She sighed, knowing the same routine of the day that awaited her. Xiu Ying dressed in her worn old uniform that all girls her age who worked in the temple wore, preparing meals, and sweeping the floors. Pulling her tangled hair in a loose ponytail, she went into the big bustling kitchen.

Feng glanced at his book then glanced around him. Other young monks were busy soaking up the material that Feng had already memorized. He was the most well-rounded young monk in the temple. Like his twin sister, he had brown dark eyes but unlike her, he easily obeyed any rules that were given. A plump old monk poked his head in the classroom with an air of authority, one of the seniors in charge of the temple. The elder monk met Feng's eyes and he smiled proudly at his beloved grandson as he shuffled into the classroom, the young monks immediately stood to attention,

“Good morning class,” The old monk said pleasantly,

“Good morning Master Zhao” the monks replied.

“Keep up the good work, study hard, for exams are coming up soon. Take an example from Feng, already prepared, he is a proper role model.”

Secretly, all the other students glared at Feng. Who wisely ignored them, he had dealt with the same glares and remarks for as long as he could remember.

Xiu Ying crept toward her brother's door, eavesdropping on his class. She had always overheard her brother's classes and she knew all the information that Feng knew and was keen to open up more opportunities for herself.

“Feng, you will need to know about the Mogao Caves.”

Xiu Ying inched closer to the door.

“Long time ago, there was an old monk named Le Zun, a monk with great wisdom about art and beauty. After seeing a vision of the supernatural he decided to praise the vision with beautiful art pieces about it. He then decided to make a masterpiece with every detail of his vision and when he finished, it was so wonderful that Buddha decided to grant a wish to anyone who saw it. Le Zun told his community of monks which was passed on from generation by the wisest monk to the next monk.” Her grandfather sighed.

I have chosen you to tell this treasured secret to, you are the young monk that I trust the most. Feng, you and I are the only people who know about this secret, and soon it will be just you.

Xiu Ying almost gasped.

“Well, it's almost time for dinner so I suggest you get ready.”

Hearing her brother getting up, she slowly crept away.

The moonlight shone through Xiu's window illuminating the quiet village and the great towering mountains which were where the Mogao Caves lay. she got up sneaking out of her dormitory, tiptoeing across the long halls finally making it to the large wooden door, she placed a shivering hand on the doorknob but suddenly a voice harshly whispered,

"What are you doing here?"

Xiu quickly turned to face a boy no taller than her with dark brown eyes

"Xiu? What are you doing here?" Feng whispered.

She replied, "If you must know," pausing to toy with the idea of telling him the truth,

"I know," Feng replied suddenly, "you wanted to go to the Mogao Caves."

Xiu blushed while Feng sighed, he didn't question his sister knowing about the caves since he always knew that she overheard his classes. He knew that she was smart and probably knew as much as he did but he still had reservations.

"Yes I know you're probably thinking but she can't come, she's a girl, she's younger, well Feng, I'm sick of it, I need a change so if you're going to try to stop me I won't let you." Xiu Ying said.

They stared at each other trying to win a battle, but finally, Feng gave up.

"Alright fine, but I'm coming with you."

Then the twins hurried along on their journey. Later in the evening, Xiu Ying sat by the fire, legs crossed, staring up at the night sky with a twinkle in her eye. The stars responded, shining ever brighter back at her. She hadn't told Feng the real reason why she was heading towards the caves, she wanted to see into the future, to see if she would ever feel a sense of belonging in her life. Xiu Ying looked down, and in the corner of her eye, she saw a moonlit crooked path leading into the tall dark woods. Her curiosity urged her to venture into the forest. Quickly and silently she sped on away from Feng, away from the real path towards the Mogao Caves.

Feng rubbed his eyes, the bright sun glared at him. He looked around, eyes searching for his sister but unable to find her. Feng sighed, he suspected that his sister ran away from him. He had to get up and start walking if he ever dreamt about finding her again. Feng packed up and started down on the main path, unaware his sister had gone in the opposite direction.

Xiu Ying walked on, it was getting darker, trees blocked out the fading light. A sparrow suddenly shrieked causing her to snap, waking from her daze. Xiu Ying had been walking nonstop for the whole night till now. She panicked, the sky was too dim to see clearly, and wherever she turned the path would never lead out to the exit, only deeper and darker into the unknown woods.

A cold shiver ran down her path, she only wished that her twin was here now to accompany her. She started to run but tripped over a branch and twisted her ankle. Crying in pain she inched over to a tree trunk and waited for the sun to rise, regretting her naivete.

The navy blue sky emitted a dim light which barely shone through the towering trees, it didn't stop Feng from running to find his sister yet he could never catch up to her. He even wondered if she went on this path, suddenly a bird cawed. He stopped in his tracks and looked up and saw a sparrow, feathers as brown as the earth. The bird gracefully flew around his head then started going in the opposite direction. Feng chased it, thinking that it was a good omen. He soon ran into the crooked path that his sister took.

Xiu Ying was wide awake. She barely saw anything and she kept hearing unknown noises which called out in the night. She didn't care about her wish or the caves anymore, she only wished for her brother to be here with her and that he could lead her out of the mess she created. Her leg felt like it was on fire, and Xiu was about to pass out from the pain until suddenly a brown sparrow came flying down and stood before her, the sparrow was beautiful, its feathers had thousands of shades of brown. Behind the sparrow, someone was coming towards them quickly, she saw a boy with the same brown eyes that she had catching his breath, the ground rumbled beneath them and suddenly the path led to the exit, Xiu Ying with wide eyes realized how far her brother ran just to make sure she was safe she now knew that she was cared for and that all this time she never needed to wish for anything because her wish was always there.

“Xiu!” Feng cried out

“Don't you ever do that again.”

Feng looked at his sister and gave her a smile of relief but seeing that she was injured he changed it to a face of worry. Xiu Ying grinned at him knowing his exact thoughts

She said, “Feng, I'm really fine, it's not a big deal, I just wanted to see you. Let's just go back home.”

Feng smiled back knowing that his sister had changed and would finally be happy. Overhead the sky was splattered with colors of pink and orange to announce the arrival of the glowing sun. It glittered and arose to begin the start of a new day.

Buried Treasure

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Ohayon, Shahar – 11

I was never so anxious that the weekend would finish and Monday morning would arrive. The excitement was felt throughout my whole body when I went to sleep. I knew that the next day we would be going on a school trip to the Mogao Grottoes in Gansu.

I woke up at 6:15, full of power although I slept only 5–6 hours. Knowing that I needed a lot of energy, I ate a double size cereal bowl and drank orange juice instead of the regular chocolate milk I usually drink. After breakfast I wore my special hiking shoes and the new outfit my dad bought me, knowing I must be well prepared for a day of adventures. My backpack was ready from a week ago and it included, flashlight, compass, switchblade, rope, hat and four liters of water. I double checked if any item is missing since my two young sisters are often taking stuff from my bag without my permission but nothing was missing. Excited, I was on my way to school.

Mr. White, my teacher, entered the class and asked us “Who knows what the Mogao Grottoes are?” I raised my hand right away because I researched about the Mogao Grottoes as preparation for the coming trip.

“The Mogao Grottoes, also known as the Thousand Buddha Grottoes or Caves of the Thousand Buddhas, form a system of 500 temples 25 km southeast of the center of Dunhuang, an oasis located at a religious and cultural crossroads on the Silk Road, in Gansu province, China”.

“You are right Shahar, and do you know when it was built?”

“366 AD?”

“Great Shahar! Ok guys you have 10 minutes to get to the bus, we have a long day ahead of us!”

I went into the bus and sat near the window to enjoy the view during the ride.

Lulu came to sit near me. She told me she is afraid to go to the Mogao caves since the caves are dark, cold, and there are usually spiders and bats in caves.

“Don’t worry”, I told her, “I can be near you and protect you so you won’t be too scared”.

“Ok thanks a lot, I really appreciate it and I am sure I will be less scared near you”.

“Lulu, I don’t want to scare you more, but do you see how strange and weird the bus driver is? His very long white hair, huge earrings, and his nails are so long that I don't know how he holds the wheel. Also his clothes are strange, like he is not from our century”.

Me and Lulu fell asleep but we woke up to the sound of the Bus door “Psssss”. I told Lulu that we arrived and it’s time to wake up and prepare.

Mr. White and all the kids were already out of the bus and only me and Lulu were left.

Before we went down the steps the driver called me and Lulu to come for a second. It was strange but we decided to approach him.

“Here take this cave map my grandpa gave me when I was a kid and I couldn’t find the mysterious cave but you might have more success”

We got off the bus with the map and Mr. White shouted “hurry up you are the last”

We ran to Mr. White and he asked “what took you so long?”

“Oh it’s nothing, the bus driver asked us to clean the bus hall before we leave”

Mr. White gathered all the kinds together and told us the precautions before we entered the Mogao Grottoes cave.

“Don’t go without letting me know”

“Don’t touch the Buddhas and the painted walls”,

“Don’t eat or drink inside the caves”,

“Don’t talk loud”,

“Stay as a group and approach me if you need something urgent”.

“Now choose a partner with whom you will explore the famous Cave 85”.

I chose Lulu as I promised to protect her and also she was my partner on the map.

“Me and Lulu went aside to look on the map before we entered the cave with all the kids”.

“We need to find this Big rock and it seems it is north-east to Cave 85”.

“I brought a compass so we will know the direction.”

“The problem is that we don’t know the distance as the map has no scale and maybe this is why the bus driver didn’t find it”

We cautiously entered Cave 85.

“Wow! Lulu, do you see the wall paintings?” I said

“Yeah it is so cool the amount of detail is amazing. I wonder how long it took to paint it and how many people were doing it? Also the Buddah was amazing, the number of hands it had, the gold body and mostly the way the Buddah looked at me....it was almost like it was a real person.”

After 30 minutes of exploring the cave me and Lulu thought we must go out of the cave to look for the big rock but how can we leave the group? Lulu said she will approach Mr. white and ask to go to the toilet.

It worked, we quickly went out of the cave and climbed a little hill to try and look for the rock. We couldn’t find it and we were depressed. I told Lulu let’s try the other side, maybe we will have luck.

We went to the other hill and I used my binocular to search the rock. I saw a big bush that didn’t fit in that area. I ran to see what was behind it because it felt weird. “It’s the big rock” I shouted to Lulu.

“Ok now how are we going to move this big rock?” I said. I have a rope but it won’t help us. Lulu found a big branch that may assist us.

“Great Lulu, now we have to place the branch in the right spot to try and move the rock.”

At the first attempt it didn’t work. We placed the branch in another spot and we both jumped on it. ”Wow!” it moved enough so we could get in.

It looks like the bus driver didn’t lie, there was a mysterious cave.

We went into the cave and there were similar paintings on the walls like in Cave 85. We kept entering deeper and suddenly we saw a big chest covered with dust. It was locked with a locker and I used my switchblade but with no success. Lulu suggested

doing something she saw in a movie “Let’s use my grandpa's pin to open the locker”. She pushed the grandpa pin in and twisted it and the chest opened.

There was an old book, 5 gold coins and a small Buddah with 10 hands and 3 eyes. Me and Lulu were excited.

We must go quickly back to meet Mr. White and our friends. We ran slowly because we carried the chest. We heard our friends shouting “Shahar.....Lulu where are you?”.

We got to them and Mr. White was very angry of us because we didn’t listen to his rolls.

“Where were you?” Mr. White asked

“We went to find a secret cave and we found it based on a map we got.”

“See what we found Mr. White, it is a treasure!”

Mr. White was shocked and from being angry he turned curious.

“It’s an amazing finding and I am sure it will be in the museum.” Mr. White said

I asked Mr. White if the museum will share that me and Lulu found it so people will know that it was found by two young kids.

Sure Shahar, your name and Lulu will be in the museum and I am sure it will be famous.

Me and Lulu got an award for being the youngest kinds to find a treasure chest.

A Happy Family

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Timmermans, Ariel – 11

“Was I safe yet? Was anyone behind me? Was my life about to end?” All that ran through my head at that moment were those 3 questions. The only thing I felt was the rain pelting down on my face and hair. I couldn’t resist taking a look behind me, but as I did, I tripped, falling, falling, falling...

CHAPTER 1

“YOU KNOW WHAT, I’M DONE WITH YOU!!! GET OUT OF MY HOUSE, NOW!!!”

“FINE, IT’S NOT LIKE I EVER WANTED TO BE HERE ANYWAY!!!”

“Dada? Mama? ”

“Oh–! Mauv..! Erm... It’s– We’re–“

“Mommy is just leaving for a while honey. I’ll come back, I promise. Okay?”

“Oh, ok mama!”

CHAPTER 2

11 years. It’s been 11 years, and she still hasn’t come back. Every day, I sit at the window, waiting for her to return. She has to keep her promise, right..? Father, on the other hand, has been drinking more. Sometimes I wonder if it would’ve been better if mother had never left. He doesn’t say so, but I can tell he blames me for everything. I don’t know what I’ve done, I wish someone would just tell me, but I’m 17 now, maybe it’s time I make my own way in the world, finally be me for a change.

Well, here we go. About to leave my ‘home’ for 17 years. I hope father will finally be happy without me here. *Thud* Phew, no one notice–

“MAUV?! WHAT ARE YOU DOING YOUNG LADY?! GET BACK HERE THIS INSTANT!!”

The one thing that ran through my head at that one moment was R. U. N.

CHAPTER 3

After mother left, the days started to go by faster and faster, until eventually the days and months and years started to blur together. I think they started to for father as well, though I could never really be sure what went on inside that head of his. The only thing that kept me from basically fading into nonexistence was school. We were learning about the Mogao Caves. The idea of it being a safe haven, an escape from this cruel world, made me wish I could just go there. I'd always been curious about them, ever since I read about them in an old book in my bedroom. It also included a map on how to get there, which I had always kept and guarded well. That map was my most prized possession, for anywhere away from the hell I had known all my life was preferable. I'd always planned to leave, only ever since then I actually had a destination in mind. The only reason I delayed leaving for so long, was simply that I had always harbored a secret hope that mother would eventually return. After 11 years, though, I finally gave up, packed my things in the middle of the night, and left..

CHAPTER 4

I heard father behind me, but I didn't dare turn around. I was so scared, for I knew that if I was caught, I would never be let out of anyone's sight again. I didn't care about the rain, I didn't care about the harsh winds, I didn't care about anything at that moment. The only thing I knew was that I had to keep going. After a while of running, I couldn't resist but take a look behind me, but as I did, I tripped, falling, falling, falling...

CHAPTER 5

"Ow..." I muttered, as I gingerly got to my feet. "Where...Where am I?" I looked around at my surroundings, and as I did, I couldn't help but let out a gasp. Even in the darkness, I could make out statues all around me, ancient pictures on the walls, engravings on the ceilings... The statues had big ears and bellies, but yet with peaceful, calm faces, that made me feel better, despite my fear and discomfort. The pictures were depicting long forgotten cities, people, cultures, even languages! Wait...Those statues...I recognize them! But—but—how can that be?! There's only one place in the world that has those, and I couldn't possibly be in... But maybe.. Wait—What do those engravings say...? The...Mogao..Caves?! I had wanted to be here for so long, but now that I finally was, I honestly couldn't believe it... I was so happy, yet so in awe! I didn't think I deserved to be here, but if I did, maybe I really was. Even though I had taken care of myself for 11 years, I didn't think I could survive on my own out here. I needed help, but where could I find that..?

CHAPTER 6

"Ughhh...", I groaned, as I sat up on the floor. Where was I? Oh, I just remembered! I still can't quite believe I'm here, in the Mogao Caves! But I still need to find a way out, or at the very least some food. Food might have been at the back of my mind last night, but it is currently my top priority. Yeah, food or water, that's what I need to find. So, I think I'll walk around the caves for a bit, maybe I'll find someone else here. A few hours later, I find myself lost, and still companionless. Then, I remembered something that I read in one of the many fairy tales about the Mogao Caves—If you're lost in the Mogao Caves, close your eyes, and with all your might, wish for the one thing that you want the most in this world, and if the creator of the caves, a god named Hillel, deems you worthy, he will appear in front of you, and grant it. So, closing my eyes, I wished with all my might...for a happy family. Just as I opened my eyes, a cloud of white and cyan smoke appeared, and once it evaporated, I could see clearly what it was concealing. "What?! How did you do that?!!!" I knelt on the ground in awe.

"Please, please, no need to bow for me." The mysterious man replied.

"Who are you..?" I whispered, half in fear, and half in awe.

"Hmm... I would've thought you'd recognize me by now, seeing as you've read so many stories and researched so much about me."

"Wait.. You couldn't be...."

“Oh, I assure you I most indeed am! Anyhow, You wished for something, and I can tell you meant it sincerely, with all your heart. What is it that you so dearly desire? Is it riches? New clothing? Powers?”

“N–no... All I’ve ever.. really wanted was a happy family..” Saying this made me remember my mother, and I couldn’t help it, I started to cry. Through my tears, I could barely make out the faint outline of Hillel, the god, waving his hand, conjuring a stream of colored smoke that surrounded me. I didn’t know what was happening, but one minute I was in the caves with Hillel, and the next I was being whirled up into the sky. That was the last thing I remembered before everything went black.

CHAPTER 7

“Honey, she’s awake!” Huh..? I blearily opened my eyes. As they focused, I saw my father sitting next to me, holding my hand. “We were so worried about you! We found you in the backyard, soaked, and brought you inside! How on earth you managed to fall asleep in that rain beats both of us!” He chuckled.

“Oh sweetie, I was so worried about you!” A familiar looking woman rushed into the room.

“Wait– MOM??!!”

“Yes, dear?”

“But– You– I– We– Didn’t you leave years ago?! “

“What are you talking about? Oh, you must be confused after spending nearly a whole night drenched, haha!”

With a start, I realized that Hillel had granted my exact wish– I finally had a happy family and loving parents! I couldn’t believe that after all those years, I finally found...my home.

The Mogao Caves

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Wall, Jemaiah – 11

The Beginning
Lydia

Around her, she saw workhouses, fields, farms, homes.... Yet, there was one place that really stood out; it was like a castle but smaller. It had a foreboding feeling, which weirdly seemed to draw her in, the mysteriousness of it made her curiouiser and curiouiser, as she observed it, something caught her eye, it felt kind of familiar, Lydia tried to remember but all her efforts were in vain, all she got was blank. She squinted and saw it shimmer in the highest window of the castle and for a split second, she thought she saw it move....

Abruptly, a boy snapped Lydia out of her thoughts, “Hey!” He demanded, “It’s already late, you need to get to your Cabin.” She tried asking about the mini-castle but the boy was firm and wouldn’t answer any questions. Lydia decided not to ask, for she was going rogue.

“Here we are, Cabin 9. If you need help, you can ask your cabin leader, Cora, she’ll give you your bunk as well. I need to get back and help the patients.”

“Wait, what?!” Lydia suddenly stopped in her tracks, “What do you mean by patients?”

“There is a deadly virus going around, millions are dying. Although no one yet has offered to find the cure, The Death Cure.” The boy looked out, his eyes were glazed, this cure seemed like a dream to him.

Lydia remembered the glittering object at the windowsill. She thought maybe, just maybe this mysterious object has something to do with the cure....

As she entered the room all eyes were on her, she felt like an outcast. The ‘leader’ had piercing, crow black eyes, and pale, white skin. Her sharp-pointed eyebrows and jet black hair made her look DEADLY. Lydia certainly didn’t belong here.

Cabin 9
Cora

“Hi, my name is Cora, I’m your cabin leader.”

Cora tried to give her a smile, though she knew the girl wasn’t buying it. The girl had brown curls that rested on her shoulders, the tips highlighted gold, her eyes were like the depths of the ocean and the colour of dark green seaweed, her thick, bear brown lashes curled up. Usually, Cora was much more welcoming— they all were. Although she didn’t know why she just couldn’t shake off the feeling that this girl was trouble.

An awkward silence hung like a heavy, winter blanket in the air. “Here is your bunk, Bunk 4....” The girl walked somberly to her bunk, not making any eye contact with anyone. As the lights turned off they all fell asleep.

All of a sudden, in the middle of the night, Cora jolted awake. The door was open. Someone had escaped! She spotted a faintly familiar shadowy figure running away. Not even changing out of her favourite midnight blue PJ’s, Cora bolted out the door, hoping to find the runaway.

The Attic
Lydia

Lydia couldn’t take it anymore, she was the new girl, the girl who has no friends and nobody knows, she didn’t like it. It felt like everyone was telling her to keep their distance. ‘I mean none of them even know me!’ Lydia thought. She wanted to be accepted to feel like she belonged, she tried to recall her family but couldn’t, all memories had been wiped out. She wanted a family again, Somewhere she had heard, “To become better you need to prove yourself.” It wasn’t a lot but it was enough. In the middle of the night when everyone is asleep, She could take her only chance. Her chance to find The Death Cure.

The massive, 10-foot oak doors creaked open as she pushed against them. Lydia peered into the castle, all she saw was a hallway lit with dim lights leading to a spiral staircase going up to what she thought might be the attic. When she saw this she almost didn't want to go in anymore, but she knew she had to, it was her duty. Lydia crept into the castle, headed for the stairs. Her heart was going wild, each step got harder and harder, and she was regretting this decision. After what seemed like ages, she saw the top, the attic. Even though her legs felt like jelly, she raced towards the door, stopping to catch her breath, she grumbled to herself, 'I really need to exercise more.' Unaware that someone was coming.

The Runaway
Cora

Cora followed the runaway, careful not to be seen. The cold, sharp wind whipped her long, coal-black hair across her face. Strangely, the runaway was headed towards the castle. She looked around her, scanning to find if anyone had followed her. Cora stayed a good distance away. When Cora was confident the runaway had gone in, she instantly hurried inside as well, not wanting to lose track. As Cora saw the staircase, She told herself, 'This is what you've trained for.' Cora zoomed up the staircase, with no problem. Shocked at what she saw, she stuttered, "Your.... Your...."

The Castle Object
Lydia

Lydia carefully opened the door, she gasped finally realizing what the object was. Before she could open it, the door flew open. It was Cora, her cabin leader. Cora was just as stunned as she was.

"Your.... Your...." Cora stuttered

"I'm Lydia and I'm going to find the death cure. Whatever is in that box, is the answer." She remarked.

"No.... No one has opened that box for 500 years! 500 years ago, when the person opened the box, they left and never returned! We have been FORBIDDEN to open it since." Cora exclaimed.

Lydia ignored her and opened the box finding a letter, sealed with emerald. Her eyes ogled it, her mouth wide open. Cora walked over to see what was so amazing, but when she saw it she snatched it from Lydia's hands and almost immediately broke the seal. Lydia silently cried out, though her sorrows would soon be forgotten, for when Cora broke the seal, the "letter" turned out to be a map, leading somewhere.

The Letter
Cora

"The letter," Cora whispered, "I've been looking for you. I can hear you, and you better tell me everything," Lydia's eyes scanned the map Cora held.

"It says we go north for around 5 miles then south and, voila! We are there!" Lydia said enthusiastically.

"Beware!" A loud, booming voice warned, "Beware the monster that guards its cave!"

"GASP! Did you hear that?" Cora's eyes darted around.

"What do you mean? I didn't hear anything." A look of confusion spread across Lydia's face.

"Something is trying to warn us about the caves..."

Before Cora could finish, the booming voice jolted her.

"Not just any cave, a cave that is perilous, secretive, treacherous, risk-fraught and it hides a colossal secret; The Mogao Caves."

The Way Home

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Wall, Keziah – 11

Ping

The smells of paint had gone, the splashes of colour had gone, art had left as soon as my mother left. The only thing I had left of her was the book about the Mogao Grottoes. She assured me they would help me find a way home....

The bleached, powdered snow fell in the midst of winter. Dense, green pine trees surrounded my house almost to invisibility. To be honest, I felt invisible. My uninvolved father took every opportunity to stay away for as long as possible. The villagers excluded me and the only person who cared for me was myself. Well, perhaps I wasn't the only person...

I still had my wicked, bitter aunt who, even though she does not live in the same house with me anymore, I can still hear her harsh, miserable accusations against me. I definitely would not want her to be my guardian. So I learned to take care of myself. Until one day...

I dragged my legs out of bed. I was exhausted but more importantly, I was dreading the day ahead.

The doorbell rang. Bluebeard, the ogre, had arrived. At the risk of sounding dramatic, my most detested person was standing before me. Even though I don't see her very often, I had a nagging sense that there was still too much unresolved for me. That I couldn't stay here. I had decided to do the unimaginable.

When she walked in, even my dad jumped at the sight. I had to find a way to -- too late. Stunned, my father left without so much as a goodbye. I was more blown away by his abrupt and extreme reaction. Disturbed, she just stepped in. "Ugh," my aunt complained, "I just hate children."

"I can stay here without adult supervision," I protested.

"Don't talk back to me," she scolded, "You should never call me 'Auntie' or 'Ah Cy. Always address me as Ms. Cy.'"

"But everyone calls you Ah Cy Jie Jie." I mumbled

"I said don't talk back!" She snapped, "I will call you -- what is your name again? Ah yes, Ping."

I know what you must be thinking. Doesn't Ah Cy mean lovely? You're right, but she was anything but sweet.

I was leaving. Knowing that my dad wasn't coming home and I wasn't accepted in this village, made me realise that finding somewhere new was the right thing to do. I grabbed the book my mother left me and ran off hoping to find the first checkpoint: Ning Xia; but travelling from Shaan Xi to Ning Xia alone wasn't easy.

I treaded along many trails only to find 2 empty sheds and 1 abandoned house that was filled with jars of fermented rice. The rest of my food was from banana leaves that were packed in my bag but sooner or later I would have to start finding another solution to my hunger. I was a long way from "nearly there."

Wang

Now I didn't say he was weird, but he was... different. I had a personal life and Ping got in the way of it. He just always found a way to stay in a corner and I am not the kind of person who works on charity cases. I will admit to teasing him a little but everyone gets teased. My dad is wealthy and my name means royal. He was so freakishly anti-social and had a strange obsession over art -- that was practically a crime. I had everything I wanted and being friends with him got in the way of that, no one likes him and I was doing what anyone else would do -- stay away. Even if many people thought my life was perfect, I felt different and that is why I was strangely attached to Ping.

I had always predicted that Ping would do something weird like that but I felt a little bit bad when no one missed him or felt sorry. He didn't even have a funeral but maybe that's because he wasn't dead. I just always imagined that things would be different. We used to be best friends and now we are like enemies. Even though I take the blame for that, I do not know why he would suddenly run away. I only ever joked about it.

I decided to visit his home, only to find more about his disappearance. He was like an onion. You never know what is hidden beneath each layer -- until I found a letter and a map. "MOGAO CAVES" it said and a note labelled 「王」. It was for me and I didn't know what to say. I could barely manage to scramble into Ping's home because of the intertwined, raw vines encircling the house. I found the note in the only place I could know more about him -- our old hiding spot. There, I figured out where he was going.

It was an old letter covered with dirt. The wrinkled paper was yellowed from age. I learnt about his family and I grasped onto the fact that I was so lucky. An aged map lay there silently folded and the urge to pick it up was too strong. I was going to bring Ping home. It would make up for everything I had done to him. I could be light again.

I trudged through snow and my eyelashes were frozen. My tears were heavy and I had never felt anything like this. I had eaten all my food. I wanted to call my dad but I knew he wouldn't come. This was my— "Wang?" someone called. I jolted around. Ping. "Ping! Ping! I... I want to say I'm sorry and... let's go home!"

"No." he sternly retorted. I was surprised. "If you came here just to bring me back then... I am not going back! I came here to find my real home— the Mogao caves."

"I— I'm coming with you!"

Those four words changed everything and Ping's face lit up. I was expecting something amazing.

Ping

I was so startled after Wang said he would come with me. He had always ignored me and thought of himself higher than me. I never thought we would speak to each other again, let alone go on an adventure together. It was unimaginable. I had never dreamed of a day like this but, surprisingly, I had been enjoying this. Scavenging for soybeans and laughing over banana leaves. It seemed like this was how it was always meant to be. I wouldn't wish for more.

We were almost there. Finding tangerines was the best thing we could imagine. The sweet, orange juice dripped down our chins. We grinned as jokes chimed in the air. It was a true gift. I felt like I was flying. I kind of wished that we would never arrive and it would just be me and Wang, wandering around. I felt free but also... paralyzed.

Soon, we arrived, a winter wonderland you could call it. The caves looked like they were stretching from a good night's sleep. I wouldn't have changed a thing. Until I saw the disappointment in Wang's face. He never liked art and I wished Wang would understand but I also had to help him find the beauty of this place. I just couldn't help the fact that things weren't worth it. Something was missing.

A community, that was what I was searching for. Not art, not my mother, people. Art and Creativity roamed the streets as if they belonged. Music bounced across walls. This whole city was like a painting. None of it seemed real. It was as if this place could defy time.

Repeating and repeating; the village was trapped in a time loop and soon the current would sweep me away too. I couldn't tell if Wang was frozen from amusement or fear. Maybe he had already been orbiting the strange clock ticking in everyone's heads. I couldn't risk staying here but going back to Shaan Xi wasn't an option... or was it?

A Tale From the Mogao Grottoes

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Yahyagil, Ayla – 11

fall, 1929

The orange blazing glow of light sank into the horizon leaving a trail of coral tinted clouds behind. Within minutes, the sky flooded with stars and the moon shone its silver on the desert before me. The ground was covered in a thick blanket of sand and all that could be heard was the slow cry of the wind blowing against my still body. As the winds blew harder, the cold slowly crept into my body and froze around me. I shoved my hands deeper into my pockets and I turned my face away from the sharp wind. I dug a small hole in the sand just big enough to fit me and I crawled into it, just like any other night. Suddenly, I heard the shriek of a crow. I stayed where I was and tried to ignore it but soon enough I felt the sand above me collapse. I scurried out and ran. My legs were burning and I gasped each breath I took. My body grew numb and I slumped lifelessly to the ground.

I woke. My skin grated against the grains of sand and the warmth of the sun was shining on me in a dry unpleasant way. I longed for water; my throat was dry like the barren desert around me. Looking for shade, I dragged myself to a cave and dropped on the floor. I almost thought I saw huge stone statues glaring at me but I reassured myself they were not real. I looked around me and noticed the paintings on the ceiling. As I pressed my face against the cool rock, I heard a clattering noise. Now there were shards scattered on the ground. I wanted to hide everything and run away, but I just sat there, too tired to move. In the corner of my eye, I saw an old shadowy figure walk into the room. He had long robes that almost touched the ground and a kind yet stern glance.

“What happened?” I dazedly asked.

“I should be asking you that,” He replied, motioning to the fragmented vase that rested on the ground. “I am Wang Yuanlu, guardian of the Mogao Grottoes,” he paused and looked at me as if I was a wild animal, “you may call me Sir.”

“I am in need of an apprentice and you have the perfect opportunity. You may work to repay the damage you did,” he said as if he was in charge of me.

“What is your name, boy?” he asked in a slightly demanding way.

“Cheng.”

“I’ll tell you what Cheng. I provide for you and you work for me. Then I let you go.”

“Deal,” I answered firmly.

spring 1930,

The cold has lost its grip on Dunhuang and I can finally step outside back into the warmth of the sun. The blinding rays of light shone on the sand-coloured cliffs and it dried the desolate earth. Wang has let me stay at the temple for shelter and he provides what I need. Although, I have been here for too long.

“May I leave sir,” I begged him, “I have served my purpose and all my work has been done.”

“No, you may not leave until I say so. It is for your own good,” he murmured.

“How! All I’ve ever done is to your advantage. Maybe you just want to use me to get all your work done. I know you are old and you want somebody to take care of the caves but can’t you let me be free!”

“Listen, you are just a child and you do not understand what danger you have been put into,” he replied with his voice raising each moment, “You are roaming on dangerous parts of the desert and there are legends of the most deadly creatures to ever live. When I found you, there was a marking on your back and that means he is after you. The Firebird is after you.”

There was a pause and I took everything in slowly.

“You hid that from me? Anyway, I don’t believe some legend.” I said that as bravely as I could but there was a quiver and a lie in my voice – I knew I disturbed the bird. I ran off. The robes I was given were dragging behind me in the dirt. The words that Wang spoke devoured my mind.

Suddenly, My vision blurred and I found myself in a different place. A place in the past.

“Hurry up!” I shouted to Li Wing, who was my best friend at the orphanage. I saw myself as a carefree child skipping into a cave and exploring.

“Is it safe here?” My friend asked as she scanned the cave.

Around me, The rock walls surrounded me and they met at a high point. There were small hills within the cave, they were covered with lush green grass. Ahead, was the nest of a bird lying on the grass. The nest was big enough to fit me and it was made of thick dark twigs.

“I’m leaving,” I heard Li Wing say, “Ms Ming told us to be back by dusk.”

I walked deeper into the cave without my friend. I remembered touching the nest of the bird and I snatched the fiery orb that rested in the middle of the nest. I felt its warmth seep through my hands as I held it close to me. Its orange and yellow glow reflected onto my face and I stared at it in awe.

It was only at night in my bed I realized what I had done. Something or someone was after me and I knew it. I looked at the orb next to me on the floor and I threw it as far away as I could. Then I knew I had to run and leave everything. That night, I snuck across the orphanage and gathered supplies to last me a while. I creaked the door open and I noticed faces surrounding me as I left. It was Ms Ming and other children that had woken up. I looked up at Ms Ming's face with guilt and to Li Wing in shame.

"Where do you think you are going?" Ms Ming sternly asked.

"Something is after me and you are in danger if you come near me."

"That is still no good reason for running away," Li Wing commented.

"That can't stop me from leaving,"

By now a crowd of half-asleep kids were watching me leave the orphanage. As I walked away, I heard Ms Ming mumble, "Good, less mouths to feed."

I woke to the noise of trickling water rushing over rocks. That can't be true in the middle of a desert. I found myself leaning on some boulders and I looked over to see somebody kneeling over a bubbling river to drink. She looked up and saw me. Between gasping breaths she managed to spit out: "It's near! – The bird – it's coming."

I recognized her. It was Li Wing. Her dark hair had grown long and it covered her face messily. Her thin sandals were worn out and covered in a layer of sand.

"How did you get here?" I wondered

"After you left, a bird twice the size of any human destroyed the orphanage and forced me to run. I came after you to give you something you dropped," she held out the fiery orb "I found this. I thought you might need it."

Suddenly, I saw a blur of black and I quickly turned my head. I saw The Firebird. His eyes were like a burning furnace they seemed to pierce through you. His gray claws scratched the earth when he stood. His slick, dark feathers were embedded with gold, slowly fluttering down with every beat his broad wings made. He came towards me, glaring at me with his flaming eyes but instead he turned to Li Wing. He held her high above a cliff and seized the orb from her hands as she tried to wriggle free of his powerful grasp.

"You think you can't be defeated," the bird dropped her and whispered, "But you can."

He turned to me and I started shaking. I hesitantly ran to the edge of the cliff and climbed down. To my surprise, I saw Li Wing sitting on a small ledge trying to not be noticed by the bird. The bird looked over the cliff.

"I have no time for your games. I will be back to finish the job."

With that he flapped his giant feathers and glided away.

I was left on the ledge with Li Wing and I was amazed by how we were still alive.

"We have to tell Wang," I said.

"Who's Wang?" Li Wing asked.

"I'll tell you on the way,"

"To where?"

"To the Mogao caves."

Overconfidence

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Yong, Casey – 14

Everyone around here knows about the tale of the Mogao Caves by heart. It's the first lullaby we sing to our children, the folk-tale all our inhabitants know by heart, and the story that's been shrouded in mystery for centuries.

Legend has it that near the high and mighty mountains, perched a small temple in the grottoes. This seemingly common temple among dozens, was actually a bottomless pit of the most luxurious relics, fit for emperors and gods. It was said that the caves were stored to the brim with gleaming golden Buddha statues, ordered into creation by some of the most famous rulers of China, and carved by the most gifted sculptors in history. The tapestries and murals covered every possible surface of the crumbling cave, designed by some of the most talented artists, illustrating our rich history in imagery equally as vibrant. The cave also contained rare offerings and materials from lands across the sea, to places far beyond our reach. It even had the protection of the Buddha on its side, forbidding robbers with impure souls to enter. The monks that do enter however, are then blessed with indescribable powers, such as knowledge beyond current human understanding, immortality, even the opportunity to live in the divine heavens, and so much more.

As we all come to learn, these are mere legends – children's tales, if you will. But are they?

The stories told had contained coordinates and hints towards the location of the abandoned temples, and as an eight year old, that was all I needed to spark my insatiable desire to discover this ancient cave.

I've always been the odd one out. My family consists of humble farmers who felt no incentive to branch out, and are instead bound to their simple lifestyles, but I always knew I was meant for more. When I heard this myth as a kid, I felt a spark lit up inside of me. I knew this was my fate, to uncover the cave no one had before, and to be documented as the amazing hero who discovered this long lost treasure of history.

I'm too good to wallow in misery in rice fields with my fellow man. I was destined for greatness right out the womb, like the Buddha himself.

Did anyone around me approve of my quest? Of course not. My parents had shunned me from further discovery when they found out about my research, and they told me this wild goose chase was only going to lead to crushing failure and despair.

"Tantan, you can't devote your life to a story."

"You clearly don't understand my genius!"

"This is a myth. It isn't real. We love and support you but you can't expect a fake cave to just show up. It's going to disappoint you."

"It's real and I'm gonna find it!"

"Darling—"

"SHUT UP! I hate all of you!"

My own parents, who were meant to care for me, had turned their back on me when I was ten, as soon as I deviated from the norm. They were just unable to understand how much of a genius their own child truly was, like everyone else in my village.

Even so, I pushed on. My vivid dreams of the inevitable discovery had only grown with time, and I occasionally wandered around the area where the Mogao caves were said to have been located. I didn't explore much, but this was my true purpose after all, so I had no doubt it would eventually come to me, one way or another. On those hikes, I asked locals, monks, and fellow travelers on my journey, who all resoundingly told me I was insane and should give up, echoing the words of the people in the village.

I was undeterred. I knew one day, they would realize their mistakes had only improved the epic tale I would leave behind. My determination will be admired by all. Everyone loves an underdog, after all.

That was all thirty years ago, and one eventful day, the gods blessed me and my relentless hard work finally paid off.

It was yet another day in the mountains of simply exploring the grottoes for me when I turned a corner, and saw the sight I had longed for for so very long.

A majestic red tower with seven floors, golden strips intertwining the pillars. I was mesmerized, and I stared at the gorgeous structure, flabbergasted, as the doubts and fear I didn't know existed in me fell away.

It was right there. The temple existed. It was undeniably right in front of me.

At first, I was so stunned I could barely process what was happening. The mix of joy, triumph and excitement amongst others swirling around in my head were too overwhelming to bear, as I gaped like a fish at the astonishing sight. Then as it all settled in, I whooped in jubilation, pumping my fists into the air, jumping up and down like a child. My suspicions of the universe recognizing how truly brilliant I was were confirmed. I always knew I was special, and this was my end goal. My life would truly begin right here.

I marched into the temple, grinning jovially and marveling at the dusty walls. The room was pitch black, so I fished a box of matches from my backpack and lit one of them up. Using the speck of light from the match, I saw the silhouettes of golden Buddhas lined up right in front of me. Even in the dim light, I could see the shine reflecting off the sculptures. If I took any of these back home, I knew I could make a fortune from selling these to monks, museums or artifact collectors. I rubbed my hands enthusiastically, and shoved the smallest ones I could find in my backpack, because who knew what treasures lay beyond the entrance. I would need to save some space.

Strangely enough, the door behind me shut tight as soon as I entered, but the wind was unpredictable around these parts, so I didn't think much of it.

Before I could move any further though, a voice echoed through the holy place.

"What are you doing, Liu Tanwu," the voice was soft, yet powerful and intimidating.

Cold sweat formed on the back of my neck. My feet were planted firmly in the ground, and I couldn't move. Was this a monk? Another traveler? A zombie here to haunt me? I had no recognition of this terrifying voice, but it felt familiar to my ears.

"W—who are you?" I stammered, trying to keep my frantic breathing under control.

"I am the protector of the cave, the guardian, the Buddha himself."

My heart sank, but then I remembered how the gods had favored me and gave me the power of ambition, which led me here. This had to be my prize. I was to be granted eternal fame or infinite gold, or maybe even more.

I smirked giddily and glanced around, "It is my honor to have met you. I suppose I shall be receiving my gift for coming so far. Have you prepared my present in advance, or will you listen to my request?"

"...Here I was hoping you would learn your lesson," the voice sighed, showing hints of disappointment.

"Excuse me?"

"Child, you have been consumed by your greed and narcissism. This temple is a sanctuary for those in need of my guidance, and your intentions for coming have been nothing but for your own selfish gain."

"I—I don't understand. This is my destiny, this is my—."

"You have soiled the holy ground. I was to spare you and give you a second chance, but it's plain to see you are unable to understand your faults, even when it is right in front of you. Therefore, you shall be punished."

“What? My Lord—”

The match in my hand flickered out instantly, and I was left surrounded by an abyss of darkness. A strange chill enveloped my feet, suddenly not able to move. The cold spread from my toes, to ankles, to my knees. I looked down in panic, but it was too dark to see anything. The freezing feeling slowly rose and I was quickly rigid from the waist down. I screamed in terror, tears streaming down my face until they too froze. But the darkness didn't hear my pleas. Soon enough, it reached my torso and I lost further consciousness.

My demise was borne from my greed, and I only realized it was I who was at fault when it was too late. I don't know if anyone found me, I would like to hope my parents went searching for me in the end, but I never found out. Perhaps it would be for the better if they never knew, I'm not sure.

Either way though, I now stand for eternity, frozen in time, forever a cautionary tale of misplaced ambition.

Highest of the High

CCC Chuen Yuen College, Hui, Yan Ting Ruby – 14

I am an archaeologist. Oh, not. I should say I was an archaeologist. A long, long time ago, when I was a young ambitious adventurer, I embarked on a thrilling journey I will never forget.

It was a sunny day, just like walking on a stove. I was in the Gobi Desert with my fellow teammates. We went there to study the types of rocks which caused serious desertification. Unfortunately, we met a terrible sand–dust storm and finally, we got lost. Until the night, we had not left the desert successfully. That night was cold and chilly. Snot froze to our face from the sharp wind and our fingers ached in the algid wind. Even though we had already walked for a long time, it seemed that there was no way to leave the desert. Desperation started to spread among us. Our food had been eaten already as we did not expect that we would get lost in the desert. Without food and any water, we did not know how much time we had left before we died. We just knew we were so exhausted.

At the moment we were going to give up, we found a spot of light that was not far from us. Full of hope, we rushed to the place where the spot of light appeared and it grew into a lantern hanging above a large cavern. Without hesitation and desperate for shelter we climbed into the darkened pit. It took a while for my eyes to adjust and for a time I could not see my fellow teammates. The air inside was warm and enveloped us, making us feel at home. As we all felt extremely tired, we soon fell asleep on the floor.

‘Who are they?’

‘Why are they here?’

‘How did they enter here?’ Different voices whispered around and woke us. When I opened my eyes, I saw a group of strangers surrounding us. That sounds quite scary, right? I recognised them as monks as their dress was such. After we stood up, they quietly ushered us somewhere further inside and large rooms lit with torches emerged. We were given comfortable places to sit and presented with mugs of warm water. Soon after we were treated to a big meal. We were so hungry, we could only focus on the spread in front of us. The table was laden with fresh fruits and vegetables, dahls, soups, broths, breads, and various spreads. It was scrumptious, luscious, mouth–watering, you name it!

During the delectable meal, we explained our plight and the conversation led us to understand that this cavern was a great place for the monks to meditate and experience Bhavana. However, I was confused. What the monks were describing were the Mogao Caves. Interest had sparked in recent times after these caves had laid forgotten for nearly one thousand years when trade had moved away from the Silk Road to the sea. As far as I knew, no one had lived there, no Buddhists certainly, since the 11th century. Of course there were the locals who had lived in the Dunhuang province, but the Mogao Caves, also known as the Thousand Buddha Grottoes or Caves of the Thousand Buddhas, in the Dunhuang district of Gansu province had long been abandoned.

From the conversation, we knew these Buddhists in front of us knew about the Buddhist monk from the Tang dynasty and his vision of a thousand Buddhas bathed in golden light at the site, which inspired him to build a cave here. It was how these caves got the name Mogao Caves. Although, Mogao means ‘peerless,’ ‘mo’ literally translates as ‘none’ and gao as ‘high’. Nothing higher–here lies the highest of the high, with these caves dug into rock at the highest position. However, what was confusing to me was if few monks had lived here since the 11th century, why were these monks here?

After the delicious meal, the monks invited us through the caves. An invitation no archaeologist would decline. The monks led us to a big cave. The scene astonished me. I could barely speak. This cave was one of the most fabulous constructions I have ever seen. It had a square central pillar with alcoves on each side and a flat ceiling with painted small box–like shapes known as coffering. The front portion of the cave had a triangular ceiling with large rafts painted red. The design was remarkable and reminded me of both Chinese and Central Asian, Mongolian, Iranian and so forth, architectural features. There was a pillar in the centre, and was shaped like a stupa, a mound over a burial site, and here it looked Indian in design. There was also a Chinese–style window above the entrance on the east wall. Now I realised it must be daytime, for sun shone through the window onto the main Buddha statue, creating a halo on his head and upper torso.

Entering another cave, I couldn’t draw my eyes away from the azure colour. On the front face of the pillar was a niche in which sat the cross–legged Buddha. The beautiful blue of his halo and mandorla was made of lapis. The murals of this cave were also terrific! They were mostly depictions of the jataka, birth stories of Buddha. The details were extraordinary. I noticed a

princely person offering himself to a starving tigress and her cubs. Two men alongside the princely one looked down at the tigress and her seven cubs. The story continued on the right. Then I realised I must be looking at the story of Prince Sattva who gave his body to feed the lioness and keep her purity, thus one of the Buddhist principles of generosity. The Chinese-style stupa built to commemorate the event ends the story's illustration. The stupa however looked odd. It was a three-story building as seen from above, but the front steps are shown at eye level. And there were more stories painted in the same spectacular way on the other walls. I was engrossed. Then when I looked up I saw the blissful heavenly scene and started to wonder if I wasn't myself in nirvana. Had we died after all?

Soon, the monks led us to another cave. Here on the long altar in front of us was a giant reclining Buddha—the classic pose used to show his enlightenment. The Buddha was lying on his right, with his right arm under his head and above the pillow.

Before I knew what was happening I heard the monks were bidding us farewell as though they had some important business to attend to. Now that we were warm, fed, and most entertained, the monks seemed happy to let us go. They told us a place where we could stay and nudged us in this direction, showing us the correct path to take. 'Farewell! Until we meet again!' Before leaving, we turned around and sighed—in front of us stood hundreds of years of history. Rarely had people visited, although this would soon change—how much has changed just in my lifetime.

To this day I remain puzzled by the monks' who showed up that night. The only explanation I have come to over these years is when we were about to die, the Mogao Caves saved us, unbeknown to us their caverns took us through time to be comforted by these the highest of the high who created such a matchless place.

New Old Tales of the Mogao Grottoes

CCC Chuen Yuen College, Law, Lewis – 14

I'm a researcher and I'm in the desert with my research team. A rumor has run for some years in my field that there is an undiscovered hidden door to a trove of documents walled up hundreds of years ago. I became determined to uncover its truth or whereabouts. However, I underestimated nature, and now lack food and water. To make matters worse, the continuous heatwaves and sandstorms have forced us to camp for countless nights in the desert. Finally, our team set-up camp in a humongous cave. I have remained in my tent, now inside this cave, burning my brain juice out on how to save as much food as possible. I've travelled all over the world, but this desert is one of a kind.

I was about to throw my hands in the air, when Simon, the team coordinator burst into my tent.

'We've found it!' Simon said.

'Found what?' I replied wearily.

'The hidden door.'

'What?' I leapt out of the tent and Simon led me to the very back of the cave. On the wall I could make out faintly marked clerical script.

'Have you figured out what it means?' I asked.

'Not yet, but we're working on it,' he replied.

'The door might be hidden under something. Keep your eyes peeled for any cracks or irregularities,' I said.

After hours of trying to find a telling surface, we found a tiny trapdoor on the east side under a ledge—what we thought had been the ground. It was Simon who heard a hallow sound when tapping against the wall. Even though we were exhausted, our exuberance meant we grabbed the essentials we needed and eased open the door.

There was no handle or a hole for us to easily open it, and we had to pry it open, gently removing all the silt and sand that had built up over time. Once opened, a long tunnel appeared. We took turns and gingerly crawled in. Maybe all the sound disrupted the door, and despite having carefully wedged it to stay open, the door suddenly closed behind us with a 'BANG!' A plume of dust travelled through the tunnel and we coughed our lungs out. Once it settled, the panic grabbed us. Simon, leading us out front was stuck. We couldn't move forward, or back. This could mean only one thing, that we were trapped, alive.

Well, this is *great* I thought. I was stuck in the middle. 'How it's going at the front?' I shouted to Simon at the top of my lungs. 'It's a dead end! It's impossible,' Simon shouted back. The tunnel fell silent. Minutes passed by and my team's breathing became audible, as we laboured for breath in the thinning oxygen. It was time to admit the situation. I was going to start praying out loud to keep us calm, rather than fight for our final breaths, when a sentence from the official documents I'd been scouting popped into my head. *The entrance to the grotto is hidden and unfortunately there are no details about it. There are also various traps.*

This tunnel didn't feel like a trap though. It had been too obscure. There must be a mechanism in this tunnel. I could barely move but my eyes scanned around, scouring along the dugout space. It must be a corridor. That's it. Using the little breath I had, in a hoarse voice, I said, 'Look around everybody. These tiles you can see might be our only way to escape.' Up ahead, Simon started shuffling. 'This one is loose' he called back, as though on his dying breath.

The whole tunnel roared and as it did the tunnel stretched. The ceiling rose until it was tall enough for us to stand. We slowly unfolded our stiff bodies and breathed more deeply in this oxygen expanded space. I could make out a maze which had appeared in front of us. Simon led the way. It became pitch black, and we turned on our state-of-the-art flashlights. 'Take out your compasses gentlemen, it helps in these situations. We should split into two groups. It will allow us to waste less time. Simon will lead four people and go west. The others will follow me and go east. If one of us find anything, tug on the rope tied between us.'

The team split up and my group went east into the maze. Our fate was before us with human skeletons and bones huddled into different nooks and crannies. None of us spoke. We wandered around hopeless, but nothing appeared besides more walls of the maze. We were all beginning to lose our minds along with our sense of direction when a team member said, 'I think there is a way to get out of this maze.'

'How?' Another member retorted.

'Look at the walls, I think there are arrows etched on it.' They replied.

I looked at my left, and indeed, there was a faint arrow. 'Let's follow the arrow,' I said, speaking allowed what we were all already in agreement on.

Sure enough we found a door but as soon as we opened it, before we could get too excited, the other group stood in front of us. 'So much for east and west' one of the team members muttered. Ignoring our despair, Simon reported, 'We found a key lying at the edge of the maze and there's a door on this side, just before this door we came through.'

‘Let’s go quickly,’ I said, knowing our flashlights couldn’t last much longer.

Simon stood with the key in his hand, in front of a huge door, carved with cursive script. In the center was a tiny keyhole. ‘The keyhole seems too small to fit that key,’ I said.

‘Then what is this key for?’ Simon asked.

Simon took out his magnifying glass, and carefully scanned the whole door. It felt as though hours passed. ‘Looks like there is nothing,’ Simon finally said.

‘No lock?’

‘No.’

‘No handle?’

‘No.’

‘No hole?’

‘No.’

‘Not even a groove, something we could use as leverage to for a tool to open it?’ I stared at Simon.

‘No.’

‘Dang.’ I gave up.

A teammate leaned with his back against the door. Before I could tell him to move, that he was endangering archeological treasures, the door swung open. Gasps rose as our teammate fell onto the floor inside. ‘Your weight has just saved us. All good?’ I asked him as I stepped into this new room and helped him back on his feet. He winced with a stupefied nod.

I looked around me and here it was. The legendary library. Piles of rolled up documents lined the shelves. Stepping up to a shelf, Simon took a roll and opened it holding his flashlight under one arm. ‘The history of the Mongol Empire’ he translated—reading fluently from what looked like Sanskrit. The rest of us started darting our lights about the shelves. I spotted oil lanterns and flints and soon we had the room lit like a ballroom. After hours of behaving like children in a candy store, Simon said, ‘We have found this, but what now? How do we actually get out of here?’

Buoyed by our epic discovery I felt no panic. I had already studied the room closely. ‘We go through this trapdoor!’ I pointed to a battered wooden door on the ceiling.

After many tricky maneuvers, we eventually made it out through the ceiling. We popped up above ground like meerkats and found ourselves back in the desert. Another expedition has arrived. Their horses and camels are laden down with provisions. It’s still freezing at night, but I no longer care. We have found the legendary cave.

Desert Cave Discovery

CCC Kei Yuen College, Tam, Cheuk Him – 13

My team got to the grottoes after several days' trek. We were setting up camp and scrounging around for some materials to set up our campsite on the eastern side of the mounds when, suddenly, the sand collapsed and Chris fell down into a shallow cave. All three of us jumped up to help.

It was just a shallow cave, a doorway or entrance chamber. A statue was protecting the entrance, a stone that looked like a cat sitting on it. Everyone felt a pang of fear moving past the cat, but entered carefully.

We then passed a frieze, a painting on a cave wall that depicted a scholar's city with a dragon flying across hipped roofs. My eyes followed the scene until I noticed that one of the dragon's claws seemed to point toward a key. Yes, it was a real key, not just a painting! It was hard to make it out in the low light. I pulled the key down from its hook.

As we proceeded down into the cave, we resisted the urge to flee. In truth, we wanted to turn around, run away, and crawl out! However, we kept trudging forward, moving deeper and deeper into the cave. After 6 minutes of walking through the half-darkness, we came to a door. A door made of metal or iron. It was time to test the key. Siu Wai slid the key into the keyhole and we heard 'click, click, click, click, click.....' and the next chamber opened. There were a lot of books, and some jars that contained maps or tapestries.

We got the impression that we were the only ones alive who knew of these treasures. However, I also got the impression that we would not be able to escape if we didn't leave soon. I don't know why I felt that way, it was a creeping feeling of unease.

We retraced our steps and managed to get back to our campsite. We wanted to go online and try to understand what we had found. When we did a search for the stone cat and the painting, we found out that they were lost treasures, lost in the sands long ago, and that we had re-discovered them!

Together, we made the decision to alert the local police station (because the books and tapestries were so valuable) after taking careful photos of everything down there. We performed a total inventory in the low light

In the end, the beautiful cave we found became a museum, and the most delicate objects we uncovered were moved to a larger museum in Xi'an. My team continued to search the dunes around the grottoes for similar cave openings. We even used tech and engineering equipment, like sonar, to try and find another cache....but we never really found one as glorious as the first treasure cave we found.

The Phoenix

Chinese International School, Chan, Zoe – 12

The thing I remember most vividly about my grandmother were the stories she told me each night before I drifted off to sleep. Each tale, each sentence weaving together like a quilt of myths and magic.

Those stories were derived through vast mountains, scorching deserts, and stormy seas with towering waves—right to the heart of our little *siheyuan* with their interlocking courtyard homes and slanting gray rooftops.

But there was one story that stood out to me the most—the last one that she ever told me before she had joined our ancestors.

“I had a brother, Lei Min. A younger brother. He had the eyes of an angel, and the soul of an imp.” my grandmother had whispered, tucking an inky tendril of hair behind my ear. I gazed at her curiously, eyes already drooping tiredly.

“He was the best brother anyone could have wished for, but he then... just... left. Ran away from us all. Nobody knew why, except for me.

Every full moon, he’d send me a letter attached to a phoenix.”

“What’s that?” I had interrupted, befuddled.

The older woman shook her head, strands of dove-white hair falling in front of her face. She seemed younger, somehow, and almost radiated a fire-like glow. “A bird. It was beautiful, with red, orange, and gold plumes that showered sparks into the air, and these clever eyes.” Though I didn’t notice at the time, her expression grew somber. “They would burst into flames.”

I nodded, taking in this new morsel of information. Flaming birds? Fun.

“He sent me a note attached to a phoenix every full moon, for years upon years. Until one day... The message was sent back to me with no response.”

I frowned—I didn’t really like seeing her aura all dimmed. It just took all the magic and stories off of her.

“What were in his letters?” I asked in a desperate attempt to cheer my grandmother up.

A small smile found its way onto her face. “He was telling me about the desert oasis he found, in dunhuang... a long way from here.

He told me about that lake shaped like a crescent moon, with water that winked at you in the sunlight, and faded into a starry void during the night. But sunsets and sunrises were the best. He’d sit there for hours upon hours, doing nothing but gaze at the fiery, smudged colors like chalk on a sidewalk.

Oh! I remember in one of his letters, he told me about this new branch of a grotto he found, and how he was building it. It’d be like a shrine for our family, he said.” Her eyes crinkled softly at the corners.

“He had also learned the art of clairvoyance. He said that there would be one of us who would walk in his path... One of us who would need to find the seams to hold the family together...”

When we need each other more than anything...

But all we do is repel each other.

Secrets and lies feast on the shadows.

One of us would have to bring those to light...

And end it all."

I didn't pay too much attention to the last part.

All I knew at the moment was that I wanted a phoenix.

"Hey, Lei Min! Happy fourteenth birthday!" I turned to see the source of the holler. Of course it was the librarian. Seriously, one of the people I'm closest to, besides my grandmother. Parentals could never compete.

"Thanks!" I yelled back. "You're the first person to say that to me today!"

Did I mention it was 4pm?

I closed my eyes for a moment, savoring the icy, silent atmosphere that hung around the *hutong* like a thick blanket.

When I opened them, though, a trail of fiery, glimmering gold was barely visible in the air. My fingers reached out, almost brushing against those delicate sparks, but they faded, yet again, into nothingness.

I blinked. Was I seeing things? Probably.

I let out another melancholy sigh. For some reason, disappointment settled like lead in my veins. Was I really expecting a phoenix? I mean, it was obviously another detail my grandmother had embellished. But still...

There was the sound of rustling from behind. Not the sound of paper that I was well familiar with, but almost like... *feathers?*

I swiveled around disbelievingly, but was once again met with nothing but an old wooden table and carved windows.

A single red feather, embellished with bright orange edges, fell ever so lightly onto the table like a snowflake. A barely-visible wisp of gold rose and curled into the air.

My fingers closed around it, feeling its soft, petal-like texture. It was warm in my hand, drastically contrasting with the frigid temperatures outside.

Suddenly, my hypothesis of a mythical bird didn't seem too unrealistic.

"I heard from your teacher that you didn't do well on your test. Do you see Lan and Qing failing tests?" My mother seethed that night.

Lan being my older sister, and Qing being my older brother. Both child prodigies.

And I'm just the fluke.

I don't even want to be a teacher! I wanted to scream. *I want to be a freaking travel journalist. I'm so sick of this.*

I have to leave.

—

That night, as I lay tossing and turning on my stiff mattress, still fuming with anger at my mother's words, I saw something.

A light, dancing gently against the window.

Like a fairy.

"What do you want?" I whispered. "Are you even real?"

Sliding out of bed, I tried not to make any noise so as to not wake up my siblings, who were snoring on the other two beds.

Forcing the window open, and wincing at the indignant squeak it gave in response, I stared right into the liquid amber eyes of—

Of a bird on fire.

Elegant red, orange, and golden plumes swished, sending sparks flying into the dark, frigid night air.

"So you are real," I murmured, mesmerized. As if on instinct, my hand reached to stroke the phoenix's soft, petal-like feathers.

But it only opened its beak, and a melodic chime that sounded like distant bells echoed through the desolate room.

"Shush!" I hissed at the bird, though I was feeling as giddy as a child on a sugar high. Ecstasy spread like liquid warmth through my veins. Firecrackers were exploding inside of me, and I felt like if I jumped, I could just stay up there and touch the stars.

The phoenix flapped its wings once, and just...

Flew away.

Streaks of gold followed its departure.

I then made the best or worst choice in my lifetime.

I just decided to follow the phoenix.

Shoving as much as I could possibly fit into my satchel, I set out in the dark to follow that bird.

That stupid cursed phoenix, who carried me as I fell asleep at the park, over scorching deserts and unforgiving heights, to the Mogao Grottoes.

How it did that, only the gods know.

That was where I learned the most important lesson of all.

—

The Mogao Caves

Chinese International School, Ma, Grace – 13

“Can you tell me another story? Please?” Meng pleaded with great excitement, her sparkling eyes filled with interest.

“All right, but after that, it’s bedtime.” Meng’s grandmother, a mysterious but kind old woman, sighed and sipped some tea.

“Do you know the cave system that was sealed off over there in Dunhuang? Those are called the Mogao caves. A long time ago, monks began leaving their paintings and literature and all sorts of treasure inside the caves. One of these includes the oldest printed book in history!”

“Wow, that’s awesome! I would love to explore the cave and see the book!” Meng declared joyfully.

“Of course, but it’s time for you to go to bed now. How about I tell you the story of the book tomorrow?” The grandmother calmly explained, as she gently tucked the 5-year-old girl to bed.

And that was just the beginning. 20 years later, in 1930, Meng began to study and work as the historian of a group of local explorers. Their recent mission is to explore the Mogao caves to conduct research on artifacts left behind by ancient civilisations, the most important being the oldest book in the world. 5-year-old Meng’s dream shall finally come true.

“Is everyone present? I will not hesitate to leave anyone behind!” The leader of the explorers called.

“Oh! Sorry, I just arrived. I was busy cooking some food to bring along.” Meng ran to the meeting location and was carrying a handwoven basket. “It’s a long trip, so I made these buns for all of us! It’s a special recipe that my grandmother taught me!”

There was a moment of silence. The explorers glanced at Meng and shrugged, one of which muttering something along the lines of “It would be better to have... more mature members on this trip”. The group of 10 adventurers squished onto a creaky, old tram and awkwardly made their way to the Mogao caves.

The tram made a stop with a piercing squeak. There it was, a looming tower of faded brick-red pillars integrated into the sandy cliff surface. It hung over the unsuspecting group, each freshly-dusted archway engraved with delicate stories. Meng stopped and stared at the ancient beauty in front of her. She turned around and checked her surroundings, only to notice that the rest of her group had moved on without her. Meng hurried into the cave, only to be greeted by a larger shock.

The interior was even more impressive: every room was covered with hundreds of intricate paintings and carvings. A statue remained at the center of each room, the sliver of its former, faded life guarding the treasures that lie within. Meng simply could not handle the excitement. As the older, more experienced members of the group were occupied with recording every artifact in its detail, Meng thought it would be fine exploring the cave a bit more and left the current chamber.

Meng was taking a casual stroll through the ruins, looking up at the ceiling, which was tiled with colourful tessellation artwork of various patterns. Being so lost in her subconscious thoughts of appreciation for such fine and ancient art, Meng tripped over something. A cloud of dust rose in the main chamber and some unsuspecting members of the group coughed uncomfortably. There, a thick concrete wall slid down, blocking the exit. BOOM! The chamber fell into darkness, and so had the spirits of the group.

“W—what was that?” A panicked voice called out.

“Wait, that thing blocked off the exit!” Another one followed.

“Hold on... we’re trapped in here!” A few more exclaimed. Meng stood in shock and stared down at her feet. She had indeed activated a tripwire by accident. The oldest member lit up a candle that dimly illuminated the cavern and heaved a tired sigh. “All of you, continue with your research. We’ll sort this out later. There’s no need to panic.”

Meng was overwhelmed with guilt, and knew very well that it's her fault for being careless and not focusing on the task at hand. She might as well continue with the investigation. She worriedly lit up a candle and cautiously wandered into the depths of the caves, searching for a room worthy of study and observing her step. Until her gaze was set upon a room larger than any of the other rooms.

This room was completely dark and sealed off by everything, except for a small archway. There were the usual paintings and engravings on the sides of the walls, but the true glory was held at the center. On a cracked stone pedestal, there laid, in all its glory, the world's oldest printed book. The cover was made from a thick layer of faded leather and the pages from coarse papyrus, and yet it appeared to be so fragile that it would crumble to dust from a small gust of wind and float into oblivion like an ancient butterfly.

Meng stared at the book in disbelief. What was merely mentioned in a tale, a bedtime story, was now sitting in front of her, gazing at her in utmost curiosity like a living, breathing being. With a lump in her throat, Meng flipped open the cover gently. Some of the pages have been worn out over time, but the remaining ones were filled with ancient drawings and undecipherable characters that bore the existence of once-told legends. She wished, for even one moment, to be able to understand everything and to dive into the ancient and mysterious world of the book. However, she was interrupted by the sound of—

“WELL, YOU BETTER FIND SOME WAY TO FIX THIS!”

“It's not my fault we're stuck here for the rest of our lives!”

The other group members broke out into a fight, some began physically wrestling whoever seemed suspicious enough, and some began wrongfully blaming each other. Meng opened her mouth and was about to notify the others about the book, but was soon yelled at.

“YOU HAVE NO SAY IN THIS, CHILD!”

Meng felt a lump rising in her throat, her head filled with confusion and guilt. She had activated the mechanism and trapped everyone in this ancient and potentially dangerous place out of her own carelessness, and now that blame has been carried onto other members that were directed with their responsibilities. Meng rushed back into the book chamber, collapsed onto the wall and started to cry.

The human figures painted on the wall looked down on her with a blank expression, as if mocking her own errors. She had only joined this group of explorers for the sake of earning money and sustaining a living for herself after her parents left her alone just last year. She promised herself, her parents and her grandma that she would do her best to take care of herself, but now she's here and is causing trouble for such an intense mission.

I was so stupid back then, Meng thought as she violently wiped her tears, I was a stupid child that got told a bedtime story that sustained me happiness for 3 nights, and now everything here is hopelessness and desolation. I messed everything up... now I've disappointed grandma...

Meng took a deep breath and sat next to the pedestal with the book. *How I miss you, grandma. I know you told me the stories of this cave to spark my curiosity so I could do something impressive in my lifetime. What was the story that you told me? “If you ever find yourself stuck in a sticky situation, just think about the buns I made you. These buns are of a really old recipe, and are used as a character in the language used within the book. It represents a tasteful relief and escape from hopelessness.”*

Suddenly, Meng jumped from her seat. She had to look for this character inside the book. She frantically opened the book, rapidly scanning each page. There it was, a page with a diagram of the cave structure. It depicted the entrance and the map of the cave system, as well as to indicate each passage that leads to the next section. *This truly was the wisdom left by those ancient monks centuries ago? How did grandma ever know of this stuff?* Meng thought, as she memorised the route to the exit. The cave was almost like a maze, a jumble of profound secrets.

This was Meng's problem, and now she was going to fix it.

“Hey, I think I know the way out!” Meng called out to the disputed crowd. This 25-year-old girl might as well be their way out. The weary group snaked around the depths, until they were finally greeted with a beautiful sunset.

The leader asked, “Meng, how did you know the way out? Please, I would love to know!”

To which she replied, “Do you know the cave system that was sealed off over there in Dunhuang?”

The caves were dark. Bits of sand swirled around my worn shoes as my footsteps echoed through the narrow, twisting hallways, mind practically blown with all the magnificent carvings in the wall.

It was amazing.

My laughter bounced off of the walls—something hoarse from disuse, but nonetheless—wow!

Incredible!

But there was one branch.

It just... felt right to me.

And so I went in, because you simply do follow your instincts in these types of situations. Yes, indeed.

But it was just so profoundly *empty*. This was a bad idea, wasn't it?

As I trekked deeper into the cave, I felt a sense of longing, a flickering flame, stronger than anything I've ever felt before.

The huge stalactites gripped to the cave ceiling while stalagmites seemed to grow from the ground, desperately reaching to their sharp counterparts, but never being able to touch, like two lovers forbidden from one another.

I wanted to cry, *where are you? Why did you lead me here?*

My prayers only bounced off the walls, echoing back to myself.

“It's going to be alright. You won't have to go back there anymore. You're *the one*. I prophesied it wrong, that you would hold them together. They were never meant to be, at all. Simply insignificant in the ways of this world, unless they change their ways.” an elderly voice, one I didn't recognise, but felt so *familiar* at the same time, rasped.

It wasn't me who spoke. Perhaps, some other being? I felt like I was reborn. “I'm the one who's following in your path, aren't I.”

A New Experience

Diocesan Boys' School, Yeung, Boris – 13

People around me were screaming, everyone was screaming, everyone was running around at full speed. Suddenly, a missile the size of a car hit the ground next to me. There were about sixteen people next to me and we realized too late what that was. "RUN!" I screamed, but it's too late. The missile detonated, and everything went black.

★ ★ ★

I woke up feeling refreshed. I was lying on a soft bed. I looked around, maybe this was all a dream and I am just waking up. I looked down. "Hmmm" I thought. This bed looks kinda big. And green, for that matter. Oh no. Suddenly I started to panic. This is real. I raised my hand up in front of my face. "Ok, my hand looks fine." Because in the stories all the main characters look at their hands first for some reason. Maybe it's easier than... I dunno, the head or something. I looked around at my surroundings, "Hmmmmmm... Lots of green!" I thought. Then, I looked down, and yelled out in shock.

It is hard to put it into words. It's not a big change. My clothes are just weird now. I am wearing a blue leather tunic with a strap that runs across my chest. On my side is a scabbard with a short metal sword in it. I unsheathed it, feeling its weight. It's like holding air, very light. I also have some gold coins, no clue there. So, I walked onwards, with only a small sword to protect me. Oh how naive I was, walking into the unknown.

★ ★ ★

I just remembered I didn't introduce myself yet. I am called Dennis, I came from the year 2657. I am a sports guy, but I also like playing video games. Like any kids would.

★ ★ ★

So yeah, I was a very curious boy, so I just walked through the plains and far away, until I heard people, yes, PEOPLE. That might be normal to... well. Everyone. But after walking alone for so long, hearing people's chatter is like a miracle, because I thought this place is sort of like a punishment for no reason. My walk turned into a jog, my jog turned into a run, my run turned into a sprint, until I saw walls, walls made by civilization. I yelled, "HEY, ANYONE THERE?" Suddenly, two heads peeked over the wall. They waved their hands frantically, and opened the door. I walked in, and finally, I am safe. I think.

★ ★ ★

When I first went into the city, the sound overwhelmed me. It was almost too much that I staggered back, which was strange, because I come from a city, New York, to be exact, and I hear cars zooming around and people chattering all the time. People are talking about where to go next, or something. So I just decided to explore a bit.

This place is my new favorite place. There is no school, no poverty, nothing bad! People were chatting like they have nothing to worry about, kids younger than me chasi... wait a second, what age am I? Oh wow, I didn't give that much thought! I borrowed a mirror from a nice guy and looked at myself. Hm... seems fine. I look like myself, so no worries there. Someone passing by just now mentioned something about a pretty nice inn close to the square somewhere, so there I shall go!

★ ★ ★

I FINALLY FOUND IT. That took me a day for me to do so, so it was night time by the time I did. So I can use my coins, I guess. I went in, and I was immediately greeted by a... worker, I guess. After a tasty meal, I went up to my inn and despite the weird day, fell asleep almost immediately.

★ ★ ★

The next day, I decided to explore the town. For real this time, because my last expedition was quite uneventful. This time though, is quite the opposite. Two steps out the door, and I could hear loud noises. From people. Holding machetes. "ALL YOUR STUFF IN THE BAG BOYS. THIS IS A ROBBERY. PUT THEM IN OR I WILL CUT YOU IN HALF." One of them said. I don't know, but they seem quite comical to me, so I just kept walking. Suddenly, a big hand clapped on my shoulder. "Hey kid, what did I just say?" I looked back, and saw the big dude. Behind him were a dozen people from the inn

putting most of their food and money into the bag. Suddenly, the big dude doesn't look so comical anymore. "Um," I gulped. Maybe walking away wasn't that great of an idea anymore."I... don't have anything?" (Which was true). "LIAR!" He yelled. Swinging his huge knife at me. Immediately, my body responded. I don't know why, or how, but my hand flew to my short sword and parried the bigger knife, easy peasy. Then, it busted out some cool sword moves that I don't even know about, and well, let's say that he won't be bothering anyone sooner or later. He didn't exactly die, but dissolved into particles that flew into the sky. I felt a rush of energy and adrenaline. People around me are whispering.

"Did that thug just get beaten up..."

"What moves... That's a level one though..."

"What are his stats man???"

"Stats?" I thought, and immediately, a screen showed up, with all my stats I guess.

★ ★ ★

Then some more formal people suddenly came up and said," Hello there, who are you, why could you kill,, sorry, I mean dissolve those thugs(family friendly, remember? Heh), what abilities do you have??" Then I thought," Abilities?????? What are those?????" Then, another screen popped up. It says, "ABILITIES" on top, and I have none. So I told them, and they didn't believe me, so I showed them. They are very amazed. They said, "How do you do that??? We can't."

I was like "WAAAAAAAttt I'm special."

They weren't that bright though, they asked whether it was an ability. I mean, c'mon man isn't the screen in front of you? Do you need to ask?"So they took me in for questioning. Eh, normal stuff. I have been sent to see the principal a few times, nothing will be much different right?

They took me to a room. A small black room for questioning. This might be a bit different from the usual principal visits. Yes. Just a bit different from the usual.

Turns out, the interrogator isn't that mean of a person. He asked me a few questions, knew that I was truthful, and nodded and let me go, we even chatted a bit on the way out!

★ ★ ★

I was back in my room at the inn, chilling at the bar, drinking some juice, not wine ok. I still have some self control, someone barged in and called for me. Well, he said the new guy that was supposed to be a noob but isn't, so I assumed that's me. He brought me to an alleyway, and told me the news. Apparently, this world is under attack by some clan from another world, called the Al-Dhabih. Then it hit me."Is this world made out of... different worlds?"

"Yes." He said, "You really don't know?"

"Like I said, I am new to this place."

"So what the interrogator told me was entirely true," He paused, and hurriedly added," Not that I don't believe him, I just find the whole thing quite unbelievable."

To be honest, I do too, but I remained silent.

He took me to the blacksmith. He said his name was Joan, and he is also very nice. I was starting to realize a pattern here. The buffer one is, the nicer they are. Anyways, he gave an extremely cool looking sword to use. When I touched it, though, my hand felt like it was being bathed in lava. I dropped it, and Joan came over in shock."SORRY, I keep forgetting that you are not even level one, judging by your skills with the blade. I'm very sorry, but I can only give you a less cool sword with less cool addons, and you need to train until you are at least level twenty to wield this better sword."He gave me another sword, which, in my opinion, is just as cool as the last.

When we arrived at the training grounds, the messenger showed me to a really tough looking guy. He is slimmer than the other people, so naturally, he is grumpy. He didn't tell me his name, and just told me to show him the skills I used to fight the baddies. I showed him, but he just said "hmph" and said I just need a bit of training to further improve my skills.

That night, I spent a lot of time thinking, mostly about this world, but I also thought about the people I met today. Most of them are nice to me, so I reckon that this world was quite a good place except for a few minor things (Cough grumpy guys Cough). It was late night when I finally fell asleep.

A random day about a year later, after tons upon tons of training, he suddenly announced that I was ready to challenge Madro head-on, so I went to join the assembling army outside the walls

★ ★ ★

So the army of this world assembled in one place, at a portal that goes into their world. The amount of soldiers made me speechless. There are so many that it covers my vision entirely. They began to march into the portal group by group. After some time, all of them went through, including me. Well, here goes nothing.

Stories at the Mogao Grottoes

Diocesan Girls' School, Chan, Tsz Yau Astrid – 12

Faith felt a thrill of excitement pass through her body as the bus stopped. They were finally here at the long awaited Mogao Grottoes!

She eagerly stepped out of the bus, shoes scoring marks on the stones caked with dirty—brown dust. The sky was a length of azure silk, white clouds sprinkled here and there, splatters of white paint on the material. A gust of dry wind brushed against her cheeks, bringing not only a flurry of sand, but also a musty arid tang, the trademark scent of the desert. An oriental tower stood, half swallowed up by the rough cliff face, the bright red long worn away by the relentless scraping of the wind. Behind it, towering cliffs stood like hostile giants, guarding many mysteries locked behind the walls. The entire network of caves seemed to be filled with an aura of foreboding and mystery. Thinking about the untold stories, Faith couldn't help but shiver in anticipation. She loved stories, they were like warm soup, something to cheer her up after a long depressing day.

"Well well well, who do we have here?" A girl sashayed up to Faith.

Faith stepped back, hugging her notebook of Chinese myths protectively. "Go away Jessica."

"I can't believe we went to this dumpster for the school trip. We have to spend the entire day listening to this nonsense of dragons and gods." Jessica rolled her eyes but then narrowed them. "I suppose you like it, with your head up in the clouds all the time, mind full of fantasies, hands clutching that pathetic notebook of yours." She snatched the spiral notebook about Faith's hand.

Faith could barely keep her hands steady from terror. "Give that back, Jessica."

Jessica flicked her wrist, the notebook sailing toward the pond.

"Oops." She fluttered her eyelashes innocently.

Faith lunged forward, her fingers just grazing the edge of the cover, but it wasn't enough to stop it from hurling into a watery demise. Tears welling up in her eyes, she snatched it up and dashed into the caves, the sneers fading behind her.

She hurtled blindly for a while, clutching the sodden wad of paper, twisting and turning through the dark corridors. After a while, she collapsed to the ground, trembling with fury. How much longer will she have to endure this? All she wanted to do was to enjoy Chinese legends in peace.

Composing herself, Faith glanced around. In an attempt to escape Jessica, she had dashed blindly into the caves.

A decision she regretted now. She could barely make out her location in the suffocating darkness, but she was in a large open cavern, deafening silence reigning in the room, only broken by the occasional sound of dripping water. The walls were covered in paintings of gods, their colours long eaten away. But their eyes were still sharp, judging her every move, waiting to pounce.

Faith slowly backed out of the cavern into another chamber, hoping to find her way, but found herself gazing up at an lifelike etching of a shackled dragon. Piercing ruby orbs stared down at her, the only hint of colour in the walls, unlike the last room, where every surface gleamed with dull colours long faded. The room was well preserved in comparison, walls free from dirt, the atmosphere more welcoming, silence less oppressive.

She reached out to touch the red eyes.

Click.

Faith stepped back in a daze as the etching let out a belch of smoke, an acrid whiff slicing through the air suddenly infused with the aroma of heavenly peaches. It shook, slivers of stone dislodging from his silver scales. The creature's eyes narrowed when he spotted her. "Who dares approach me?" He roared.

Faith took a step back again, shaking her head to dislodge the disbelief. She had just been transported back into the time of dragons and fairies!

"P..please I mean no harm" she babbled. "I don't know why— I just pressed eyes in a cave and I found myself here— please send me back into time—"

"Send you back in time?" The dragon expression was incredulous. "Explain."

After listening to Faith's account of what happened, he silenced her, swishing his tail excitedly, its thuds echoing around the chamber. "Listen. Not far from here is the Heavenly Palace, where Xiwangmu resides. She stole my dragon's pearl, and told the monks to paint a network of caves with ornate paintings of immortals laced with incantations to trap me. Today, the peaches of immortality ripen, so she is holding a festival to celebrate. In the chaos, you can sneak in, steal the pearl and return it to me. Then, I can send you home. "

"I'll do it. But under one condition."

The dragon roared in frustration. "What is it?"

He listened intently as Faith told him her wish.

"Here is a slip of parchment. Open it when you want to use it."

Faith thanked him and set off towards the Heavenly Palace.

The Heavenly Palace was a temple swathed in wisps of ethereal clouds. Fairies of all sorts draped in robes embroidered with flowers zoomed over the courtyard, carrying baskets of saccharine desserts in preparation for the banquet. The cloying scent of peaches hung in the air, holding promises of wealth and fortune. It was a sight to behold and Faith drank all of it in, from the sickeningly sweet hymns of praise to the flashy colours of the decorations. She could have spent all day admiring the sight, but she had a mission to complete.

The festival was nearly starting, so she sneaked into the banquet hall to hide under a table, hoping for a chance. She didn't wait in vain. The banquet started quickly, endless assortments of fragrant dishes made of peaches were served, along with potent peach wine. Faith watched in disgust as Xiwangmu indulged in plate after plate, gluttonously shoving food with both hands down her throat like a pig, calling for a refill each time her glass ran low. It took all her self control not to punch the fawning immortals as they heralded Xiwangmu with flattery and fine gifts.

"My friends," Xiwangmu said impetuously afterwards, her haughty voice cleaving through the hushed admiration of the crowd, "Your gifts are fine, but this far outshines them."

Drunk with praise and wine, she whipped off the grandiose cover with a flourish.

The pearl was as round as the moon, as smooth as a baby's bum and as silver as a wolf's pelt in the full moon. An aureate hue emanated from it, buzzing and humming with the dragon's power.

Then Faith sprang, tucking the luminous orb under her arm. But she couldn't resist implanting a punch on Xiwangmu's face before leaving, earning herself a high-pitched squeal from the queen of heaven. The guests gasped in shock, then exploded in outrage.

"They say all isn't over until the fat lady sings," she muttered to herself, a smirk crossing her face. "I suppose it's over now then."

"Perfect!" The dragon roared. He snatched up the pearl, power humming through his scales, and pointed with his talons, a portal opening. "Go! Now!"

When Faith stepped back to the entrance of the Mogao Caves, she was greeted by Jessica and her gang.

"It almost seems that you've appeared from mid air! The last time we saw you, you were blubbing like a baby and running towards the cave like some maniac!" sneered Jessica. "What are you going to do now? Sob on the ground over your worthless notebook?"

A flame of fury rising inside her, Faith unfurled the piece of parchment, hoping to use the magic which the dragon had promised her.

But instead of a spell, the dragon had written:

Dear Faith,

True magic lies within yourself. Have faith. After all, that is your namesake, isn't it?

Dismayed, Faith read it a few times out loud, hoping that it was a spell of some sort, to the amusement of Jessica. "No magic can save you." laughed Jessica.

Faith thought about her magical adventure and the dragon's words again. She had faced dragons, immortals and even punched Ximuwang in the face herself. Was Jessica more frightening than them?

"Stop bullying me Jessica. The fact that you bully people is showing me that you are insecure. Leave me alone." Emboldened, Faith pushed through Jessica and her gang, who all had identical expressions of shock on their faces.

For the first time in many years, Faith strode away, spine straight, expression resolute and her heart free. She gazed back at the caves. The once foreboding towering stone cliffs were welcoming, beckoning to her to embark on a magical adventure. She stepped back inside the cave, gazing at the paintings. But they no longer seem antagonistic. She could spot Xiwangmu feasting, the Heavenly Palace's courtyard, even the etching of the silver dragon himself. However, the shackles were gone, and the dragon was flying joyfully in the sky.

Faith smiled.

The Dragon Of The Grottoes

Diocesan Girls' School, Cheung, Hoi Yin Ariel – 12

The Longtaitou Festival.

Jiang audibly groaned. Tomorrow would be the annual Longtaitou festival, in which 'heaven and earth would meet, and nature and humankind integrated', and no, she was not excited.

Unlike her family and pretty much everyone else in the village, Jiang did not believe in gods. 'Tian Di' and dragons and the whole mythology that they had to worship were all stories to keep the people happy, in her opinion. If they were real, then why were they letting their people, which they *so-called* created, starve to death? There had been no rain for six months, which meant no food. The Buddhas reassured everyone, saying that the 'dragon' would let rain fall and the people would have food and water again, and the gods would support them. Jiang didn't need a god to watch over her and protect her, as they were all fake and she could survive perfectly fine on her own, thank you very much.

"Jiang!" her mother called from the fields. "Come prepare for the festival." Her mother just *had* to insist to prepare the sacrificial food for the festival, and 'it's a great honour to prepare food for gods', but the whole family had to work twenty-four hours a day to prepare food so they could burn it the next day. How wonderful.

And their life had been much harder since Father disappeared in the grottoes...

"Jiang! Come now!"

Jiang sighed. "Coming."

The Longtaitou Festival was going to end. The Buddhas were singing one of the weird songs to pray for rain. Jiang was probably supposed to know the song's name, and how to sing it, but she usually zoned out at school when they taught mythology, which was basically half the syllabus. She just wasn't interested in learning about supernatural beings that she wholeheartedly didn't believe in. She would much rather learn math, which made much more sense and oh, she had forgotten to read the scroll which the teacher had assigned, he was going to be *so mad*—

"And now, we shall read the book our ancestors left us in the Mogao grottoes, to pray for the awakening of the dragon king to give us rain..."

They didn't really need to announce that, every child knew the ceremony by heart. They always read the same old testimony—'the dragon has awakened and heard your cries, he will answer and fulfill.....' Supposedly, the ancestors would change the script if there was something out of the ordinary, but it had never and would probably never happen. A murmur arose from the crowd. Jiang snapped her attention back to the ceremony. The head Buddha was now holding the 'legendary' script that held all the wishes, but in Jiang's opinion, it was nothing but a dusty old scroll that some Buddha with wild imaginations wrote.

The head Buddha opened the scroll and a hush came over the crowd. Jiang rolled her eyes. It would still be the same old thing and everybody would continue living half-starved and undernourished.

"The dragon is sl—" the Buddha broke off abruptly. Jiang perked her ears. This year's reading was different! This was going to be interesting.

"A—a prophecy," the Buddha's hands trembled as he held the scroll.

"The dragon is fading, unable to wake.

The hero must find the beast.

Venture into darkness, awake Life.

Or destruction will be brought upon at the very least.

Discussion almost immediately started in the crowd. Jiang didn't really care. The prophecy sounded like gibberish, and chances they would proceed to pick some poor guy to be the hero. They would die anyway.

“We—we must discuss this in private.”The head Buddha still looked shaken.

Jiang looked at her mother.Despite being tired and starving,her eyes were gleaming.

“The gods have spoken!There is hope for our village!Isn't that exciting,Jiang?”

Jiang tried to make her face look as hopeful as possible.”Yeah.”

The Buddhas had called another meeting of the village.Jiang guessed that they would announce the poor person having to go on the quest,and they would be like ‘I’m honoured’, ‘I will do my best’,and stuff.

“After praying to gods for guidance,we have deduced that the hero is Jiang of the Xia family.”

Wait WHAT?Of ALL the people you could have picked,WHY ME?The whole village is full to bursting with people who would willingly go on the quest.WHY couldn't you have picked those people?

Like father...

Jiang sighed.There was no getting out of it.If a hero was picked by ‘gods’, then ‘no’ was not an option.She walked onto the podium.

“Jiang.The gods have chosen you to go on this quest.Do you accept?”

Jiang tried her best not to do an eye roll.There was a slight undertone to the words.’Do you accept’ was more like ‘If you don’t accept you’ll get forced to go anyway’.

“Yes.”It wasn’t like she had a choice anyway.

“Good.You will go to the unexplored caves of the mogao grottoes to fulfill the prophecy.The village will supply you with all you need.”

“I am honoured.”and Jiang absolutely did not mean it.

“Best of luck!”

The doors of the Mogao grottoes shut behind her,along with the villagers’ clamourings.Jiang looked around the first cave.Except for a few wall drawings,there wasn’t anything out of the ordinary.There were three passages.The buddhas had told her to take the left one,which they hadn’t explored yet.There wasn’t even a choice anyway.She would take the routes leading to the supposed ‘dragon’.Then she would return telling the people that she had found nothing.

The second room had only one passage.The third one had two. *When in doubt, always take the right one.*She did.The door of the fourth room was locked.Shoot.

Perhaps there were other ways.Jiang retraced her steps but all the other passages led to dead ends.So the only possibility was the locked door.Jiang went back and double-checked all the rooms,there wasn’t anything that could unlock the door. Maybe she would find more clues back in the locked room.

The lock was gone.

No... That's impossible...I'm sure this is the same room!I should go check one more time...

She was frantic.The doorway behind her had disappeared.Now she only had one option:to keep going.She took a deep breath and stepped inside.

The fourth room was enormous.Stone stalactites hung from the ceiling and paintings of mythological creatures were scattered across the walls.Without a doubt,Jiang immediately knew that this was what she was meant to find.There was a figure waiting for her in the centre.

The dragon lifted its head and gazed at her.

It's beautiful.

Just like the legends had said, the dragon was a sleek beast of pure emerald green. But seeing it in person was far beyond what words could convey. It was a shining, brilliant personage of pure beauty. It radiated the aura of *life* itself—of springtime, of rain falling onto fields, of morning dew on leaves, of all things living. Most of all, it was definitely *real*.

A familiar voice sounded in her head. *I knew you would come.*

Jiang remembered a soft soothing voice coaxing her to sleep when she was a child. That was when she believed. When *he* was still with them.

“...Dad?”

Even now, as I speak to you, I fade. The time has come for one to take my place.

Jiang understood in a flash. As the dragon's power was fading, the village had been plagued by drought. There had to be a successor, who could take her father's role, like he had done ages ago.

Her.

“No...I can't lose you...” Jiang choked out.

A tear ran from her face.

Come here.

Jiang stumbled towards the centre. The dragon her father curled around her

Everything will be fine.

Everything will be fine...

Jiang closed her eyes in her father's warm embrace.

Her eyes snapped open. She was lying on the floor. Alone.

“F..father?”

A glowing orb floated in the air. The power of life and preservation. The dragon's power.

Take it...don't take it...

She wasn't powerful enough.

If she didn't, her village would die from drought. Could she really ignore that?

Take it. Her father's voice, whispering in her mind. *Take it...*

Take it.

Jiang reached for the glowing orb.

Jiang's mother worked in the fields. Despite the drought, a few plants had survived. They needed as much as they could harvest. The drought wouldn't last long, since her daughter had gone on the quest.

“Everything will be fine.” she whispered.

As she spoke those words, the sky glowed. From the Mogao grottoes, a coil of emerald green spiraled into the sky.

Rain fell from the sky. The land glowed green. Everywhere the drops touched, plants sprang to life, the land long asleep from the drought.

Jiang...

Perhaps everything will be fine.

The Crucible

Diocesan Girls' School, Cheung, Tsz Yan – 14

A lone figure traveled on the deserted, dust-marred path part of the famous Silk Road winding along a desert in West China. As a whip of grit-filled gale slashed by, he reached to pull out a scroll of leather, squinting against the sand at the messily scrawled-out words on the piece of parchment: Silk Road's end lies the fountain of knowledge—Mogao. The young man looked ahead, eyes watering when the golden sand finally swirled down and sunk into the desert, like venom into flesh, clearing the sky ahead. There, standing tall and gleaming in the desert sun, was a turquoise hill of crystalline ice, sweet water spurting out of the cool, earthen mountains underneath and pooling about the patch of plants around the small oasis. He ran towards the sparkling patch of ground two steps at a time to guzzle in a generous amount of the water soaking up his boots. Standing up, energized, the young man marched towards the opening of the caves of Mogao.

As the traveler entered the dimmed tunnel, he caught a faint gleam from a tall pillar. Engraved on it were a few rows of Chinese words, and accurately did the traveler translate the sentence even with his threadbare knowledge of the Chinese language: A curse, there is, within the Mogao caves, all who are unworthy of knowledge shall mark their eternal graves. That stopped the young man in his arrogant strides, sweat beading down his skin as he reread the neat lines of engraved words. His pupils darted around in his eyes, like a pair of marbles. All who knew this man would know that was his nervous tic. He soon hid his unease under a steely facade and continued with his steps towards the bowels of the twisting and turning caves. "Hah, you'd think that'd scare me!" His hollow laugh bounced around the empty grotto. Unbeknownst to the young traveler, the ancient murals of concubines dressed in silk, gods, and goddesses floating about on dragons and swooping around the misty clouds circling black and grey peaks, and tigers stalking after an oblivious prey on the cave walls of Mogao, instantly sprang to life upon his bark of mocking, eyes with peeling colors and fading carvings burning holes into his back.

It was only a few hours before the young man got what he wanted. He had found the most sacred part of the Mogao caverns—the enchanted libraries of priceless scriptures and literature from decades ago. It was a mind-blowing pace, with chipping yet sturdy shelves stretching into the unseen limit of the space, books with yellowed pages spilling out leaning precariously against one another, holding the deepest curses, the brightest wisdom from all who had unmatched wit and unmeasurable imagination from long ago. The protruding dragons perched on the sides of the bookshelves flashed their eyes with hot glares at the traveler when he let out a short laugh, eyes gleaming with greed. Stuffing all the parchments he could find into his large rucksack, specially made by the elders from his town for this trip, the young man let out a cry of triumph, "I shall be hailed as a hero from this day onwards! I've retrieved the deepest knowledge from the caves of Mogao, giving my home the power to conquer the world!" he took a deep breath, "Glory is sweet—the earth shall cheer in my name!" And rumble did the long, twisted tunnels, the cursed chambers of cool boulders. That was exactly the moment the vain and unlucky traveler was deemed unworthy. His rucksack was suddenly unbearably heavy, tugging his shoulder down and arching his back, all the ancient scriptures spilling out of his bag as if proving to him that he was anything but worthy of their wisdom. All the tigers and gods and goddesses swirled out of their dust-caked places in the murals, eating up the sad man's soul like how the devils guarding hell would, eyes glowing with loathing and despise towards the whimpering mess that was the glory-thirsty traveler. The young man, panting and clawing in air through his contracting air pipe, shrugged off his knapsack, yanked a silver dagger from its sheath on his waist, and stabbed around with all his might, blinded by the unquenchable thirst for glorified success. The beasts around him howled at every slash of the dagger, before finally collapsing in a bloodied and lifeless heap on the ground. The traumatized but proud traveler grinned a lustful grin, slipping his knife back into its sheath, and wiped the blood from his hands as if nothing had happened. Proceeding to pick his bag up and heaving it shakily onto his shoulders, he found it felt heavier than ever, but he told himself he had to manage, for his fellow villagers would be waiting to throw a feast in his honor and rummage greedily through the endless wisdom he'd brought back. He squinted up through the sweat clotting his lashes and saw a far opening at the top of the dome of the library. Adjusting his knapsack on his aching back, he gripped two narrow daggers and started climbing up the magnificent dome, sweat rolling off him as he came nearer to the slit-opened gap.

And it happened within a fraction of a second, when the young man, perched on the arch of the dome, was hit in the head by a blast of white light, and a blast of fiery air. He let out a yelp of pain, his sweaty palms tightening instinctively around his daggers.

"You're just like Qin Hui," bellowed a low voice. The trembling traveler paled at the sight of a dragon, pearly white, which had jumped out of the carvings of the shelves, staring at him with scarlet eyes.

"W—who?"

"Qin Hui, a traitor to the Song Dynasty, killing the guardian of the empire, the loyal Yue Fei, for his glory. Do you know of him, shallow human? My spirits, the tigers, the gods are the great general, Yue Fei, protecting the treasures of Mogao. And you, the killer of those innocent souls, will be scorned like the betrayer Qin Hui for many centuries to come."

The pitiful man shuddered as the dragon breathed in his face, "Have mercy, I know of nothing!"

"You're pathetic, getting rid of all that is in your way to reaching glory. I shall spare no one like you."

A whirlwind of fire engulfed the dome as it spurted fiery flames, melting the icy oasis surrounding it. Not many have lived long enough to see the caves of Mogao smoke. An old monk, on a temple on a faraway mountain, shook his head as black plumes of smoke came out of the patch of lush, "Pity the unworthy of knowledge."

The fire died down, and the books and scriptures were unscathed. Yet, all that was left of the man who once was proud and vain, was only his skeleton, clinging to the dome, a threadbare bag dangling off his collarbone. That was nothing less than one who was undeserving of knowledge would get. His family never had any more descendants, and his spirit was nothing but a wisp of smoke when he died.

Years later, a humble man in his mid-thirties, came empty-handed to the grottoes of Mogao, which had been the graves of too many to count. He saw the same pillar, but stood calmly, reading the lines with ease. He was not afraid. He knew what he came for. As he passed by the murals, the spirits no longer glared and remained deep in their cool slumbers.

He reached the same library, with the ever stretching shelves and parchments spilling with secrets. He brought no bag, so the kind man merely sat down on the cold ground, and piled books by his side. If not given the dire environment he was in, he would've hoped for a cup of tea to immerse in the endless wisdom with. But he read quietly, genuinely.

When finally, the desert sun drifted into a breezy evening, the man knew he had little time left. He stood, stacking the scriptures back in their places, and bowed his head, "I know knowledge is endless, but I know, too, I've taken in already more wisdom than a small mortal like me should deserve." As he finished, the pearly white dragon which had terrified the traveler back then so, glided out of the shelves. The man didn't even flinch.

"Welcome to the path towards eternal wisdom, child." The dragon's voice was low all the same, unchanged over decades, but it held a melodic air this time, soft, solemn, and slow. It caressed the man, and as the same blast of white light faded, a glowing statue of a kind man was left.

At the exact same time in a faraway town, a couple cried, "It's a boy!"

And all who watched the boy grow would know he became to kindest and wisest man ever.

Chasers of the Golden Light

Diocesan Girls' School, Cheung, Chung Miu Bethany – 14

She wanted to be a poem.

She wanted to be beautiful, like distilled moonlight on a rippling lake, like the sparkle of a diamond among pebbles. She wanted to watch herself be crystallised in time, a buried gemstone that people from centuries after would dust off and marvel at. She wanted to be something worth thinking about, something that resurfaced in minds from time to time. Something adored, worshipped even. A gentle ray of light, a perfectly pitched note, a poem recited in the night with a crystalline voice.

She was the dreamer, and her brother was the thinker, she'd always been told, but it was fine; she was female, after all. But she'd been brought here, by her brother, seeking the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas, and suddenly it was the two of them, both dreamers, chasers of the golden light. Perhaps she could leave her legacy. A diamond, a pearl, perhaps even just a flower's seed that might sprout. (But she was female, after all.)

They were chasers of the golden light, the two of them. That's what her brother had said. His was a hand she could hold onto in the nights when she was young, when the night terrors made her run shrieking in fear. He used to be her anchor, her refuge, keeping her afloat when she was about to drown in a sea of her own tears. Now she is not as sure.

The two of them walk, and she watches their footprints blow away in the murmuring breeze. Soft, light, infinitesimal, in the golden sand. She wonders: if she fell, would she blow away too? Her own identity is slipping past her fingertips, and she cannot do anything to stop it. The heat blisters and boils at her, and sand blows into her eyes from the blasts of sweltering heat thrown at her. It prickles at her. She tries to blink it away.

"Keep up," wafts past her ears, and it echoes with a resonance that makes her feel like her brother is miles away, in a dream. And he is, isn't he? He is a chaser of the golden light, after all. He spends his whole life in a dream. If they find the golden light— what then? They will not be remembered, she knows, as their footprints are lifted away by a gust of wind. The golden light is but a mirage, the thousand Buddhas a desperate illusion. The caves will be forgotten, abandoned, the fabled "mythical art and literature" dissolved to dust, sand, cobwebs by the incessant passage of time. The flowers planted there wilted, reduced to shrivelled dreams amongst a tangle of weeds. She laughs bitterly, and her brother looks at her in confusion. She shrugs it off, but it takes the force of moving mountains. The world heaves under her as she tells herself it is insignificant. Turbulence, turbulence that will toss her off as though she weighs nothing.

Small steps, small steps. She is stepping into oblivion; in pursuit of an identity, she can make for herself. She had a poem written, tucked under her sash, from when she was innocent and free and joyful and all those things she'd lost. And perhaps she could— perhaps! She taunts herself. "Perhaps" never meant anything. "Perhaps" is what the lazy say, what the useless say when they have nothing, when they know nothing of what reality holds. Because reality is harsh, isn't it? Reality, descending on her like a flock of crows, smothering her.

She wonders if her brother is having second thoughts, but he saunters on with a swagger only the self-assured can pull off.

He was a dreamer— he was flame.

He was hungry. He'd been born hungry for something, hungry to be something. He wanted to shatter the earth itself. So, he was drawn to the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas, like a moth to blazing flame. Myths, legends: they were all opportunities. He wanted to be treasure. He wanted to be part of something— some legacy.

Didn't they all, though? And could anyone, really?

He breathed in the tangy air, spiced with adventure and possibilities and dreams, and exhaled, still tasting gold and wine and stardust and fire on the breeze. "You can see it in his eyes," they'd said when he was a child, "that one's going to shine."

And shine he would. Shine he *had* to.

He was going to be a legend. He was going to shatter the earth. But doubt prickled at him like sand he could not brush away: it spread through time, spread through the years of his journey. He'd held onto hope for a while, but the journey grew steadily longer, more endless— and he'd wanted to be great. Oh yes, he'd wanted to. Was he leading his sister astray? He shuddered to think of it — was he leading his sister on a futile journey? (He wants to apologise; but for what?)

She'd asked him once, when they were both intoxicated on their own dreams of glimmering silk, all flaming brightness and gold— "What are you without hope?" Oh, he could recall that scene. He sees it in his sleep, those candles that flickered orange by the window, smelling of ash and spice, almost hypnotic. Candles that are puddles of wax now, but he can smell them— he smells them even in his sleep, the incense and the ash and the rising smoke.

What is he without hope? What is he without the golden light? What is a moth without its tantalising flame to circle? (Sometimes he thinks the flame is his sanctuary. Sometimes he thinks he can only be safe with what is familiar— the heady rush of adventure, of dreams, of great things to come. Just like a drug, flowing and coursing through his veins; he is an addict, and what is he without that?) He can still smell the flame from the ashes he sifts through, and oh, how he mourns.

He is fragmented, he is a shell of what he tries to be and he is his sister's big brother, her anchor, her guide, but who is he? Who is he, if not a hapless little child, lost in the place he calls home? He stumbles blindly around in the dark, searching vainly for the golden light. Golden light. He is an optimist, he is insane, he is a dreamer, he is delusional, he has died—

Hope, where is his hope?

Small steps, small steps, keep up his image. He is hopeful, he can be hopeful. He can be an optimist, but oh, how the façade is shattering, just like his hope. March on. March on, don't let the cracks show. No regrets now.

she chased beauty / he pursued greatness

"What are we here for?"

He can hear the exhaustion rolling off her voice, an exhaustion he himself was trying to hide. What are they there for? (Buried treasure, hidden gems. Discovery. Adventure. Creation. That is what he has tried to convince himself for so long.)

"Does it matter?"

It is a weary response, a lazy response, a response absolutely devoid of hope, and she knows this. She sits still, fidgeting ever so slightly with the hem of her sash. (There is starlight and the moon's reflection on the rippling lake under it.)

"Remember when you said you were looking for greatness? And when I said I was looking for beauty?" she continues.

He remembers. The caves, the caves! Treasures, literature, creation— golden light.

"Remember what you're here for. That's how I keep myself afloat."

And the sun rises, and they stand watching it, drenching themselves in the golden light. It is like molten gold, like honey, like wine, like spices, like everything they'd been chasing all this time—

Because what is greater than that which chases away the darkness? And what is more beautiful than a beginning— the beginning?

They were chasers of the golden light; and they had found, right at their fingertips.

The two are silhouettes against the golden light that washes across the walls, pouring like the richest milk. One of them raises a glass, his self-assured laughter ringing throughout the room, dripping with light. The sound is like gold, the other thinks; it is like molten gold, and it flows like honey.

The silhouettes bend against the light; they intertwine; they dance across the wall behind them. There is a faint, celebratory tune arising from both of them, a hum that seems to promise, even, the sun.

The girl takes a sip from her glass, and the wine goes down like water would, except it courses through her with a dull glow.

The two— one a poem, the other a dreamer— sway slightly, soaked in starshine, and for a moment, they feel as though they could do anything.

The Lost Music of The Mogao Grottoes

Diocesan Girls' School, Ho, Nga Kiu – 12

“...there are 492 caves in Mogao built on five levels, with more than 2,000 painted sculptures, and 45,000 square meters of murals, including many masterpieces featuring flying apsaras.”

The tour guide paused. He was an old Chinese man with greying hair and narrow black eyes that gleamed rather ominously in the morning light.

Today was what I liked to call a grey day, with light drizzle raining down on the heads of passerby and tourists alike. Most of the people in my tour were covered by umbrellas, though. Not the tour guide. After one month of investigating the Mogao Grottoes and coming to know everyone nearby, I had learned that come rain or shine, he was always here to educate anyone curious on the topic of the Mogao Grottoes.

He continued on. “People often talk about the scriptures and paintings in Mogao. However, there is a less known myth concerning the Mogao Grottoes. A myth concerning a lost piece of magical music from the nirvana, hidden within these grottoes.”

My heartbeat quickened. This was what I was here for.

“They say this music by Buddha as he rose for the nirvana, when played, has the ability to tame a wild creature, to summon spirits and demons alike, to cure any ailment. When played, it gives off an exquisite aura of energy so profound and powerful it feels like there is a soothing, mysterious stream of Qi dancing around, giving precious life to nature,” On that note, he shrugged, and the spell was broken.

“Many people have attempted to find this magical piece of music. No one has succeeded. Maybe no one ever will. Who knows?”

Without noticing, we had reached the end of the tour. The tourists all left, one by one. When everyone was gone, the tour guide sighed heavily and looked at the wall. It was painted with scenes of Guqin players, all dressed in beautiful robes of red and ivory, their long fingers dancing across strings pulled taut against the instrument.

He murmured something to himself and left without another word.

The next day, I went up to the tour guide after his usual tour.

“Excuse me? Sir?” I said in Chinese.

“What do you want?” He said through his teeth.

I flinched. He was in a bad mood today. Still, I ploughed on.

“Well, um, I was in the tour yesterday, and I couldn’t help but notice that you said something about a hidden piece of lost music. I’m an archaeologist, and it just so happens that I am currently searching for that hidden piece of music, myself.” Even as I said the words, I wanted to take them back immediately.

The tour guide snorted. “A fancy archaeologist like you, believing foolish nonsense like that?”

“I—I just wanted to see if you could give me a bit more information concerning these myths,” I stammered out. He shook his head at me and started walking away.

Turning to me, he said almost angrily, “Listen. I’ll tell you something. It’s a romantic myth that doesn’t exist. I have searched for that piece of lost music for twenty years. Even if there truly is a secret piece that has been hidden from humanity, neither you or I have the skill or the smarts to find it. So you might as well just go home.”

There was a look in his eyes that I couldn’t make sense of. Then I realized what it was.

Sorrow. Great sorrow, hidden behind layers of feigned indifference and annoyance. It was the face of a man who had searched for grace for as long as he could. Until his motive had faded from this world.

Long after the tour guide had left, I stayed there, his words stuck in my head.

The next day, I returned to the Mogao Grottoes to investigate. Maybe I could discover something about it that the tour guide had failed to.

Three days of tireless searching yielded absolutely nothing.

I sank to my knees. I had explored every corridor with paintings, scrutinized every character and element in the orchestras and flying apsaras, to see if I could find something that would perhaps direct me to anything. If the secret had been kept through thousands of years, it must have needed some unusual way to unlock it.

While walking along one of the tunnels near Cave 156 absentmindedly, I started humming the song “Three Lanes of Plum Blossoms,” which was one of my favorite Guqin pieces from the Tang dynasty.

All of a sudden, I heard a faint click coming from the wall I was walking along. My heart skipped a beat. There was a small wavering spark of hope in my mind, but I tried desperately to quell it.

I hummed the song again, a bit louder this time. The click sounded again. It came from an inconspicuous wall across from the wall painting with the Jiyue—the flying apsaras dancing and playing music. Could it be voice activated? How could such advanced technology have existed in ancient Tang dynasty? I stared feverishly at one of the flying apsaras who seemed to smile encouragingly.

Puzzled, I looked closer at the unrestricted wall the Jiyue seemed to be pointing at across the painting. I gasped.

There was an inscription and some images carved into it that had not been there before. It was dim in the caves, and I couldn’t see anything clearly. I took out my camera to snap a few pictures without flash, fearing that the images would disappear any second.

The next day, I went up to the tour guide again. He was writing something down in a notebook when I approached him. At the sound of footsteps, he lifted his head, then sighed when he realized who it was. “I thought I told you not to come here again.”

I shifted nervously. Clutched tightly in my hands was the camera I had used to take the photos the day before. “I found something. I think it’s related to the hidden piece of music.”

He raised his eyebrows.

I handed the camera to him without another word.

As he clicked through the photos, I couldn’t see his expression, but when he looked up his expression was both fearful and incredulous.

“Where did you find this?” He whispered. I took him to Cave 156 without another word.

The images vanished when we arrived, as if they had been my imagination.

“How did you activate this?” He asked. “I have walked by this corridor a thousand times. Never before has the wall revealed anything.”

“I sang ‘Three Lanes of Plum Blossoms,’” I said uncertainly. “Then I heard a clicking sound and the images appeared.” Music recognition, I said silently to myself. That’s what it was.

The tour guide stared intently at the wall.

“The inscription says, “gong-shang-jue-zhi-yu, everlasting unity of heaven-manearth”. Gong-shang-jue-zhi-yu are the pentatonic notes in ancient Chinese music. We must quickly find the other flying apsaras and activate the images with corresponding notes.”

It took us another two weeks before we got it right. Finally, the final image—and the hidden score—revealed itself at the tune of the ancient Tang Guqin music “High Mountain and Running Water.” As we activated the images, we could hear the muffled sound of an ancient Chinese orchestra playing from a great distance.

“Listen,” I whispered. “Can you hear the orchestra playing?” He nodded. Emotion filled his eyes.

As the music finally faded away, the tour guide broke into tears. “I have been looking for the hidden piece of music because of my wife. She had glioblastoma, you know? She loved the Mogao and always believed the myth about the lost music. I heard the hidden piece of music could heal sick people. And I thought that maybe I could help her get better. And,” he swallowed, “—even if I couldn’t, at least I would have fulfilled her dying wish.”

“After she died, I left my art history teaching and became a tour guide here, so I could come here every day to search. Once again, it feels like we are doing this together.”

As if in a trance, he headed straight for the wall painting and stared intently at the score. Then he started singing the tune of the hidden piece of music.

The music started off soft and enchanting, then rose in tempo, and as the rhythm got faster, I feel mesmerized. It was the same music we had just heard. I could not help but feel that he was singing to his wife.

Maybe this lost music couldn't heal people, or save lives, or do the otherworldly things the legends said it could do. But I thought it was magical all the same. In my mind's eye, I could see the flying apsaras from the nirvana, bestowing the world with precious heritage that could transcend time and space.

New Tales from the Mogao Grottoes

Diocesan Girls' School, Ketul, Jiya – 14

Dawn breathed in and out, huffing and puffing, making her way round the steep slope. Everyone had fallen asleep, and she could finally go explore on her own. She was across the Gobi Desert, and now on Sanwei Mountain, looking for a Mogao Cave. Her instructor had told her that the Mogao Grottoes featuring Gautama Buddha were just a legend – a fairytale that was passed down generation by generation in special families for over 1000 years, but was never proven to be real. Dawn was in one of those rare families, and had grown up listening to some beautiful stories of Gautama Buddha, so when she was offered a spot on the archaeology trip to the Sanwei Mountain, she jumped at the chance.

Dawn was not one to believe in legends or myths, but the tales of the Mogao Grottoes just captivated her. They pulled her in, and soon got her wanting for more. She originally had no intention of sneaking out, until at dusk, when she saw a ray of golden sunlight pointing at a point on the mountain. Nobody in her group believed her when she told them about it, and instead told her to let her obsession with discovering something go. However, after catching herself staring subconsciously at the spot on the mountain multiple times, she did the most insane, most illogical thing after everyone was asleep, and snuck out, alone.

Dawn kept hiking at a steady pace, smiling softly at the sound of the leaves crunching underneath her boots. She glanced at her GPS— she was getting close to the spot. She continued making her way up the path, until ‘SNAP’, a branch broke some five feet behind her. Dawn froze. A drop of sweat rolled down the side of her face, and her blood ran cold. Someone was following her. She felt her hands trembling, and slowly turned around, knowing that she would have to face whoever that was.

“Wh–Who is it? Who’s there?” She stuttered. She heard a few more leaves crunch as somebody walked towards her.

“Dawn? Is that you?” A deep voice asked, and Dawn felt herself releasing a breath she didn’t even know she was holding.

“Logan, what– why are you following me?”, she felt her cheeks heating up as a tall, built frame towered over her.

“Do you have ANY CLUE how much you terrified me when I saw you walking out the tent, Dawn? What were you thinking, sneaking out alone?” Logan thundered, making her flinch.

Dawn rolled her eyes, “Miss Zhao wouldn’t let me come during the day, so I figured I would come find the entrance to the Mogao Caves after everyone was asleep.” She saw his arm reaching out and grabbing her own, pulling her the other way,

“Come on,” he grunted, “We’re going back before anyone figures out that we’ve disappeared.”

“NO WAIT Logan,” she whined as she struggled against his firm grip, “I’m not going back until I find something. Just, at least hear me out.”

“Fine, you’ve got two minutes before I drag you back.”

“As you know, we have already visited five Mogao Caves– Cave 45, 57, 220, 257, and 259,” She counted off her fingers. “We’ve seen exquisite art pieces like statues and murals; we’ve seen the goddess of mercy, the story of the deer of nine colours, and the ‘meditating buddha smile’; But you know what we haven’t seen? We haven’t seen a single story about Gautama Buddha. Remember how grandma used to tell both of us such interesting stories about him when we were younger, Logan? Anyway, I think I saw something this afternoon, that is, according to my GPS, roughly five minutes away from here, and my theory is that it is an undiscovered cave. Can we please go? I promise I’ll go back to the tent immediately if we don’t find anything. Pretty pretty please with a cherry on the top?” She batted her eyelashes at her cousin, hoping that her puppy eyes would soften him up a bit, and when he sighed, she knew that she had succeeded.

“Come on, let’s go but you better make sure that we don’t end up in trouble.” He grunted, and followed her up the trail. They trekked in silence, until Dawn’s GPS started beeping.

“We’re here! We’re here!” Dawn whisper–screamed, “But, why don’t I see anything?” Her face dropped.

“You know that we actually have to dig to find something, right?” sighed Logan. “Come on, you should have a pocket knife and a mini shovel in that bag, hand one to me.”

After what seemed like hours and hours of digging, being covered by layers and layers of dirt, and numerous complaints, “I FOUND IT! LOGAN, COME DOWN HERE I FOUND IT!” Dawn screamed, beaming with happiness.

They both pushed on a large rock, and as it rolled a bit to the right, they were both blinded by the radiant yellow light shining in their faces, illuminating the dark. Logan brushed off the gravel around the entrance, “After you, malady,” He motioned for Dawn to go in, and she squeezed her petite frame through the narrow entrance.

Stepping inside the cave was like being pulled into a whole new world. There were ravishing paintings, like a large comic strip, on all the walls of the cave. There were characters that even Dawn, with her vast knowledge of the topic, didn’t recognize. As her gaze shifted from the walls to the middle of the room, her mouth dropped wide open. There the statue of Gautama Buddha was, and it looked just like her grandmother had described in her stories. There was a bun on the top of his head, his face held a soft smile, and he was wearing a delicately draped set of robes. Right in front of the statue was an open book which the light was coming from.

“This is unreal, I don’t believe this,” Logan whispered, lifting his hand, and touching the first painting on the wall.

“You don’t believe what?” Dawn replied, intently observing the paintings.

“We know this story, Dawn, Grandma told this one to us, after Grandpa died, I never believed this one though,” He chuckled softly, “It’s the story of the woman with the dead son. Do you remember?” Seeing Dawn shake her head, he walked towards the first painting, and started narrating the story.

“One day, a woman, a mother of three young boys, lost her husband and was crushed. Following this, she grasped onto the three children like a lifeline. However, a year later, her eldest son also died, followed shortly by the second son. Devastated, the woman held on to her only child, but he also died soon after. Unable to stand this, she took her son’s dead body to Gautama Buddha. She explained her grave situation, and pleaded with Gautama Buddha for her youngest son’s life, and almost lost all faith in him.

Gautama Buddha knew that the woman was grief stricken, and he wouldn’t be able to help her out in any way at the moment. So with the promise of reviving the woman’s son, he told her to go and get him a few sesame seeds from a family that has never witnessed or seen death. Carrying her son’s dead body, the woman went around the village, from one house to another, looking for one family that had never known death. However, when she couldn’t find anyone, she realized there wasn’t a single family like this, and that death was inevitable. She then buried her son’s body, and started getting along with her life, doing social work, and devoting herself to Gautama Buddha and Buddhism.” Logan finished up, inhaling deeply.

“I remember it now, Grandma told us this story a couple of years ago when Grandpa died.” Dawn replied, gently flipping through the book, fascinated that the light was still shining out of it. “She kept emphasizing something about the circle of life, but I never paid too much attention to it.” Now she understood, her grandma was talking about life and death, and how the both of them were bound to happen to everyone at some point. She heard the faint ticking sound of her pocket watch, and saw Logan shuffling around in the corner of the room.

“Come on, it’s almost dawn, if Miss Zhao sees us, then we’ll be in serious trouble.” He said, making his way to the entrance.

“Nobody’s going to believe what we just saw, Logan. Nobody at all.” Dawn’s eyes were wide open as she took another look at the cave. “Let’s go back.” She followed Logan up the tunnel, smirking.

Mogao Morals

Diocesan Girls' School, Li, Sze Wing Jennifer – 14

An Island in the Middle of the Pacific Ocean; 10:00 GMT+8

The Pacific Ocean was pitch-black, with not even a boat in sight. There weren't any islands in a 500-mile radius – except a tiny one with a white tower surrounded by weak flashing lights. It was consumed mostly in darkness, as the sea attempted to conceal it with the blanket of its waves, and the thick air masked it with silence – which was broken through by the sudden kick of a chair, followed by sharp shouting.

“Ugh, Peraldi, wake up and stop being so lazy – eww, is that beer all over your shirt? You're the one who's going to the Mogao Grottoes, not me! Wake up!”

“Oh, come on! Why even bother with a plan! This is like taking candy from a baby – it's nothing compared to all those museum heists I've done before!”

S stood in a dark room with a tipsy Jake Peraldi, plotting their next robbery: the Mogao Grottoes. The agents' plan was simple: Jake would rob from the Mogao Grottoes, and his loot would be auctioned by S, who would then split the proceeds between them. Before them sparked a map with a glowing red dot at Dunhuang, China, along with photos of the murals and sculptures of the Mogao Grottoes – the ultimate goal of their robbery. Jake took one swift, uninterested glance at the photos, before rolling his eyes at S. After all, he preferred a luxurious, elegant life: showering himself with crystalline jewels and sparkling golden crowns, drinking from teacups and wine glasses used by royalty, and lounging on plush velvet cushions. The idea of paintings and stone sculptures in the middle of a hot and dry desert was just boring and drab. It hurt his dignity to go out in the scathing heat – he kept feeling like he was “destined” for something greater, something worth much more. Yet, if he gave up the plan, it would only make him seem like an absolute coward – he can't let anything destroy his image of a ruthless, professional burglar.

Jake sighed. “Fine. I'll do it, just for the money.”

Cave 257 of the Mogao Grottoes, Dunhuang, China; 00:01 GMT+8

The sand dunes in Dunhuang sculpted a dark, unwelcoming abyss, ready to swallow anything that came its way. The arid wind cut his cheeks like a flat, piercing knife. Among the sand and the dust stood a wall of caves. Inside one of them, labelled Cave 257 stood Jake Peraldi, with his shirt covered with dust and sand. ‘Alright, just get what you need, and we're outta here’, he thought to himself.

The first thing he saw when he looked up after dusting himself off was a colourful illustration, which he recognised as the “Nine-Coloured Deer Jātaka” from the photos S made him swipe through as preparation. Back then, in that pixelated photo, it was unimpressive and bland, but seeing it up close... it was indeed incredible and majestic. Red and green, two opposing colours, were coordinated together with swivelling curves and vivid movement – emeralds and sapphires scattered over a red carpet. Everything blended together like sea waves, bringing out a story as deep as the ocean. It was way better than the sand-filled cave he imagined last night, and as much as he hated to admit it, it was truly a beautiful masterpiece to him.

His then-tipsy mind couldn't remember everything he had read about the painting the previous night. All he could recall was the Buddhist virtue portrayed in the painting: generosity contributes to good karma, whilst malicious thoughts bring severe retribution. However, what fascinated him most was the Buddhist Jataka tale depicted in the painting. A nine-coloured deer rescued a merchant lost in the desert, and in return, the merchant promised not to reveal the deer's whereabouts. However, the ungrateful merchant later broke his pledge under the temptation of the reward offered by the king and queen, who were in pursuit of the nine-coloured deer skin for making a cloak. Feeling cheated, the deer informed the king of the merchant's treachery, leading to his exile under the king's order.

Jake, determined to take the painting, took out the special chemical solution once used by Langdon Warner, an archaeologist who sought to remove the paintings and bring them away just like Jake. That was when something in the corner of his eye caught his attention.

In another cave nearby, beautiful paintings like the one in front of him lined the wall. Except, there was a blank white rectangle right in the centre – a missing piece that ruined the beauty. Eyeing the bottle of solution in his hand, S's voice came to his mind. “Be careful with the solution! When Warner used it, back in 1924, the solution had frozen before the process was complete, causing damages to the frescoes.” Right in front of Jake was the crystal-clear evidence.

His hand gripping the bottle slowly began to shiver. Sure, he could make lots of money, but did he really want to inflict damage onto these ancient masterpieces with great cultural significance? Would his damage “bring severe retribution” on him, like the merchant in the painting?

With a deep sigh, he put the bottle away.

Cave 17 of the Mogao Grottoes, Dunhuang, China; 00:23 GMT+8

Jake paced through the sophisticated layout of caves. His shoes brushed against the harsh rock ground, making a swishing sound as he passed by rough granite walls. His rumbling head was buried in his shivering palms, with a deep frown underlining his ambivalence. After all, S would be extremely furious with how Jake Peraldi, the greatest burglar of world-renowned museums, couldn't even capture one painting in a small cave – and all the money they could've earned! These murals bore cultures tracing back to 366 C.E. though... shouldn't they be protected?

Before he could even think straight, he bumped into a small door on the wall of a cave, which he recognised to be Cave 16 – meaning that the entrance would lead to the infamous Library Cave, Cave 17. He was about to push open the small door when a small scrap of paper with characters in Sanskrit attracted his attention. A webpage he read the previous night floated back to his mind again: in 1907, the Hungarian British archaeologist Aurel Stein was regarded as a thief for how he, at the low cost of 130 pounds, had purchased a total of 24 trunks packed with valuable Buddhist scriptures and 5 trunks of magnificent embroideries and artwork, leaving a gaping hole in the culture of the Mogao Grottoes. The scrap of paper must've fallen out from a page of the scriptures he 'bought'.

When Jake had read about Aurel Stein last night, he considered him as a despicable destroyer of culture. Now that he thought about it, he was just as bad as Stein...

A chime from his phone pulled him out of his deep thoughts, and he withdrew his hand from the entrance to the Library Cave. It was a message from S. *hey u done yet? what have u got?*

Another deep sigh escaped his mouth. No matter how much he wanted to avoid it, he had to make a decision. How did he end up in this painful situation? This was not what 5-year-old Jake would've wanted...

When Jake was a small little boy, his mother had taken him to museums around the world. The Louvre, the British Museum and the Vatican Museum had replaced amusement parks, and little Jake had grown up with sophisticated artefacts as his best friends.

When he had graduated as a Master of Arts in Museum Studies, he had longed to be one of those cool dudes who would dig up historical pots and analyse them. However, none of the big museums would hire him. To them, he had been nothing more than an “indolent graduate with no motivation for scientific work”, or a “spontaneous, unorganised individual with lack of management skills”. Jake, extremely frustrated, had decided to take matters into his own hands and turned to museum heists instead, partly as a revenge on all the “big shots” who had rejected him.

Looking back on his past, a selfish intruder who stole artefacts for profit wasn't what he wanted to be. What he truly desired was to protect these traces of ancient civilisation and show the world the sophistication of human culture across centuries.

With one swift glance at the scrap of paper crumpled in his palm and the blinking notification on his phone, he made up his mind once and for all. He sprinted to the nearest opening he could find, and with a determined swing of his arm, threw his phone with the unanswered messages as far away as he could from himself. The phone dropped down against a rock before sliding smoothly downwards into a small lake of an oasis.

Its screen went dark, just like the great robber Jake Peraldi.

Tales from the Mogao Grottoes

Diocesan Girls' School, Mai, Polly – 12

The sheer number of manuscripts in the Mogao Grottoes' Library Cave astounded Elora, over 50000 manuscripts on various topics sealed and forgotten for over 600 years until in 1900 when a Taoist priest stumbled on it while cleaning up dust. The flashlight the staff members held lighted up only small parts of the caves, and each time Elora discovered something, it only made her ache for more. Elora was listening to the stories told about the paintings on the walls when her thoughts drifted off to turn her creativity mode on. What wonderful paintings, how absolutely breath-taking were the statues and caves! What secrets were there hidden in the darkness? Elora longed to know more. And rashly was her decision made then, that she barely had time to think it over. Even though she knew she would get into trouble, and curse herself for her stupidity later, Elora felt her longing can only be satisfied by more exploring and that she practically knew that there was a lot more to the caves than what she knew. After a fierce internal struggle, the logical part of her brain gave in to her instinct, Elora held her breath and stealthily ducked behind an aging shelf so that nobody could see her.

The moment the visitors clambered out and closed the door behind them to prevent the caves from being destroyed by humidity or brightness, Elora's heart sank. She took a long breath to steady her nerves and sat down, taking out a torch from her backpack slowly and silently. The rashness of her actions sank in and Elora felt for the first time since a long time ago, fear. She was trapped in a dusty dark room which Elora had no knowledge of. Just as she was about to open her torch, she heard a cough which made her blood run cold. Was there someone inside the room with her? Another cough and a hoarse voice croaked, 'You can come out now you know.' Elora was frightened, scared by the unknown. She weighed her options, she could stay put, or come out from the shelf. But the stranger knew already that she was there so what was the point of staying hidden? Elora sighed, and groaning, stepped out from behind the shelf to see a white-bearded elderly man, leaning on a walking stick and smiling. 'Oho, another girl too fascinated by the cave to leave?' He said sternly, but was unable to hide a smirk under his thick beard. The old man looked reasonably tidy but still as if he worked rough every day. Elora noticed that he did not have a staff badge. 'Yes sir,' Elora blushed and unable to resist, added, 'If you don't mind me asking, sir, who are you and why are you here?' 'Aha, I am a member of the staff, and I'm going to arrest you!' The man laughed out loud and Elora rolled her eyes grinning, 'I might have believed you had you not been saying it in such an amusing manner. My name is Elora and yes I just broke the rules to stay behind.' Elora sighed and the man seemed to tremble with suppressed humor, 'It's actually alright Elora, dozens have done so before you. My name is Ching Hua Te, just call me Ching. And as to who I am,' Ching's eyes shimmered, 'follow me.' Ching walked slowly towards one of the walls and beckoned for the hesitant Elora to follow. He put his wrinkled hands on the dusty wall and he kicked at something Elora was unable to see, after a few minutes of searching, the pale hands stopped and Ching gave a slight push. 'Um, what.....' Elora trailed off and gasped as the wall trembled a bit and a previously hidden door flew open, 'Oh my!' Elora was sure that no words could do the wonder she felt justice.

It was an enormous room, with a gigantic aged map into the very center, and a glass door that led to a golden field. 'Oh my!' Elora repeated as she strolled unconsciously to the large piece of parchment located in the centre of the room with words, colors and shapes in faded ink. But what was most majestic of all, was that the map was ever-changing, the colors changing shades and the words like those on a computer screen during a typing competition. 'Yes...a beauty ain't it. This never ceases to amaze whoever lays eyes on it.' Ching sighed, and continued, 'If you don't mind, pray take a seat, and allow me to explain. Centuries ago, when the Mogao Grottoes was built, it was a time everyone valued art, particularly creation of poems, drawings, sculptures and books. Poets, painters and scholars. Even during the wars, people appreciated how much peace art could bring and how they could pour out their poor souls into poems and drawings. And to keep track of the great works to replenish the caves here,' he waved a hand, gesturing the room they just came from, 'a scholar and monk called Ching Lai Tu, who discovered the library next door sometime during the Ching dynasty, devoted his life to creating this room we are standing in, even this map was hand-made by him. He left instructions for his sons and theirs to continue his task before his death. The map here, as you can see, changes constantly, to reflect the artworks around the world and also how important it is deemed in people's lives.' Elora noticed that even though he spoke quite calmly, the bitterness swirling in his eyes were obviously shouting out his distaste for what he was about to say, 'For the past years, I am sorry to say, the popularity have been plunging, due to the invention of TV, laptops and smartphones. My grandfather even purposely left clues for this cave to be found, putting the books at great risk, in the hope that this could reawaken the hearts of the people. But no, all of them, still too concerned about their lives to care a bit about art, and parents squashing the talents of young children simply because art is not going to help them find a job.'

Elora admired how people could sacrifice everything to live in this musty place just to make people passionate about art again. Art always seemed so sacred to Elora, it never made much sense, but after the lecture from Ching, it was a lot clearer. Art is something that can link people together as one expressed thoughts and feelings through it. The many interpretations people have of art is exactly what makes it so unbelievable, and yet the very thing that connects, impact and capture the heart. This realization struck her speechless. 'So, I guess you know the story now, Elora. You are not the first to stumble into this room and nor will you be the last. I am at a lost as to what I could do, and when I saw you, a girl mesmerized by culture, when others couldn't even spare books a glance, I had hoped you could think of a solution to help.' Ching looked at Elora with his eyes sparkling, and Elora felt a sudden sense of pride at the old man's words, 'Actually, I would be honored to help.'

Elora knew how she could be of a help, words can have a great impact on the human mind. And so now you, my dear reader, have knowledge of how this story is created, and I do hope you will feel inclined to pick up that long-forgotten book.

Tales from the Mogao Grottoes

Diocesan Girls' School, Ng, Heymann – 12

In the Qi dynasty, war raged in China. Blood showered the earth, and smoke covered the sky. Storm clouds forever obscured the sky, and darkness hugged the country tight. A young soldier fled his camp base. He ran and ran, until he could run no more. He was going to leave this place, this deserted hell, for once and for all. He didn't know what he'd do. He was on the run, homeless and starving. His family had been cruelly slaughtered, his house had been burnt to shreds and he was penniless. Most of all, he was sick of this cruel, senseless war that seemed to never end. He wanted to flee, leave all of this behind.

On and on the young man trudged. He shaved his head and became a monk. He gathered disciples. He passed thick woodlands as large as cities, towering mountains that reached the heavens, shimmering bodies of water teeming with creatures that seemed to stretch infinitely, he saw everything. Yet wherever he went, he still could not find the one thing he was looking for: a safe haven to call home. The days grew long, the sun burnt his back, the wind whipped his face, yet on and on the old monk trudged. He could not rest until he had found what he was looking for. Then one day, he passed a small cave just by an oasis in a dry desert. He felt spirits calling him, beckoning him inside, and he knew there was something special about this cave. This was it. He would make this place his home, for him and his disciples to live in.

Days turned into months, months turned into years, and years turned into centuries, and life and laughter spiraled in the cave. The monk's disciples painted pictures and words on the walls of the caves, sculpted beautiful buddha statues, and pilgrims passing by also contributed to their work and culture. However, one fateful day, disaster struck. The disciples, their families and the pilgrims all left, leaving behind their sacred treasures. Time turned the story of the Mogao Grottoes and its inhabitants into nothing but a dusty old legend, forgotten by the common folk and young people. So you may ask, what happened to them? Why did they leave? Nobody knows.

It is now the year 1912. A young business man looking for a place to start his own tobacco company stumbled upon the caves, and figuring that it would earn him some good money, he called the government, hoping for reward and some attention. Little did he know, he had just discovered one of the largest and most sacred system of temples in China, and had unknowingly unleashed a curse upon the people of China.

"The Diamond Sutra is one of the oldest written books in the world, and it was discovered right here. It is said to be the protector of these temples, and whoever enters the cave will unleash the curse upon the people of China, and guardian spirits will hunt the land and protect the caves." Eddie looked up from his book and at the dusty old book sitting under the spotlight. His parents were professional archeologists sent to explore the ruins and mark down their finds, and they had dragged a reluctant Eddie along with them. He sat for hours and hours inside caravans and under trees with a bored look plastered on his face, watching his parents scrape and shovel away, sweat dripping down their necks. He couldn't possibly understand them. What was so interesting about a few dusty pieces of junk? The past belonged to the past, it was now the Modern ages, not the Prehistoric times.

It was now midnight, and Eddie and his parents were sleeping peacefully in their hotel room after a long day of lectures and talks. All of a sudden, a blood-chilling scream echoed through the night. Storm clouds gathered in the dark starless sky, and as if on cue, more screams followed. "Reporter Annie speaking! There have been alleged sightings of ghosts wearing ancient tribal masks haunting people all over China! It is not known whether it is a hoax, but this has never happened before in all of mankind's history! All citizens are reminded to stay calm and report any sightings of supernatural beings. It is currently unknown if these creatures pose threats to humans, but please do not provoke them if you see them!" Eddie woke up with a sweat, his greasy brown hair plastered to his face. He had just had a nightmare of angry tribal beings surrounding him with spears and sticks, all threatening him in a low voice, and then he got woken up by his terrified parents screaming in their room. He angrily raised an eyebrow, marched into his parents' room and switched on the lights. And then he saw it. A ten-foot tall ghost-like creature with purple skin paint was hovering over his parents' bed, a huge tribal mask covering its face. It let out a series of angry grunts and moans, its spear in one hand, and it seemed to be demanding his parents to do something. Eddie, exhausted and annoyed, frowned at the creature, his tired eyes glaring at it. The creature sweated aggressively and disappeared, leaving with a trace of red mist. He tried to shrug it off, but as much as he tried to sleep, he couldn't. The demon he just saw was the same as the ones that appeared in his dream. What did they want from us? Why were they here? Who were they? How could we make them disappear?

Four forty-four in the morning. Eddie hadn't managed to get a wink of sleep last night, and by the tired looks on his parents' pale faces, he could tell that they hadn't slept well either. He couldn't wrap his head around the incident. What exactly had he

seen? He heard from the news that similar creatures had been haunting people from all over China, and he himself had seen them too. Maybe I'll go read some of my parents' books. That'll ease my mind, and maybe I can find some clues to this mystery as well! He crawled out of bed and headed to his parents' room. There were piles of books shoved into suitcases lying on their hotel room's floor, and Eddie picked one up. Wait... books! Books... ancient books... The Diamond Sutra! That's it! That's why there have been ghosts haunting the citizens! It's because we've disturbed their resting place! He excitedly shook his parents awake, and screamed, "It's because of the Diamond Sutra's curse! We disturbed the spirits' resting place, that's why they're haunting us! Quick, call the authorities! We can't let the government open the museum, who knows what these spirits will do?"

Officer Wong sat at his desk facing Eddie and his parents. "Are you sure? We can't shut the museum down after all this hard work just because of a rumored curse.." He frowned. "Then again, we've tried everything we could. Water bombs, gas grenades, toxic gas, machine guns, you name it we've tried it! I suppose it couldn't hurt to try..." He looked up at Eddie and smiled. "I'll hand your report in to our Sir Meng, I'm sure he'd try that. After all, no one's been able to sleep these past few weeks because of these god-forsaken spirits.." Eddie and his parents let out a cheer, happy that their plan had succeeded.

A few days after the museum had been closed, the spirits returned to their resting place and all went back to normal. There were no more reported sightings of ghosts haunting people, and the people of China had calmed down. Eddie sat down at his desk, relieved that he could finally go home. He smiled. He learned to respect peoples' privacy and their wishes, and not to stick his nose where it didn't belong. After all, you might not know what's watching you – just because some things can't be seen doesn't mean that they don't exist!

Past, Present and Future

Diocesan Girls' School, Wong, Chloe – 13

Situated along the Silk Route, at the crossroads of trade of the Dunhuang oasis are the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas.

It was where Jing's father pilgrimaged to when she was just shy of ten. To this day the memory of the moment he left was still lucid.

She had been sitting at the table when her father emerged from the dark corner of the hut, a cloth bulky with possessions in his hand. Over the years, his tall frame had forced him to hunch his back to pass through the doorway.

"Papa, where are you going?" Her voice had a noticeable tremor to it. He rarely went on extensive trips — only strolls in the market and his annual visit to her mother's grave in the hills. If he was to leave, he would always return by evening.

He knelt, placing a finger beneath her soft chin, tilting her face up towards his. She gazed into the deep pools of his eyes, observing a smattering of creases stretching at the edges. "Papa's going on an adventure."

"Please, take me with you!" Grasping his arm in a frenzy, she chased after him as he headed down the stone path. Without a word, he sighed, lifting her from under her arms and sitting her back down at the table.

"Be a good girl, Jing," were his words to her as he left for the last time. His silhouette slowly shrunk till it was no more than a dot on the horizon, and he never looked back.

For hours, she waited at the window. The blistering afternoon sun slowly slid down the canvas of the horizon, the sky melting into a mass of magenta and fiery tangerine.

Evening came, and he did not return.

Sixteen-year-old Jing peers over Aunt Mei's shoulder and watches as she stirs the noodles in the vegetable broth. "Mei, I've asked you so many times. Where did my father go?"

"Jing, he's been gone for years. It's time you forgot about him. He was a scoundrel who left his own daughter. Leaving to the Mogao Grottoes, no less. Irresponsible excuse of a parent." Mei's tone drips ice as she continues to stir the steaming pot. Up, down, left, right. Watching the repetitive and rhythmic action would have soothed Jing if the pair of hands were another. All these years, Mei has been cursing her father solely because he has left behind a child for her to feed.

Jing purses her lips in frustration and her sharp chin juts out in defiance. How she aches to tug on her father's calloused fingers, running across the field in search of a dandelion. To have his deep voice read her favourite book to her time after time. To sit on his knee as still as she can while his weathered hands trace along her scalp, gently weaving her hair into a bun. To totter at his side on a step-stool and place her hands over his as he stirs the noodles in a pot. He had adamantly refused to use other types of broth; it had always been chicken.

But she is no longer six, and her father is no longer here.

That night, she waits until she can hear the slight snores of Aunt Mei before sneaking into her room. The room is dark, the musty air entering Jing's nose as she fights the urge to sneeze. She paws briefly at the furniture before her hand meets with the cold knob of the drawer. Reaching past various trinkets, she feels the crinkling of paper and immediately pulls it out.

Tracing the red route marked on the yellowed sheet, she remembers her father examining it, just as she is now. Gathering her sparse belongings, she tiptoes across the living room and heads for the wooden door. A sorrowful glance back at the slumbering Mei, and she is on her way.

She stumbles through the desert. The night winds blow threateningly on her back, chilling her to the bone. A stray strand of hair slips into her jet-black eyes, and she tucks it back. She finds it hard to believe that the desert is sizzling hot during the day. Wrapping her cloak around herself tighter, she hurries, lifting her feet high to tread on the dunes.

At last, after what seems like eons, a dot appears on the horizon. Clambering along, she trips along her own feet but rushes expectantly until she is right in front of the caves. For a moment she is awe-struck as she takes in the scenery — a grandiose entrance towers over her, lush trees flanking the structure.

Jing breathes in. Away from the bustling of the village, the gossip of townsfolk, the nagging of Aunt Mei, everything seems cleaner. A place where chill meets warmth, day meets night, where true balance and peace is achieved. She shakes her head, freeing herself from these thoughts when she remembers that she is here to find her father.

Cautiously, she slips into the temple. She gapes as the elaborately detailed paintings, rendered speechless by the elegant and intricate designs. Travelling deeper into the heart of the cave network, she passes by murals galore, each seemingly more colourful than the next. Her fingers are trailing along the walls when she notices a girl in the corner of the mural. She is holding a book, her childish features scrunched up and eyes squinting as she reads, her shadowy irises bearing an uncanny resemblance to that of Jing and her father's. Upon close inspection, Jing realises that the book is the very one her father used to read to her every night, and the girl is her young self.

Tears well in her eyes as hope builds up in her heart — her father has not forgotten her. He still cares about her; he still loves her.

Suddenly, a monk clad in burnt-tangerine robes darts in and notices her presence. He looks up, surprised. "Who are you?"

Jing doesn't answer but asks for her father, and the monk's face drops. "I'm sorry, Miss," he reluctantly. "He was a good friend of mine. He's painted so many of the murals we can see at present, full of delicate apsaras. He passed away just a year ago. Are you a relative?"

She freezes in shock before turning away in despair when her mind registers the news, oblivious to the desolate tears rolling down her cheeks. There is nothing for her to live for now. All these years, she has lived without her only family, and the moment she is brave enough to leave come searching for him, she learns that he is dead. Her father has left her forever, the only person she had that loved her.

"Miss?" The monk's worried gaze pierces through her haze of grief. "Ah, I see it now — you have his eyes and chin. You must be his daughter Jing. He spoke of you very often." When she didn't reply, he continued to speak. "He loved you and knew you would come searching for him. Unfortunately, his death came quite abruptly, and he was unable to leave you much — however, he told me that he was certain you would come one day."

Taking her gently by the arm, he leads her to a secluded hollow with vibrant paint splashed across half of it. "This was the mural he was working on prior to his death," he explains. "He wants you to finish it. Will you stay with us?"

The use of present tense hits her. She feels her skin tingling, as if he is standing right there, next to her; so close, yet so far she cannot reach.

"I'll stay," she says firmly after some brief hesitation, and the monk smiles.

As you walk through the chambers of the Mogao Grottoes, through the hordes of tourists with cameras in hand, you will wonder at the enticing artistry, the intricate details, and the bright hues.

Maybe, just maybe, you will notice the slight frame of a woman from a thousand years ago captured on the wall. Her shoulders are slightly stiff with the burden of age, wispy hair silver with kindly wisdom. Robes of fire hang loosely from her shoulders, a palette of rainbow in her hand and a paintbrush in the other.

Her dark, sparkling eyes rest on your face and her lips seem to curve up in a serene smile. She is one with the Mogao Grottoes, neither a character of the past nor the future, but a constant watcher over the caves. She is the past, the present and the future, and she is hailed as Jing.

A Journey Through Time

Diocesan Girls' School, Yeh, Celeste – 14

Cool wind flowed through the cave entrance, a refreshing break after being exposed to the July sun. My family and I had taken a short bus ride from the visitor center to the Mogao grottoes. Cut into the side of a long cliff, the caves were full of excited tourists eager to begin their tours. The Mogao grottoes are known for the sculptures and murals inside that provide insight on ancient cultures. We passed through cave after cave, each one filled to the brim with sculptures. Murals of battlefields, and even flying goddesses decorated the stone walls. Finally, we stopped inside a cave that was covered by a huge painting.

The painting spanned from the ceiling to the floor. Age and dust had made the once colorful mural fade significantly. Even though the tour guide had said that the paintings were hundreds of years old and that we could not touch them. I wanted to see the painting clearly, so I could not resist reaching out a finger to brush off some dust. I suddenly became aware of a tingling sensation at my fingertip. It quickly spread throughout my body, to the point where I started panicking. I shouted to my family for help but no sound came out of my mouth, my finger was glued to the painting like a magnet. The world around me grew blurry, and then darkness swept over me like a wave.

When I finally woke up, I blinked open my eyes to see myself standing in the middle of a busy marketplace. People shouted orders as they rushed to and fro. Their clothing was nothing like the t-shirt and jeans I had on, but they were robes that reached the floor. Confused, I turned around and tried to locate my family, but instead, I saw a cave that looked exactly like the one I had been in just now. With a start, I realized I was in one of the paintings!

My family was looking around, obviously distressed by my disappearance, but they did not know that I was still here! I pounded desperately on the invisible barrier that separated the painting and the cave, but it did not budge. Suddenly, I felt a hand on my shoulder. I jumped and spun around. Looking at me with a concerned expression was a middle-aged monk who beckoned for me to follow him as I was making a scene and people were starting to stare. Standing under the roof of a temple, a torrent of questions burst from my mouth – How did I get here? How could I return? Was this magic? The monk raised his hands and asked me to let him speak first.

Stroking his greying beard, he said “I have seen others like you before, people dressed in strange clothes, children who appeared suddenly after touching a painting. Even though they may not know it, the tour guides actually have a point when they tell you not to touch the paintings.” At this, my face burned neon red from embarrassment.

Gazing sternly at me, he also said, “I can teach you how to return to your world, but the journey is perilous, and if you fail... Well, let us just say the consequences are dire. To return, you must go to the painting with a special sun symbol and touch it. The good news is that the painting is only one cave away. The bad news is the painting in between is full of battling soldiers.

According to Shang, the monk, the only way across was by going around the battlefield and hoping that the armies would be too busy fighting to notice us. Despite my numerous protests, Shang insisted on accompanying me to make sure that I was safe. He also said that I did not need to worry about him because he could not die. After planning our route, we set out at once.

The borders that divided the paintings were like glass, but once we touched it, we were sucked in. We shot out on the other side and tumbled painfully to a stop. Blinking my dizziness away, I saw a vast plain that was surrounded by mountains. The sounds of swords clashing and arrows whistling filled the dry air. Aware of the danger around us, we began to creep towards the edge of the battlefield.

Thankfully, the portal was only about two football fields away. We kept low and scurried forward, trying to look inconspicuous, which was difficult given that we were the only people not fighting. Just like Shang, the soldiers could not die because they were drawings. We saw fallen soldiers leaping up after two seconds, ripping arrows from their helmets and immediately charging into battle again. The sight was both amazing and disturbing. We were about halfway there when things started to go wrong.

My back ached from remaining hunched and sweat trickled down my back. Suddenly, we heard urgent shouting and turned around. A soldier was frantically gesturing and pointing at us. Shang muttered angrily and pulled me along.

Speaking louder, he said “They think we are spies who are trying to go around the back to launch a sneak attack!”

More soldiers were looking in our direction now, and the murderous looks on their faces did not make me want to stick around. Thinking quickly, I gestured to Shang and we stole two horses before the original owners, who were temporarily dead, could get back up. Now that we were picking up speed, the soldiers began shooting at us, and arrows flew around me, passing so close that I could feel my hair raise. As we rode forward, I pushed soldiers off their horses and shouted to confuse and scare the horses. The horses panicked and reared up, stomping their hooves in fear. They galloped frantically, kicking up clouds of dust and we lost our pursuers in the stampede.

Before us, we could see the shimmery border that led to the next painting. The soldiers who had been thrown off their horses were after us again, but they were much angrier and their arrows whizzed past my ears. We were so close to the border now. Fifteen yards, ten yards... Suddenly, I heard a panicked whinny on my left and I realized that Shang's horse had been shot.

I wanted to stop and help him, but he said "Keep on going! I can't die remember?" I thanked him for helping me so much and focused my attention again on the destination ahead of me. The soldiers seemed to realize targeting the horses worked better, so they started firing again, but at my horse. I was now ten feet away from the border. Then, my horse cried out in pain as an arrow found its mark. I realized that my horse would not be able to run anymore. Sweat made my palms slick and my heart beat twice as fast as I steeled myself to do the most reckless thing I had ever done in my life. With a desperate cry, I closed my eyes and jumped off my horse's back.

When I opened my eyes again, I was no longer being chased by Mongolians. Instead, I was in a market not unlike the one I had been in before. I got up from where I was lying down and dusted off my clothes. To my amazement, the sun symbol I was looking for was right in between my two feet. I reached down and touched it. Gold light shone from my fingertip, and a warm feeling coursed through my entire body as the light spread. With a flash of light, I was gone.

Orange spots swam in my eyes as I tried to figure out where I was. I smiled with joy and relief when I saw the familiar entrance of the caves. I saw my parents talking frantically with a tour guide and I ran over to give them a big hug. Their smiles matched mine as they realized I was not lost.

"Where were you? We were worried sick!"

I thought about how to answer while holding back a smile and said "Sorry for wandering off, I took the scenic route. Maybe next time I could show you guys around, there is more here than meets the eye."

Mogao Grottoes

Dulwich College Beijing, Yuan, Jonathan – 11

He had been traveling for months now. He Shang slid off his camel, stamping the sand off his feet and retrieving a folded piece of rough parchment from his dusty robes. Slowly unfurling it, he laid it on the back of his camel, carefully smoothing the creases. It was a map, the map. It was charted and drawn by himself, the only link to the outside world he had. He Shang traced a route through the desert with a gnarled finger, stopping at a splotch of ink near the rim of the desert. It was the meeting place, the reason He Shang was traveling in the first place. It was the only thing urging him on, and not to give up his endeavor. He remembered, how his family had begged him not to embark on this journey, how they all were starving at home, how he had decided to trade their life savings of silk to the outside world for money. Now, as he stood, suffering from the fatigues of traveling on sand, he regretted it all, the greed, the hope of a chance to live on. A fierce gale of sand and dust smote him square in the face, bowling him over and sending him sprawling in the sand. The map flew from his hand and was submerged in the sand instantly. He Shang rose, cursing, and set about locating the map. That night, he prayed to Buddha, like every night before. He knew that there was still a long way to go.

He Shang was roused by the pounding of hooves around him. He drew himself up and was startled to see a group of men riding towards him, silhouetted by the moon. Gripping his camel by its reins, he ran for his life. He did not know who these men were, but he could only think of one word – bandits. As he ran on, he thought he saw a glimpse of a brandished cutlass. Still running, he slid his foot into the saddle, whilst grabbing the reins on the other side of the camel's head. Then, in one smooth motion, he hauled himself up onto the camel. He fumbled in his robes and produced a knife. Slitting open the saddlebag, he dug out a crossbow. He slid back the hammer, then tugged on the trigger. At that instant, an arrow from the bandits caught He Shang in the arm, and his crossbow leapt out of his hand. He fell off his camel and was lost in the rolling sand instantly.

As he sank, He Shang saw the light disappear, tasted sand on his tongue, heard the muffled sounds of hooves fading around him. Then, he heard cracks below him. He tried to move, but it was as if the sand was restraining him. He felt the weight of the sand on his chest, squeezing the air out of his lungs. He swallowed, but only sand entered his mouth, choking him. Just as he began to lose consciousness, the sand and rock underneath him gave away with a mighty roar, and He Shang plummeted deep, deep into a wide underground chasm. He sensed the ground moving swiftly towards him and he instinctively maneuvered his body to fall with feet pointing down, in a standing position. There was a loud crack as his left foot slammed into the ground, and He Shang collapsed onto his sprained ankle. The pain was immediate and excruciating, it penetrated his whole body like one continuous electric shock. Needles of extreme pain wound up his leg and onto his torso, leaving He Shang lying shuddering on the ground. For about five minutes he lay there, wondering how he had gotten himself into this mess. Maybe it was the bandits, maybe it was his own recklessness and foolishness. Whatever the cause, he was stranded in this underground cave, with a broken ankle. He felt like giving up on life.

After a while, He Shang struck a match and lit a splintered piece of lath nearby. He knew that he had to try, and for some reason he felt an urge not to lose faith. He tried digging his way out, climbing his way out, but most of the time he prayed to Buddha. He prayed for a chance, he prayed for his family.

One day, (or night, he never knew which was which) he fell off the ledge he was trying to climb for the fifteenth time, and sat down, sweat beading his forehead. Lamenting, He Shang slumped down onto the damp cave floor, and gave up on climbing. He kneeled and prayed to Buddha. Then, as he gazed up at the towering stalactites on the roof and floor of his cave, he almost thought he saw a Buddha in each one. He blinked, rubbed his eyes, and looked again. He saw the same image, even clearer. Then he realized that he could carve Buddha out of the stone! He set to work chiseling the stone, laboring over the stalactites with renewed gusto. It wasn't like sculpting a buddha, it felt like releasing Buddha out of the rock. Time slowed as he chipped, rounded, and scraped. It was as if he was in a trance, his hands flying over the stone, shaping the Buddhas. He lost track of time, and never stopped even to eat and rest. But most important of all, he never lost faith in Buddha, never believed he was unfavored by Buddha.

As he finished his last Buddha, he sat down to rest, leaning against the rock wall he had once tirelessly climbed. Suddenly, the wall behind him rumbled, then collapsed. A shaft of bright sunlight pierced his eyes, and he fell backwards in shock. The desert had eroded away long ago! All was left were some grassy hills and meadows. How long had he been in the cave? When he exited the cave, a gust of wind scooped him up, and whisked him up to the heavens. Buddha was there with many other gods and goddesses. "You have done your duty as a faithful Buddhist. You have created a series of linked caves promoting Buddhism to all

humanity, known now as the Mogao Grottoes. Therefore, I award you to become a god at my side and be forever immortal” Buddha declared.

“Wait!” exclaimed He Shang, “Before I become immortal, I would like to know how long I have been in that cave!”

Buddha smiled to himself, and replied, “Precisely 200 years.”

The Statue's Tale

ESF Island School, Chan, Kate – 12

The Buddha statue lays back, stretched out across its ancient stone bed, patiently waiting for nirvana as it has done for over 600 years. The once rich and bright painted murals spanning all across the walls are faded with age and leached of colour, blotted out by a thick layer of gray chalky dust. The once bright red of the stone pedestal is now an ashen dark gray. The stone walls of the cave are choked in cobwebs, the surface of the rock is pockmarked with crumbling chunks of stone and riddled with cracks and dents. The Buddha remembers each day long past, memories swimming in every corner of the once—vibrant room, memories of joy and laughter, of sorrow and fear. Salvation is near. The end is near. It can sense it.

The Buddha remembers when it was first carved from stone, under the careful hand of a sculptor. It remembers what the caves were like before, bustling with life and activity. The Buddha statue remembers the monks that would come each day to meditate and can picture it still, the monks all sitting in line, hands clasped in their laps, surrounded by candles and incense. Their maroon robes spill around them like pools of serene water, identical shaved heads gleaming in the low lamplight. The oldest monks with their white, wispy brows, and gnarled frame at the front of the room, the wrinkles in their skin like dried-up rivers, each mark a sign of wisdom and experience. The youngest, some children, sit at the back. Most of them orphaned or abandoned, grown up at the nearby monastery. Their life is filled with strict timetables, meditation, and Buddhist teachings. A few—the newest ones, fidget, struggling to keep still and focus. The Buddha remembers them fondly, the closest thing to a family the statue can picture.

The buddha remembers when the pilgrims started coming. The visitors' numbers had grown with each day as more and more sculptures and paintings and murals adorned the walls, monks filling the caves with beautiful illustrations depicting Buddhist teachings. Pictures of parts of the quest for enlightenment had stretched across the walls. Some vibrant depictions of buddhas and gods, others mnemonic devices or colourful, vivid images that taught Buddhist teachings for the illiterate that came to worship in the sacred grottoes. The monks had constructed new caves as shrines for the new Buddhist followers, relying on donations and funds from the pilgrims, merchants, and military officers that visited. Those days, the grottoes were filled with life, new faces, new stories. The Buddha remembers it all with longing, missing the days when it was always meeting new people, learning their stories, living adventures through their tales.

The Buddha statue remembers the day everyone left. It remembers the weeks leading up to it, vacant of its usual thrill. The visitors and monks who had once seemed an ever-present aspect of the Buddha's life were suddenly gone, replaced by strangers. They came sometimes several times a day, other times only once a week, always bringing with them scrolls and texts and books piled high in their arms. They would disappear into one of the chambers and come out empty-handed, hurrying away from the cave as quickly as they had come. And so the days passed, the sun rising and setting just as before. One day though, something was different. The library cave was sealed. Rocks were piled high, blocking out every crack and crevice, stopping every ray of sunlight from reaching in. The lamps burned out. The candles melted. And finally, the cave of books was plunged into infinite darkness. After a week passed, and not a single person had returned, the buddha had started to worry. And when the weeks had turned to months and then the months to years, the statue had finally understood. They weren't coming back.

The Buddha remembers when the cave was found. It remembers the years living in isolation, and the day the men arrived. Pale—almost white—skinned people had climbed in, leaping over boulders. They had gazed at the walls and the floor and at the statue itself in awe and wonder. And in moments, they were everywhere in the grottoes, examining the murals, leafing through books, scanning scrolls. Then they left.

The Buddha remembers when the strange men tore apart the caves. They had returned one day with metal tools and strange objects. They had grabbed scrolls from the library cave and carried them away. They had carved away sections of paintings from the walls and cut out parts of murals. The Buddha gazes at the chamber now, each blank section of wall a stab of pain in the statue's stone heart and a harsh reminder of the day. The day they left. The day they took it all away.

The Buddha lies in silence, exhausted from it all. Each moment relived, each experience reflected. Because the Buddha remembers it all.

And then the stifling, suffocating darkness is suddenly broken by a loud, bone-rattling crunch. In the wall, the rocks start to slide, dislodged by some unseen outer force. A shout and then a second startling crack and the wall caves in on itself. The rocks

tumble to the ground, hitting the floor with a crash. Boulders scatter every which way as a cloud of centuries-old dust rises into the air. The wall gives way, revealing a crowd of people. The lost caves have been found.

The Secret Cave

ESF Island School, Chen, Winnie – 11

“Alright, class, here we are!” announced Mr Wang from the front of the crowd of students. “The Mogao Grottoes!”

“Wow!” shouted Meiyang excitedly from Qingyu’s left.

The entrance to the Mogao Grottoes rose before them. It was magnificent. The design looked like a Chinese temple, except it was taller. A lot taller.

“The Mogao Grottoes are seventeen hundred years old, and the caves were carved by hand,” said Mr Wang. “It lay forgotten for years after the Silk Road fell into disuse. After it was re-discovered, people have found many treasures like paintings, silks, and documents inside. Not many know about the Secret Cave, though.” Qingyu looked up from taking notes. “According to legend, it lies hidden behind a wall of courage...”

The name “Secret Cave” was not new to her. Her mother disappeared just yesterday. Qingyu remembered her mother’s last words to her clearly. “I’m going to find the Secret Cave. I’m going to find out if it exists. I’ll be back at sunset,” she had said. She left, waving.

Then, after that, she did not come back.

“Hey, what are you thinking about?” Meiyang elbowed her. “Mr Wang just said we’ll be grouping up to explore the caves. You’re with me.”

“Oh.”

“Anything wrong?”

Qingyu realised she had not told her friend about her mother. “My mother disappeared looking for the Secret Cave.”

“We’ll look for her! We can find her!” Meiyang declared.

“Thanks! We can do this.”

“A wall of courage...a wall of courage...what does that mean?” Qingyu muttered to herself.

“Do you want to look in there?” Meiyang asked, pointing to a cave.

“Alright, let’s go.” We’ve come here to learn about the Mogao Grottoes, so we should explore the caves as well as look for Mother.

The girls entered the cave. “Wow,” Meiyang breathed.

Qingyu was amazed. Elaborate paintings covered the walls, and a statue of Buddha painted in vibrant colours sat before her. The roof wasn’t flat or domed. The shape was hard to describe—it was kind of like a pyramid with the pointy bit knocked off.

“This really is magnificent,” Qingyu remarked, remembering that Mr Wang had told them how magnificent the caves were.

“I know, right?” said Meiyang, gazing at the paintings and the Buddha statue.

The two girls walked around, taking notes of what they saw. This will be great material for our assignment, Qingyu thought happily as she took notes about a picture of a warrior she had seen.

“Ready to move on?” asked Meiyang.

“Yep,” Qingyu responded.

They walked out of the cave, looking over their notes.

“What do you think ‘wall of courage’ means?” asked Qingyu.

“I have no idea.”

“You can’t build a wall with courage...” Qingyu murmured.

“Maybe it means we can find it if we have courage?” Meiyan suggested.

“Good idea, but what about the wall part?”

Meiyan fell silent. “I don’t know.”

“I guess we’ll have to think about it.”

“Let’s check this one out,” said Meiyan, stopping beside a cave entrance.

They entered the cave. This one was just as impressive as the other. A statue of Buddha, with his hands resting on his legs as if he was meditating, was at the center of the room. Other statues surrounded him, in all kinds of different poses. The wall paintings told many stories. Qingyu saw a picture of a tiger in a forest. There was another picture of people bowing to a king.

Meiyan whipped out her notebook. “Time to take notes again.”

The girls continued walking after they had visited the second cave. Qingyu read through her notes. She could feel an idea forming in her head. That...actually makes sense. It could work.

“I’ve thought of something,” she told Meiyan. “What if the wall of courage means a wall showing courage?”

Meiyan frowned. “What?”

“It could mean a wall with paintings of battles on it. The soldiers fighting would show bravery!”

“That...is actually a great idea!” Meiyan said excitedly. “So we look for a wall with battle paintings on it?”

“Exactly.”

“Let’s go!” Meiyan yelled, grabbing Qingyu’s hand and beginning to run.

“Slow down!” Qingyu gasped. “We might miss something!”

“Alright,” Meiyan laughed, skidding to a halt.

They walked on, looking for any signs of a wall with battle paintings on it. They kept walking for what seemed like forever without finding anything.

“Are you sure you’re right?” Meiyan asked. “Maybe ‘wall of courage’ doesn’t mean an actual wall.”

“It feels right.”

In front of them, there was a massive rock blocking the way.

“It’s a dead end,” Qingyu sighed, turning to go back the way they had come.

“Wait.” Meiyan walked around to the side of the rock. “Look.”

There was a little gap on the edge of the rock, just enough for a person to squeeze through. Little bits of rock littered the ground around it.

“The rock crumbled,” Meiyan announced. “Or someone drilled through to get to the other side.”

“Maybe my mother drilled through to get to the other side to find the Secret Cave...” Qingyu said thoughtfully. “Meiyan, you’re a genius!”

“I know.”

Qingyu squeezed through the gap, wincing as the rough rock

scraped against her skin. Meiyan came after her.

They walked down a long hallway with many paintings on the walls, until they reached a giant wall. There were warriors painted on the wall, holding all kinds of weapons.

“The wall of courage,” said Meiyan.

Qingyu stared at it. “How do we get through?” There were no holes in it, and they had nothing to make a hole with.

They walked around, trying to find any sign of a way that Qingyu’s mother used to get through. There was none.

“Maybe it wasn’t a wall showing courage,” Qingyu said miserably.

“Don’t give up,” encouraged Meiyan. “Keep searching.”

They searched. And searched. Still nothing. Even Meiyan was losing hope. “Now what?” she said, frustrated. “Do we go back and start all over again?”

Qingyu sighed unhappily.

The two of them walked back the way they came. Meiyan had lost the energetic spring in her step and was now trudging after Qingyu, who was also walking with slow, heavy steps.

Qingyu suddenly remembered something her mother had told her when she was little. Never give up because success takes time.

Never give up.

She started to walk faster. She knew that she could find her mother. She just had to work harder.

“Look,” Meiyan said suddenly, pointing. Qingyu saw a painting of a warrior on the wall.

“It’s a warrior. I think I saw this painting on the wall we found at first,” said Meiyan. “Do you think it can give us a clue?”

“It could.” Qingyu studied the warrior. He carried a spear encrusted with a translucent green jade. The jade was not painted, though—it was real. It stuck out of the wall like a doorknob.

“That’s it!” Qingyu shouted out loud. She grabbed Meiyan’s hand and began to run.

“Slow down!” Meiyan gasped. “We might miss a clue!”

Qingyu laughed, skidding to a halt. “Alright.”

They went back to the massive rock. “Oh no, I don’t want to squeeze through again,” Meiyan said, putting her left hand protectively over her right. “My hand still hurts from the last time.”

“It’s okay,” said Qingyu. “You can stay outside.”

“I never said I wasn’t going, just that I don’t want to,” said Meiyan, squeezing through the crack in the rock.

Qingyu followed. She was so excited, she had to resist the urge to run to the battle painting wall immediately and see if she was right.

When they reached the wall, Qingyu asked Meiyang, “Where did you see the warrior with the jade in his spear?”

“I...don’t really remember.” Meiyang walked up to the wall and examined it. “Found it,” she said.

Qingyu ran up to look. Meiyang was pointing at a smaller version of the jade-spear warrior.

Qingyu felt slightly disappointed. “The jade...doesn’t stick out. I thought it would work like a doorknob to pull open a hidden door.”

Meiyang gave her a look. “Doors don’t have to be pulled open. They can be pushed open.” She gave the section of the wall the warrior painting was on a push. It moved a little bit.

Qingyu helped her to push. Eventually, the door burst open.

“I was beginning to lose hope!”

Qingyu’s mother rushed out from behind the wall. “Qingyu!”

“Mother! We came looking for you! We were about to give up! But we’ve done it!” Qingyu yelled excitedly.

Meiyang let out a whoop. “Success!”

Qingyu’s mother smiled. “I’m so proud of you both. Never give up because success takes time.”

The Protector of the Scrolls

ESF Island School, Cheung, Max – 11

There are many treasures in the Mogao Grottoes which have been accumulated over the centuries. They were only discovered in the 1900s, but three hundred years earlier, a child and his bunny came very close to revealing them to the world...

Screaming, Ming woke up. He had a nightmare, but he couldn't remember what it was about. He got out of bed and put on some clothes. He walked into the kitchen, where his mother was cooking some dumplings for him. She ruffled his jet black hair and gave him a freshly harvested carrot from his father's farm.

"Remember— don't go into the old grottoes!" she cried as he left the house. She sighed and got back to cooking, not sure if he had even heard her at all. Ming, along with his pet bunny, Goldy, happily walked through town, greeting farmers and fishermen on their way to work. The fishermen didn't really like Goldy, as he was always stealing their crops and breaking their tools. Ming was usually very busy, and today he finally got a day off from his farmwork. They had rarely been outside the village before. Goldy was the closest thing to a friend to Ming, and they had been inseparable since childhood. They had been planning to go out and explore for a very long time.

"I've been waiting for this day for a long time..." said Ming. Goldy squeaked and beckoned Ming to follow him. Goldy led him to the entrance of the Mogao Grottoes. They had been planning an adventure to the grottoes for some time now.

"Well, mum always says not to go... but she never lets us do anything." Mumbled Ming, as Goldy stared at him excitedly. Ming looked at the grottoes, then at a very mischievous looking Goldy.

"Let's go— but we won't stay for long" Ming had made his decision. They walked in together, peering into the darkness. It was dark and dusty, and the further in they went, the less they could see. Ming was starting to get scared.

"Let's go back now, Goldy" he said, grabbing on to Goldy— but he was not there.

"Goldy? Where are you?" Ming was now terrified.

Suddenly, Ming heard a squeak further in the darkness. He rushed forward, calling out for Goldy, but there was no reply. Ming waved the carrot around, hoping it would attract Goldy, but it didn't work. Ming was about to turn back and get the villager's help when he saw a light. He walked towards it, and entered a room full of tapestries and scrolls.

He reached out and felt one of the tapestries. They were beautifully crafted, with patterns of dragons and gods weaved into them. The dragon and the goddess in the tapestry looked very lifelike and realistic. The dragon had bright, fiery eyes and the goddess had pale skin and a beautiful face. He heard a squeak behind him, and saw Goldy, hopping up and down. He smiled and rushed towards him, but stopped when he saw the tapestry behind Goldy. It was ripped in two, and Goldy looked guilty. Very guilty.

"What did you do! That was a precious artifact!" He cried. As soon as the words left his lips, he heard rumbling up above him.

"Oh no!" The grottoes were collapsing in on themselves! Ming grabbed Goldy and ran out of the grottoes, only to stop in horror. The entrance was blocked by fallen rocks. He turned around to find Goldy missing again. Lifting over rocks and stones, Ming tried to look for Goldy, but he was nowhere to be found. Ming walked back into the room, and saw the huge collection of scrolls.

"Woah..." Although not an avid reader, he still found such a collection of written works amazing. They were in perfect condition, as if they were placed there just yesterday. The scrolls were written in an ancient language. Inside the room there was another door, and Ming could tell it was important because of its golden handle and frame. He slowly opened it and walked through.

The final room had a golden dragon statue in the middle of the room. It was polished and smooth, and Ming could see his own scrawny face in the reflection. He reached out and touched it, but recoiled quickly. The dragon was coming to life. The gold melted away to reveal colorful scales. The dragon stretched its legs and moved towards the room with the scrolls.

It examined each of the scrolls carefully, inspecting if they were damaged. The dragon then moved on to the tapestry room, and when it saw the ripped tapestry, it glared at him. It pounced at Ming who barely dodged out of the way.

Ming ran for his life, through the grottoes. He waited until the dragon was close enough then dodged out of the way, making the dragon smash into the fallen rocks that were blocking the entrance. He ran out of the grottoes and past the mountains, with the dragon on his tail.

Ming was unintentionally leading the dragon towards the village, and he only realized it after it was too late. He tried to warn the villagers, but they were concentrating at their jobs and didn't notice his calls. Luckily, before the dragon was too close, they heard him and started evacuating.

It was getting dark, and Ming was getting more and more tired. He finally stopped to catch his breath, and the dragon caught up. The villagers were watching nearby, tittering anxiously. They were shouting at him, telling him what to do. He might have to sacrifice himself otherwise the dragon would destroy the village because he had destroyed an artifact in the grottoes.

He understood what must be done otherwise the villagers and his family would be killed because of him. Mustering up the courage, he calmly approached the dragon, and closed his eyes. He heard his mother shaking her head and sobbing uncontrollably, and the villagers saying that he was too young to die. He gritted his teeth, and was about to be swallowed by the dragon when they both heard a squeak.

It was Goldy! Goldy rushed up to him, hopping up and down. Ming worried that the dragon would find out that Goldy did it and he would be hurt as well. The dragon looked at Goldy for a long time. He seemed to know something. He turned to Goldy and approached him.

Goldy whimpered in fear, but stayed where he was. Goldy glanced at Ming and the villagers before letting out one last squeak. The dragon opened its jaws and swallowed Goldy in one gulp. Ming didn't see the actual moment, and he was too busy crying. His mother approached him, and Ming thought that she was going to scold him, but she just sat next to Ming and wrapped an arm around him. They both were crying, as they watched the dragon slither away into the night.

All seemed lost, but suddenly a glowing figure appeared before them. She was wearing colorful robes, and had jade bracelets and necklaces. It was one of the gods from the tapestries!

"You are a kind boy", she said. Ming looked up at her and sniffed.

"You were about to sacrifice yourself for your village, which is a very heroic thing to do." She smiled at him and came closer.

"I, as well as the dragon, were created by monks who inhabited the Grottoes," she explained. "They created us to protect the scrolls and art pieces. The dragon was the protector, unleashing his wrath on those who damaged it, while I was created to reward those who were kind and brave. The incident was unfortunate, but there was nothing you could do. I can see that the death of your bunny caused you great pain, and I am willing to bring him back from the dead."

"You would?" he said, looking up at her.

She smiled and nodded.

"But there is one condition. You must never tell anyone about the treasures inside the grottoes. If anyone were to hear about them, they could seek to use it for their own benefit, and that would be...undesirable."

Ming nodded, and stood up. He would do anything to get Goldy back. Suddenly, he heard Goldy's squeak. He ran up to Goldy and hugged him, seeing the glowing lady smile. She faded away, leaving the villagers in awe as the two joyously reunited.

From then on, people would ask him what was in the Mogao Grottoes, but he kept his promise to the lady. He never told anyone what was inside, keeping the secret until the day he died.

Skirmish at the Mogao Grottoes

ESF Island School, Chu, Nathan – 13

The weak wind drifted from the plains beyond the oasis, cooling down the deserts of Gansu even more. Creatures jumped out of their underground holes and burrows but ran away at the sight of a shadowy figure. Opening his radio, he called his comrades, notifying them of the vacancy of the cave. Footsteps soon followed, and he thought about yesterday, where they spent the majority of their time traveling to Dunhuang to find these magnificent grottoes. “Shame we can’t look at them for longer,” he thought, as these caves would soon be emptied of their valuable relics. As they drifted closer, however, the robber soon noticed a flash of light in the dark night from a distance. “Some research vehicles are incoming,” he told his team, and they swerved into a smaller, nearby cave. Preparing his weapons and equipment, he awaited, lying on his stomach with binoculars, peering into the distance. Daytime was incoming, and they had to be quick. With a screeching sound, the car in the distance came to a halt. “Perhaps we should recharge for now,” he said.

Arthurine Plantagenet stopped the car in place. She had just officially become a researcher, and she was going to such an incredible place, filled with such relics that she could not comprehend, relics from an age long gone. With her were 3 partners: Adette Blois, her great friend who she had met in university; Amycus Normandy, a doctor who she met recently and was accompanying them on this special trip, and Harrison Plantanget, who was a member of the World Archeological Congress, and was there to help her sister and her companions document their findings. Arthurine quietly listened to a weak desert wind. This particular crew had the rare chance to visit these newly discovered ruins long forgotten but now found.

Clutching a blinking battery cell connected to his hand, Brett Prentice peered with his binoculars patiently, looking at the jeep in the distance. Gently closing his tired and dry eyes briefly, he opened them again to see the four enter the cove. “Drat,” he said, “No choice left,” as the raider and his comrades grabbed their weapons and equipment, swiftly getting up and sneaking away.

Stepping into the cave, they were immediately shocked by the mass amounts of historical Buddhist relics piled up around them, and it was just the entrance. It was quite clear that many had been here before, and likely more would come in the future, tourists and researchers alike. As the cave grew darker, and a louder echo emanating from each step, Adette then found a power switch, and turned the lights on, revealing a massive cove dug into the cliff, containing even more relics to see, and a small rest station which they went to and dropped their gear in. They immediately split up after that, each exploring a sector of the cover they were in. Arthurine headed right and looked around until she spotted a peculiar pool of water. It was quite big and seemed quite deep, with a door on the other side of the bank. She decided to call her teammates, and upon the sight of the door, they all unanimously decided to try and find a way to break into the door. Unbeknownst to them, however, another break-in plan was also brewing.

Brett clutched his rifle and prepared to enter the cave. Turning on his radio, he asked: “Y’all ready?” A unanimous “yes” responded. With a “3. 2. 1.” a thundering sound echoed, followed by an explosion. He could have sworn it looked like a mushroom cloud, but it was no matter, as they marched into the vast expanse of the grotto, their heavy steps loudly echoing across the series of caverns.

Arthurine felt a distant sound, and she looked around, soon ducking as a gigantic blast of sound rushed through the cave, almost crushing Arthurine and her crew. “RUN!” Amycus called, as he and Adette ran towards the rest station “I’m seeing bullets!” Gun shells slammed into the magnificent walls of the place, destroying artworks and relics as she heard a horrifying scream from Harrison. He had been shot in the shoulder, and Arthurine ran to help him get to the rest station. “Turn off the lights!” Harrison whispered as they all crouched in silence while Amycus treated Harrison’s bloodstained shoulder. “Luckily the wound isn’t very deep,” he said, “But try not to move your left arm.” Harrison nodded and Adette looked out of the station and could see the raiders pillaging the archeological site. A peculiar thing attracted her vision, however. The mysterious door previously sealed had opened, and a stone path had eerily formed in the middle of the pool, causing an azure light to shine into her glasses. “Look,” she whispered, as the light grew brighter.

Brett looked around. Everything had gone quiet. Too quiet, as if the researchers just now had vanished. He stepped around, checking corners and natural cover for the person he shot, but he couldn’t find anyone until he found the rest station. “They must be in here,” he thought, and holding his pistol, fired 3 warning shots at the glass, and a thumping noise followed. “Gotcha,” he thought, believing that his victory was upon him. But without any time to think, a fist made contact with his face, and he collapsed backward. Amycus jumped out and restrained him whilst the other members of the crew escaped, but they weren’t able to go very far before being stopped by the other raiders.

“Perhaps this is the end for us,” Harrison remarked. Adette made a gesture towards Arthurine and the others, but before she could try reasoning one of the raiders chuckled and said “No chance. You lot are going to die here.” Brett had gotten back up and pointed at the stone door “The relic hidden in this door holds power none of you could even comprehend. No ordinary treasure could suddenly create a stone bridge out of nowhere.” Arthurine looked back and a bridge had definitely formed, with railings on the side and even arches on the bottom. “I have a feeling we shouldn't let whatever this is fall into their hands” she whispered to Amycus. He gave no response but pulled out his handgun. The four nodded, and they charged at one of the raiders each.

Adette pulled out her retractable baton and swung it at the raider in front of her, but he blocked with his spiked bat and kicked at her. Taking a blow to the stomach, she reeled back and coughed out blood, but remained steadfast and slammed the baton into the raider's head, knocking him clean out. She rushed to Harrison's aid, who was struggling to use his pocket knife due to taking a bullet prior. The raider threw a rock at Adette, taking her out of the fight, but Harrison responded with a quick slash at his attacker's chest and a quick stab at his arm, causing blood to shoot out and the masked raider to drop his gun in pain. Harrison picked it up and fired at his head. He prayed that Amycus and Arthurine would be successful in their fights, and blacked out from blood loss.

Near the stone bridge, Arthurine and Amycus were fighting Brett and his companion, with Amycus firing his handgun rapidly in an effort to neutralize his opponent, but to no avail, he was too far away. He ran forward and tried to get closer, but the raider threw grenades at him, which he quickly dodged away from. Hiding behind some debris, he waited for the right time and pulled the trigger, hitting the raider perfectly in the chest and causing a fountain of blood to erupt. He looked back and a grenade was rolling towards him, about to explode. He tried to run, but to no avail, the grenade blew up, throwing Amycus far away. He was lucky though, as he wasn't close to the bomb, but he was still injured and collapsed. Arthurine had already caught sight of that and grimaced. Looking forward once again, she brandished her knife and leaped forwards, jabbing at Brett who dodged and picked up a nearby spear and threw it at her. She avoided it and held it while running forward and attacking. The spear hit Brett square in the heart, and with the sound of organs being pierced, he died instantly. Panting, she dropped her weapon and trudged towards the stone door, blood on her hands, and caught sight with the brilliant jewel that laid in the middle, blacking out to intense, bright light.

A tired Arthurine sat down at the lab and peered at a nearby mug, which started floating towards her. “What a bizarre month,” she said, taking a sip from the mug, and continued with her usual work, the eye on her forehead closing.

The Myths About the Mogao Grottoes

ESF Island School, Khong, Edward – 11

Mogao Grottoes. An ancient place filled with all kinds of valuables. Those who had seen those sculptures, valuables and objects there might have wondered how did humans build such a wonderful place without the help of advanced technology and machines? Myths have it that the Mogao Grottoes are actually a passageway to the heavens. They thought maybe the gods helped the humans who lived a millenia ago built this wondrous place. Even though it was just a myth, millions of people think that those myths actually came from real stories, but just have been forgotten by us.

Time after time, lots of adventurers tried to find the secret staircase that the gods used to come and visit the mortal land but most of them failed. Those believe the portal led to the heaven village that immortals, exotic species and mortals who died heroically or people who were true believers. some people say “Different religions are all right in some kind of way but all wrong in some kind of way.” It was also a legend in the heavens, there were all kinds of immortals which different religions believe, people imagined and some people thought never existed. Also, all kinds of medicines grew there, making plants that were extinct on earth still existing in the heavens. Even though lots of adventurers didn’t find their way to ther portal, little did they know that among some of the adventurers may not be able to come back, those actually found their way to the portal. This is why? It is because the gods admire their bravery so the immortals opened the real passageway for those. Those which made it through the portal were sworn to secrecy, never to tell anyone about their experience to the world of immortals so their existence was always kept a secret from the greedy mortals. In the heavens, all valuables that you could even imagine, they existed in the heavens. Each kind of valuables so when the gods wanted one, they picked one and another one would pop into existence. That made most of the mortals who heard about the myth become greedy and used all their willpower to find their way to the immortal world. Those only wanted to confirm their theory, the gods knew and will only open the passageway to them.

According to legend and myth, when monks in the past still lived in the Mogao Caves, the gods will come down from the heaven realm to the mortal world and help the mortals to finish their gigantic statues, sculptures and the unbelievable length of the five hundred temples, which is about 25 km. In order to thank the gods, they worshipped them day and night, singing songs around the god’s sculptures while putting food onto the worship plates. It is those humble, kind–hearted gods and monks, who made this glorious view for us humans in the future.

Even though those who had found way to get to the heaven gates had sworn to never say it in the mortal world, every now and then, one of person among the lucky ones will accidentally let word go out and even though most of them will only believe that he has lost his mind but some of them actually believes it, making the gods to change the passageway and the portal to a new place. Those who had spoken out the truth, they were punished by the gods themselves. They had to suffer 10 years without enough food and water, causing them to suffer from hunger. Even though there are some of these willing to share the information with others, there are still some of them that have followed the God’s orders and they are always welcome to arrive at heaven village anytime.

Nowadays, the Gods still come down to earth to help preserve those statues, valuables and the sculptures, but they are much more careful when they. Those unlucky adventurers who didn’t succeed to find the portal, some of them still managed to stumble upon the Gods themselves with a bit of luck. Those which were lucky enough to do that were immediately welcomed to the heavens. The Mogao Caves are known worldwide for their beautiful valuables, but when will it be time when the Mogao Caves are not only known for their valuables, sculptures, statues and paintings, but also known for its connection with the heavens?

Who knows what valuables will be discovered if some lucky scholars stumbled upon the secret doorway that leads to the spooky and mysterious basement? What more valuables and other things can we find in the undiscovered parts of the Mogao Caves? These, maybe there will be more myths and legends that will be spoken of in the future, and who knows, maybe those legends may be true!

Journey to Dunhuang of “Forgotten city”

ESF Island School, Kim, Jin Beom – 13

This story begins a long time ago, back in 1934, when a major archeological service known as the Gray Unlimited was experiencing a financial crisis. The Great Depression had hit the company years earlier and archeological operations had dried up and the company was about to go bankrupt. With no other option, the company's Chairman, Melvin Mathews, had to make a breakthrough in one last chance. He was desperate to survive this depression and had to come up with a solution.

After a few weeks, he finally decided on a secret expedition around the world to expand foreign operations. They hired me, Meldrick Moore, to lead an expedition to find new treasures that the company could sell and hopefully save them from disaster. I was assigned to “Team A” of the expedition to East Asia, more specifically to Dunhuang, a province of the far northwest region of China.

When the expedition began at precisely 7:30 pm, 1st December 1935, I began packing small, personal items such as a bible, small notebook, pencil case, photographs, and some spare clothing for the chilly climate. After a quick shower I suited up, got a big suitcase and rushed out. I drove all the way from Columbus, Ohio, to the O'hare national Airport in Chicago. The airplane was a palace to say the least. It had five bedrooms, a restaurant, with several employees to facilitate the best possible service. We had two destinations to start our expedition to China. The first destination was Hawaii, and then the Philippines to refuel. With countless hours of travel, I was already severely jet lagged. Although our plane one forged out of metal, a metallic beast could withstand almost all climates and cut my team hours' potential time to travel. The flight itself was pretty uncomfortable and the food was equivalent to an instant army meal with the water tasting like cheap tap water. The airplane was always shaking and despite all the weather resistant attachments the inside the plane still was cold, hot, humid. My slick haircut became a mess and was as greasy as the oil dripping from the airplane's strained engines. My eyes were as red as Count Dracula's and I was desperate to end the journey. Despite there being official stops in the Philippines, we were sent to Manila, the nation's capital. There, we took a ferry to Shanghai, a shining city, one of the richest cities in China. I showed admiration and interest with the rich culture of the people and the colossal structures that made up the city. neon lights that illuminated streets as we went deeper into the country. As we studied local customs and history to prepare them for a visit to the more rustic west. After a weeks since we set foot in China the team finally arrived at the province of Dunhuang where we saw the great, ancient relic of the Mogao Caves.

The architecture of temples in the area of Mogao Cave were so fascinating. They were an amazing example of rock-cut architecture, made up of simple material like a soft gravel conglomerate with a unique, square-sectioned central column, with sculpture in niches, representing the stupa around which worshippers prayed and gained blessings. The caves are usually referred to in Chinese as the Thousand Buddha Caves, coming from the ancient legend of the monk Yuezun having a vision of a thousand Buddhas at the site or from the several miniatures figures painted on the walls of these caves as these figures called "thousand Buddhas". The name Mogao Caves was used in the Tang dynasty, where 'Mogao' refers to an administrative district in the region during the Tang dynasty. The word itself could mean Mogao "high in the desert" because the word "Mo" is read as a variant of the Chinese term for "desert" with the other meaning “high”. Mogao is also used as the name of a modern town called Mogao Town. I was surprised to find out that the other caves may have been funded by merchants, military officers, and other local organizations such as women's groups. The development of the caves was at full swing during the Tang Dynasty, when Dunhuang became the main hub of commerce and trade in the Silk Road. The place also became a safe space for many Buddhists under emperor Wuzong in 845 as it was then under Tibetan control. After the fall of Tang Dynasty, the site went into a gradual decline, with construction ceasing entirely after the Yuan Dynasty. By then Islam spread throughout much of Central Asia, and the Silk Road declined in importance when new trading via sea-routes began to dominate Chinese trade with the outside world. During the Ming Dynasty, the Silk Road was finally officially abandoned, and Dunhuang slowly became depopulated and largely forgotten by the outside world. As time went by, most of the Mogao caves were abandoned, however, it was still a place of pilgrimage and still used as a place of worship for locals. I became immersed in the heritage of the caves and days suddenly became weeks as our team gathered up more knowledge.

The art style of these paintings in Mogao had heavy influence from other ancient civilizations spanning a variety of styles from India to central Asia. With different types of and style of the paintings as well as costumes worn by the figures. Cave paintings date back more than a thousand years from the 5th to the 14th centuries. The murals are vast and cover an area of 46,000 square meters. The most heavily painted caves are painted on all walls and ceilings, filling rooms where geometric or botanical decorations are not occupied by figurative images, mostly Buddha statues. The sculpture is also vividly drawn. Mural paintings are

highly regarded for the size and richness of their content, as well as their workmanship. Buddhist motifs are the most common, but some have traditional mythological motifs and portraits of patrons.

About 2,400 clay sculptures are preserved in Mogao. These were first built on a wooden frame, filled with reeds, then modeled with clay stucco and refined with paint with bigger ones having a stone core. The Buddha, along with Yaksha and other mythical creatures, is commonly shown as a central statue frequently visited by Bodhisattva, Tenno, Deva, and Apsara. The early numbers are relatively simple, mainly from the Buddha and Bodhisattva. The Buddha statue of Northern Wei may have two bodhisattvas, and two more disciples were added to form a group of five in the Northern Zhou. People from the Sui and Tang dynasties can exist as larger groups of seven or nine, some featuring a large nirvana scene with a group of mourners. Early sculptures were based on Indian and Central Asian prototypes, some in Gandhara's Greco Indian style. Over time, the sculptures showed more Chinese elements as time went by. Two giant statues represent Maitreya Buddha. The former large one in the 35.5m high cave 96 was built in 695 under the edict of Empress Wu Zetian, who ordered the construction of a monastery in 689 and the construction of a huge statue in 694. rice field. The smaller one is 27m high and was built in 713–41. The giant Buddha in the north was damaged by the earthquake and has undergone several repairs and repairs, resulting in changes in clothing, colors and gestures, with only the head retaining its original early Tang appearance. The statue in the south is almost in its original shape, except for the right hand. The large Buddha is housed in an impressive nine-story wooden structure. A type of cave built during the Tibetan era is the Nirvana Cave, which has a large reclining Buddha that covers the entire length of the hall. Along the hall behind the Buddha, mourning figures are also depicted in the form of murals and sculptures. The Buddha statue in Cave 158 is 15.6 meters long.

with my team finally reached the end of the caves we took several photos of what was left of the great of the ancient times never to return to its full glory but now what's left is only a shadow of a building that once was a part of bustling religious and commercial settlement but now it was an abandon dry land with rotting buildings here in my time in the Dunhuang. I discovered a meaning, a truth behind the deep history of the Middle Kingdom and its culture and several treasures for the archeological community whose beliefs influence the human's behavior and determine the human's action. With such a strong belief, people have achieved these massive structures. People want to spread God's words to the world and honor God's achievements or just to make a quick buck. Our journey will be published and attract more investment from the people. The expedition is finally over, but the incredible experience will stay in my heart.

The Mystery of the Mogao Caves

ESF Island School, Kim, Minjoon – 11

Introduction

To the northern-west of China lies a place of ancient buddhas and their long history of the past. A place only recently discovered and hadn't been explored yet. This is a story of 3 monks who were passing by the Mogao caves and got into a huge discovery no-one had ever seen before. Who knows what lies within these caves? The mystery continues.

Millions of years ago, everything was old and ancient to the northern-west of China. Now, back then, there weren't as many brave and curious people as there are now. Not many would like to go adventuring but 3 monks did. These 3 monks were roaring for adventures, roaming for mysteries and they were all good friends. Their names were Albert, Kyuro and David. Albert was the shortest of the 3 of them with a round face and a furry head. Kyuro was in the middle and was a bit plump and had a plump face. And finally, David was the tallest and smartest of them all. He was also the skinniest and had a lean back. They were a good team with adventures and mysteries. One day, while hiking out in the desert, they found a grotto. A grotto with so many caves it seemed to be endless and would never stop. Cautiously, they approached the grotto with precaution. Now reader's, you may wonder why they were approaching with caution. This was because China wouldn't find caves and even if they did, they would be the ones that are already discovered. Although, this one mysterious grotto has never been seen before nor has it been explored.

As I was saying, they approached the grotto with precaution. They had reached the cave and took a little peek inside. But, the cave was pitch black without a single trace of light. Luckily, each of them had a flashlight to see. They went in with the flashlight to see an extraordinary sight! The light refracted the shining walls in the cave to make a sparkling glow of blue and white. The monks were astounded by this site and rushed over to the sparkling glows. Afterward, they continued their exhibition until the floor underneath them suddenly opened. They all fell into the pitch black hole and woke up to be in a different place. A strange place it was with nothing but pitch black darkness. They soon realized the flashlight wasn't turned on! Unfortunately, Albert's and Kyuro's flashlights were broken from the fall. Only David's flashlight remained safe so he turned his flashlight back on. What a tremendous sight it was! There were all sorts of art and wall paintings all over the place. With different symbols and pictures unlike they know. They continued reading the wall paintings along with continuing their exhibition. The pictures describe something of a man of loyalty and everyone bowing before him. It seems these were pictures of the ancient times when everyone believed in god and how they worshipped him. These were arts of history and culture. At the end of the tunnel, they found a statue with a message carved in the stone template below it. The statue looked like the person in the wall paintings who was worshipped and had great loyalty and power over his servants. There was a huge word carved in the stone, BUDDHA. The great ancient buddha who was worshipped and had power. The note on the stone was:

To those who discovered this grotto, I would like to greet you all for finding your way here to the wall paintings of the past. They represent how I ruled over the land and how everyone worshipped me. Without a single person going against me and everyone with me. But near the end of my days, I started to rethink my past and try to think of something new, something that wasn't power or authority. Something called faith and belief. After discovering this, I went to the northern-west of China to create a ruin for my message. I want to say these last few words: Power isn't the most important thing in the world. Nor is it the key to getting people to worship you. You are the only one who can answer the question to fame. Fame isn't the most important thing either, it is what you believe and what you want to do. The answer is yours.

After the message, they found a button on the stone template that made an elevator which would lead to the surface. "Beep". They suddenly appeared on the surface. The desert where they were and the entrance to the grotto. They all went home and reflected on what the message said: the answer is yours, the answer is yours, the answer is yours. They were all tired and fell asleep. The next day, they decided to do what the Buddha said and to not rely on power itself. To be good.

The Old Lady

ESF Island School, Pang, Leah – 11

5th August, 1973

Every morning, there came an old lady.

No one really knew where she came from, only that every time the sun rose, she always sat, before the murals, scribbling ferociously at a piece of parchment.

“I wonder why she comes?” My friend Oui asked. I would only answer with a shrug. I didn’t really care.

“I bet she’s a witch! Ready to *eat* us all!” Xiaoma said, his eyes bright and shining. Us more mature monks would roll our eyes, groaning at the youngster’s absurd statement. “Witches aren’t real, fool.” We would answer.

Every night, before our snores echoed around the vast room, the younger monks would whisper, “Why does the old lady come? I’m afraid that she’s here to kill us.”

The younger monks often looked up to me, asking for my opinions or advice.

“I think she’s just an average woman, searching for inner peace.” I always grumbled in response. Then the younger ones would nod silently, and settle deeper into their blankets, their soft snores sounding peacefully.

Oh, how I wished I was as pure, as innocent as the younger monks.

Falling asleep into a wonderful dream, of shining meadows and grazing sheep, of evergreen trees and bright-coloured flowers.

When I started to fall asleep, my breaths starting to fall into a peaceful rhythm, my eyelids growing heavy...

The nightmares came.

It always started with screaming.

“Doctor!” She yelled, “Doctor, save me! Save me! I can’t breathe.” She was trembling in the bed, her eyes wide. I tried to help her, tried to save her, but after a final shrill scream, her body went limp, her eyes still open with horror and pain.

And then, the crying came.

“Mother!” The children yelled, “Doctor, save mother!” But I couldn’t. Didn’t they already know? She was already dead.

I had become a monk to escape the pain, escape the pain of reality. But with my past haunting my dreams every night, my pain is still there. It was like a knife, cutting in, deeper into my wound, making it bleed even further.

I had become a doctor so I could save lives. I wanted to take care of my parents when they were sick, when they were too old to take care of themselves. I wanted to help those in misery, when they are too helpless to fend for themselves.

And yet, seeing those people, still sick even with my help, their cries of agony erupting from their cracked lips, it broke me. It cut me down, with every cry, like a hammering down my chest, sending the pain deeper and deeper down my heart.

And I knew, I knew that I couldn’t do it anymore.

So I threw away my past, throwing it into the deep ocean, away from me. I threw away my education, and my dream of becoming a doctor. And I started anew.

I travelled into the deep desert. I buried myself deeper and deeper away from my past, walked further and further away from home.

I became a monk. I prayed, I reflected, I lived peaceful days, quiet days, a steady life.

But even with such calm days, my past still haunted my dreams, the cries of my patients loud and real, just like before. The harder I tried to forget, the deeper I remembered it.

I sometimes wonder whether I should just throw my life away. After all, being dead would make me forget everything for real.

I was cleaning the walls when I saw her, curled up on an old rug in the Library Room, her wrinkly hands copying down the words and phrases from the murals before her.

“What are you doing?” I couldn’t help but ask, silently creeping beside her.

“I am writing down all the knowledge from these murals.” She said secretively, a warm smile creeping up her lips. She continued scribbling, saying, “I will tell my children all about this knowledge, and hopefully they will feel peace.”

I nodded, leaving the old lady to her work. Buddhist art often had a secret meaning that would bring you a sense of inner peace.

It was good that the Old Lady was writing it down. This knowledge is worth sharing.

I will remember this day for the rest of my life.

I know I will.

I was meditating outside the temple, silently muttering a few prayers. The old lady had come,

The younger monks had given up on wondering who she was. After all, she had not caused us any harm or annoyance in these few days, so we left her to do whatever she had to.

A breeze blew by, making me relax.

The day was so lovely that I had forgotten my past for a second, stopping to marvel at the beauty of the dunes of golden sand that unravelled before me. The sky was a brilliant blue, fluffy white cloud dotting here and there. The day was fine without the boiling sun, but not cool enough to prevent me from sweating.

Even though it was so beautiful, even though the day was everything I wished it could be, it happened.

It happened when I was least expecting it, and it took me by surprise, a ghastly surprise.

It happened so suddenly, out of the blue, that I wasn't prepared for it.

The old lady fell to the ground, and never got up again.

And I was helpless, like a pup in a raging storm. There was nothing I could do, nothing I could do to save her. All I had in my hands was my praying beads, and even with my experience of being a doctor, I couldn't do anything.

I ran toward her, praying that she was still breathing as she fell. I checked her neck for a pulse, which was slowing with every second. I shook her, hoping that she would wake.

But honestly, there was nothing I could do.

So I watched her as her breathing slowed, her heart beat quieting, her life slowly ending, her mouth forming her last breath, "Don't watch me die, son, go *do* something meaningful..."

As I wandered, I found myself facing some workers repainting a few murals. The colour had dulled over the years, and they were painting over the old words with all their concentration.

And that made me think.

I should be like the workers.

Painting over the words when they are capable, making the words visible again.

Making it visible for other people to see, to remember.

And not just watch silently, watching the colour fading everytime I walked past it.

And for that, I needed a paintbrush. A big one.

My bags were packed.

All the monks had watched me leave unhappily, their usual shining eyes damp and colourless.

But I still left, waving a final goodbye as I disappeared through a corner, making the temple, the monks, everything that I have seen, heard, or told as a monk, disappear for the last time.

I am tired of being able to see, but too powerless to do anything. I am tired of being hidden away, being buried away from reality. I am tired of being sheltered away from myself, from my past.

I am ready to return to my past.

10th October, 2012

I gazed up upon the temple, admiring the vastness of it all.

It was built into a cliff, it's red pillars snaking across the plain beige walls. The detail of this temple made it look dreamlike, like a child's dollhouse. Countless trees stood before the temple, guarding it through the many years. The sky was foggy and a chilly wind blew, giving off an entirely different atmosphere.

I had retired as a doctor, now spent my time wandering around, exploring new and yet also, old places.

I roamed around the temple, admiring the tapestries and murals.

I brushed my hand over the flat walls, remembering that decades ago, I had lived here, wandered here, and learnt here. I remembered all my friends, all those monks I had left behind. And then I remembered my life as a doctor, saving, taking care of people with all my heart.

As the crowd dimmed, a particular silhouette caught my eye.

It reminded me of the old lady that died, all those decades ago.

I remembered myself as a monk, shielding myself from the truth, watching, never doing anything.

I remembered myself standing up again, brushing away the sand that shielded me, and venturing back the path home, back to reality.

I remembered myself as those people, making the dulled words visible again.

And then, I remembered the old lady's words, the very words that made me stand up again.

"I did it," I whispered to myself, to the Old Lady, "I did it. I did something meaningful."

The sun shone onto me, making it seem like the Old Lady's warm gaze.

Thank you, Old Lady.

A Mogao Grottoes Dream

ESF Island School, Yeoh, Aiden – 11

In 1932, a boy named Zhen Yin stomped out of a caravan in Dunhuang, China, with a grin on his face. Outside the protection of the caravan, there was a freezing cold sandy biome with little humidity. He floundered around in the sand. He spotted two brown molecules and picked them up. They were sand cockroaches. He laughed gleefully – these would be his new pets. He would be able to prank his friends with them. He realized he could put the cockroaches in his friends' beds. His friends were currently eating grilled fish, sitting outside behind the caravan, and watching the sunset. Avoiding them, he walked around the front of the caravan. He put one pet cockroach each inside his two friends' pillowcases, so they would haunt his friends at night. That night, his friends Fu Lang and Qin Zhe woke up to a fiddy-diddy feeling in their mouths. The cockroaches' legs scurried around in their mouths.

'Yuck!' they both said at the same time since they were twins. Qin Zhe accidentally swallowed the cockroach in his mouth because he thought it was the fish that he had eaten earlier. Fu Lang moved fast enough to spit it out.

'Zhen Yin! Why would you do this to us?' they screamed angrily. Zhen Yin woke up from his sleep.

He awkwardly said, 'No, it wasn't me!' But because Zhen Yin was a prankster, the twins knew he was the one who had put the cockroaches there. Qin Zhe was angry because he actually swallowed a cockroach.

So he said, 'GET OUT OF MY CARAVAN!' Qin Zhe and Fu Lang agreed to kick Zhen Yin out.

'Are you sure we should do it?'

'YEAHHHH!' The twins shouted. Zhen Yin was still wearing his PJs. They locked the door and did not let him come back in.

'I didn't think they would react this harshly,' said Zhen Yin to himself. He was cold because his friends had confiscated his jacket. He also felt left out because he had no friends other than Qin Zhe and Fu Lang. He felt hungry, so he walked in a random direction in search of food. He walked for what felt like an eternity when he spotted faint lights coming out of the side of a mountain.

He walked towards the lights.

Before long, he realized that he was inside a set of caves. The caves looked like a million nostrils had sprouted from a huge mountain. Zhen Yin walked inside one of the caves. There was an old man who had a white grimy beard that touched the ground. He had a tattoo of a golden lotus on his forehead. He was standing in front of a bronze statue of a Buddha protectively, like he was guarding it.

'ROAARRRR,' yelled the man standing by the cave.

'Why are you roaring, roar man?' Zhen Yin responded. Was this man trying to sell him some fake ripoff kung fu ROAR products?

The guard marched toward him, saying, 'ROARRRRR! GRRRRRRRRRRR!'

Zhen Yin tried to touch the statue of the mystical Buddha, which stood in front of him. He walked forward, curious to see what would happen to him when he touched it. His hand swept across the Buddha's knee. He felt like a cool breeze was rushing through his hand. It was as if a huge Chi power was expanding his mental capacity. The guard gracefully slapped Zhen Yin's hand off the Buddha but Zhen Yin pulled back. His arms tilted backwards, and his legs crouched down, as his weight shifted onto his toes.

Zhen Yin thought, HOW DO I EVEN KNOW THESE KUNG FU MOVES? While he was surprised at his own sudden power, the guard managed to hit Zhen Yin's chest, and he went flying off and accidentally smashed a holy urn on the floor. To his surprise, the urn didn't break! Instead, it opened with a whoosh! Blue gas flew out, accompanied by the sound of cackling. The gas circled the room in a fast arc, and Zhen Yin watched it in awe. Suddenly, the gas swooped down and flew right into Zhen Yin's nostrils. It felt like icicles had gone straight into his nostrils, all the way to his brain.

He fainted.

When he woke up, he saw the light of many glowing stones scattered around the cave. He saw many rocks, scrolls, paintings, murals, sculptures and the Buddha statue, all carefully in place on the floor. He then saw a young man kneeling and worshipping the Buddha statue. The young man's face was too familiar for him to not notice. It had the exact same golden lotus tattoo on his forehead. Except this young man looked 50 years younger than the guard who had just fought him. Zhen Yin realized, *all of a sudden, I travelled back in time...*

Suddenly, a group of merchants broke into the cave. The young guard yelled, 'Are you here to pay respect to the Buddha?'

Without answering the question, the merchants ran quickly in one direction, as if they were planning something. The guard saw right through this and blocked their movements. The merchants ran in the other direction, and swooped up the Buddha statue and dashed for the exit of the cave. Zhen Yin saw that the statue had a golden lotus on it. Before the merchants' backs disappeared in front of Zhen Yin's eyes, a bright ray of golden light shot out from the guard's

forehead and there was a bang. A huge BANG! Zhen Yin's eyes filled with white light and stars, and he fell to the ground again...

Zhen Yin woke up back in 1932. The now old-looking guard was still fighting him, and, responding out of intuition, Zhen Yin started blocking the guard's attacks.

Zhen Yin jumped back with his arms raised high in surrender, 'I understand what you are guarding now. I am not one of those greedy people who would steal your Buddha. I am just a wanderer searching for food.'

The guard took a big step back, lowered his arms, smiled and vanished. Zhen Yin touched the Buddha again. Nothing happened...

In 1966, there was a girl that went hiking with her mother in Dunhuang. They got lost and the mother was found outside a set of caves two days later, along with a stone statue that was her daughter. From the mother's words, they encountered the same guard protecting the Buddha statue with the golden lotus. They also saw the vision of the merchant thieves, but this time, the girl ignored the past, became greedy and tried to steal the Buddha statue. The guard turned her into a stone statue and let the mother go.

In 2022, Zhen Yin is still alive. His story came out as one in a million because he survived his cave encounter without being turned into stone. Zhen Yin did not turn into stone because he understood the sacredness of the caves, and he learnt the lesson from the past.

The Mogao grottoes are there to be worshipped and respected, not to be tarnished and ruined.

The Full Moon

ESF Island School, Yoon, Seung June – 11

He had arrived. The muscles in the raider's arms bulged as he heaved open the wooden door. It squeaked open, piercing the icy silence of the night. The stone walls reverberated with quiet footsteps as he ventured onward, the tales of his childhood echoing in his mind. As the silent thief neared every new room, his heartbeat quickened, only to later angrily curse in disappointment. Blurred colors rushed past his vision as he quickened his pace.

He stopped and looked to his right. An eerie silence enveloped the room, somehow *more* than quiet. The hairs on his bruised, dusty arms raised. The raider entered and let out a gasp. There was the scroll, proudly displayed on a golden stand.

The raider took a deep breath and ventured forward. As he neared the treasure, he heard a slow, rhythmic whine. He reached out, and it grew louder and louder...

The monk's eyes jolted open and he whipped around to face the stranger. The monk's thoughts alternated between fear and surprise. Slowly settling into a state of cold, unbending rage, he grabbed the raider's wrists and flung him to the ground. The scroll fell beside the man. The monk stared into the stranger's eyes, now hollow with fear. A raging fire burned in his mind as he pressed his thumb against the intruder's forehead. As he inhaled deeply, the roaring flames began to die down into smoldering ash. The monk relaxed his grip and let the body fall.

The professor frowned at his team, eyes flitting from one member to another. His thoughts slowly drifted elsewhere and his eyes clouded with yearning. He missed his family, his home. He wouldn't get to them any sooner by delaying. But here they were, dipping their feet into the crystalline water of the crescent-shaped oasis.

The professor stood up and barked, "The sandstorm's dying down, we better get moving. Lying around won't write your paychecks. Remember, according to the locals, we're looking for some kind of Chinese temple built into stone."

"Come on, Professor, we haven't got any rest since forever. It will only be a few minutes. Besides, that place is haunted. One of the villagers said that if you don't get out before midnight, you never will. They say one man tried to get in a century ago but he was never heard from again." Eric, the navigator, complained.

The professor clenched his fists, frustration building up inside him like a volcano ready to erupt. 'I won't let this gossip rob me of this chance,' he thought as he packed his belongings. He knew they would soon follow.

Beads of sweat dripped past the professor's eyebrows, clouding his vision. A thin layer of dust coated his dry throat. Emotions rippled through his mind as he refocused his gaze on the grueling path ahead.

The beam of his flashlight shone on rows of elegantly carved terracotta tiles that lined the roofs of wooden porches, stacked on top of each other like layers of a wedding cake. While not elaborate, nor particularly grand, the structure had an ineffable aura that seemed to draw him in. As he dragged his hand along the grooves and bumps of the wall, his eyes took in the cliff face, searching for possible entrances. He soon found one.

It was a magnificent sight; hundreds of intricate paintings littered the walls and ceiling, and meticulously carved statues of Buddhas loomed over him, wary of a foreign presence. The professor marveled at the beauty of the caves, pondering how much time and effort had been spent on their creation. Entranced, he wandered around, occasionally pausing to take notes.

The professor sensed an abrupt movement at the corner of his eye. 'Must be too nervous...' he mumbled to himself as he continued his search.

As the pale crescent moon shone like a silvery claw loomed high in the night sky, the professor took a break. He plopped onto the cold stone floor and began rummaging through his backpack, pulling out an apple. The sweet juice helped clear his mind. An eerie chill ran down his spine as his crew member's words echoed in his mind. *If you don't get out before midnight, you never will.*

A high-pitched whine quickened his heartbeat as the professor whipped around, only to be greeted by a solid mass of stone. The narrow beam of his flashlight focused on the area as he reached with his hand to feel the wall. It met nothing. His eyes grew wide as he grasped his machete and stepped in.

The professor let out a deep breath. Layers of scrolls almost ten feet tall lined the walls, and textbooks and manuscripts littered the floor. It was so much knowledge and wisdom, all crammed into a space no bigger than his bedroom. Behind among the heaps of scrolls, one seemed to stand out, boastfully resting on its throne of gold. It seemed somewhat special.

As he gazed in awe, the walls reverberated with a low booming. He ventured onward still, and the noise grew into an almighty rumble. The professor was left standing eye-to-eye with a pale, ghostly figure.

"Sit," it ordered.

“Where has he gone?” Eric muttered out loud. “We’ve been searching for him for an hour!”

The crew slouched onto a cluster of rocks, weary and exhausted. It had been ages of searching, all to no avail. The professor’s harsh words of scorn swirled in Eric’s head, but he soon remembered they had a mission to complete. The professor was right; lying around wouldn’t do anything.

He checked his watch. 11:36pm. They had to hurry. Eric slung his backpack over his shoulder and got up.

The professor gripped his machete and charged. When he turned back, the monk was gone.

Thump.

A loud footstep shook the floor. The professor swiveled his head towards the entrance. Blood rushed to his head as he took the scroll and ran. He didn’t dare to look back.

The rumble grew louder, so much so that he soon collapsed. As he hastened to get back on his feet, he glimpsed a sight of his attackers. Massive stone legs as thick as pillars were rapidly getting closer. The professor sprinted into the darkness. Cold black eyes swiveled in his direction. Monks, kings, horses, and dragons poured out of their homes set in stone to join the hunt.

Running out of breath, the professor slowed, yet he gritted his teeth and concentrated all of his energy on the path ahead. Chunks of gravel fell from the ceiling, followed by an enormous stone, blocking off his attackers. An acrid smell stung his nose and dust coated his throat and nose. As the debris cleared, he looked back at the obstructed pathway and breathed a sigh of relief. His heart leaped at the light ahead.

Creak.

This time, the professor’s eyes were drawn to the ceiling. Nothing was happening.

Creak.

There it was again. The professor’s eyes widened and he scrambled to his knees, frantically crawling towards the entrance. He soon realized he could not make it. He wouldn’t be able to unlock the secrets of ancient culture. But someone else could. Summoning all the energy in his body, the professor let the treasure fly. It rolled slowly – agonizingly so – until it lay bathed in moonlight. ‘Just in time,’ he thought as he closed his eyes. The ceiling soon fell..

“There it is!”

The crew quickly scoured the structure for entrances, but they were all blocked off. Quiet. Then Eric held up a dusty scroll. “I found this in front of one of the openings.”

With trembling hands and pounding hearts, the crew huddled over as he shakily opened it up. Once again, everyone lay in shocked silence. The moon shone dimly on blankness.

Dr. Jonathan slouched onto a couch and massaged his forehead. It has been a long day. His open suitcase lay plopped onto the windowsill. The full moon cleared his mind of the day’s events.

An old man had walked up to him in the train station, rambling about how he was the spitting image of an old friend. The elderly man, who introduced himself as Eric, quickly handed him a wooden box. “Your grandfather would have wanted you to have this,” he had said and hurried away.

A dim light began to emanate from his suitcase. Curious, Dr. Jonathan walked over to his suitcase and pulled out a brightly glowing wooden box. He opened the box. Just a scroll. With a thumping heart, Dr. Jonathan opened it. It was blank. Disappointed, he tossed it onto the windowsill, where the glowing light of the full moon shone brightly on the moldy paper. Thin lines began to materialize on the surface, slowly interconnecting into a web-like map.

The Mogao Grottoes

ESF King George V School, Chung, Michelle – 13

"I trust you will be able to find a partner in approximately thirty seconds. Once you have done that, please follow our assistant for today, Mr. Bixby, and myself into the first grotto we will be exploring for research." Ms. Rosaline, our volunteer archaeologist group leader instructed, pointing to a high rectangular doorless entrance to a grotto. Ms. Rosaline's eyes swept the group's eager and nervous faces, nodded, and began to walk toward the entrance with Mr. Bixby trailing behind her like a faithful soldier. The clomp of their booted feet followed the lingering echo of her command which reverberated in everyone's mind. As her and Mr. Bixby's outlines faded into the entrance, murmurs began, as if we were awoken from Ms. Rosaline's unintentional threat. Eyes shifted to a favoured person. Murmurs began to rise, then fell, like a wave crashing onto the shore, leaving silence behind. Then a voice rang through the silence, hands were grabbed, arms were grabbed, and the stomping of boots created a cloud of dust as pairs ran toward the entrance. Silence settled once again on the remaining people. Two people were left. Including me. I stole a glance at the remaining girl who stood timidly aside. I took a deep breath. I would need to socialise.

"Um, hello, so, do you want to—" I spluttered, before a rapid mix of a slap and a clunk carried my voice away. A tall, brown-haired girl wearing slippers and supported by crutches was running toward us, her crutches awkwardly slowing her down. However, as she advanced, her speed did not decrease. Fear sparked in my chest, and I backed to the side until a rocky surface grazed my shoulder. I turned. It was the entrance to another grotto. A bright smear of paint was visible through the dark entrance. I took a step towards the paint, questions and thoughts revolving around my head.

"Sienna!" I spun on my heel and was now facing the back of the girl with the crutches.

"You're here! I thought everyone had gone, but I tried my best to come fast because I broke my leg and—" The girl jabbered away while the other, who I now know is Sienna, looked at her, obvious relief flooding into her face. As she watched the other girl's face, her eyes slid swiftly to my darkened ones, and slid back to the other girl's, just as fast as she had looked at mine. A sharp pain of irritation shot through my body.

"Calm down, the group and Ms. Rosaline and Mr. Bixby went to that grotto, we'd better hurry," Sienna interrupted, midway through the other girl's chatter. The other girl nodded in reply, adjusted her crutches, and they headed for the entrance to the grotto next to mine. I stood, glaring at the stone wall on the right of the entrance to my grotto, wishing I could burn a hole with my eyes to penetrate Sienna's face.

Lava trickled through my bones and burned the ribcage surrounding my heart, making it thunder aggressively in an attempt to escape the burning prison. Sienna and her friend's voices had faded several minutes ago, but the only word that reverberated in my mind was hate, hate, hate. I clenched and unclenched my fists, cracked my knuckles, curled and uncurled my toes, and exhaled. I rotated on the spot, and faced the looming entrance to the grotto. The smear of paint was gone. I breathed in and plunged into the darkness.

I was in a treasure trove. Everywhere I looked, colourful art met my eye. Faint outlines of what appeared to be people surrounded the walls of the grotto I was in. Despite the multiple murals in the grotto, my eyes were attracted to a specific painting. I took a step closer to the mural, my eyes gradually adjusting to the darkness. As the outlines of the figures began to crystallise, my mind began to crystallise as well. The figures seemed so familiar to me, and I cocked my head slightly to one side, pondering for a moment what the figures were, until a serene, deep voice entered my head. *Ivy, do you recognize the upper figures on that mural?* It was my grandfather's voice. *They are the bodhisattvas. They wear an expression of envy as they realise what nirvāṇa is about, which is when the subject is released from the cycle of death and rebirth as well as the effects of karma. However, the lower figures are wailing aloud as they believe that Śākyamuni has died. Ivy, remember? Do you remember the stories I told you?* A tear rolled down my cheek and my heart ached. I had forgotten all the stories. Swiping at my subsequent tears, I looked underneath the painting. A tranquil face with half-closed eyes lay, staring at me. Fear jolted my body and woke my melancholy heart by making it thunder vigorously against my ribcage. I backed up from the face, turned, then sprinted from the face. The next thing I knew, I found myself in another grotto. However, the empty grotto consisted of eroded stone walls which were undecorated and plain. I did not need my grandfather to gently remind me. This was a monk's room. As I took a step forward to further examine the bare walls, everything abruptly tilted. My head spun. I closed my eyes. Then everything was still. I opened my eyes but the room was no longer empty. A monk sat with his eyes closed, a placid expression on his face. The silence was broken from footsteps coming from behind me. I turned around, and a man holding two bowls appeared in the entrance of

the cave. Before I could move out of his way, he walked through me. Everything went cold, hot, then normal. I stared at the man's back. *Maybe I'm in a dream.* But my thoughts were interrupted by the voices of the men.

"Thank you, Kenny, it is so generous of you to bring me food, but you did not need to," The monk said, smiling up at the man.

"You are my brother, Reynold, so it's not a problem," Kenny replied, bending down and gently pushing the two bowls of food to Reynold. The two brothers smiled at each other as Kenny adjusted to a seating position facing Reynold. Kenny then reached into his pocket and pulled out a chopstick case. He clicked it open, took out the chopsticks, and handed them over to Reynold. Reynold accepted them with a grateful "thank you" and began to eat. Kenny watched him, his eyes overflowing with brotherly love and care. Silence returned back to the cave, except with appreciative chewing filling the silence. Then the chewing stopped. Reynold stared at Kenny with blank, wide eyes, then dropped his bowl and chopsticks with a loud clatter. Kenny jumped up to Reynold, and held him and whispered comforting words while asking if he felt all right.

"Kenny—" Reynold whispered.

"What is it, Reynold?" Kenny asked, his eyes filled with silent fear. Reynold paled and staggered in Kenny's grip, clutching his heart, with an expression of silent agony.

"I— I need to give you this before— before—" Reynold rasped, reaching into his pocket with a shaking hand. He pulled out a delicate silver-chain necklace with a jade Buddha hanging on the edge of the chain. He dropped it in Kenny's trembling hand. A tear rolled down Kenny's cheek.

"Reynold, I—" A gasp interrupted Kenny's speech, and Reynold's wide eyes froze with pain. His body loosened in Kenny's grip, and he stared with glazed, blank eyes at the eroded ceiling above him. I couldn't move. My breathing was ragged. My head spun. I closed my eyes. The last thing I remembered before falling back to reality was that I had the exact same necklace as Kenny. Except I had sold mine during a yard sale. Sharp, cold regret pierced through my body. I opened my eyes.

Even if the Sky Falls

ESF King George V School, Kang, Yerin – 12

Past:

The start of my story was way before I learnt how to write so now, I write the start. I am a Roman boy who once upon a time travelled with my family on a chariot, through the silk road to trade our gold. Despite being born whilst travelling, my life shined like the golden sun now that I look back. Father and mother were always busy and occupied so I talked to grandpa, which was when I was usually elated.

“Grandpa, are you always going to be with me?” I asked one day, looking up to the ocean blue sky swirling with the flocculent clouds.

“Oh Julius, how wise you are to wonder.” Said grandpa, tranquil. “I will be near you no matter where we are, even if the sky falls.”

“How can you stay with me if we are far apart?” I asked naively.

That was the last conversation I had with my dear old grandpa as just before grandpa answered, a bomb went off with a loud BANG. I still have no clue of who the bombers were, but I yearn for solid revenge. A hard, unrelenting revenge.

Fortunately, a group of tender scholars helped me recuperate from the bloodbath by teaching me how to read, write and speak. Being able to communicate opened the door to a whole new world for me.

Present:

“How magnificent the cave is!” a scholar hollers next to me.

I like him. His pearl white hair that covered his wrinkled yet smiling face and his long, luxurious cloak. I hope I will get one too because what I’m wearing at this point is patched and ripped and still covered in browning stains of blood.

“Can I go in?” I ask as I am one ardent child blinded by curiosity.

“Sure.” This time the scholar grins.

Stepping into the depths of this cave, I wander around. Oh, how beautiful everything seemed! Piled books of letters and paintings to stories. I receive no company, yet I feel no loneliness, or perhaps I am just too numb to feel it. For minutes then hours I wander around the cave.

“Oh, it’s time for me to leave.” I think as I try to remember the direction I need to go towards.

But there came the problem. I do not remember the direction. To blame it, the cave is ginormous. Each path is filled with goods, it is accustomed to make people lost. Nevertheless, I’m lost.

Starting from whimpers, I evolve to howling my eyes out. Oh no, not this again. My lungs flapping rapidly like a newborn butterfly and failing to grasp air seguely brings me back to my grandpa’s lifeless body. I walk around the perimeter of the cave with my sob thriving each step then I see him.

My grandpa. Lively, spotless, and unharmed, my dear old grandpa stood with a benevolent smile in front of me. His white hair glistens like silk whilst his wrinkles deepens and darkness every blink, balancing each other.

“... This can’t be,” I breathe, heavily shocked by the sudden appearance.

I must be hallucinating, or maybe dreaming. This couldn’t ever possibly be true.

“...Oh Julis!” exults the apparent grandpa.

“...Stay away.” I enunciate warily.

“Well, my dear Julius, you may fight me all you want but my job is to lead you out of this cave.” Says grandpa serenely.

“... If you are my real grandpa, how do I find my way out of this cave may I ask?” I still distance myself but obey him as I seldom doubt or distrust my grandpa.

“Oh, oh Julius! Before we move on to our agenda, may I give you a hug?” He exclaims and I make my way to him without hesitation.

What was I thinking? That could’ve been the demon from underground luring me to his depth. However, I do not speak or think before flinging myself into the arms of my grandpa which is as warm as the sun coating my body.

“Ah, he’s my grandpa.” I think, relieved.

We stay in that position for a few minutes, and I stay buried in the arms of comfort.

“So shall we go find a way now?” I ask, finally setting myself free.

“Sure, Julius. But the first and the only step requires patience.” Says grandpa.

“What is that step?” I ask

“Finding the Guidian,” announces Grandpa.

“A what?!” I ask as if I just heard him say that the sky is made of blood.

“A Guidian is a little furry creature, hue of blue who guides the lost souls out of this cave... then becomes their loyal servant for the rest of their lives. In order to tame a Guidian, you have to be charming.” He says as I flatten my brown, unkempt hair down, “Hahaha. Sadly, a Guidian is only truly tamed when you’re not only charming on the outsides, but if you own your charm in your insides, too.”

“... Do I have any grandpa?” I ask timorously, I never reflected on my looks... and less on my charm.

“I believe that you own a perfect charm for a Guidian,” smiles grandpa.

I smile back.

CREAK! I hear it. Grandpa puts a finger to his mouth to signal silence. We both crouch on the stone hard floor as squeaks and giggles of delight get carried around the cave by an echo.

“Those creatures are Guidians. Go up to them and talk... but be friendly.” Whispers Grandpa sedately.

“Alright,”

I march to the tiny creatures. What I see is an abundance of tiny blue furballs with the eye of a beetle huddled together. They make the squeaks of a bird but the movement of a cheetah.

“Oh, hello there. My name is... Julius.” I smile benignly.

From the huddle, one single furball jumps out and climbs onto my shoulder. When I look behind, I see grandpa still crouching but this time holding a thumbs up. I must’ve been charming.

“Oh hello... Mr. Furball.” I beam.

The Guidian squeals in delight as it stretches its tiny arms and legs. I see that the other Guidians have dispersed, searching for another person. As soon as I look at the Guidian, it squeals merrily and points to my left.

“Do I go?” I ask.

The Guidian jumps up and down jovially.

“Grandpa, Come on!” I call and grandpa walks to me then shakes hands with the Guidian.

I see his charm is alive and well. For a while, Mr. Furball negotiates us through what seemed like endless turns and paths until we saw the beam of hope blinding us.

“We did it grandpa! We did it!” I exclaim ecstatically, not noticing Mr. Furball scurrying away, “... grandpa?”

When I look towards grandpa, my lungs close and my brain fogs in disbelief. I see grandpa smiling at me, his edges teetering away piece by piece. Oh no.

“G—g—grandpa!” I spit, “You cannot do that! You cannot leave me here! Grandpa... Grandpa!” I shriek and I don’t even try swallowing my tears.

I choke then wail. Then I plead and plead until it is only grandpa’s placid crystal smile that is left glistening in the sun.

“NO! GRANDPA! PLEASE!” I cry and cry and cry.

For minutes, then hours, then days. I sob and wail and shout. At one point I am sick of recalling my grandpa’s last smile. The loss weighs the world down and the flocculent clouds spin. The loss is too palpable.

Then I look up at the sky and anguish crawls upon me. After everything, after everything I have been through, all the loss and pain, how is the sky still as blue as the ocean? How is the sun still shining so brightly that I must squint in order to not blind myself? How are the clouds soaring across the sky? I start to pound onto the golden sand, the glowing heat burning my skin. But who am I to care? Who am I to rage and cry when after all this despair, the sun is shining, the clouds are dancing, and the sky is upright?

Being as frail as ever, I lie down and let the sun blind me. Without blinking, I think.

“Take me grandpa, if you’re still with me even if the sky falls.”

I wait and wait and wait. I do not flinch, or move, or protest when insects crawl on me. It then is one blazing hot day when I finally feel it. I feel my soul flying like a cloud. Free and new, and searching for my grandpa.

“Oh grandpa... I miss you so much.” The sorrow is just too heavy for me to toss off.

My breath becomes shallow, perhaps it is a sign for me to fly away. I lift from the ground and reach for the diamond sky. Now I reunite with my grandpa because he said he will always be there for me... even if the sky falls.

Paradise

ESF King George V School, Wen, Amy – 13

I'll never forget that day until the day I die. What year was it? It was in the 20th century, doesn't matter, just know that I was on an expedition to China. I was still an archaeologist and professor back then. I was particularly interested in the silk road and its effects on cultures around it. Me and a few friends of mine, of course, took this chance as a vacation. Nothing much happened on the way, we found a local guide and asked him if he knew where the "caves" were, we paid him enough, and that was pretty much it. When we arrived at the site it was already noon, desserts were always a pain, the rough winds whipped against our heavily guarded bodies, none of us avoided wounds. Was it fate? I don't know, but walking far enough until the car disappeared in our sight, I felt pressure, unease, whatever you want to call it. It's a feeling that words will never be able to paint. It's a feeling of respect and fear, like a peasant walking with rags into a palace. It felt like we were invading territory of a thousand gods, the fear pushing us out, and the beauty hidden within is drawing us closer like a Siren's call, giving us no time for regret.

I've never been so drawn-in by something ever in my life. I wanted to keep going, I wanted to see what these ancient roads lead me to, I wanted to see what treasure time has left in this sacred place. I don't believe in heaven or hell, but I believe that a god made this place now that I look back, how is it possible for humans to create such pieces of art? The large caves revealed themselves, dipped in gold dust as the desert winds roared harder. "This is it?" Our guide nodded at my question and gestured us towards it. "I'll pick you up when the sun goes down." He soon left without a sound.

Jeremy went in first. He was always the type to go head first into the unknown, I respect him for that. I followed suit right at his heel. The rocks were cold and sharp under my palms, they were guards for the imperial grounds I was just about to enter. I couldn't see that well inside, but the smell was weird, it wasn't bad, it was like... old smoked wood. Golden details crawled across the stone walls, the desert's sunlight couldn't seem to reach this place. I narrowed my eyes, I could barely see Jeremy in front of me, he stopped. "Jeremy?" The echoes of my voice went right back to soak in my mind.

"Dear intruders, what brings you here?"

I could feel my blood freeze, where? "Jeremy? This is not funny." It felt like the world was folding itself up in front of my eyes. The entrance was reduced to a golden dot, my eyes were wide open, but no image entered my sight. No perception. "*What is your purpose here, intruders?*" This was hard to believe, but someone, or something else was here with us in this cave. I don't even remember how I shuffled towards Jeremy, he was shaking, I could see his petrified grey eyes muddled up, he couldn't even talk. It wasn't him. "Who are you?" I took a deep breath, only to squeeze out this phrase. I felt so powerless, my knees were buckling, like a prey between the sharpest fangs.

"You should answer that first, intruder."

My heart was pounding in my chest, my body was panicking, but my brain was slowly freezing up. "*What do you want from this place, intruder?*" The voice continued, it was a monotone voice, no emotions. Like a deer in the headlights, I felt helpless. I didn't understand, I still don't.

"We are here to... to... find paradise."

Jeremy answered for us, his voice was shaking with every syllable. He was terrified, so was I. Now I could see right ahead of me, there was a stone statue, the ancient artefact was different from the rest of the cave, its colours were bright as ever, almost like it was just painted. "*Paradise, you say?*" The Buddha statue's mouth moved as it spoke. That either made me feel better or further horrified me, I couldn't tell from all the sweat. The statue's hands moved. It was like the Midas touch right out of the fairy tales, but more glorious, and more authentic. Suddenly, everything, no exaggeration, came alive under the statue's touch. There were colours that I've never seen before, the golden marks stretched like the roots of a tree, the flowers bloomed to their best, everything was alive before my eyes. Apsaras soared across the ceiling with vibrant lines of silk dancing behind them. My consciousness told me that they were drawings, but each and every pair of eyes were on me, they were just like blades, stabbing my body repeatedly. Everything was so, for a lack of better words, alive. Extravagance had expressed the best of itself to me, dancing around this room under the bright golden layers of light and the bursting colours all around us. I was lost. Lost in my own mind. The army on the wall was racing forward with passion, the gods sat silently in the heavens, everything was not just moving, but alive. Alive. Alive?

Men of different races were painting on these walls, some were reading from books. They stood right in front of me, but no matter how loud I screamed, they didn't seem to hear me. Every paint splash was more vibrant and vivid than the previous, there

were heaps of gold, silk and pottery stacking up and disappearing. The cave distorted, wrapping itself around. Colours grew on golden trees, the flowers spread through the walls. People of all kinds appeared on the walls, they were talking, what were they saying?

So loud...

Colours were blossoming so violently around me. I could hear colours, I could hear the revelry, I could hear the peace. People were talking in a language that I couldn't understand. There was so much of everything, but there was nothing, they escaped right in front of my eyes. Some weren't even colours, to this day I still couldn't understand what I saw. My eyes couldn't process all the images flying through my mind and sight.

Silence.

Everything was reduced to nothing. For a brief moment, I thought I was dead, or on my way to meet Satan's hellhounds. I stumbled backwards. My eyes looked back up. Nothing. The flowers were a worn out colour, the wind and sand eroded my eyesight, time washed away everything around me, so cruel. How do I explain this. It's like falling from a high place before suddenly being placed upright on the ground. Bits and pieces of colour were slipping through my fingers. I was desperately grabbing for the mirage of beauty like a dying merchant in this majestic desert. No. No. No. My sight was slipping through my grip like smoke, no matter how much I waved my arms around and grabbed, everything escaped under my grasp.

Nothing.

"Are you there?" Jeremy's hoarse voice hooked onto my skin and dragged me back into reality. He was equally as stunned, his grey eyes were filled with terror, he definitely didn't like the sensory overload. "Yeah, I'm still here." My voice was shaking again, not out of fear, but ecstasy. I could feel my blood pumping. If paradise existed, I just let it slip out of my very own hands. "Alright, let's get the samples." Jeremy seemed to try and avoid the topic, I went with it. Soon enough, dusk gently kissed this desert. She was gentle, but calmer than the day. Dimmed light crawled its way towards the interior of the cave, covering everything around us with a layer of the sweetest honey, even the air was sweet.

Our guide was there just as he promised, thank god he didn't leave us to starve. "We have to travel back to the hotel quickly, it's very cold when the night comes." I nodded at him, but I needed a little longer, just a bit. I looked down at my rough hands, there was a smudge of gold dust, as if to prove that paradise once existed in this mortal realm. I stared at it while the sun drowned itself in amber.

Goodbye.

I gently kissed the dust, and with a tuft of the desert wind, it disappeared into Dusk's embrace. We spent hours studying the patterns silently while we were in the cave, neither of us spoke about that experience, not that day, not ever in our lives. Why didn't I tell anyone? No one's going to believe me, but if anyone ever does, I hope whoever that is can find the paradise that I found on that autumn afternoon.

The Explorer's Wish

ESF Sha Tin College, Fung, Andrew – 13

A flaming, yellow ball burned the endless desert, making heat waves simmer in every direction. Not a single noise or sound could escape from the vast desert, save for the wind that blew at the sand, making the smooth hissing sound of singing sand. Grains of sand moved by the sand very quickly, turning the desert into an orange sea.

Suddenly, a loud thud disturbed the silent desert. An explorer wandered hopelessly in the burning desert. So much sweat had gotten on his skin that he looked like he had drenched himself in rain. His mouth was too dry to speak or even groan. His wet, stinky body gave out a stench that was the same as a dead person.

Without a signal or warning, a crack appeared in front of him. Once he noticed it, he struggled to escape from the crack. However, the struggle was unsurprisingly futile, since he felt tired and weak. The crack grew bigger at a rapid rate, and eventually, a massive hole that spat out dust and sand was formed and he fell in helplessly.

About a year ago, three explorers formed a British exploration team, whose goal was to sail to China to explore any interesting customs on their way. However, their main goal was to rediscover the legendary Mogao Grottoes. The team consisted of three brothers: Tom, Andy, and John Scott. Their expedition was supported by King Edward VII, who gave them a boat for their expedition. Before their journey, they rested in the warm, orange glow of their home. The explorers spent many nights near a fireplace that provided them all the light and warmth while maps full of ancient writings were placed in a stout table. They sipped on hot coffee and talked about their plans for the expedition and how successful it would be.

On the first day of their journey, they stepped on the majestic boat that King Edward VII had prepared for them. It was a humongous wooden ship with two big white sails that waved at them. There was a vast open area in the middle of the ship where they found it convenient for setting up a table for further planning. There was also an observation deck with a steering wheel which was placed above a room on the right. On the left, there was a ladder that led to rooms below the deck of the ship.

However, things became awry when they were trying to pinpoint the Mogao Grottoes in a scorching, boundless desert. Without a signal or warning, as they laid down to rest, they were suddenly surrounded by a thick, orange sand fog. They fumbled for their bags and supplies and tried to escape from the sandstorm. It took about an hour for the wrath of the sandstorm to fade, and Andy and John Scott were gone. The sandstorm had also taken all the vital maps and notes that were required to locate the Mogao Grottoes. With no one in sight, Tom was left alone in the desert until he succumbed to its dryness and dropped dead on the sand. He cried for the loss of his brothers for a long time, took his sandy bag and wandered around hoping to find them miraculously.

Now, after falling down into the hole, Tom laid face down on soft mounds of sand. For a while he couldn't remember how he got there. A moment later he remembered a crack forming in front of him. He stood up and brushed off the sand that gave his face, shirt, pants, and shoes an orange shade. After that, he looked around to find out where he was.

He was in front of a solid stone wall marked with some ancient symbols and a neatly drawn arrow in the middle of it. Using his equilibrioception, he figured out that the slope slanted downwards to the right. The arrow pointed to the right, so he looked to the right and saw the darkness consuming the path. He turned around and received the same sight: an endless corridor which was obscured by darkness further away from where he was. He looked up, but was immediately blinded by the blazing sunlight on top of him. He looked back at the arrow. "Could the arrow be guiding me to the Mogao Grottoes?" he thought. He took out his torch, turned to the right and walked downwards.

After a long while, he arrived at the entrance of a small cave at the end of the corridor. A large pool of water dominated most of the cave's space. Deeper inside the cave were two dusty coffins that seemed like they haven't been touched for millions of years.

"Is this the Mogao Grottoes?" he asked himself in an excited manner.

He walked around the pool and went to the two dusty coffins. A golden, giant Buddha statue was placed behind the coffins. He looked at the statue, which looked back at him with glistening eyes. It sat still in a criss-cross position with its hand placed in front of its heart. A red, simple rug laid on the cave ground in front of the statue. Words were carved on the stone wall next to the statue. The writing read:

*If you pray and repent your faults,
You can bring back what you have lost.
A brother, father, pet or friend,
An issue that you cannot mend.
However, you must beware
This cave of hope you must not share
If you reveal it to a peer,
What you hold dear will disappear.*

What good would it do praying in front of a statue? Tom had completely no idea, but at this time he only wanted his brothers back. Even though it was a completely ridiculous idea to him, he knelt down in front of the red rug and prayed with his heart. He didn't expect anything to happen, but hoped that some warmth would come back to him as he prayed. However, instead of any comfort, he began to feel the presence of the same sandstorm that had taken away his brothers. He opened his eyes, and his world had become an orange fog of sand. He collapsed in despair and was filled with regret. How would he have known that the statue was indeed cursed? Now, the sandstorm would take his life away.

He laid face down in tears, but he started to notice that the smooth, silky presence of the rug turned into the rough, coarse presence of the sand. The sandstorm's wrath on him was also weakening, and was eventually gone. The cool air inside the cave grew hotter until it was as hot as the burning atmosphere of a desert. As his despair faded away, he stood up and looked around his surroundings.

The sandstorm had taken him out of the caves and into the desert once more. The yellow ball of fire burned his body again, and even the wind failed to provide him with a cool breeze but instead warmed him even more. He looked around him, and found out with glee that Andy and John Scott were right in front of him.

"Andy! John! I'm so glad you're here!" he cried with delight. "I've missed you so much!"

Time stopped as they spent each moment together in delight hugging each other. However, they knew they still had to find a way out of the vast sandy plains. In an attempt to escape from the desert, they went up a sand dune, and the blurry image of a village was revealed in the distance. They quickly slid down the sand dune like kids and raced straight to the village, ignoring the complaints of their stomachs and the dryness of their throats.

When they arrived, the villagers swarmed around these strangers like flies, and asked many questions about how they came here. Tom wanted to share his strange experience but the words carved on the stone wall cut clear into his mind. Although he didn't believe in the consequences of telling them about the cave, he knew he couldn't afford to lose his brothers again.

The Heart of a Monk

ESF Sha Tin College, Fung, Sophie – 13

The air holds its breath in anticipation as I duck under the tape labelled “restricted area”. A monotonous speech about the history of the Mogao Grottoes from the tour guide was enough to drive me crazy. It probably isn’t the best idea to sneak in the restricted Mogao Grottoes as a tourist. But curiosity makes me reckless anyways.

As I admire the vibrant Buddha artwork at the restricted cave, a lizard suddenly appears. Waving its right foreleg like an enthusiastic mom at a football match, it beckons me forward. It scampers forward, stumbling over the little ridges the sand had made before the foot of the Buddha. Eagerness overtakes me, and without a second thought, I chase after this funny lizard. At last, I lose sight of the lizard in the endless desert.

Mounds upon mounds of sand, so fine that it slips away under my foot like pure white silk. The air laps at the sand like waves, and the sand bends under its touch, hissing and rasping. The sand covers the Mogao Grottoes like sugar dusting on a cake. As if to mock me, the sky is a beautiful forget-me-not blue. If only I stayed with the tour group! Have they noticed that I have disappeared from the Mogao Grottoes? They would be eating and drinking. Now, alone in the desert, it takes every ounce of liquid my body can spare. My skin is now lava, about to combust from the scarring glare of the sun.

Imperceptibly, the wind starts to pick up the fine grains, throwing them into the air like confetti, getting ready for the main attraction. The wind and the sand dance as synchronized ballet dancers, whirling and howling in shape-shifting sleets of turbulent gritty clouds.

Sandstorm! Swallowing a mouthful of dust, panic starts to grab me. It expands and spills out of me. I want to jump out of my skin to join the rush of adrenaline. It wraps around my chest like a python, the air in my lungs is pushed out as I hopelessly try to take a breath. The blood pounds in my ears in a constant beat. Darkness flickers at the corners of my eyes as the fine silk grains squirm their way into my clothes and the pores of my face. My panic is like a thousand worms, burrowing inside me, slowly digesting all my sanity.

Light! I see a flickering light. Over the hurricane of sand that is getting whisked through the air like icing in a beater, the light is a candle flame struggling to keep awake. I must be near the Mogao Grottoes! People can help me!

“Help!” I cry, but the deafening howl of the wind and sand muffles all sounds.

Suddenly, the pressure of the air lessens and the sand falls, dropping like weights. I face plant to the ground. Sand coats my tongue.

Run! My legs strain with effort, slipping clumsily under the ever-moving patterns of the sand. Go towards the flame! The Mogao Grottoes! Move! Just as suddenly as it stops, the sand explodes into the landscape with the force of a hundred grenades, kicking me forward. The flame is getting stronger, calling me to come. A gust slams me into the light. Finally!

But it is not the welcoming glow of the Mogao Caves. The pure blackness swathes the space like the thick velvet curtains of a theatre, different from the spark in the sandstorm. My numb and clumsy hands manage to find my lighter in my pocket. The flash of the lighter causes rainbow spots to appear. At last, my eyes adjust to the dark, I can see that there is a dim glimmer on the walls that dilutes the murky shadows. From a small crevice on the wall of the cave, sand slips in. This must be where I entered!

Without bold sunlight streaming in through the entrance, the colours stay in their slumber, waiting for light to ignite them in their dazzling radiance. A statue stands adjacent to the crevice entrance. From the faint shimmer, the cave seems to be the size of a football field. Looking up, I could see more of the shining things scattered across the rough ceiling.

Are they glow worms? I have heard of caves that lit up because of them, but these seem different. Contrary to the distinct inhospitable gleam the worms give out, these have an almost cosy, mellow glimmer to it. Upon close examination, these things are diamonds! The largest ones were fist-sized while there were ones smaller than my pinkie nail. Even in the gloom, they emit pulses of the sun’s farewell kisses, twinkling warmly at me in gorgeous colours.

My glee echoes in the cave as I run here and there, kicking up the thin layer of sand coating the floor. How much could the diamonds be worth? Millions, billions even! And the statue at the cave entrance. It must be a priceless Buddha artifact! This must be one of the undiscovered Mogao Grottoes!

Turning around, I rush back to the entrance, my thirst and tiredness forgotten, as enthusiasm soars through me. The strong scent hits me, one that I did not notice before over the stale smell of the cave, sour and dusty. I raise my lighter to look at the statue better. Terror seizes me. My limbs freeze, icy—cold fear surging through my veins. My heart is beating so hard that it is about to fall out of my chest. A shrivelled corpse sat there. His cold eyes bored a hole through my soul.

Behind the corpse, on stone wall is the inscription:

The light brings a cave of delights

A gift that bites

That attracts blood and war.

Let us build a thousand shrines at a cliff far away.

Let the attention be diverted.

Avert the tragedy the cave brings.

Hope that no one will find the secret.

Hope you, who reads this, will keep it.

Under the inscriptions are the names of the monks who had found the cave first. This corpse must have been one of the monks who stayed to guard the cave. He stayed to guard it even in death. This monk had the selfless heart of Buddha.

Abruptly, I realize how silent it has become. The storm has stopped and all that can be heard is the quietly whistling of the wind running through the crevice. The desert has come to listen, to see what I choose.

No! I choose not to reveal the secret.

The wind sighs, relaxing. My chance to leave the cave has come; otherwise, there will be one more shrivelled corpse joining the monk.

Slipping out of the crevice, all that meets my eye are a boundless stretch of sand dunes. A lizard reappears suddenly, nudging my shoe. It is the same lizard that led me here and maybe even the monks from long ago. The lizard wags its tail. It starts to scurry faster and faster. Simultaneously, a cool breeze ruffles up a grainy fog. Sand is tossed into the air. The clawing fingers gain more and more courage to yank my clothes. Everything is whipping, searing sand, erasing any trace that I had come. The cave has sunk under the force of nature once again, vanished from the reach of men.

Over the waves of sand, through the hot burning fingers that fidget the sand, my legs strain from the effort, until I stand with the lizard in front of the Mogao Grottoes again. The lizard tips his head up at me, smiles, and then disappears, mingling with the dust.

My disappearance goes unnoticed over the talk of the strange sandstorm. People whisper— never has there been a sandstorm that occurred so quickly and fiercely and yet, had only lasted for a few hours. Guards are busy, constantly reassuring anxious tourists that this is a rare occasion in the Mogao Grottoes.

Now I know the real purpose of the Mogao Grottoes. They were built to keep the innocent away from greediness and wars. I will never reveal the cave. Since then, I have never visited the Mogao Grottoes again, but I will always remember the grace of the monks and the peace they have brought to the world.

Mogao Grottoes

ESF Sha Tin College, Lai, Kate – 14

My dad, a Buddhist monk who had devoted his entire life to the religion. He loved visiting and learning about monasteries and temples. He always described his experiences as *“free from the interference of secular life as much as possible.”* Which painted a unraveling utopia in my head. Everyday after school, he would have me snuggled and sat by the fireplace whilst he described the sculptures, sacred art and literature. My eyes were constantly peeled and off the edge waiting to indulge his experiences. I remember one particular night, one of my fathers stories attracted me more than the others, the Mogao Grottoes. I remember being so fascinated that I wanted to see the hidden world I’ve only ever been able to imagine in my dreams.

16, I find myself in the back of an old carriage. As I seated, I could smell the perfume of the lady who sat before me. I barked an address at the driver and the carriage drew away to a rhythmic clippity clop to the horseshoes striking the cobbles. Within less than an hour, I will be in Mogao Grottoes, my childhood utopia. I’m supposed to feel all emotions I told myself. All but the lingering glum over my head. Maybe it was the worn-out leather that crept all over me, the leather that I had been sitting on. It numbed my body with every stone it hit. Leaving the smog, there was a winding path near the edge of a steep cliff in the distance. It was leading to the top of the hill. As the carriage reached the top of the hill, the musty damp smell no longer dawdled around the air. The entire atmosphere had transformed. Bird callings, rushing creaks. The stuffy warm air gave me a mild sense of nausea. I paid the cab driver and he buzzed away leaving a marked trail.

Approaching the cave, the pillars were rusted. I had surrounded myself with damp stone walls. Twigs hanging from above it shielded me from the burning brightness in between the creaks. I could only capture a tiny glimpse of light, the light from the raging fire ball shone through a tiny broken skylight window up above me. After I had taken a few steps, I felt soot gushing down my spine. The floor was cold, cold as the coldest marble floor. Everything was so quiet, my footsteps echoed in the corridor as I passed through. I toured deeper and deeper in the cave, with every step I felt my limbs shaking, I wasn’t sure whether or not I was breathing. The tall, large door unexpectedly opened on it’s own in the distance, it made my heart drop at least a thousand feet below me. My sullen mood was no match for the demons crawling upon the crumbling cement wall. I walked further into the temple, it was dark like anticipated, the ghastly wind smelled hot and verdant.

However, this new room in particular felt different. As I walked through, I was greeted with the cave murals, and statues. I spun my head around. And like a kaleidoscope, I was looking at something new with every turn, every corner of this room was filled with astonishing art. The caves gave me reminiscence and nostalgia. It was the idyllic place that only existed deep in my vast imagination. I hold my gaze for two seconds, three, four then, I felt a tap from behind. It made my skin hair shoot up. “Woah, you scared me... sir!” turning around to see a tall figure with drawn looks and sunken eyes and he had glasses tipping off the edge of his nose with a strong smell. Old books and coffee. “Sorry,” he says with a short laugh, “I was just strolling around the caves when I saw you staring at that mural, what were you doing? You looked like you saw a ghost/” “Mesmerised” I say. “Of course,” the man said whilst pointing at an appealing tarnished statue. “It’s beautiful.”

Guo Zi Yi of the Mogao Grottoes

ESF Sha Tin College, Lee, Keng Hung Nicholas – 11

The massive sand dunes in front perplexed me, that is, they should have been flattened by sandstorm after sandstorm, which were very common in the Dunhuang region of China. I could see sands shimmering beneath the morning sky as I gazed out the tour bus windows. Beyond the numerous sand dunes, there was a large hill with a flattened top above the horizon with hundreds of small holes. My mind was playing tricks and images began forming in my head as if I was staring back in time – into the Tang Dynasty. I snapped back to reality and turned to look around the bus, only to find that everyone was wearing masks, which were mandatory during the Covid-19 pandemic. When we arrived at our destination, I looked up and was taken aback by the sight of the peculiar looking hill. I had to weave around boulders in the walkway as the tour leader took us towards the Mogao Grottoes. The tour took us through many of the Mogao Grottoes (caves). There were statues of Buddhas in most of them. Some Buddhas were positioned as if they were sleeping, some were positioned as if they were praying. I then noticed a small hole in the wall while walking through one of the caves and began tapping on it. The hole opening became bigger and by reaching through the hole, as far as my fingers could stretch, I felt a silky type of cloth stuck inside the hole and hence, attempted to pull it out. I was able to recover a large silk scroll. It was dusty but well preserved and was intact. I slowly unwrapped the silk scroll so as not to damage it. It contained a large amount of texts written in traditional Chinese characters. I started reading the scroll since my curiosity got the best of me. The texts gave a very vivid description of someone's account of what happened to him/her whilst they were in the vicinity, and whilst I sat down in a corner and began reading, pictures were forming in my mind, again, as if I was there...

“It was the second coronation of Emperor Suzong. I slowly crawled towards the Mogao Grottoes, injured and fleeing from the An Lushan Rebellion. The Mogao Grottoes were the closest accessible spot near the battleground. When I looked around, all I saw was sands gleaming in the sunlight, occasionally punctuated by blood drips. It tortured me to move, so I kept the movements small and steady. Flashbacks of the previous battle caused me to see mirages – I remembered seeing how, under the starless sky, our swords clanged and clangored, as the army of An Lushan swirled and swayed us like farmers harvesting a cornfield.”

“As I approached the main entrance of the Mogao Grottoes, I noticed a few monks at the doorway who were looking at me with pitying eyes. The monks appeared to be wearing a tunic, a cincture, a hooded scapular, and a mantle, all of which were made of cotton. Their outfits were mostly white, with a dark brown shoulder hood on top. Without hesitation, they escorted me inside the one of the Grottoes, where I was served boiled vegetables and fried bean curd.”

“After resting a few days in the Grottoes, I realized living in the Grottoes areas was very different from what I was used to. Every day, I ate primarily rice with vegetables. Each morning, I'd travel down to the village near the Silk Road routes and be greeted by various farmers. I would help the monks trade their paintings on silk and paper scrolls for food and tools that could contribute to the development of the Mogao Grottoes as a way of repaying their kindness. In addition, I would also help the monks by fetching water from the Daghe River. The clothing people wore near the Mogao Grottoes was quite eccentric compared to what people wore in Dunhuang where I was brought up. Women's clothes had a trend of being more open. Short-sleeved coats, usually made of yarn, skirts that were long and wide, and long scarves were what were often worn. On the other hand, men's clothes were made of wool, linen and silk. Instead of bricks and wood, the houses in the village near the Grottoes were built with bamboo, mud and dried grass straws. They were small, one-room homes.”

“One morning before I went to gather water for the monks, something unexpected happened. An old monk, whom I had met while fetching water a few days ago, approached me and offered to teach me a certain kind of Kung Fu. Shaolin Kung Fu was the name of the style. The old monk told me that he used to be a martial artist, but later turned to Buddhism. He wanted to teach me because of the cruelty I experienced. He taught me how to fight with swords, long spears as well as using Praying Mantis style. I learned quickly as I had military training background.”

“However, as days passed, I became increasingly concerned that the An Lushan Rebellion soldiers would find me as they will not rest until they see my dead body. My feet shuddered as I thought about it. One day, I heard a knock on one of the Grottoes' thick wooden door. The Grottoes didn't get many visitors, so I hastily crawled to hide. I immediately assumed that the rebellion troops had arrived to execute me. For a brief moment, my stomach twisted and I felt nauseous. I felt stuck, as if I were

choking on sand while trying to breathe. It was the sound of the adversaries that I heard which made me feel waves of pain gushing through my head. The monks, reassuringly, were aware of what was going on and covered up for me. Despite this, the rebellion soldiers continued to search for me, telling the monks that I was a commander in the war and a significant threat to the An Lushan Rebellion. Some of the monks quickly shoved me into a secret room, filled with numerous unfinished statues of Buddha. There were paintings on the walls which seemed newly painted and were of a large Buddha praying in the middle with worshippers around Buddha. There were several monks in that secret room too. They were preoccupied with painting the walls. They were using vegetable extracts for colouring and hence the filthy and strained floor in that secret room. There was poor ventilation and the leftover vegetable extracts created an unpleasant odour.”

“Finally, the rebellion soldiers discovered my hiding place and charged at me with their spears. I was able to fight them off using the Kung Fu I had learned from the old monk. Surprisingly, a majority of the monks came to protect me too. I noticed that I had paralyzed a few soldiers without even realizing it. My rib cage, injured previously, began to hurt. More monks joined the fight and we eventually triumphed. I realized that staying in the Mogao Grottoes would also be a hazard to the monks. As a result, I thanked the monks for their kindness and quickly left with a sac containing several days' supply of foods and water. As I turned to look back and waved a sorrow goodbye, I began to miss the cave where I used to live, the hundreds of holes in the hillside, the thousands of Buddhas carved inside individually by different monks. With a brave heart, and a deep breath, I strolled back to the battleground.”

“Ooooo! we're moving on,” I could hear the tour guide snap at me. I suddenly felt as though I'd just woken up from a dream.

“What is that silk scroll you are holding?” someone asked me.

“It is something I had found in that hole,” pointing towards the hole as I was answering.

“Shouldn't you put it back or give it to the museum office? You can't keep it,” another voice muttered.

“I will give it to the museum office but can I at least take a close-up photo of it, and take a selfie with it so that I can read the rest of the story.” I said in return. Other tourists helped me take photos and I then handed it to the tour guide who was then seen talking to the Mogao Grottoes head of security and handed the silk scroll to him.

As the tour progressed, one statue, in particular, drew my attention. Compared with the other statues, it felt out of place and out of the ordinary. It also looked very familiar to me. I asked what it was. The tour guide replied, "Here we have a statue of Guo Zi Yi, the Tang soldier who defeated An Lu Shan Rebellion several times and prolonged the existence of the Tang Dynasty, and the only soldier, that is a civilian, to have lived in the Mogao Grottoes."

New Tales from the Mogao Grottoes

ESF Sha Tin College, Yau, Karson – 11

One and a half thousand years ago, a monk called Yue Zun walked across the sandy land of Dunhuang, located in west central China. And ere there he saw the sun shimmering on the land which was already named sacred by Buddhists. With a sudden surge of motivation, he dug the first cave of the Mogao Grottoes. Cave after cave, they transcend to one and a half millennia later, now stated as one of the world's most fabulous places and contains a thousand years' worth of rich culture.

In Chinese, the word Mogao, translates to peerless. It perfectly describes the mission of the monks when they were creating these spectacular Grottoes. Inside this piece of artistic achievement lies a gigantic number of 492 caves where countless wonderful paintings were drawn by old masters which recorded the old folk stories of China. Some of them are open for public to view. It so happened that Cave 257 was open for public viewing too.

On a perfectly normal Friday, normal tourists were being guided through the Mogao caves. The promotional videos were normal. The gift store was normal. Everything was perfectly normal. Who would have thought that after years of studying and experiments conducted by professionals, this would have happened here this Friday when everyone was craving for the weekend?

John was holding tightly onto his mother's hand as the pair strolled through the beautiful monuments of Dunhuang. John was absolutely flabbergasted by everything. Lots of chattering people were bustling around him, big, towering statues were staring at him, and the ceiling was sometimes higher than a hundred metres and sometimes the tall adults could touch it. All over the place there would be scribbled writing in a language no one understood. The ground was uneven, with rocky bumps all over it. Everywhere he looked, there was something new and fascinating for little John to focus on. It truly was a magnificent sight! His small curious eyes travelled across painting over painting, ever so inquisitive to each amazing cavern. But he hadn't seen Cave 257 yet...

The moment he stepped into Cave 257, he felt that there was something different. He didn't just feel it, he knew it. The feeling was not just contained in the five senses, it was throbbing and pounding in his heart. There was a small tingling feeling at the tips of his fingers, his heartbeat increased, and his breathing grew faster. John immediately saw that this cave was much older than the other caves he had been in. He took in a deep breath. The cave had a fresh scent of rocks and dust. Due to the big pillar at the centre of the cave and the general form of it, the air around them whooshed around in a different sound, filling the ears of the tourists with a faint buzz. Then, his eyes found the west wall of the cave and –oh– the beauty was beyond words.

The colourful matching and crisscross of the red and light blue contrasted on the white and faintly pink deer, making it look even more magnificent. The artist captured perfectly the power and strength in the deer with the angle of its tilted head, the curved horns, and the four hooves in the seven scenes. The king's mercy and compassion were shown clearly in his facial expression. It was amazing. But the best thing in the painting were the eyes of the deer. They weren't drawn out, but they gave out an immense aura of power and John could feel invisible eyes fixed on his own menacingly. John looked directly at where the eyes should be of the biggest deer in the painting and focused on them. Without knowing it, as if in a dream, as if sleepwalking, he slowly stepped forward and raised a trembling hand towards the painting. Then, the guide and the security guards saw John and yelled, "Stop! Come back!" But John heeded not the summons. As his small hand went closer to the deer, the security guards ran towards him, still shouting. John's mom, just noticed the commotion happening was about his son and she, too, started shouting and walking to him. As the security guards reached John and pulled him back, two fingers reached the deer, the deer's eyes.

The air in the cave seemed to freeze, white dust fell from the ceiling and the cave rumbled. Where the eyes of the deer should have been were now filled with an eerie illuminating green light, replacing the pale white with shiny green. Everyone stood there and stared at the eyes, hypnotized by the view in front of them. Slowly, the green light in the eyes expanded, spreading on the painting until the whole deer was full of green. It didn't stop there, it continued along the thousand-year-old drawing like corrosive acid, covering everything with green light. Not long after, the last corner of the painting was filled with the monstrous green. The light shone brighter than ever and grew blinding! It seemed to explode into the air, rebounding on the walls. Then, the light retracted back into the eyes suddenly and dissolved, leaving the cave and the painting untouched.

As sudden as the creepy light appeared, there was a big cracking noise and there appeared a huge rip from the top to the bottom of the painting between the deer's eyes. The two halves of the painting slid apart effortlessly, still hanging in space, as if the painting was all this time a sliding door. The space where the painting was revealed a hole, and inside the hole was, behold, the nine-coloured deer!

The power and the immortality of the deer was unmistakable. The deer's eyes were not green, but they existed, and they sparkled like dancing sparks in a campfire. Its antlers were big and beautiful, elegantly curved. It was still standing, head high, hooves steady. This cave was built one thousand years ago, and the deer had been in this hole since then, yet it was still living and withholding this much strength. The crowd near the deer started to scream and run, even the guides and the security guards were horrified. They immediately contacted the local authorities to handle this surprising situation. John was still staring wide-eyed at the deer, his hand back in his mother's. Both were silent. After a lot of speaking and convincing, the historians and police finally decided that this was not a prank and they quickly rushed to the scene where they question everyone and did a health check on the deer, which proved to be unnecessary as no medical instruments could process the deer. The historians did further investigation on the painting and the hole after the deer was safely locked up and sent for deep experiments. Before the truck closed, the deer looked at John and the tips of its lips curved up. It gave John a swift nod of approval. John smiled back, his head slightly tilted, and returned a pleased nod.

After a fortnight, this news was still the headline on every newspaper in every country. John and his mother had been in numerous interviews and were both world-wide famous. The deer had been handled carefully by the government and a research team is investigating the deer and the painting. The whole Mogao caves were now closed, and professionals are working round the clock to know more about it. Another week passed by and there came another bigger news, the deer had miraculously vanished! CCTV footage had been revealed to show that the deer had vanished in a shower of green light in a secure locked room where scientists were trying to test its blood for antiserums to diseases. The whole world was beyond shocked. Everywhere, the only topic was the deer.

The day the deer disappeared, crime rates dropped by 94% and the accident death toll was almost zero in China. Everywhere, victims claimed to be rescued by the nine-coloured deer. "Coincidence? A world-wide prank?" News reporters said, astonished. Whether the deer's rescues were pranks, coincidences, the deer awakening conscience, or it was real, the nine-coloured deer was now an omen of peace in China. Now, people will live a safer and better life. Now, China becomes a better place.

On the peak of mountain K2, a glow of nine colours shone brilliantly and brightly, illuminating the land of China and the sky and a sudden loud bleat was heard all over China. A signal of peace to the good, a dire warning to the bad. The deer is back, and it has become a symbol of peace in China. In the original painting, the deer told us what comes around goes around. Now, it tells us to be good, or else the deer will come for you. The nine-coloured deer will be a living legend, guarding over the people of China. Forever.

The Cave of Knowledge

ESF Sha Tin College, Respicio, Eunice – 13

Have you ever heard of the Mogao Grottoes? It was like the lost world from the past. Filled with carefully crafted staggering scared art and graceful literature. The finest paintings, thousands of literature and sculptures. More than one and half millennia ago, Lè Zūn, a monk had once pronounced that there was something merely so remarkable about a cave he found at an oasis in a desert in China. He was inspired to build the cave there since he had a vision of a thousand Buddhas bathed in golden light.

The year 1450. A young girl running around the cliffs far from home. She had big black eyes, a tall nose, a small frame and a fair complexion. She had run away from her dwelling as soon as she heard her mother arranging an engagement with her future betrothed that afternoon, however, she had ended up scurrying only with a knife found from under her bed to the southeast, which was, unfortunately, a desert. The sun flamed on her skin and her face, hot and dried up from running. Uncomfortable. She couldn't take it. She felt like she had to just let go of the jagged rope and fall into the unknown abyss. But she couldn't, she hadn't explored the truths and lies of the world. She had been told about tales of a vast sea of arts and literature, dragons and Nian. Some of these sensational stories, spoken of from her childhood. Now that she had freed herself from the treacherous strict rules of her life; she finally had the choice to explore. She was set on the idea that she could never go back for they'll slice her with a thousand cuts for her going against her grandfather's orders.

Several hours went past while she hiked through the broad everlasting desert. Her beauty was nowhere to be seen. Her skin, cherry red and itchy. Face, clothes, legs and arms, covered in soot and grime. Feet, aching with blisters and worn by straw shoes tugged across the barren desert letting tides of searing oppressive sand into her shoe like a bucket. Earlier she had cut off the bottom half of her tunic using the knife she was carrying in her right hand. Every minute felt like it had been an eternity but she, being stubborn, convinced herself to keep going even if she would have to suffer the hardships of a peasant girl. Out of a glimpse in her eye, she saw movement. Shimmering and sky blue. The necessity that she especially desired at that very moment. As a move of desperation, she encouraged her whining legs to sprint. Wishing to fly like a dragon. Her feet flinging bunches of sparkly yellow beads into the air leaving a foggy residue gradually drifting into the beds of sand. Quickly kneeling down near some weeds, she cupped her hands together and brought them together to her lips and hurriedly drank like someone would steal all of its precious sources. A sigh of relief came over her as some of her desperation disappeared, however, her stomach still felt empty. Rapidly she splashed the leftover resource onto her face then scouted the area with her black eyes. She could see nothing insight from the barren land. She then peered at the eternal sky. The sky subtly turned into shades of red, orange and yellow. Deciding to just quickly continue forward and hope for the best was the first greatest idea she had since it was getting dark and she did not learn much about the area except the mighty walls of her home. The second idea could never be considered.

She guessed it was past her bedtime due to her distressed eyes closing for way too long as they begged to sleep. Luckily for her, she came across a cave half blocked by sand. The cave was a remarkable place for a shelter compared to sleeping in the wild unknown world with all kinds of spine-chilling creatures who'd love to have a fulfilling meal tonight. Her petite hands pushed against the hard rough sand making a passageway into a corridor. Breathing heavily, she collapsed onto the ground with a heavy thud as the exhaustion of her protesting body was too much for a stubborn little girl to handle.

Shades of sapphire, scarlet, salmon flourished out into the sky. Light seeped through the open passageway and dawned onto the girl who still hadn't had any food for a day. Stomach empty, her hands rubbed against her eyes and got up from the cold hard floor by using all the willpower she had. Examining the area, she realised this was not a cave made naturally from nature; it was a man-made cave. Noticing drifts of smoke, curiosity got the best of her and she cautiously followed the smoke. She then found a walled-up area behind one side of a corridor where the smoke came through tiny cracks in the rough rubble. Excitement and anxiety jumbled in her mind. Using a knife, her whole body put pressure on one of the larger than usual small holes in the stone wall. Nothing. Then she violently lunged forward. Nothing but a small crack. Again, knife in hand she lunged forward pushing her whole strength and body in the sole knife. She felt a cold touch in her hands and pieces of rubble came rushing down onto the frigid floor.

What laid behind was unexpected. It was only just a small cave, however, stuffed with an enormous hoard of rolled up thin pieces of decaying paper. She picked up one of the manuscripts and read. It told her a folk song about a jasmine flower. It was just like the story she was told as a young child. The vast sea of literature. This could be just what they were talking about. Hours and hours were spent dedicated to reading only to come out every once in a while to scout for berry bushes in the wild. She later

came on to discover history, mathematics and dances from these manuscripts. It was a happy ever after just like most of the tales.
A happy ending of life-lasting literature and arts.

The Tales of the Mogao Grottoes

ESF Sha Tin College, Seto, Hayley – 12

A woman in a beautifully crafted qipao walked down a dimly lit corridor. She kept her composure even as the candles flickered. Holding a candle dish in her pale hand, she stopped in front of a mud door and flamed it. CRACK! The fire produced a loud spark after it came in contact with a piece of metal sealed behind the door. The woman smiled as she turned to look at the rusting lever. She pulled it down with great force, and looked expectantly at the mud wall, anticipating its great opening. She heard rumbling noises coming from all directions along with the sound of gear churning. The mud doors slowly fell away, revealing a matte metal door, which, they too, opened.

“Ha!” She exclaimed, “I have finally unlocked the secrets of this grotto, after all my years on Earth. Mother, Father! You must be proud of me!” She took a step forward, excited to find out the secrets that lay within these walls. As soon as she entered, there was a line of scattered crowns and jewels in front of her. The woman reached out to one of the many crowns. As soon as she touched the diamond crown, she felt a searing pain on her back. She had been impaled. She looked down in horror and disbelief as she realized what had happened. This had all been a trap! The spear was now sticking out of her stomach. She felt even more spears stab her as her vision was going blurry. She was going to die. She was blacking out as she said her last word and took her dying breath. “I never asked for redemption, never...” Finally, her vision went dark and she was no longer human.

Present Day

Today was the day Liling finally got to visit Mogao Grottoes. She had been fantasizing about it from when she was a kid. She had heard fascinating, charming and terrifying stories about the Mogao Grottoes from her parents before their tragic death in a car accident. Liling nervously waited in line for her time to enter. The line in front of her finally started to move as she walked forward. She handed her prepaid ticket to the ticket collector as she walked through the grand archway into the Grottoes. Little did she know, she may never emerge from the place.

Liling was entranced by all the beautiful works of art etched and painted onto the walls and ceiling. She was fascinated by the sculptures and many relics from the past on display. There were many other visitors also surveying the art, relics, scrolls, paintings, sculptures, and many other things that were left here by the people who used to inhabit the grottoes. She was mesmerized by all the ancient treasures. Liling wanted to explore all the rooms, even the hidden ones, but alas, she knew that part of her wish was unachievable. She walked around the fascinating rooms, admiring all the breathtaking treasures and relics. She arrived at a room with many larger-than-life-size statues and millions of intricate paintings all over the room, even extending to the geometric roof. At this point, Liling felt as though the crowd of bustling tourists had started to thin out. She shrugged it off and assumed that this part was just less popular. She turned right and walked down a long corridor. She thought that it was rather strange as this part of the grotto was hardly lit with just a single dying candle. At the end of the corridor stood a crumbled door and next to it, a lever. Liling thought that this was all part of the experience, part of the mystery. She excitedly pulled down the lever and felt her heart drop, she was plummeting down a deep, dark shaft.

Liling had blacked out from the fall and she would have died if it were not for a big patch of soft thick grass which had little, almost glowing yellow flowers. She felt light headed as she sat up taking in her surroundings. There was a gushing waterfall a distance away. She was in a cave and there seemed to be no way out, except for a pitch dark tunnel leading away from the cave. Liling tried to shout for help but there was not a single soul to come to her rescue. She had an ominous feeling about the tunnel but decided that it could be her only chance for an escape. She slowly got up, brushing the stray flower petals and walked slowly into the tunnel.

She walked slowly with her hands stretched out in the front trying to feel her way forward, not knowing what danger her next step might bring her. The tension and atmosphere got thicker every step she took. She walked on and on, not knowing how far she had gone into the tunnel when suddenly her hands landed onto a mud wall. She thought frantically “Is this the end of me? Am I going to die here?” This was the only way out! Liling felt the wall frantically with her hands until her hand touched a piece of loose but hard rectangular rock. Liling pushed the rock with all her might until suddenly the rock slid away. There was heavy rumbling noise and Liling could feel the ground shaking and rocks shifting. Then all of a sudden, light flooded the tunnel and it was so bright that Liling could not open her eyes.

When Liling could finally see, she saw piles of jewels and crowns. She could not believe her luck! She had discovered hidden treasures. She was about to put her hands on the treasures when suddenly she remembered one of the stories that her mum told her. It was about her great great great grandmother who lost her life in the Mogao Grottoes because of her greed. Liling hesitated, could this be a trap? It was only at that time that she realized that there were also columns after columns of books, scrolls and documents there. It dawned on her that she needed to get out and she did not care whether she could have these treasures. She had a ray of hope in her as she was sifting through ancient texts and files that were dated 1739. Liling opened a file at random and a mysterious mist floated out of it. The text spoke of a woman by the name of Zhenhe but whose true identity was never found. She had been one of the first “outsiders” of the grotto to discover “the secret room”. On the last page of the file, there was a drawing of a waterfall and a strange looking key. Liling had the file in hand when she heard crumbling and smashing noises around her. She looked up and saw walls and ground crumbling and falling away. She knew she had to act fast if she wanted to live. She didn’t have time to look for the key but she needed to get back to the waterfall she saw earlier. She dashed back to the opening leading to the tunnel.

Liling dashed forward, not caring if she crashed into anything. This cave might collapse any minute now and her heart was beating so fast. At last, she reached the patch of grass and the waterfall. She saw a door with a keyhole hidden behind the curtain of water. She dived into the water and swam towards the door. The water was icy cold and she could feel the piercing pain all over her body. When she reached the door, she tried pushing it hard but it would not budge. Without the key, there was no way out!

Liling was tired and cold. She had no more energy to keep herself afloat and she could drown any minute now. As her eyelids became heavy, she thought of the fond memory of her parents. Her hand reached for the necklace that she was wearing. It was a gift from her mother and it had been in the family for centuries. She felt the pendant and all of a sudden, she had a hunch! She gathered all the energy that was still in her and swam towards the door. She inserted the pendant into the keyhole and turned. The door opened with a crisp click. Liling swam through the door until she reached a landing and climbed onto the solid ground. She found herself in a tunnel again and she followed the tunnel carefully, until she was out of it, out onto the broad daylight. She found herself on the bank of a river that was not far away from where the Mogao Grottoes was. She lay down on the grass on the bank looking up at the clear blue sky feeling grateful. She thought about her shattered childhood dream. Liling felt the necklace and the key pendant in her hands, she decided escaping with her life was the best gift.

The Long lost tale of the Mogao Grottoes

ESF Sha Tin College, Wan, Sophia – 12

Throughout the years, humans forget the past and continue to live their lives like it should be.

Long ago, when the tales of the Mogao Grottoes began, there was nothing but sand down the silk road of China.

Years ago, someone called Zhenji walked the roads of China, finding caves. He was a normal citizen, he had a job and a hobby. Zhenji loved finding caves. The treasures, antiques, Ancient scrolls and the legends behind each and every cave.

One night, he passed through the caves close to the silk road of China. Some of them in particular caught his eye. Those were the Mogao Grottoes. Suddenly, a shine of light shimmered through the Mogao Grottoes. With curiosity, he went in. The sand glowed before him. Zhenji stopped and dug the glowing thing out. Antiques appeared in front of him, along with an ancient scroll. Zhenji was astonished. It was everyone's dream to get blessed with such great fortune. With happiness, he brought everything he saw back home. With his greed and curiosity, he decided to go back there and find more and more of these fascinating things. Days after days later, Zhenji became wealthy.

After a few years, he was blessed with a lovely family of three. The wife, Xiangling and the child, Lingji. They lived quite happily until the downfall came. On a rainy night, someone sneaked into Zhenji's mansion, hoping to find the money and rich Antiques to sell. The robber took them all apart from the chunks of gold stored inside the depths of earth. A thud could be heard as the thief closed the wooden door to the room of antiques. With Zhenji's sensitive ears, he ran towards the thief who happened to be walking away. Anger boiled inside Zhenji as he punched the thief in the face. Crash! The antiques fell to the floor, shattering everything inside the bag. With such a sudden sound, Xiangling and Lingji woke up. As the fight continued, Xiangling rushed to Zhenji, just to find the robber slash a knife down her husband's throat. Xiangling stood in horror, tears trickled down as she heard her last wish from her deceased husband. "Continue my footsteps, i will always be by your side..." The words turned into a whisper as it echoed through Xiangling's head. She yelled, hoping someone would come and help her. Knowing what was happening, the robber dashed up to Xiangling, stabbing her right in the heart. The robber took off her hood, it was none other than Yoshimi Nakashi, their part-time maid. Yoshimi ran as fast as she could. Lingji slowly walked to her parents, not knowing what had happened. Lingji Froze as she saw "paint" trickle down her parents body. Lingji's eyes widened as her parents lay on the floor. After a few minutes, Lingji kneeled down towards her mother and shaked her. She was five when this happened.

Years have passed since the incident. And the antiques slowly got forgotten. No one started walking to the Mogao, that was until Lingji turned eighteen. On Lingji's eighteenth birthday, she carried out her father's wishes and searched the caves again. Her first stop was the Mogao Grottoes, but this time, she brought people with her. They dug the dirt inside the Mogao Grottoes until all of the antiques were out, except for one. When Lingji and her crew left, the cave glowed a faint yellow color. Lingji looked back, just in time to see the glow disappear to darkness. What was that? Was it another fortune?

That night, Lingji could not stop thinking about it, she was sure she saw something. Determined to know what that was, Lingji got out of bed and ran towards the cave. It was a silent but calm night. The soft wind blew as Lingji sped across the Silk Road of China. The clouds were gone, it was pitch black, apart from the moon. Soon, Lingji arrived at the cave. Nothing was there. Lingji was confused, she could not have been hallucinating, it does not seem right to do so. Suddenly, Lingji got blinded with a flash of light. Lingji peered inside, two formally dressed people stood facing the once empty stone wall. The wall was now full of strange patterns, one in particular reminded her of a pattern she saw when her parents got killed. It was a living nightmare.

As the night turned into day, Lingji stood there watching the whole process. One of them touched the symbol while the other one recited a line from a book. A world of brightness and hope opened up before her eyes. The view there was splendid. Bright glows of light shone in every corner of the village. Some chartered around the roads, shops were open, everyone was happy. Lingji's eyes widened as she stared more into the world of happiness. The door closed once again as the two figures stepped inside, Lingji looked up, thinking about her cruel world of devastation. Walking back, an odd feeling bugged lingji, a feeling that she never felt before.

Morning came the same way it did everyday, nothing has changed after she saw one of the many secrets hidden inside the cave. The streets were busy, people of all ages bargaining, yelling and chattering to one another. Lingji got out of her house and went to work. Everything was fine until she reached the cave. The cave was different from yesterday, the pattern on the wall stayed, the dull dirt floor was flat, nothing was on it. Lingji was confused, what happened, where is all our work? Questions echoed through her brain as she tried to process what happened. Meanwhile, the other workers gasped, some quit and left the Mogao

Grottoes while others talked among themselves. After a few more moments, Lingji orders her group of people to go back as she investigates the cave. Without anyone noticing, she copied what the two figures did last night. Surprisingly, the wall opened up to her, she stepped into the world.

Everything was unknown, nothing was the same anymore. Lingji felt new and fresh, it was like she belonged here. The trees were filled with blossoms and the sky was filled with light. Snapping back to reality, she continued to explore this world, trying to find out the connection between the two worlds next to each other. Walking to the distant village, she spotted the same two figures walking towards her. Lingji panicked, she tried to move but her legs would not budge. As the two figures walked closer, Lingji began to sweat. Before the figures appeared right in front of her, a symbol appeared in front of her. It was the same symbol as the one on the door. Lingji dashed towards the door in fear. Opening the door, Lingji was once again back to her own world. She panted as the door closed behind her, but something was different. Lingji was different, she was not like anyone of her age anymore. There was something she had that was different, she was the human form of the symbol. Shaking the feeling off, she continued to walk home.

As she walked, she felt many eyes stare at her as if she was some kind of monster. Lingji trembled along, mumbling something unstop.

“What is this feeling? Why are people staring at me? What is going on? I need to get out of here,” Lingji’s head hung low, she ran and disappeared through an alleyway. When she thought she lost everyone, she took a deep breath and calmed herself down. Clearly, there was something wrong with her, but what was it? Lingji was human, she was like everyone else, at least she thought so. Soon after she calmed down, she peeked outside, searching for a safe route to get back home. She felt calm, this time, she sped through the village, soon she stopped at an old building. This was her home.

Inside, furniture was placed in odd positions, the clock was on the floor, the chairs were blocking the entrance. It was as if a hurricane swiped through her house. Lingji ran through the mess, searching for the broken mirror, which was placed under her bed. Picking it up, she looked at herself. To her horror, she was a monster. These words echoed through her head, causing trauma to make its way towards her. A symbol appeared on her cheek, her eyes changed to red, the edges of her hair turned white. Lingji was no longer herself. She calmed herself down, but just at that moment, her heart stopped for one beat, a flashback appeared. Someone was holding something. The person’s hair was the same as hers, black with white tips. The thing the person was holding was an ancient scroll. Scanning through the scroll, the same symbol appeared once again. What does everything have to do with the symbol? What is the meaning behind it? That is the unsolved mystery behind the tale of the Mogao Grottoes.

The Mogao Caves: Blood Bleeds into History

ESF South Island School, Kwok, Stephanie – 12

“Before there was a beginning, there was nothing. A blank and featureless void, with not a single cell or breath. Suddenly, a tremor erupts, chaos resonating through the earth, awakening Pangu, who separated this nothingness into Heaven and Earth, Yin and Yang, mountains and rivers, hills and oceans. He was not alone, aided by the four great animals; the dragon, the Qilin, the Turtle, the Phoenix, and the Dragon. While his blood boiled into rivers and his breath coalesced into mist, it was said that his heart turned into the very first constructional structure known to man – the Mogao Caves and grottoes, where his heart is said to lie.”

Alone, isolated, secluded, desolate; completely and indefinitely alone. Well, if not for the sole companion named ‘Ling Ling’, a cheeky and adorable parrot, as it sat atop An-Ni’s shoulder, trilling its voice into her ear. Her legs were meek sticks of lead, bending to the will of the looming sun, a hanging stature of doom as it glared its eyes upon the golden dunes of the desert. Every passing ray of sunlight, where timid yellow blended into orange, hope started to dwindle, every trudge shooting sharp pangs of pain up her leg, saccharine liquid pooled at the hem of her pants while sand fervently pricked against her skin mercilessly, hot wind lashing against her face, “Saints, hard to believe grandmother got nearly as far,” Her inner voice muttered as wisps of dust swirled around her, a glimmering haze of sand and sour fragile air protruded her vision, as if it ridiculed and mocked her helplessness.

It couldn’t be helped that she had to fulfill the legacy of her grandmother. A history extraordinaire, research prodigy, she created as many questions as there were answers. She spent decades chasing the ghost of a legend, a mere myth, embellished and morphed, intricately woven into generations of bedtime stories before being reduced into what it was today: an urban legend. At the brink of discovery, she tragically passed away, passing on her life of research, her legacy and her grandson to An-Ni’s care. An-Ni refused to let her grandmother be thought of as insane, insignificant or delusional. She would finish this, no matter the bottles of tears (or blood) it would take to get there. The map was almost indistinguishable, a barricade of rips and tears, smudges of red pen, sweat and question marks. Then, something catches her attention. A peculiar shaped mountain, curled and winding upwards, resembling a roller coaster where rock and stone slabs lined the edges. An-Ni stilled in shock, hurriedly pulling out her binoculars in frantic search of the mystery. Her legs sink into the sand as she ploughs through the desert in heat; the wind further amplifies the pain as she desperately casts away negative thoughts. It was getting dark – she had to hurry before the caves became shrouded in shadows and midnight, when the blazing heat melted into the icy cold.

An-Ni’s legs were numb, ringing noises panging incessantly at her head, mind so hazy she could barely think. She had gotten to the head of the mountain, her legend and legacy so close she could almost touch it; and yet as she stared up, all she could feel was dread pooling in her stomach., twisting into an anxious, ranting coil. She turns her head to the base of the mountain, curiously fanning her fingers over the engravings – A Dragon, Qilin, Phoenix, and Turtle, carved in inhumane detail. It was almost like divine resolution. *The animals from grandma’s story.* A thick veil of transparent fog lined the path upward, like a winding staircase of doom blanketing the head of the mountain – clambering up, up, up, with almost feline agility. An-Ni timidly setted her foot on one of the stone slabs, which let out a nasally hollow creek, the braided rope shaking uncontrollably. She let out a sharp gasp, hurdling backward and desperately clinged onto the side of the mountain. *Another step*, she thought, the resolve now clear in her mind slicing through the uncertainty. She grasped the grooves of the mountain carefully, stepping on another slap in a turtle-like pace. She knew she had to hurry – night was approaching, and fast. Her sole companion groaned on her shoulder, as it nuzzled its beak into her neck as if to say “don’t drop me!”

“It’s okay Ling, we’re almost there, I promise.” She whispers, and the parrot silences, as if it understood. Adrenaline courses, unchecked as rocks menacingly fell beneath her feet at the edge of her throat. An-Ni’s stare was intense, visceral, as she jumped across the slabs, shaking uncontrollably, her feet and hands moved like the notes of slow melody, utterly battered but determined to carry on. Suddenly, she felt her leg plunging into a gap in the slabs, skidding backward. She writhed in pain and let out a sharp cry, eyes watered in anguish, blood now trickling down and soaking fabric with liquid. Wincing, she bit the inside of her cheek, drawing blood, the last of her tears sliding down into the desert as she painstakingly gripped at the two slabs at her waist, hoisting herself up onto the trembling stone, the salt of her sorrow on the tip of her tongue. She was almost there.

The peak of the mountain extended into the now sunny rays, the clouds of sombre parting, peace fueling her chest as her foot met the rocky path. The dying sunlight enraptured her into its arms as her legs melted into the ground, ever upward into the clouds. According to her mind, she was alive. Her veins were circulating, brain functioning, heart pumping blood, and breathing; but her body betrayed her, ultimately scratched and torn. The wind whipped through the air, the percussion of nature. An-Ni,

succumbing to curiosity, scoured the mountain, when she found an entrance with more engravings, mirroring the ones she saw at the base. The Dragon, Phoenix, Turtle, and Qilin. She stares in confusion at the engraving, when the seared skin on her hand let out sanguine liquid, filling the crevice of the engraving. It uttered a satisfying sizzle, letting out a looming glow for a bare second before returning to its inanimate state. Suddenly, she understood. She pulled out the copper dagger from her emergency bag, calloused skin against tanned leather, she slid the dagger against her palm. An-Ni's flesh hummed uncomfortably as the liquid ran down her elbow from the gaping wounds, landing onto the carving. The carving began to be engrossed with her blood, running left and right, like the edges of a lost crossroad.

Finally, the cave slides open, An-Ni's throat hitched in her chest. The mouth of the cave was a beckoning violet eye, pulling her into its grasp. She timidly steps into the cave, a gasp barely leaving her estranged throat. Paintings and stories completely cover the ceiling, patience and skill riddled into each brushstroke, each tile, each colour. Each told a different story, some, the blooming flowers of spring, some, the icy mountains of winter. She barely contains her tears as she continues the journey inside, calm, resting statues adorned with colour and graced with gold. Her heart pummelled into her chest, proud to be witnessing the pure spectacle in front of her eyes. She walked close to the heart of the cave, her heart betraying her mind and the parrot squawking in agreement. *We did it, Ling, We did it. I know I shouldn't, but I've come all this way...* The statue omitted an eerie glow, illuminating the entire cave, a Buddha in its rest. Heart pounding, hands shaking, she touched the jade crown of the Buddha. Like Pandora's Box, the statue was almost beckoning her to give in. The cave shivered, as debris fell through every corner. *Oh no, oh no, I'll never get out.* Panic twisted in her gut, Ling-Ling helplessly grasping the edge of her sleeve. To her complete surprise, a library materialised in front of her. Carved by wood and the skilled hands of all those before her, pages of history and treatises of talent line the floor and ceiling. and standing in awe, she whispered to herself: "Grandma, I proved the legend. I did it."

The Johnson Twins

ESF South Island School, Xing, Kristen – 11

May and Luca Johnson were passing a summer morning down at the seaside. If you looked past their different wardrobes and styles, you'd notice that their facial looks are almost indistinguishable because they are twins. Besides their appearances, the two twins were very different. The only similarity that they had was that they were both exceptionally bright.

At the age of two, May had taught herself how to communicate in multiple dialects, the languages being English, Spanish, French, and German. Years later, May had learnt thirty languages. Luca was not gifted in languages unlike his sister, but he was very talented in the arts. His paintings were set adjacent to the artworks of Picasso and Michelangelo.

Despite their differences, the twins loved each other dearly and their adventure began during their holidays. Due to their work, Adira and Liam Johnson had to go on trips, leaving the twins alone. The twins spent days at the beach to pass the time.

'It's lonely without Mum and Dad. I wish they didn't have to leave.' Luca said.

'Me too.' May said, scavenging the sand for seashells.

It was hot so the twins went to a nearby restaurant to cool down.

'Anything I can get you?' A waiter asked, handing the twins menus.

'Just a milkshake, please.' Luca replied.

'I'll have the same, thanks.' May said.

'Thank you, sir and madam.' the waiter said, taking their order.

'Hear about the rumours of the Mogao Caves lately, John?' A burly man sitting at the adjacent table to the twins' said to his friend, catching Luca's attention.

'No.' his friend named John replied. 'Never heard of the "Mogao Caves" either.'

The man rolled his eyes. 'Nowadays, nobody knows about the Mogao Caves. But I'll tell you about them. Long ago, a monk knew there was something extraordinary about a cave he discovered at an oasis in a desert. Over the years, travellers arrived and decided to stay in the caves and expanded them by digging smaller caves. These travellers created art and literature. Years passed, and people started taking different routes. The world forgot about the caves. Soon almost nobody recognized the name "Mogao Caves".'

'What's so special about it?' John said.

'Rumour has it that the caves contain treasure beyond imaginable. They don't mention where in the caves it is though. Only that the treasure is behind a golden door.'

John's eyes glinted greedily as he thought of the treasure. 'Where are these caves, Caleb?'

'They are located on the Silk Road in the Dunhuang district of Gansu province.' Caleb replied.

Luca didn't hear anything after that. 'May! Hear what that guy said? If we could get the treasure, we would be so rich that Mum and Dad won't ever have to leave us for trips.'

'Good idea!' she cried..

'The man said it's in the Dunhuang district of Gansu province, that's far away but we should get there in an hour.' Luca replied,

The twins finished their milkshakes, paid the bill and rushed out of the restaurant, eager to go to the caves.

The sun scorched the twins' necks but they persisted on their journey. Finally, they reached Dunhuang district of Gansu province. When they saw the caves, the twins stopped in their tracks, transfixed by the caves' beauty.

'It's amazing.' Luca and May whispered in unison.

The twins quietly tiptoed into the dark cave.

‘Look, sticks!’ Luca exclaimed.

Moments later, a flame erupted in front of May.

‘See? Watching YouTube *is* useful!’ And look!’ Luca said, pointing to the caves’ walls. ‘Paintings!’

The twins looked at the paintings in awe. The paintings were close to perfection. The twins were so absorbed in the paintings that they didn’t notice two men behind them.

‘They’re amazing, right?’ Luca said.

There was no answer.

‘May?’ Luca called, turning around.

To his horror, a muscular man was holding May and had his hand around her mouth. She couldn’t scream, but Luca could see the fear in his sister’s eyes.

‘Let her go!’ he cried, throwing himself onto May’s captive.

However, another man lunged forward. He pinned Luca down, and tied him up.

‘Get off!’ Luca screamed.

‘Hey! You are Caleb and John, the guys from the restaurant!’ Luca cried, recognising his captives.

‘Yes, we couldn’t let you two steal our treasure.’ Caleb said.

‘We need to get out of here as soon as possible, Caleb. Get the treasure and let’s go.’ John said, uneasy.

‘What’s the hurry?’

‘They are children, people are going to look for them. You don’t want to end up back *there* again, right?’ John said.

Luca saw fear flash in Caleb’s eyes.

‘Fine. Leave the children. We go as soon as we find the treasure.’

The two men hurried off and left the twins. Caleb didn’t tie May up so she untied the knots of the rope that bound Luca.

‘We need to catch up with the men!’

They soon caught up with the men, because they were making such a racket.

‘The treasure? Where is it?’ John said. ‘It’s a waste of time. We could easily rob a jewelry store down the streets!’

‘The treasure in these caves are worth more than all of the world’s jewels combined.’ Caleb said.

‘We can’t even find it!’

They bickered all the way and were too busy arguing to notice the children following them.

‘This way!’ Luca whispered.

They came across a golden door with exquisite drawings carved into it.

‘This is the golden door! The treasure is near.’ Caleb said.

‘That door must be worth thousands!’ John said. ‘Do you think we could take it down?’

‘No, silly. We can’t carry it.’ Caleb replied.

‘Hey, Caleb! The kids are back.’ John said, suddenly spotting the twins and grabbing May.

'We called the police and they are going to throw you two in prison for abusing children!' May shouted at John, wishing her lie was true.

John looked fearful, then called Caleb. 'Caleb, we need to go!'

'Why?' Caleb said.

'Cops coming. Got to leave, hurry!'

'Should we tie them up?' Caleb asked.

'No time. Got to go.' John said, fleeing into the darkness of the caves. Caleb followed him.

'Good job!' Luca cried.

'Let's see what the door leads to.' May said, opening the door. 'There're so many papers, vases and books lying around!' 'But Caleb said that there was treasure...' May said.

'Yes, where is it?' Luca asked.

'Were the rumours wrong? Was this a waste of time?'

The twins fell silent, puzzled. Why were there books lying around instead of gold and jewels?

Luca stopped, deep in thought. Moments later, he cried: 'May! Don't you get it? This is the treasure!' Luca said pointing at the art and literature.

'The people here must have created these!' 'Look at this book, Luca! It's so old!' May exclaimed.

'Look at this painting!' Luca answered.

The twins explored the room. When they'd finished, they realized how much time had passed.

'How long has it been?' Luca asked.

'I don't know. It's probably dark already. Let's go home.'

'Right. Should we bring something back for Mum and Dad even if it isn't gold?' Luca suggested.

'Dad would love an old book!' May agreed.

The twins took an old-looking book and left the cave. They rushed back home.

When they arrived home, a shock awaited them. Their parents were inside the house! Adira was sobbing and Liem was pacing around.

'Mum! Dad!' May said. 'Why're you here?'

'Luca! May!' Adira cried. 'I almost passed out when I couldn't find you. Your father and I've looked everywhere for you. Where've you been?'

May and Luca glanced at each other. *Oh no, today was the day Mum and Dad were coming home...*

'Yes,' Liem said. 'I was about to call the police until you two burst in here.'

'Sorry, Daddy. We forgot you were coming home today. We just wanted to get you treasure so you wouldn't have to leave us for work anymore.' May said.

'We went to get treasure in the Mogao Caves because people were talking about it in a restaurant. We thought we would find gold but we only found books and paintings.' Luca said.

'Guys, I don't need treasure when I have you two. We don't need treasure to be happy, family is much more precious. You don't need to bring me riches to make me happy. Just you guys are enough make me happy.'

'I'm sorry, Mummy.' May sobbed. 'I didn't mean to worry you and Daddy.'

‘I’m sorry too.’ Luca said. ‘Please forgive us.’

‘It’s alright, just don’t scare us like that ever again.’ Liam said

‘We promise. Daddy, you won’t believe what we found in the caves!’ May cried, handing her father the old book.

‘What a nice book! Thanks, I love it!’ Liam said.

And there it is. May and Luca’s first adventure. That day May and Luca learnt that you don't need riches to be happy. Family is the most precious thing in the world.

The Wishing Stone

ESF West Island School, Chan, Ila – 11

Yesterday, Joanne and I were actually excited to visit the Mogao Grottoes. Today, I'd want to be anywhere but here. If you don't know what Mogao Grottoes is, look it up. It's 2050 people, the internet is a thing. The Mogao Grottoes was built by a monk, way before even Grandpa was born. And that's certainly something, for all I know, Grandpa is old.

Apparently the monk saw 'something special' in this cave. Many of our ancient ancestors arrived and stayed, digging more caves, and creating sacred art and literature. As time passed, the Mogao Caves were forgotten, but gradually people have rediscovered the breathtaking artifacts that the cave beholds. Some even say that in the midst of the cave lies a sacred wishing stone that grants you whatever your heart desires. But I don't buy into any of this nonsense. Joanne does though. She's the whole reason why we got stuck in this mess.

A few hours ago, we were happily walking inside rooms inside the cave. Joanne says that deeper inside the cave hides more valuable riches, and we might find the stone too. And of course, she had to step inside the 'no entrance' zone. Mum said we were not to be separated, and to follow Joanne (as she was older), so I had no choice but to be dragged along.

Life lesson #001 'NEVER. disobey mum.'

After walking deeper into the cave, I advised ourselves to go back. But Joanne wouldn't budge. She wanted to find the stone. Why is she so desperate to find that stone anyway? After several more minutes of walking deeper into the cave, we realised the floor was starting to rumble. And eventually, the floor gave in and we started to fall. That moment happened so quickly, I don't even remember what had happened. I just remember Joanne and I screaming our lungs out.

My hair is a mess and I've got dust in my face. Joanne's complaining about having no WiFi. Seriously? We've fallen inside a deep hole, and she's worried about WIFI?!

So now I'm stuck in this stupid cave, with no food, no water, and no way out. I already told Joanne that this would be a bad idea. That we never should have gone deep inside the cave. Did she listen? No, of course not. She's Joanne. So now look at us, stuck in a cave, with nothing to do, but to wait for rescue. I am so mad at her right now. We just sit on different sides of the room, no more talking, just sitting. I can't bear looking at her face. Everytime I take a glance, her eyes are full of sorrow and fear.

My mind is completely full of anger, but guiltiness. I never should have shouted at her like I did. If there was anything we needed right now, it'd be for us to work together and escape. But I'm pretty sure I've ruined any chance of that happening now.

Mum must be worried sick. She's already got too much on her mind. Everytime I look at her, I see her smiling at me, even though I can tell that she's stressed and tired. It's been a few hours (according to my phone), and I can't stand it anymore. I decided that this is enough and I've got to talk to Joanne about our current situation.

So I walk up to her and say: "Hi. Erm, we need to get out of this cave." I hadn't actually planned what I was going to say, but that was the first thing that came out. Ugh, seriously? Of all the things I could have said. It had to be the most obvious one. Joanne looks at me like I'm an alien. There's an awkward silence, which is followed by a "ya think?"

I tell her to start looking for any signs of sunlight. Because often in those Bear Grylls episodes, Bear escapes by doing just that. Joanne nods in agreement. There are three pathways in the cave. I took a left, and she took a right. We agree to meet back in ten minutes to share our discoveries and to search the middle path together. I start walking towards the left path. The insides are filled with heavy cobwebs, and collecting dust.

After about one minute of walking deeper into the midst of the cave, I see a neon backpack that shines when you look at it from a certain angle. I walk closer to it and see that it is coloured a nice shade of green—ish blue. I take a look inside and see a molding piece of bread (Of which I toss away, because mum said that kind of stuff would make you sick.), a flashlight, two glowsticks, a first aid kit and a water filter. My throat is starting to itch a little and I remind myself that I don't know how long I'll be stuck in here for.

I check my phone and see that it's already been about 7 minutes. So I start heading back to our meeting point. I arrived one minute late. And I expected Joanne to have shown up already. But she's not there. Joanne is always the last one to get out of class, so I wait for a minute or two. But after a while, she's still not there. Then I start to worry because Joanne never takes this long.

Then I hear a scream. "ILA! ILA HELP! HELP ME! ILA PLEASE! IS ANYONE THERE!?" That's my name. And that's Joanne's voice. And at that moment my whole body numbs and I can't feel a thing. But I know I'm jogging towards the echo. The jogging turns into a run, which becomes a sprint. I can't feel my legs but it doesn't matter. Because my best friend is in trouble.

I get closer to the voice and soon I reach an enormous mountain of rocks, piled cliff-high. I hear Joanne's voice, which is weak now, but still audible inside the lumps of grey. Obviously I start digging, until I see her hand reach out to me. I pull as hard as I can onto her hand and pull her out of the rubble. Her face is full of grey stuff that probably came from the rocks. I can see a few scars on her legs and arms, and a few bruises here and there but nothing too serious. I search through my first aid kit that I collected and tape a few bandages onto his scars. I even allow ourselves to break into the precious source of crackers I saved from this morning.

As I am healing Joanne, I noticed that the room seems lighter than normal. Then I look up and I can't believe my eyes. Sunlight. And it's not that hard to reach either.

"Joanne! That's our way out! That's our exit ticket!" I start climbing up the rocks and rubble to the top of the sunlight, but I feel a tug on my leg. Looking down, I see Joanne holding onto my leg. At first I thought she was injured and unable to move. So I come back down and start to carry her up. But Joanne still doesn't budge and in fact, he starts to walk away from the sunlight.

"What are you doing?!" I exclaim. "I want to find the stone first," she replies.

"Are you kidding me?! Who cares about a stone, it's not even real! We need to get out, do you want to die here?!" I say. Joanne answers with: "What do you know? Besides, if we are able to find the stone, then we could just wish our way out!"

I cannot believe it. This was our chance to escape, to find our way home. I just want to go home to my mother, I'm cold, and tired. Not to mention that my legs are sore from all that running previously. But Joanne wants adventure. I really want to stick with Joanne, but I know that this is best for me.

I say I'm sorry and I need to escape. Joanne looks disappointed in me. But as I'm climbing up towards the light, I hear a giggle from behind me. Then I hear Joanne bursting out laughing. She holds out her hand, and I see something shiny and red, gleaming ever so brightly.

It takes a while for me to recognise what I've just seen. Joanne runs up to me and holds my hand. She closes her eyes and for a second nothing happens. Then all of a sudden, there's a luminous bright yellow light all around me and I see myself standing in front of my mum. And that's when I realise... I'm back home.

I hugged my mum like I've never done before, and I see the relief in her eyes. "Don't you ever run off like that, ever.", she says.

I just nod.

Mogao Caves Story

ESF West Island School, Hammond, Georgie – 11

It was the day of my expedition, the day I left Britain to go to the middle state to discover and investigate more about the ancient Silk Road and the lost cities of Central Asia. I Sir Marc Aurel Stein didn't know what I was going to find there. I arrived in Dunhuang, China and was amazed at the talk I heard. Talk of the world of caves, the hidden Buddhist shrines, and Wang Yuanlu wormed its way into my brain. I was excited. I was as happy as sunshine on a bleak wall. A child finding a lost toy. This is exactly what I came here for.

So far Wang had found 16 caves. A Maoist priest, he declared himself protector of these Buddhist caves of wonder. There were murals, giant paintings on the walls of these caves and I was so excited that I, Sir Aurel Stein, was going to see them.

When I got to the site, I was surprised to see Wang discovered another one the people I overheard hadn't heard about yet. This one was different, unique, I thought. The jewel of all jewels, the diamond among the rubies of caves. It was a library containing scrolls and small books. I was starstruck and knew this was going to be a great archaeological find. If you thought that was it, oh no. There was more. Banners, textiles, small sculptures of Buddhas and other Buddhist paraphernalia. Some of the books even contained information about the cave's original state! "The Ruins of Desert Cathay: Volume II" I read. I then read through most of the book and found an interesting extract. 'Heaped up in layers, but without any order, there appeared in the dim light of the priest's little lamp a solid mass of manuscript bundles rising to a height of nearly ten feet, and filling, as subsequent measurement showed, close on 500 cubic feet. The area left clear within the room was just sufficient for two people to stand in.'

This was amazing. I had to have a connection to this cave. It was my chatty best friend I couldn't stop talking to. So I negotiated with Wang, and ended up getting a significant number of manuscripts as well as the finest paintings and textiles in exchange for a donation to Wang's restoration effort.

This is the story of how I, Sir Aurel Stein discovered more about the Mogao caves. How I ended up getting lots of precious items from the library cave and helped to tell more people about this Eastern wonder. This is my story.

Sir Aurel Stein's story ends here. If you are curious about what happened later then well, here you go. As more explorers longed to visit the site, word spread throughout countries. Lots of explorers took items from the caves when they weren't supposed to and many robberies and vandalisms unfolded on the caves. The situation got better when artist Zhang Daqian offered to repair the vandalised murals. In 1956, the first Premier of The People's Republic Of China was personally interested in the caves and repaired and protected them. In 1987, it was declared a UNESCO world heritage site. Then from 1988–1995 a huge number of 248 caves were discovered. That is the story of the Mogao Caves.

Mogao Grottoes

ESF West Island School, Narula, Prisha – 11

Quite long ago, there was a cave called the Mogao Grottoes. The Monks that lived there believed that this cave was special. They started to create masterpieces, art, literature, pottery, and more. The Mogao Grottoes was forgotten, until the 1900's, where some explorers found it in the Silk Road. The scholars unlocked beloved secrets, and may have found the earliest book to be printed. With all this excitement in the caves, others went down to unlock more secrets...

One day, a young boy named Yang Ming was going with his parents to see the Mogao Grottoes with his own two eyes. Yang Ming was thrilled to see the province that led to his culture. His dream was to be an explorer and to discover secrets that the world has never seen before.

A Saturday during the summer holidays, 2 days before Yang Ming was going to Mogao Grottoes, he was so excited that he made a countdown. He started to pick things to take with him, like a camera and notebook, his favourite aeroplane and his explorers outfit. His parents were laughing, and told him that he didn't need to take anything except himself, because they weren't going to be there long. He ignored them, and got ready as if it was the day he was going to the Mogao Grottoes. All he did for the next 2 days was think how spectacular it would be in the Mogao Grottoes. He drew maps, got binoculars, and packed a bag full of his explorers equipment, and it was finally the day.

Today Yang Ming was up and early before his parents, and got ready as quickly as possible. As he was getting ready, he sang, "Today is the day, today is the day, dum di di dum di di doo". He was off note and on high pitch, and sang so much that got his parents annoyed, and they told him to keep quiet, because he was being way too irritating. Finally, when everyone was ready, they left on the wonderful adventure.

After that long car ride, they got out at the entrance of the legendary Mogao Grottoes. Yang Ming's parents told Yang Ming to go enjoy himself and explore the corners of the Mogao Grottoes. While doing so, Yang Ming tripped on a piece of rock that led him banging into a wall. Yang Ming got up, and the wall opened into a secret pathway that led him into a secret room. He was elated, and wanted to explore. He thought, 'I shouldn't go in without telling my parents'. He banished that thought and went inside the room.

The secret pathway was carved with loads of beautiful things, and had ancient relics placed on both sides of it. Even as beautiful coloured glass, the room was more dazzling than the corridor. He found art pieces, poetry, pottery and so much more. The murals of the monks are the most spectacular thing he has ever seen before. He smiled super hard while reading his favourite piece, a poetry piece about the world before, when the Monks were alive. He thought about how thrilled everyone would be when they knew what he had found. Yang Ming has added colour to his life, and has fulfilled his dreams of being an explorer.

After this, he found his parents and the guide, and told them about his thrilling experience. The guide said that no one had ever explored that section in the cave. Everyone wanted to see this, and he guided them into the secret room where everything he found. This news was reported to the Chinese newspaper company, and finally this news reached the emperor, and the emperor was astonished that a 7 year old found such an important piece of history, that he carved a stone in the name of Yang Ming, and placed it right next to the poetry, as that was Yang Ming's favourite piece in the cave.

Yang Ming's wish had come true, and everyone congratulated him for his efforts. Yang Ming was so glad, and he continued to explore other areas of the world, and Yang Ming made history. As they say, 'A simple wish for today: That you always have dreams that always come true.' Never stop believing in yourself, because you don't know what you can do!

A Passage in Time: 968AD in The Mogao Grottoes!

ESF West Island School, Tan, Clyth – 11

“RINGG!” The burglar alarm went off. It was the 2nd July 2022. Panicked voices spoke in rapid French. Glaring light beams swept through the night sky, searching for the thief. There he was, on a building rooftop, a few streets from the Louvre, the painting of Mona Lisa tucked under his arm, his steely brown eyes darting from place to place, checking for unseen threats. WenTou (art-thief) removed his mask with one hand, revealing rich black hair. He checked his watch and frowned. His contact was late. Then, WenTou saw him, camouflaged in the shadows of the night. The man in the black business suit held out his hand. WenTou handed him the prized possession. After authenticating the painting, the man nodded and gave a few taps on his mobile. WenTou checked his own phone and grinned. The promised reward had been transferred to his Swiss bank account. As he turned to leave, the man called out, “How do you like going to London?” WenTou smiled at the prospect of the next assignment.

During the 1-hour flight to London, WenTou wasted no time in finding out about the object he was paid to steal from the British Library – the Diamond Sutra. The Diamond Sutra, the world's earliest dated, printed book, was found in a holy site called the Mogao Caves which was a major Buddhist centre from the 4th to 14th centuries. The long cliff wall, carved with 492 caves, is located near Dunhuang, in the present-day province of Gansu, China.

Wentou waited till nightfall before heading to the British Library. Darkness was a thief's best friend. He picked the door lock easily and entered. His trained eyes swept across the main hall, locating the positions of the CCTVs. He soon found the Diamond Sutra, displayed in a glass case. WenTou whipped out a gadget from his utility belt. This marvellous invention of his could cut glass like a knife through butter. It was called the Super-Duper Glass Slicer. He masterfully got the top glass panel off and rescued the precious scroll from its glass prison. Suddenly, WenTou noticed a faint green glow emitting from the Diamond Sutra. Before he could react, he felt a strong force pulling at his body. “AAAAAH!” WenTou screamed as he got sucked into the scroll.

WenTou woke up with a start. *Was it a nightmare?* He wished it was, but his aching body told him otherwise. The Diamond Sutra was next to him. *It wasn't a dream after all.* He found himself in an enclosed space. The ceiling was low and the walls were rough. *Could it be a cave? What was happening?* Suddenly, he heard voices. “Master, I hear sounds coming from the Library Cave. Let me go and investigate.” WenTou heard footsteps approaching. “Is anyone in there?” WenTou inhaled deeply. *Time to meet the owner of the voice.*

Surprise was his best chance. WenTou slammed the door open, sprinted out and ran into a crowd of monks. “An intruder in our place of worship! Chase him!” WenTou wriggled through the group, dashed down meandering passageways and weaved through the maze of caves. Even though he was on the run, his keen eye for fine art did not miss the beautiful paintings and sculptures in the caves. “BUMP!” He hit a wall. A dead-end! “There he is!” WenTou sighed and put his hands up. “I surrender.”

Monks wearing saffron-dyed robes filed into the cave. An elderly monk with a long white beard stepped forward, “I am Elder Monk, Wuxi. We mean you no harm but who are you? Why have you intruded into our sanctuary of tranquillity?” WenTou stammered, “Whe-where am I?” The old monk looked surprised. “Why, you're in the Mogao Caves.” WenTou's eyes widened in alarm. Didn't he see half-chiselled sculptures and wall murals that were obviously work in progress just now? “May I know what year this is?” WenTou's question was barely a whisper even though his heart was racing. “This is the year 968 of the Song Dynasty.” WenTou fainted, for the second time in a day.

It has been several days since WenTou travelled back in time to the Mogao Caves. He knew that the Diamond Sutra was the key for him to return to the present. However, the scroll gave no indication of opening up the time travel portal. WenTou sat on it, sunned it, smoked it, even fanned it. Nothing worked to make it come ‘alive’. WenTou became resigned to the fact that he might remain in the 10th century for a long, long while. Meanwhile, making the best out of the situation, he settled into the daily routines of life in the Mogao Caves. He befriended the monks and learnt about their work, values and beliefs. He witnessed how the monks put their blood, toil, tears and sweat into the construction of the caves. Some painstakingly hand carved Buddha sculptures out of rock walls, while others decorated the caves' walls and ceilings with elaborate paintings depicting stories of the Buddha and Buddhist sutras. WenTou began to appreciate the Mogao Caves as a treasure trove of Buddhist art.

One day, WenTou heard a monk, WuDong, saying, “The sun is sweltering! I don't feel really well!” WuDong's eyelids fluttered and he fell to the ground. “WuDong, WuDong!” A fellow monk looked desperately at WenTou. “Hurry! Get the Healer from Cave78. Take Corridor 3 to get there.” WenTou sprinted off in a flash. He used all the experience he had to keep up the pace. Time seemed to slow. He kept his eyes sharp, dodging obstacles. Finally, he reached the Healer's cave. It reeked of medicinal herbs and ointments. “WuDong seems to have a heat stroke. Please save him!” The Healer briskly collected the required herbs and followed WenTou down the corridor. However, when they reached Wudong, his body was already covered

by a shroud. Monks were gathering around, chanting prayers and grieving for their brother who sacrificed his life in the construction of the caves.

“WenTou, can I have a word with you?” Elder Monk Wuxi asked. WenTou was perplexed. “Yes Master,” WenTou replied, curious to know what Wuxi had to say to him. “You have been with us for nearly half a year. When you first arrived, I sensed that your spirit was restless. Your heart was filled with greed, your mind filled with selfish thoughts. But now, I feel patience, kindness and gratitude radiating from you.” WenTou realised that Wuxi was right. The wise, old monk continued, “I had a vision. The time for you to leave is still not ripe. Are you willing to stay and help us construct the caves?”

WenTou inhaled. He had come so far, so he agreed. He worked tirelessly, alongside the other monks, to expand the network of caves to add on to the 200+ caves built before him. These caves were also gradually filled with paintings, stone sculptures, literature and more! Suns rose, moons fell and seasons changed. WenTou pressed on.

Two years passed. Wuxi had another meeting with WenTou. “WenTou, you have matured a lot. I have seen the transformation in you. It’s time for you to go home.” WenTou nodded. “Tha—thank you. I have learnt so much during my stay here. I’m sad to leave, but I have to go back to where I belong. I miss my home. Farewell, Master.” He felt himself tearing. He had made some good friends, but now, it was time to let them go. The elderly monk handed the glowing Diamond Sutra to WenTou. Bittersweet memories flooded through WenTou’s mind as he felt his body being pulled into the scroll.

WenTou woke up to find himself lying on the floor of the British Library. Glancing up, he saw the empty glass display of the Diamond Sutra. Without a moment’s hesitation, WenTou replaced the ancient scroll to its rightful place. He would lose his cash reward of millions, but it was the right thing to do.

WenTou became an art restoration and conservation professional. He was currently working at the Mogao grottoes. He also gave talks about cultural preservation and how people in the past worked hard to let future generations enjoy art masterpieces today. Taking a stroll by the lake, he thought, “If Elder Monk Wuxi could see me right now, he would be so proud.” The sun was setting, but WenTou’s adventure had just begun. As he gazed at the sunset, he made a silent promise to himself, “Without the sacrifice of the monks, there would not be the Mogao Caves today! I will work hard to restore, preserve and treasure this religious and cultural heritage site.”

The Mogao Grottoes

French International School, Champion, Kyle – 11

There once was a legend about a Sonaria lake in the mysterious Mogao Grottoes in Greater China.

In a nearby village, there was an evil Emperor who wanted to be the richest person in the world. One day, his old story-teller told him about the mysterious tale of the ancient Mogao Grottoes and about the wonderful Sonaria lake that can grant you three wishes of your choice. The very greedy Emperor was very excited and ordered ten of his soldiers to go and find the Grottoes. A long week passed and the Emperor started to get impatient so he ordered his search team to go and find the missing soldiers. Days after days, the Emperor became incredibly anxious. What if they found the lake in the grottoes and used the three wishes for themselves? He wondered in fear... Or what if the soldiers found the Sonaria lake and couldn't find their way back? That was also a possibility, thought the Emperor. Finally, one night after his dinner, the Emperor was so restless that he let out a yell of anger and ordered twenty more of his soldiers to go with him to try and find the Mogao Grottoes and the Sonaria lake. In the morning, they left and would not return until they were successful.

They walked for days and days and days hoping that they would finally find the treasure but there was not a single glance of a grotto. There was nothing around them except for dunes. The Emperor was so annoyed that he ordered the story-teller to come and tell him more about the grottoes and the lake. He told the Emperor that they had to wait for the right moment at sunset for the light of the sun to reflect perfectly on the grottoes so that it could be seen many miles away. The Emperor warned the story-teller that he'd better be right or his life was in great danger.

Agitated like a volcano about to explode, the Emperor waited and waited and waited restlessly until sunset. Then, as a miracle, in the distance, he couldn't believe his eyes: a bright light shone like a star. The Emperor could not believe his eyes, it was like his dream came true. All at once, everybody started running towards it as if they were hypnotised. Unfortunately, without any warning, it disappeared a couple of seconds later. The Emperor was furious. His heart dropped, his mouth dried and he raged like a werewolf. The story-teller, as pale as snow, luckily remembered precisely where the light was and could guide the Emperor and his exhausted twenty soldiers.

On the next day, the Emperor woke up and continued alone with the story-teller because he thought that the twenty soldiers were slowing them down. It took them the whole day to reach the Mogao Grottoes.

When they finally arrived, after a very exhausting journey, a sign at the entrance of the grottoes warned every visitor not to be too greedy. The Emperor chuckled as if it was a joke. The story-teller told the Emperor that they had to solve three riddles in order to pass. The first riddle was: I am tall when I am young and short when I am old. What am I? The Emperor thought for a very long time then pronounced with hesitation, a candle. Then, a massive rock door opened and the Emperor stepped into the second room. The second riddle was: what goes up but never goes down? The Emperor thought and said a cloud but nothing happened so he had to try again. A couple of seconds later, he whispered age and another stone slid open and the third room was revealed. The last riddle was: what is always in front of you but can never be seen? The Emperor really didn't know what to answer so he said air but nothing happened so he thought even harder. Then he got an idea and he shouted out excitedly "the future!" Within seconds, a massive lake appeared in front of him and miraculously, there laid a HUGE stash of gold, all for him. He jumped in glee singing like a bird tweeting in the sky. Without waiting a second, forgetting about the warning sign, he put everything in his pockets (wherever he could think of basically) and then he started to walk towards the Sonaria lake. He said loudly and clearly: "for my first wish, I want to be immortal". Magically sparkles from the nearby flowers rushed into him while he was laughing. "For my second wish, I want to be the richest person in the world". Out of nowhere, a basket full of gold appeared in front of him. "For my third wish, I want to be the most handsome person in the world". But then something terrible happened, the Emperor was turned into a monster! The water vocalized: "We warned you not to be too greedy but you didn't listen so you have to pay the consequences". The Emperor could not believe what just happened. He tried to complain and explain himself, but only the sound of a horrifying roar got out of his mouth. But the only reply he got was: "You will be stuck like this until you find true love".

In the meantime, in a far away village, there was a beautiful girl being mistreated by everyone because of her long red hair. People thought that she was a witch. In despair, she escaped hoping to find the Mogao grottoes and make a wish. Her grandma once shared with her the secret of the Mogao grottoes and their location. She followed the light at sunset. After a long and tiring journey, she finally reached The Grottoes! She ran joyfully towards it hoping that the Sonaria lake was there. She saw the sign and told herself that she must obey the rules. After the three riddles, she saw the lake and a hideous beast next to it. Her mouth let out a little scream. She made her first wish: "I wish to never be mistreated again." Her second wish was: "I want to find true love". At that moment, the beast woke up and slowly walked towards her. She stepped back and cried. She was so scared that no sound came from her mouth. She was paralysed. With watery eyes, the beast bowed in front of her and gently kissed her hand. Startled and overwhelmed, the girl felt pity for the beast and wished she could help him. She cuddled him and kissed him back. At that moment, the air got filled with floating multicolored flowers and the beast gradually turned back into the old Emperor. The girl and the Emperor fell in love at once. They went back to the Emperor's village and got married. All his life, the Emperor remembered this experience and swore to never be so selfish, greedy and careless towards people. He was forever so grateful for having such a wonderful wife, she was more important than any gold in the world. Everyone in their kingdom was so happy and they lived happily ever after. Or so they thought...

Ten years passed by but every now and then, a huge mountain of sand would form in the distance and disappear but everytime it got closer. The Emperor was becoming worried. So one day, he told his soldiers to go to investigate. When they returned, the chef explained that it was a massive and deadly sand-worm and everyone was in danger. The Emperor thought and thought and thought until one day he found an idea. They were going to put red and golden firecrackers all around the village so that when the sand-worm comes it will be scared away by all the noise. On the night the sand-worm arrived, the villagers set up the fireworks praying that the plan would work. Unfortunately, the sand-worm rushing towards the village didn't even change its path. The Emperor was starting to lose hope. His whole kingdom would be destroyed and there was nothing he could do. He felt so helpless. Luckily, his lovely wife remembered that she never used her third wish in Sonaria lake. Without wasting a minute, they rushed back to the Mogao Grottoes. Emotionally, she expressed her last wish: "I wish my kingdom stays safe from any threats to come". From that moment, an invisible dome covered the entire kingdom like a protected shield. From that memorable day, a massive banquet is celebrated every year to show respect and thankfulness to Sonaria Lake.

Mogao Grottoes

Good Hope School, Chan, Hayden – 12

The cavern sloped down, until the air was so thick and stale that Anzan and his team could only breathe shortly and quickly, like a dog panting after a run. The elegant, faded art on the red clay walls and the smooth stone sculptures on either side became invisible in the shroud of pure darkness.

Anzan switched on his flashlight and pointed in the right direction, which immediately revealed a dusty, rotting skeleton appearing to lung at them. Anzan nearly dropped the flashlight as his men yelped, but then his gaze fell on the two rusting green shackles holding the bony wrists to the wall. 'Not all of it is beauty and grace anymore,' he muttered under his breath. He called to his men: 'Let's keep walking.' No sooner after he had spoken, a dead end loomed before them, dark and ominous.

'A door!' Anzan yelled to his companions. 'Here! There's a faint outline here.'

They pried open the door and cautiously stepped inside, surveying the scene before them. Inside was a large cave constructed of jagged obsidian. Glowing crystal stalagmites hung on the ceiling, giving off a warm tingly feeling. The only thing in the cave was a long golden sarcophagus adorned with warding spells written in demotic and bejewelled with silver.

'Okay, men, carefully,' Anzan said, nearing the sarcophagus. 'There may be dangers you never know—'

'Ow!' a rather young man yelped as he pricked his finger on a stray obsidian jutting out from the mass of black. Anzan sighed and pulled out a bottle of alcohol and some salve. 'Take this,' he said, promptly placing them into the other man's hand. 'The salve works wonders for little cuts like this.'

Ignoring the other man, who was profusely thanking Anzan, the archaeologist approached the sarcophagus, giddy with anticipation. Without hesitation, Anzan reached out a hand and laid it upon the golden lid.

At once, the room started to spin. The obsidian chunks whirled and rotated like robotic fangs, and the crystals spilled fluorescent liquid that dripped onto Anzan's shoulders. He was dimly aware of the other men taking a break in the cave while he spun, on and on...

Anzan, surprisingly, woke up.

He was in a strange land where all around him was barren land and scarlet sand. Wispy cacti, seemingly water-deprived, stood short and stout with a defeated air, half buried in sand. The heat was so intense that it created ripples in the air.

But Anzan's sleepy state did not last long. Before he could figure out where he was, a huge roar jolted him and he could have sworn the ground shook.

Nosediving towards him from the sky was an enormous, winged reptile. It gave another echoing roar before coming to a landing, its talons scraping dents in the rocky ground.

'You're...you're a dragon,' Anzan stuttered with amazement.

And indeed it was a dragon, each scale looking astoundingly thin and perfectly iridescent while reflecting the glare of the sun. Its bat-like wings were folded along its lithe body, the membrane between the thick bones clear and thin, yet able to soar through the sky at neck breaking speeds without as much as tearing an inch. It had a long, slender neck leading to a relatively small head with two large, straight horns almost lying flat alongside its scaly neck. Two amber slits stared at him curiously.

Anzan drew in an awe-stricken breath. He'd always had a predilection for these fascinating mythical creatures, following in his father's footsteps, who'd been a well-known monk studying these legends before that terrible night. If his father had been alive to see what Anzan had accomplished, he would have been so proud. The sight of the dragon's amber slits reminded Anzan of his father's golden ones.

'You're quite a beauty, aren't you?' Anzan stroked its ear tufts. 'I wish my father could have seen you.'

And then the dragon was gone; Anzan simply couldn't describe how odd it felt. In the dragon's place was a pale man with a very familiar face...

'Indeed,' the monk agreed, and Anzan could see the pair of dragon wings on his back, slightly unfolded. 'You are in the Land of the Lost, where all whose names were lost through history live. But you do not belong here. Not yet.' He shook his head.

Anzan's eyes stung. 'You can't leave me. *I* can't leave you here. Not again.'

'You'll be back,' the monk promised. 'I am sorry for what happened. I did not mean to...' his voice trailed off, but both men could hear the unspoken words hang in the air. The tension in the air was so thick you could cut it with a knife. *I did not mean to disappear forever without a warning.*

'I'm sorry,' the monk said again.

He placed his cool hand upon Anzan's chest, and Anzan *remembered*. He remembered that night, when *he* had said to Anzan: *Don't worry. I'll be back. I promise.*

And *he'd* left anyways.

'There are things in the world that you do not know, dear boy,' the monk said. 'The world is not so much black and white as chaos and order. This is what I meant when I told you I would be back.'

Anzan turned his head away. He didn't want to hear this anymore. *It was like a tunnel to a lost world in the past*, the scholars had said. And now he understood.

You can't bring someone back from the dead. You can't follow his footsteps in order to rid yourself of the grief and replace it with pride. A piece of that someone you once loved dearly is always in your heart. And you don't need to set aside your grievances to find that piece.

It's always there.

'I'm sorry,' the monk whispered one last time. And then within a blink of an eye, Anzan was back in the obsidian cave where this emotional rollercoaster had first started, drawing his hands away from the sarcophagus.

But something was wrong. The sarcophagus had been opened...

Something told Anzan to move. He did, gripping the sides of the sarcophagus tightly, and peered over it, his knuckles white.

A haze struck him, his breath caught. 'No,' he muttered.

After all of this. After seeing *him*.

The body in the sarcophagus opened its swirling gold-hazel eyes. *Hello, Anzan*, it said in his mind. *You've finally grown up.*

A thousand years later

'Welcome back,' the monk said, his face sad as he looked at the old man who stood hunched in the same place young Anzan had once stood. 'I knew you would come, but not so soon. What happened to you?'

The old man snorted, but his face was miserable. 'They kicked me right outa the organisation,' he growled. 'Said I was crazy, making up stories about bodies and coffins and doors. Of course, I didn't mention dimensions, or else they would've put me in an asylum for sure.'

The monk scrutinised him carefully with those gold eyes. 'Then?'

'I died, alone on the streets,' the man said. 'Nothing but a filthy peasant begging for crumbs. And then it's several centuries later before they stopped laughing 'bout crazy old Anzan.'

The monk placed a hand on Anzan's chest, a loving gesture.

'Now you understand why I left,' the monk said sadly. 'It destroyed me. I was despondent and unresponsive in my angst for decades, but just like you, I recovered from the loss. Things do not choose to be lost. Victims do not choose to be killed. But mankind can choose to find things. Murderers can choose to protect, to give up a life of death instead. And I choose to protect those who have lost so much they cannot loose anymore.'

His fingers laced through Anzan's.

'Welcome home, son,' he said.

The Mogao Mission

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Chan, Kathryn – 13

It had been a lifelong ambition to see the Mogao caves; an ambition about to be fulfilled as my camels and I progressed along the ancient Silk Road towards the venerable caves themselves.

Having trekked for several days through the torrid sands and scorching heat of the Taklamakan desert, I gasped as I saw the shape taking form across the weather-beaten landscape. They rose from the earth as if one with nature, radiating a tranquil yet powerful ambience. Embedded in the sandy rock was the facade of a temple surrounded by countless cavities resembling the hexagonal cells of a honeycomb. The temple emanated an aura of strength and glory as though it were keeping a millennia of secrets under its roof. It blushed as the light passed across its seven floors and I felt the influence that this cultural crossroad had had on all privileged to see her.

Many fascinating stories had been told to me about the caves, where people were so enchanted by the beautiful tapestries and statues that they could not bring themselves to leave. Now I understood why, and how deeply these ancient people had understood the relationship between themselves and Mother Earth. Where had we gone wrong?

Thank goodness I had not left this journey any longer as it was only March. Yet my throat was parched, my feet were blistered and the camels were ready for an all important rest. I realised that the following month the sun would have been too intense for me to reach my destination.

Walking past the numerous small dwellings where my ancestors had lived, I felt a lump in my throat. I reflected on my own small achievements in life feeling overwhelmed by all that was before me.

My heart pounding with excitement, I entered the caves.

Several huge Buddhist statues stood at the doorway, their size once again emphasizing power as they silently stared as if following my every move. These supreme beings with divine status protected this sacred site. Despite hundreds of years facing all types of weather, they still stood imposing their power over all those who entered.

There was a coolness inside the caves, a welcome relief from the searing heat outside. As my eyes became accustomed to the dark and the dusty smell that I couldn't quite recognise, I realised there were a myriad of rooms all around me. Where to start?

Colours slowly revealed themselves and once again I found myself in awe at the way the monks had incorporated light deep into the caves from so many angles. The first room I entered was filled with red wall paintings of people worshipping their gods. There were whole walls depicting stories of ancient ceremonies, beliefs and myths. Great details allowed me to step into their world and truly understand more about these magnificent people. I carried on walking into a second room, again full of paintings but this time surrounded by huge sculptures – men, women and children during harvest time. Unable to recognise some of the plants and vegetables, I assumed that many of the crops no longer existed in the modern world. I was beginning to feel like a time traveller prying into a whole new world.

I brushed my hand along the tiny cracks in the wall, feeling the power and strength surging through the walls of the caves. I was in the presence of something much greater than I was, and I knew that being able to venture in this sacred place was a privilege.

As I marvelled at the magnificent yet intricate artwork, I caught sight of a miniature lotus-shaped jade stone stuck on a wall, appearing as part of a drawing of people offering a gift to Buddha. Fascinated, I knelt down and leaned forward for a closer look. There seemed to be a mysterious substance that I couldn't quite describe swirling around inside the stone, placing a hypnotic trance over me. Tracing the grooves on the lotus with my finger, I was amazed at how the ancient people were able to create such detailed and beautiful art without any modern technology.

Just as I lifted my finger from the stone, I heard a small click and felt a strange tugging sensation on my body. I saw the rock enlarge before me, the mystifying substance within the lotus swirling more rapidly as I felt myself being sucked into the unknown abyss inside the rock. Then all I saw was darkness.

I found myself lying on the soft grass in the midst of an endless plain beside a river of lotuses, the wind gently caressing my face. The flowers vibrantly bloomed, blushing in pink as they stretched along the river, their sweet fragrance filling up my nose. I was bewildered at how I was here but at the same time closed my eyes to revel in the stunning view.

As I watched circles of ripples travel across the water surface, a booming yet soothing voice sounded behind me. I turned. Striding gracefully towards me, was a lion, its intelligent brown eyes gazing deeply into mine, as if they contained the deepest, darkest secrets of the universe. It walked with a confident yet majestic swagger, its mane flying freely in the wind. "Do not fear," the lion's voice seemed to flow so naturally from its mouth. "I am simply here to spread a message. Humans are destroying the Earth, cutting down trees and polluting everything in nature. If this continues, the entire planet is doomed, and I cannot stand watching them continue to destroy their planet anymore. As the protector of the Mogao caves, I am unable to leave my position to warn the humans of the consequences they will have to face." It shook its head with a deep sigh. "I am appointing you as my messenger to spread the word and do everything in your power to stop this situation from getting worse." I nodded. I had always been unclear about what I wanted to do in life, but now, I was glad I finally had a clear goal to work towards. "The Earth's fate is in your hands. Keep my pendant as a reminder of what you have to do." It gave me one last look as it shook its mane and a pendant in the shape of a lion fell out onto the palm of my hand.

The scenery gradually faded away and I found myself lying on my camel's back outside the caves, with my belongings right beside me, as if it had all been a dream. But I was fairly certain it was not, for grasped tightly in my hand was the lion pendant I was given. It had only been fifteen minutes since I had entered the caves, yet I came out as a new man, comprehending knowledge I never would've known was there. I tightened my grip on the pendant. I was given a much larger purpose, and I was going to fulfil it. Continuing my journey along the Silk Road, I was determined to complete the task I was given to save the Ear

Hidden in the Desert

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Jiang, David – 12

Max studied the map carefully, breathing with a feeling of urgency, and almost tumbled off his chair in alarm. A large pile of charts and vivid reports made by explorers lay on the floor, as did half a dozen empty cans of tea. The smell of his breath hinted at the necessity of mouthwash, and he looked as if he had not showered nor slept in days. Nevertheless, he heaved a great sigh and continued to examine the map, giving it his unwavering attention. Finally, so fatigued that he could not even raise his hand, his glasses slowly slid down the side of his face. His eyes drooped, and he thought in his mind: Sleep, sleep, sleep...

Max woke to the ear-piercing sound of his alarm clock. Stretching and groaning, he clambered out of his chair and flicked his eyes at the calendar. He yelped and scrambled to find his diary. Max had slept for over two days, and the expedition was about to start! He raced around his spartan room, hastily preparing his notes about his enigmatic yet dangerous destination, The Mogao Caves, known for its paintings and mysterious history.

A few hours later, Max slid off his plane into an appallingly different world. For hundreds of miles, the landscape was barren, deserted and devoid of most life. After a long trek in the desert, they had finally reached the caves. A gigantic sandstone wall carefully moulded together towered over its surroundings, with hundreds of little caves mysteriously curving hither and thither among a meandering valley of desolate mountains and hills. The average person who sees this image, this complex system of these caverns, sees only the outside, the magnificent mountains and valleys stretching further than the eye can see. However, being a seasoned explorer, Max was intrigued by the interior, the rocky insides of the hundreds of the infinitesimal grottoes. Many explorers had travelled to these Mogao Grottoes, but they all came back in a stupor, murmuring about an ancient world in the caves, and depicted the same image as told in those old Chinese myths. Max was one of many explorers to attempt to find this lost civilisation.

From his toolbelt, Max fetched out a lasso and, with great effort, thrust it up and lodged it onto the side of a protruding ledge that jutted out the side of the mountain like an arrow. Then, he tied the other end of the rope around his waist and began the perilous climb up the cliff. Every step used up every bit of his strength, and when his hands tired, Max used his feet to grapple to a small overhanging rock, and sometimes the ledge would crumble under his weight, and the lasso would be the only thing attaching him to the mortal world.

After what felt like hours, he scaled the last wall and fell headfirst into a surprisingly dusty cave. Max rose slowly and yelped in pain as his head hit the ceiling of the cave, a cloud of dust floating down. He choked and spluttered and struggled to maintain balance. His echoes reverberated across the cave into the valley. There was a uniqueness to this cave and an old yet pungent smell that was somehow indescribable. Fetching a wood stick from his toolbelt, Max lightly brushed it against an oily match, and it immediately caught ablaze. He threw the stick at the murky darkness before him, and his eyes darted back and forth between the walls of the cave and the torch, which tumbled slowly down.

An eerie blue light shone from the sky and into the cave, and Max, totally spooked, strengthened his nerves and plunged forward, his arms outstretched in self-defence. Soon he was enveloped in thick darkness, with no light but a small torch to guide him. As he descended deeper and deeper into the depths of the cave, he raised his torch to illuminate one wall. On it, he saw murals and depictions that were more ancient than even the Egyptians. It was just when Max was in deep reverie when he stumbled across a tortoiseshell. "What was a tortoiseshell doing in a cave in the middle of a desert?" Max thought. He pressed his makeshift torch against the tortoiseshell, and he found some interesting engravings on the exterior. Max, who understood all ancient Chinese writings, could not even recognise this himself. Racking his brain for ideas, and it finally hit him. This writing was Jia Gu Wen, recorded on tortoiseshells thousands of years before complex civilisation was formed in China. The writing was comprised of small pictures that somewhat resembled the object they were describing. Treating it with a great deal more respect, Max carefully tucked the artefact into his toolbelt and continued his trek along the cave. Suddenly, Max felt his feet give way, and he plummeted down a vast chasm. Frantically waving his arms in the air, he clung onto a ledge and held on to dear life, slowly making his way down. Max was surprised to find a dead-end and landed with a satisfying thump. He found the ground soft like burial dirt, and with his years of experience as an explorer, deduced that underneath the ground was a place long buried and forgotten. Max slowly clawed his way down, and by the end, his arms were sore and his hands red with callouses. He felt a rush of wind that created an updraft that lifted the leaves and rocks in the vicinity up and out of the cave. Max coughed and spluttered

and found himself standing in the middle of a swirling dust cloud that came from thousands of years of dust gathering these rocks and buildings.

Max did not dare open his eyes until the dust cloud subsided. The ferocious swirl slowed, and the dust floated upwards along with the other items. Then, slowly opening his eyes, Max gasped in awe at the unfolding scene before him. A fully-fledged ancient metropolis that could have housed hundreds of thousands of people and must have stretched for a large proportion of the whole Gansu province stood before him. This was the first time Max thought of the ancient towns in the Mogao caves as a reality. The buildings stood tall and true before him, and no one would ever be able to doubt the existence of the caves again.

Moreover, the buildings, although dusty and in derelict were still intact. It was what archaic London must have looked like before the great fire, with clay huts and terracotta buddha statues stretching for all the eye can see. Each house was refurbished with buddha paintings, terracotta statues of the enlightened being, and its fair share of Tortoiseshells. In total darkness, Max lit a torch. He was startled to find himself in the middle of an enclosed courtyard. Raising his eyes, he yelped and stared into the gigantic red eye of a massive buddha, in plain South Asian attire, dancing in a circle in jubilation, holding hands with a dozen other giant Buddhas.

He was already hundreds of feet below sea level in the depths of a mountain cave, but the place felt lively and not entirely discarded. The place had spiritual meaning for millions of people, thought Max. It seemed like a crossover between heaven and earth. The symbolic meaning of the Buddhist drawings, the hundreds of Buddha statues and idols, further accentuated this fact.

Soberly pondering other religious sites like the Western Wall or the Great Mosque and many other ancient relics, Max thought of how melancholy it would be to see this beautiful ancient capital turn into areas infested with unwelcome tourists. Maya bay, Venice, and the Great Pyramids have been ruined, desecrated and nearly destroyed by an influx of tourists. He had no doubt that a discovery like this was unprecedented and that swarms of tourists could easily ruin the place. This hidden gem that was the subject of nameless legends, blessed with a mesmerizingly large scale and breath taking view, would cease to exist. Therefore Max resolved to keep the place a secret and never tell anyone of the site. Heaving a great sigh, Max climbed slowly up the archaic staircase leading to the cave, and on his way back, filled in the cave with muddy dirt. "I can't bear to see the place in shambles," Max says, "I am doing something good for religion, and Humanity as a whole." He slowly trotted out of the cave, listening to the soft breeze of the wind, and looked again at the Mogao Caves, a slight smile of satisfaction on his face.

The next day, Max woke with a relaxed yawn and stretched out of bed, looking refreshed and washed. He smiled at himself serenely in the mirror, and staring once again at the azure blue sky, realised that there are many things in life to be cheerful about, and he felt no compunction for what he did the previous day.

The Magical Painting of Hope

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Lam, Audrey – 13

Gentle shades of sapphire and turquoise painted across the atmosphere as layers of puffy white clouds suffused across the horizon, sheltering the small town from the sun's luminescence. Rows of sage green trees neatly decorated the tiled floor as rough grainy caves carved into the tall cliffs. In the middle of the town was a tall majestic temple with ancient red-roofed balconies and religious Buddhist characters delicately carved all over the walls. The temple stood there proudly as it watched over the people of the Mogao Grottoes. Echoes of laughter and chatter gracefully danced across the warm Spring air as a group of monks briskly walked towards the temple for their daily worship.

"I—is it just me ... or—?" Nicole murmured softly, trembling with fear, as her eyes skimmed the area again for the third time. She bit her bottom lip with her two front teeth and rubbed her eyes to make sure she wasn't in a dream. Adrian tilted his head upwards and immediately dropped his jaw in disbelief.

"I— where are we? Why are we here?" Adrian shuddered. Seconds ago, they were in the history museum on their school trip, chatting in one of the exhibit halls, and now this? The two exchanged worried glances as they tried their hardest to recall if they had recently done anything that could have caused this.

"Wait — hold on! What if it was because you touched it?" Nicole blurted out after some awfully long seconds of silence.

"Touched what?" Adrian's eyelids tensed.

"The painting in the exhibit," Nicole whispered quietly as she sunk her fingernails into her arm, trying to relieve her stress.

"W—what? How does touching the painting even relate to this?" Adrian forced a chuckle.

"Look around you! This place looks exactly like the one inside the painting in the history museum that you touched. What if we're stuck inside the painting? And this is some kind of punishment for touching it?" Nicole breathed faintly. The two's heartbeats began accelerating and their faces turned as pale as ghosts. They didn't know what was going on or how this was even possible.

After a few minutes of constructing ideas, Nicole had come up with a plan to get them out of here.

"OK — how about this, we walk around and try to find someone who might know what is going on and how to get us out of here." Nicole asserted with a hopeful smile on her face.

"And how would that work? Why would people here even believe us if we told them this was a painting and we're stuck in it?"

Adrian lay slumped against an old tree trunk as his mind tried to process what was going on.

"Well, it might not work but it's worth a try. Better than doing nothing right? Just follow my lead." Nicole called back happily as she gleefully skipped forward.

"Ok, fine." Adrian sighed hesitantly.

The town was a lot smaller close-up. It was shielded by hundreds of ancient caves along the edges and was permeated with all sorts of people, from merchants to monks to sculpsit to painters. Everyone was wearing posh silk-made tunics with long wide sleeves, high waists and colourful ribbons wrapped around them. Women carried small circular fans embroidered with flower patterns while men carried parchment books covered in inked calligraphy writings. When the people saw Adrian and Nicole, they started murmuring and shooting judgemental looks at them. The two looked like outsiders and didn't fit in.

"Hey, who are you guys?" a slow raspy voice whispered from behind. Nicole let out a faint gasp and turned her head to face a sardonic looking old man. The old man's face was slightly translucent and marvellously wrinkled, he looked at Nicole and Adrian in bafflement.

"Hi, my name's Nicole and this is Adrian. Nice to meet you. We were just wondering, where are we and how do we get out of here? I think we're stuck here somehow." Nicole sighed and replied with a friendly smile on her face.

"I'm not too sure what you mean by 'you're stuck here' but you two seem lost so I'll lend a helping hand. If you guys want to get out of here, you should go look for the magical painting of hope." The old man was half smiling and half squinting in confusion.

"What's that?" Adrian and Nicole asked desperately in unison.

"You've never heard of the magical painting of hope!?" the old man stared at the two, dazed, with his mouth wide open. "The magical painting of hope is the most famous tale told here. In the story, it tells us that when this town was first built, Yang Jian, Emperor of the Sui dynasty came and visited the Mogao Grottoes. During his visit, the monks treated him respectfully and kindly. And before he left, Emperor Yang Jian gifted the monks with a beautiful painting as gratitude for their kindness and hospitality.

Legend has it that this painting contains magical powers that could grant anyone who finds it with a wish of their desire. So I guess that if you find the painting, you can use the wish to bring you home? ”

“Where do we find the painting?”. Adrian and Nicole’s eyes lit up with hope as they asked excitedly.

“I’m not sure, no one has ever found the painting before but there has been a riddle passed down from our ancestors that gives us a clue to find the painting.” The old man continued.

“What’s the riddle?” Adrian pleaded.

“Hmm, let me think. Ah right, the riddle is:

I am home to many animals such as insects or bats,
Whenever they start talking, they never seem to stop.
Where I am, a single drop of water can form a pointed weapon.
From where I am, you can see the entire town.”

Adrian and Nicole stared at the old man in puzzlement. What could the riddle mean?

“What if it’s a forest? Forests have animals, insects and bats!” Nicole called out.

“No, that doesn’t explain the pointy weapon part and there aren’t any forests near here!” Adrian replied.

“Oh right, what do you think then?” Nicole scratched her head.

“Um– I’m not sure.” Adrian laughed nervously.

After spending a few minutes trying to figure out the riddle, Nicole suddenly whispered “Wait, could the answer be caves? There are loads of caves around here and caves are usually filled with bats. Also, don’t you remember, we learned about caves last year and the teacher said that there were pointy things hanging around inside the caves. They were called ... stalagmites, right?!”

“Oh, yea. How did you figure that out so easily...” Adrian asked, feeling embarrassed that Nicole thought of the answer faster than he did.

“It’s just logic.” Nicole chuckled with a grin on her face.

“Wait, but how do we even figure out which cave the painting is in? There are so many caves here.” Adrian asked.

“The riddle says you can see the entire town from where it is. I think it means the painting is in one of the higher caves?” Nicole smiled.

“Right! Ok, let’s go find the painting. We can start from the cave over there.” Adrian’s finger lingered at one of the higher caves in front of them.

“Okay.” Nicole nodded.

Entering the first cave, Adrian and Nicole were automatically greeted with the smokey smell of burnt candles and thick layers of dust. The cave was filled with statues of delicately sculpted deities in rich clothing. They were surrounded by dozens of mosaic designs painted across the walls. Most of the caves looked the same, they were all filled with religious items and statues of all sorts.

After spending hours visiting different caves and trying to find the magical painting of hope to get back home, Nicole and Adrian finally came across a rather odd-looking cave. The walls of the inner cave were not decorated with mosaic patterns like the other ones they visited. Adrian and Nicole stared at each other in confoundment. All of a sudden, Adrian called out “Look, the painting!”. Sitting at the very side of the room was a tiny painting framed with golden edges. The painting was a picture of a dove and beside the dove wrote the letters "希望.". This meant hope in Chinese. "I think this is it!" Nicole said as a smile spread across her face and her eyes glistened with happiness.

"Yeah. But now what do we do with the painting, how do we get home?" Adrian asked curiously. Suddenly, tiny black letters appeared on the golden frame of the painting, it wrote: "to have your wish of hope granted, blink twice and say your wish." In unison, Adrian and Nicole blinked twice and said "I wish to go home!".

Within seconds, Adrian and Nicole were transported back to the modern-day world in the history museum where they left off.

The Lost Treasure of the Mogao Grottoes

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Lam, Timmy – 12

“Deep down in the mystical caves of Mogao, lies a treasure. A treasure with a gift to heal all sickness, all pain. A treasure with a power so strong that it will cure me of the dreadful sickness that I possess and will allow me to finally break loose of the chains that forever strap me to this bed, and finally set me free once again. The treasure is guarded by an ancient dragon, with extraordinary powers. Only he will let through the purest of hearts, and I believe that you have what it takes. It is a mystical place unexplored for an unimaginable amount of time, and it is only now that you, my granddaughter Jade, the daughter of the Wong family, will finally know the truth about the hidden wonders of The Lost Treasure of the Mogao Grottoes.”

As the sun sets, Jade sets out to the seemingly everlasting mountain range stretching across the horizon. As she approaches the bottom of the hill that she inhabits, she acknowledges that she may not ever come back. She questions if what her grandmother had told her was true, and that it can truly cure her sickness. Jade sees a forest up ahead of her, and although sceptical, decides to enter. She sees lush greenery, magical trees, wondrous bushes all enclosed around her that seem to be full of life, untouched by all humans for countless years until suddenly, a shadow appears to slip past her view. A silhouette of some sort of creature. Jade yells, “Who’s there?” But no response is heard. Jade draws her sword ready to fight whatever this creature is, whatever mysteries it hides. Out of nowhere, it jumps out at her, and with no time to examine it, Jade immediately slashes at this monster, wounding it in the chest. It attempts to glance at something beyond the forest, just before it collapses onto the rock-hard ground below. The monster, who appears to be a mix of a lion, snake, and goat, finally speaks. “I am a guardian of the temple and you, Jade, are worthy.” It disappears in a blink of an eye, leaving behind nothing, but its velvet red blood. Jade begins to think that what her grandmother was telling her was true and that these guardian-like creatures are only the start. They will not stop at anything until they kill her. Jade proceeds through the forest, now much more tentatively, until finally, she meets the end of it. She sees an enormous structure in front of her eyes, and can’t see it quite clearly enough until she exits the forest. Jade sees the ginormous Chinese temple built by an ancient civilisation formed into a cliff. It has four pillars each holding up its own section, six red roofs carved in the style of the forbidden city each separating the individual floors from each other, an old, musty scent, and a gargantuan of a statue next to it. She is bewildered.

Jade wanders down the sand-like path near the structure until she finds the entrance. Except, she doesn’t see a way to access it, only a concrete wall separating her and the inside of the temple. Jade is very confused. She almost feels like cursing and yells, “I’ve come all this way just to find a useless temple?” up to the skies. Out of frustration, she picks a rock she finds on the floor and throws it at the wall. Jade expects to hear the sound of the rock smashing against the side of the building, but hears nothing. She inspects the wall, then slowly puts her hand through it revealing the real entrance. Jade is now strangely drawn to this and realises that this concrete wall isn’t what it seems to be, but rather a hidden entrance to the temple. You have to walk through it to enter. She rushes through and discovers a room on the other side of the wall with art painted all along the sides full of ancient Chinese myths and legends. But amongst the paintings, three stone statues stood at the back-end of the room. One appears to be very similar to the one that Jade had encountered earlier, one has a goat head, but the body of a human, and one has the head of a bull, but the body of an elephant. Suddenly, the concrete wall magically seals behind her, and the statues come to life. Jade is caught off guard and hastily draws her sword once again, to then instantly start fighting with the statues. Amidst the fight, Jade wonders how this all could be happening. She reasons to herself that this might be a figment of her imagination or some sort of dream, but deep down, she knows that it is not. She continuously slashes at the statues, each of them all constantly charging at her one at a time, all constantly spitting all sorts of fires, gasses, and even poison, until one statue misses an attack towards Jade, and without hesitation, she uses this opportunity to destroy it. One down, two to go. The second statue is clearly enraged and starts to swing his blade side to side in some form of circular motion. Jade finds it hard to defend this time but eventually gathers the courage to slide under the legs of the statue and destroy it from behind. The last statue is the least of the challenges. It is the bigger one and does not have much mobility. Jade easily swerves around it and chops the stone head clean off. Now that all statues are destroyed, the next room is finally revealed, rewarding Jade for the effort she put into her fight.

The moment Jade enters the mysterious room, she notices that it is not a room, but rather a gigantic cave. She observes a glowing object sitting behind a ginormous sleeping silhouette, and realises that that silhouette is one belonging to a dragon. The guardian of the cave. The only thing that stands between her and the cure to her grandmother’s sickness, is that dragon, and only that dragon. Tension builds up as Jade slowly edges toward the mighty creature, all this work building up to this moment. All she has to do is grab the treasure, and run. She lightly treads over twigs and leaves situated on the ground, but unfortunately, also onto a fallen branch. It snaps, and to Jade, feels like the longest second of her life. The dragon is instantaneously aware of her presence

and wakes up causing Jade to be forced to be engaged in a fight with stakes so high, it is either life or death. She swiftly dodges a tail strike of the dragon, then slices a cut into the dragon's leg, only to see it heal up again. The dragon seems to silently chuckle, and charges toward Jade at top speed. She ducks, barely avoiding the dragon's attack, only to get flung against the side of the wall from behind. As she struggles to get up, the dragon starts to charge once again, swinging its body from side to side, as if a blood-thirsty snake. Jade knows that this will be the end of her, and wishes her grandmother a goodbye with a prayer into the sky. As the dragon comes closer and closer, Jade recalls all the great memories that she shared with her grandmother. All the good times. But suddenly, the mighty creature stops at the tip of Jade's nose, moments away from death. Jade is frozen with confusion, until the dragon booms, "Jade, daughter of the Wong family, has what it takes to take the treasure from this cave and use it for good use. I trust that you will guard it safely with your life, alongside your grandmother." Jade is extremely dumbfounded, and asks the dragon, "Why me?" For which it replies, "You came all this way for your loved one. To help her. This is a noble act, and you should be applauded for it." Jade, still as bewildered as before, politely asks the mighty creature, "May I take the treasure?" For which it doesn't reply, but silently agrees. She takes the treasure, to finally exit the cave, and out of the temple.

She walks back up the sand path, through the forest, through the vast, lush mountains, and finally arrives to smell the warmth of green tea awaiting her, and the temple that she calls home. Days have passed, and as soon as Jade sees her grandmother, they both smile at each other, and finally, after so long, embrace.

Fourth Beast's Curse

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Lui, Michelle – 13

In the far-off mountains of Mogao Grottoes and Silk Road, a girl lay drowsing in her simple house, reliving her past. All the storms she survived through, all the key events of her life. She smiled knowing how her kind people were generous enough to look after her.

When the dull caves of Mogao Grottoes were refurbished into comfortable living spaces, pilgrims and monks saw a child that found herself in their town. They knew that – considering their religion – there would be consequences, but took the risk and smuggled the child into their pocket dimension. Thankfully everyone in the village accepted her as their own, naming her ‘Shao’. For many years, only peace and harmony existed in the mountain caves.

One entity in the safe haven despised the people. It was too weak, unable to feast on their happiness – yet. Year after year, its strength surging back slowly, it made people clash against each other. This particular entity thrived purely on conflict and pain. Lurking among the citizens, hidden in their shadows, it sat and stalked its victims all day long. For what purpose, nobody knew.

★★★★

Shao, now aged 14, became an avid collector of all the treasures of nature. Anything she could find, she would snatch. Vibrantly coloured rocks, dead insects, desert plants, everything. She possessed a brave heart, daring to steal her peoples’ sacred artworks no matter the aftermath. Even though she was the youngest citizen, Shao’s thinking was sharper than most.

The girl never really understood the ways of her hometown, even though she’d been living in it all her life. She, unlike the others, wasn’t religious, causing many of them to turn against her. She was secluded from all her friends over a religion.

Shao, who dreamt pleasant dreams of her childhood, had a storm raging in her head. The nightmare was forming; here comes the event that changed her life forever.

On April 4th, Shao felt a strange sensation pulse through her body. Jabs of pain hit her back like someone was performing acupressure on her. Wherever she went, eyes spied on her from every corner. She swore that there was a creature that looked far too abnormal to be real ducking away into the darkness when seen.

During the tender hours of night, visions of a beast danced into her dreams. Its eyes were a blazing purple; its fur coat was soaked in blood; its claws were sharp like glass and its scorpion tail swung behind it. The creature was glaring at her with an enormous grin on its face.

‘I’ll take away everything you love,’ came a raspy voice. *‘Happiness is overrated. I failed to be joyful centuries ago, and you must suffer the same fate as ME!’*

And the dream ended with distorted images and a disgusting cackle. Shao woke up, sweat coating her entire body. Her thoughts and feelings were not normal. Whatever creature she saw in her dream had to be the one peering at her from behind closed doors. *No, this isn’t right*, Shao thought. She had enough. It was time to put an end to this beast.

It was nearly impossible to locate her way through the desert in the dark. Shao was shivering from the freezing cold temperatures of midnight. She approached the newly finished shrine. Perhaps the creature would be there. Citizens were forbidden to enter at the time, but nobody could stop her. Shao gawked at the tower looming over her, afraid to discover what would be inside.

The building was warm and silent. Whispers of the wind couldn’t enter these walls. Shao marvelled at what stood in front of her. Stained glass of all colours twinkled above her. It took Shao every muscle of her body not to touch the statues that sat smiling under the luminescent ceiling. Needless to say, she was in love with it.

Shao was lost in the halls of the first floor. She couldn’t take her eyes off the art pieces and murals. The Dunhuang Manuscript caught her eye, and she couldn’t resist pocketing it.

Ascending the tower, Shao felt the same prods of pain on her back. The warmth dissipated and was replaced by an icy cold. Shao crept across the floor, stepping on an object. A deafening crunch echoed through the shrine, apparently she had stepped on a skull. Fresh pools of blood and bones littered the floor. What used to be blissful smirks of statues’ faces were now raging scowls. The creature must really be taking its job of wiping out happiness very seriously.

Room after room filled with beautiful works of art were slashed. Not a single ray of moonlight shone through the

stained glass again. Shao's feet were frozen in place as soon as she reached the top floor. There it was, in all its glory. The satisfied beast lay chewing on a bone, before tossing it into a large pile of skeletons. It bared its teeth in an attempt to smile.

'Why are you doing this to me?' Shao cried. 'I never wanted to meet or hurt you. Leave me alone, I beg you.'

It shrugged. '*You have committed several crimes. Wrongdoers must pay the price.*'

'What crimes? I don't understand.'

'*Lying? An unwise choice. You should have known better,*' it sneered. '*The sacred art you have torn apart just so it looks nice on your shelf? Those are not meant for you. How dare you steal what belongs to the people above you?*'

Was she going insane? Shao decided she had enough fun and raced down the stairs. She wasn't about to deal with a creature that could murder her at any moment. Unfortunately, it didn't take long for her to slip on a puddle of blood, landing harshly on the ground. Her escape hadn't even started and she'd injured herself already.

'*Tsk tsk tsk,*' it taunted.

Tears came to Shao's eyes. 'Let me go. Please.'

'*Do me a favour sweet girl,*' the creature hissed. '*Come with me. There is something you need to see.*'

Although Shao didn't trust it at all, she had no choice. There was a chance she could be killed if she refused to move.

Dragging her with it, the beast threw her into a room with only a pedestal and a gargantuan stone horse that donned armour. Even an inanimate mineral horse struck fear in her. '*Let it decide your fate.*'

Shao gulped. She hesitated for a moment, unsure of what to do. Offer something on the pedestal? There wasn't anything special to place on it apart from her colourful rocks. Then she remembered. She needed to own up to her mistakes and admit the crimes she committed.

From her bag Shao pulled the Dunhuang Manuscript, along with pieces of silk swiped from paintings. She placed it on the pedestal. Human decency was the first step to making sure all problems would be solved.

Within seconds, a deafening neigh came from the horse. The beast's iconic grin spread once again on its grotesque face. It knew her destiny. '*Nice knowing you, Shao.*'

She dropped everything and ran for her life. Despite her efforts, she tripped on the scorpion tail. Her lungs couldn't function immediately. Shao was suffocating, crying for help to anyone in the Thousand Buddha Caves to rescue her. Of course, her voice went unheard.

The beast was acting strangely. Her vision going blurry, Shao could see the vulnerability behind its eyes and snarl. '*Help... me...*'

A cloaked figure rushed into the tower, wielding a sword. Shao was blacking out, choking on air. Someone familiar was beneath that hood. With a single slice, the amulet coiled around the beast's neck was gone. Both her and the beast fell unconscious.

She couldn't move. Shao could see the ceiling. *Phew, I'm alright,* she thought.

It was another noisy afternoon with the wind howling outside. Everything was normal... for now.

Shao regained her mobility hastily. When she crawled outside, all the caves had been abandoned. Her friends were gone. Everyone had disappeared.

'Hello?' she called. The only response appeared to be her own voice.

Even more peculiar, the other cave homes had degraded. Dilapidated houses that wasted away over time, consumed by age. The finest art pieces had been destroyed, only fragments of them left were buried in the sand.

No insects. No attractive rocks. No citizens. Shao was the only living thing visible in the desert. Every event of the shrine were just fuzzy memories. It felt like days ago Walking out clumsily into what was left of her village, she saw the shrine standing in the distance. There wasn't a sign of age whatsoever apart from its usual bright colours fading. Shao's smart mind wasn't working anymore.

Stuck on her wall was a worn piece of animal skin and ink splattered all over it. Most words were readable. Shao's memory had mostly been erased, but knew that the message had to be from her very own people. '*Shao, when will you ever wake up? We miss you.*'

The Fangs of the Flower

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Myers, Jasmine – 13

He had finally reached the caves. After trekking along the arduous silk road, confronting insatiable merchants and warding off grisly bandits he had finally made it. Eyes widened at the sight of the mighty rock pillars, he wiped the sweat off his brow with the back of his rough, calloused hand and approached towering blocks of chiseled stone. It had been many months since he had left the familiarity of the palace to venture on his journey and every inch of his aching body lusted for relaxation and a delicious warm meal. With such an appetite he feared if presented with a flask of water he would drown himself in it, choking on gulps and gulps of clear, cool water. But he had to forget his desires and labour on, battling through the raging desert storms and glaring sun to fulfil his duty.

He had come to the Mogao caves for a reason and planned on executing his task perfectly, nothing could get in his way. Allowing himself the final luscious sip of the liquid gold in his flask, he crept towards the open mouth of the cave, his hand carefully placed on the hilt of his blade. Step by step on the sizzling scorching sand he silently approached, sneaking past the arches and pillars that whirled along, carved in stone. The walls were adorned with decadent murals of vast colour and majestic portraits of powerful deities. His feet floated across the carpet of sand without so much as a whisper or a rustling of the torn midnight black cloth that enshrouded his muscular frame. This was expected. Two years of training with only the most dangerous guards in the entire empire should result in such skills. With the training his weapons had become new limbs, extensions of his body that flowed and moved elegantly, following his every command with power and grace.

He crouched below a well-polished statue, hiding nimbly against the cold, veined marble as two young men marched past cloaked in blood red robes “I can’t believe it!” exclaimed the taller one of the two, clearly infuriated by something. “Everyone knows Ai is the least skilled but of course, she had always been his favourite” replied the other. They rambled on angrily through the pillared corridor into another chamber and as their clamorous echoes faded away he exited the room slyly and continued exploring the caves. He thought to himself as he paced, considering the severity of the situation. *Those men were not monks and they wore those flowing red robes. And they spoke of knives, the emperor must be right. The suspicions seem to be correct.*

He continued along the underground passages, weaving his way through; his mind was occupied by the surprise of this revelation since at first he had doubted the rumours. *Could the caves and monks really have been a front all this time? Is it possible that the Red Dragon really does exist?*

Suddenly, in the corner of his eye he saw a mysterious room that drew him in as if there was some kind of magnetic force beckoning to him, begging him to enter. He stared curiously at the magnificent carving of the engraved dragon that he recognised from the village littered with corpses he had visited before and it seemed to snarl, challenging and taunting him. He approached the entrance, hastily drawing out his silver blade. Hands quivering, he pushed open the sturdy oak doors and entered. They groaned announcing him to the assassin in the chamber and he braced himself, expecting the worst.

However, when his eyes finally opened, he saw a small fragile girl with coal black hair; the colour of death and ruby red lips, shaking adorned in crimson robes that seemed to flow around her like a river. There was something unusual about her but he ignored it and allowed himself to feel relieved. The captain of the imperial guard, one of the most talented skilled swordsmen in the land, could deal with a little girl. His blade gleamed in the light of the flames and he pounced, ready for an easy fight.

“Ai is going to lead us?” exclaimed Dong in surprise. Master Zhao had no reply as he tidied the scrolls littered on the floor. The rest of the young protégés stood bewildered, their jaws hung open and the whites of their eyes grew larger. They all believed she was weak, weak, fragile and sickly. She shook off her bubbling anger. She knew she wasn’t weak like they said. Ai was a lethal poisonous snake coiling, ready to pounce and dig it’s dripping fangs into flesh, disguised as a beautiful wilting flower. Master Zhao asked Ai to stay and the boys all left, grumbling about how ridiculous it was for a girl to lead them. “It must be a joke! Her? Impossible” they muttered outraged amongst themselves. Ai fiddled with her ruby robes, restraining her fingers from reaching for the razor sharp throwing stars that she always hid in her pocket. Her aim was perfect and she knew once her fingers released the steaming anger that boiled in her blood they would never breathe again. She turned away feeling reassured by her weapons; for now they would remain untouched.

“Ai I believe it is time for you to stop your facade. It may prove useful one day but it’s unnecessary amongst your allies” said the master. “Very well, I will show them,” grinned Ai. For years she had struggled to downplay her abilities, constantly missing on

purpose and always allowing the opponent to win. Ai hated having to hinder herself but she knew it would one day be useful. She had looked forward to the day the rest would have that shocked look on their faces. The look of a foolish man when he realises the sweet fragrant wine he poured down his throat so greedily is really poisonous as he splutters taking in his last gulps of air. It made her happy to think of it. She retired to her chambers cheerily to sharpen her favourite dagger. It had been gifted to her when she was accepted into the Red Dragon. The dagger was engraved with the flowing strokes of her name and the symbol of the dragon. The symbol was a warning sign, warning innocent prey to stay away.

Her dagger was finally glaring a bright blinding white, reflecting the dark wisps of hair dangling from her head as she checked its surface carefully, stroking the grooves and dents in its surface. She left her room and headed towards the eastern chambers and the ceremony room. It was a sacred room adorned with lavish furnishings and paintings, even the door was heavily decorated with bright gold all over and a large symbol, the same as the one on her dagger. She could still remember when she first visited the room with Master Zhao. In that same room Master Zhao had told her the saying of the red dragon, the words she had repeated in her head every night. "The wisest man is the man who hides his wisdom only for himself and lets the fools believe he is one of them." At that moment Ai had decided she would follow her master's advice and train until she was the best while pretending to be weak. From that day onwards she trained and trained secretly into the late hours of the night until her hands bled, seeping with blood and her feet were covered in a thick layer of calluses and cuts.

As she stood there marvelling at the walls the sound of careful footsteps approaching reached her ears and sure enough there was a loud heaving groan as the doors swung open. A man cloaked in midnight black with a jagged blade held firmly in his palm entered. His hardened eyes stared at her in bewilderment and he stood dripping with thick sweat. The man lunged forwards, his blade aiming for her chest, hoping to leave her bleeding on the floor, crimson bubbles frothing and spilling out. She avoided the blow easily with her light feet and nimble reflexes. However he almost landed a second blow, scraping the side of her thigh with the needle-sharp edge of his sword. The sting burnt across her skin as ruby droplets escaped. Ai didn't like seeing her own blood, she only liked the blood of others. It was time for offence. She reached into the pocket for her throwing stars. Her heart steadied at the familiar comforting feeling of the weapon in her control. She released with a fluid motion as she had done so many times before however this time she wasn't holding back. It was time to use the fangs she had hidden for so long.

The Caves of Darkness

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Ong, Jayden – 12

Chapter 1 The New World

The new world was a stunning yet terrifying place, when the Caves of Darkness had been rediscovered in the depths of a sandstorm. it unleashed horrendous creatures that tormented our habitat we called Home. These monsters went from area to area, destroying everything in their path, and leaving not even rubble behind.

With darkness, there also came light, a new form of hope was bestowed upon humans, the art and magic of the world's elements. Humans were able to control and bend the elements around them on one condition, they were required to beat a trusted figure in combat, any weapon you were allowed to use.

If you won, you would officially become an elemental. No man on Earth had ever outsmarted the system, except for one...

Chapter 2 The Master – Sensei

I slowly hacked my way through the depths of the sodden pathless forest I was stuck in. I had tripped over and fallen face first into mud multiple times. I spat out the earthy grainy dirt as I got up cursing my luck. I wiped my mouth as I fumed.

Who could have guessed that, I, a warrior who defeated all people by completing the 100th mission, WAS NOT able to breeze through a forest. Why did Sensei have to build his shrine in such a covert location?

I cut off the last vine strangling my leg with a quick slash. A dancing silver light caught my attention. I squinted as I looked directly at the light and vaguely made out the distant silhouette and the shape of a sword. It was my Sensei, up 14 flights of stairs!

I groaned and collapsed on the slippery squeaky carpet laid ahead of my destination. An hour had passed. I could not remember how many times I tried going up and felt like I was on an endless cycle of a treadmill prank.

I lay at the bottom contemplating the meaning of this nonsense Sensei was putting me through. I needed a game plan. I sharpened my spear for the last time and faced my final trial before becoming a Hundred. Using my weapon as a launching pole was wise. A special technique I figured out how to do myself.

I sailed through the air, enjoying the wind airing my sweaty robe and also ignoring the angry stares directed at me. Sometimes one has to think out of the box instead of going head on with a cunning master.

Chapter 3 The Final Test

My final test would be the hardest of all – defeating my Sensei in battle mode. I flicked my hand and threw out 6 knives, 3 from each hand. Sensei caught two of them and dodged the rest which landed on the floor like useless metal.

I picked up my spear and did a battle cry before I charged forward. The tip of my spear split and forced its way through the air. My legs moved in synchrony, weapon and master – we were ONE.

The first attack was dodged skilfully as expected. I did not pause. Momentum picked up and I spun around and intercepted the Sensei's next move, blocking his exit and forcing him to act. Finally, the moment I was waiting for happened. His sword flew out of his sheath, the true symbol of a Hundred and I was worthy of it.

I leaped backwards instantly. I had to stay alert and not let him be too near as it would be an instant triumph for him. As we battled for the ownership of my rank, the keen eyes of his fellow apprentices bore holes through my soul. I looked back at the battleground, but it was too late. The metal had met my skin.

I let out a blood curdling scream as he sliced through my skin, my knees fell to the floor and started bleeding a bloodbath while I accepted my fate. It was over.

Suddenly, multicoloured light flashed from my eyes, I slowly but steadily rose from my knees, and lifted my hands, a humongous body of water started flowing out of nowhere surrounding me. My master stood there in shock.

I let the water flow through me, pure power coursing through my veins. The transformation was complete. I had complete control over the elements, a skill that usually took 3 years to master. Like how sudden the water came, it disappeared but left me in a vacuum. I lay there motionless and weak, vaguely hearing Sensei calling for help. My eyes hung heavy and went black. .

Chapter 4

The Preparation

I woke up in a cold sweat to the sun almost piercing my skin. I sat up and glanced at my master staring into the distance.

I stood up and limped towards him, he sensed a disturbance in the air. It was my strong aura awakening. He did not turn around but I could hear the slight uplift in his voice.

“Congratulations, Elementalist. You have accomplished an incredibly skillful act.”

I picked up my backpack from the corner of my room ready to leave. A strange item lying on the floor of the balcony caught my eye. It was bathed in moonlight and little silver flecks were dancing around it. It felt like it had been waiting for me all this time.

I knew it was for me. My own symbol of a Hundred. I picked it up and smiled, letting the double edged blade shine in the darkness. Next to it was a letter from Sensei.

I sheathed my sword, sliding it in smoothly into the detailed engraved wood, enclosing it with the powerful aura of the case. Yet as soon as I did that, my heart skipped a beat. I looked in the distance and saw something in the corner of my eye, a hellhound, my first kill.

I jumped up and landed on the roof, hurriedly leaving a scribbled note beside Sensei’s letter. I performed one of the hardest forms using the earth around me, and the ground erupted before me, creating a giant pillar of rock and Earth ready to launch me into the woods. I lunged onto the massive block of rock and leapt out, creating a launching board. I spun through the air, a slight smile across my face. I landed on top of it and it went limp. A warmup.

Chapter 5

The Epic Battle

Sensei had given me a piece of wisdom before I left.

‘As an elementalist, mobility comes from all elements. If you have successfully mastered every single one, teleportation would be granted, but more importantly you are truly talented and skilful. Use your skills wisely’

I sat down and meditated, calling to the elements in my body and once I felt I had gathered them, I envisioned myself at the entrance of the Caves of Darkness. I opened my eyes again and stood up.

I dropped my sword and the elements were floating around me like shimmering powder. My trance was soon broken by the rumble of the Earth behind me, I turned around to find massive rocks blocking my only way out. I let my vision have a life of its own. It navigated the entire underground system with ease, discovering dusty nooks even the terrorizing creatures had not yet discovered.

‘Appreciate your senses for what they can do’, Sensei had always reminded. While I reminisce, my vision caught it – the throne room. I did a quick calculation of the area and charged straight for the prize – the Monster King.

Using the elements of steel, a second blade materialized in my hand, I sheathed and unsheathed both of them to give them a coating of unbelievable strength and power. I could go beyond possible with my swords guiding my elements together with me. I swiftly slid on the floor, creating ice below me to extend my slide time. By quickly switching to fire, I swung my swords back and forth creating an inferno surrounding my double-edged weapons. I aimed and hurled my two blades at the heart of the grotesque colossal monster. With a quick blast of water to weaken and thwart its balance, I managed to once again recall my swords from the monster's chest using the speed of wind.

It breathed fire in anger over the sudden attack. It was too late for it. It was a futile retaliation as it struggled in pain. I jumped up and lifted the Earth around me, made a circle of water surrounding my waist, created a quick roaring flame above my head, and finally ended it. I plunged my the swords into its heart. All the elements joint forces to destroy this horrid creature.

Everything went still for a few seconds and a sudden burst of bright lights temporarily blinded every being, letting a wave of freedom flow through. It was so powerful that it set hearts singing of happiness.

I finally ended this era of pain, suffering, torture and underserving death. I transformed the Caves of Darkness into the Tunnels of Light. I did it as the Chosen One.

Conquest in the Mogao Grottoes

Harrow International School Hong Kong, So, Shannon – 12

Today was one of those days when Kabir wished his father was still around to give him advice. As the new and inexperienced leader of the Theravāda warrior monk army – a position he inherited from his dad three years ago – Kabir and his 10,000-member troops had almost reached the fabled Mogao Grottoes when he spotted the growing crest of the wave. Kabir could do the only thing he could think of.

“Theravāda! Form a firewall! The Mahāyāna army has activated their water manipulation power!”

Just a few seconds ago, Kabir was picturing of the welcome that would greet him as the rightful owner of the Mogao Grottoes. The moment he got his hands on these precious relics only found in these legendary caves, he would immediately advance onto the leader of the Buddhist sects.

When the arch-enemy Mahāyāna showed up to compete for the claims to the Grottoes, they spared no time in unleashing their weapon of water manipulation.

A rush of rapid waters propelled in Kabir’s direction to sink him into the murky waters many meters deep. Years ago, his father had once told him how menacing the Mahāyānas had become since the separation between Mahāyāna and Theravāda; from then on, the Theravādians would fight the Mahāyānas with fire, while the Mahāyānas would fight the Theravādians with water. He could feel the full force of his enemy’s power now, as water filled his lungs and blood pounded behind his eyes.

Just when Kabir could no longer hold it anymore, suddenly a hand reached out to grab him. He looked up. It was Master Thur, his dad’s most trusted lieutenant. On other occasions, Kabir, always eager to get on with his plans, would resent his long-winded advice. At the moment, however, Kabir felt grateful towards him.

“King Kabir, one should always be 100% alert around the Mahāyānas,” Master Thur bowed coolly and backed away.

Kabir glanced at the sight in the distance, lines of warrior monks dressed in red and gold aligned themselves in positions where they would be ready to strike. Opposite the Mahāyānas, swarms of white troops dressed in their grey suits. “Leaders should fight to the death, especially if you’re a leader of Theravāda.” Kabir recollected one of his father’s last words before he headed to his fate. Victory comes at a price and not a cheap one. Stepping into the battlefield, he raised his hand prominently, sending blazes of fiery orange darting across the battlefield, as fire struck every creek and corner of the land.

Hollow sounds plunged into the air, as sparks exploded. A gust of wind raced in circles, destruction was without a doubt. Because it was Theravāda’s cyclone of death, and made by none other than Kabir. Men were screaming as the ground became slippery with a dark shade of crimson.

Each time Kabir trod on the remaining corpse of the battlefield, they instantly turned into barbecue meat. It was crystal clear now. The Theravādians would claim the Mogao Grottoes, a victory no one would ever forget.

As impatient for success and riches as a kid craving attention, Kabir insisted on heading off instantaneously. He gathered his most trusted companions, all of whom were his childhood playmates. When Master Thur offered himself as the young gang’s protector, at first Kabir wanted to deny his request. But then he remembered Master Thur had just saved him, so he let him accompany them reluctantly.

On their way to the cave, Kabir was already doing quick calculations in his head: the chests of gold inside the caves would be divided among the leaders of the army, any potions bestowing special powers on the drinker would go to him alone.

The first thing Kabir noticed about the Grottoes was its cool and dusty echoey chambers’ tapestries laid from thousands of years ago covered the ceiling of the grottoes’ hollow entrance.

A beam of light shone from the outside onto the wall, revealing all kinds of Buddhist-themed paintings that adorned the walls: from peaceful-looking monks holding lotus to graphic depictions of evil humans suffering everlasting torments (such as being boiled in a giant wok of oil). The Theravādians gasped at these scenes of hell.

Master Thur approached the pictures and read out a script he found there: “The road to hell is crowded, while the path to heaven is deserted.”

“Oh, shut up you old fogey!” bellowed Adjik, the spoiled son of the head soldier of Kabir’s father. He then turned to Kabir.

“Look at that gate with ornate stone carvings on the right. Looks like it would lead us to somewhere important. There’s some ancient Buddhist script inscribed on the frame of the gate!”

Kabir’s eyes widened, he was sure that this was the discovery that would transform his kingdom into the world’s most feared. He and his gang quickened their pace, leaving Master Thur to pant behind in his attempt to catch up with them.

The moment Master Thur laid his eyes on the stone-plaited gate, his face was drained of colour. For he read:

*The road to riches is paved with pain:
On the first day, you will lose the power;
On the second day, you will lose your brain;
On the third day, will be dead by the hour;
On the fourth day, no more of you will remain...*

“Children, do not proceed,” Master Thur urged in a panicky tone. Kabir, not pleased that his “perfect” scheme was being interfered with, glared at Master Thur.

“If you’re scared, old fogey, don’t come with us, but don’t expect us to share any treasures with you,” exclaimed Kabir. His gang laughed after him.

One by one, Kabir and his followers, who were oblivious to the danger ahead, marched straight to the gate. Master Thur eyed Kabir and his followers mournfully as one by one, they disappeared into the gate, not knowing what fate awaited them.

The further they walked into the tunnel, the thicker the air became. Soon their path, enveloped in darkness, could barely fit a human. Kabir himself fought hard for the last whiff of oxygen, his fingers hanging onto the sharp edges of the wall.

“I can’t feel the sparks, my power is gone!” groaned Adjik. He stared ahead blankly. Soon they collapsed in exhaustion. They had no choice but to call it a day.

The next morning, they were woken up by the dripping of water above them. The muffled sound of the wind and the trees outside was incapable of making it so far in the cave. Layers of dust piled around them, outlining the only human footprints in the cave.

Kabir stood up with difficulty. His hair hung loosely. The wailing banshees had kept him up all night. The former twinkle in his eyes had reduced to deep circles. Just one night in the grottoes and their energy had already been sapped. Driven by their desire for riches, however, they forced themselves to go on.

Each step took all the strength as they trudged through the meandering corridors, all the while choking on the cave’s micro debris.

Suddenly, the young Theravādians began to crumble to the ground, hallucinating as their brains were being emptied of their knowledge. Their faces blanked as they stumbled around blindly, expressionless to pain. At that moment, Kabir would have given anything for a moment of strength and peace to soothe his weak soul, which was torturing itself like a bird beating the wires of a cage. They were unable to reason, to think, and babbled nonstop.

Lying still on the ground, they fell asleep, entering the halls of nightmare, the kingdoms of doom.

The next morning, Kabir woke up to incessant reverberations. He huddled as close as he could to a wall desperately wanting to shield the echoes.

Suddenly, the wall shook, cracking in half and revealing a sturdy wooden door behind.

“This must be the entrance to the treasure!” Kabir gasped. His previous dreams of glory flooded back. They had suffered for too long, but it was worth it. Instinctively, all his fearful thoughts dissipated into the beautiful dreams he had earlier. Would there be gold? Silver? A treasure chest? Every member gaped at the sight like their eyes had been permanently glued to the sight. It was the moment they had all been waiting for, from the beginning of time.

The doors swung open with a resounding echo as the floor began to shake, their footsteps had caused the rocks to crumble. It was chaos and destruction. In place of the eerie silence of the cave was the ear splitting bellowing of roaring waters – the last-ever sound Kabir and his gang were to hear in their lifetime.

This was hell.

The Mogao Grottoes were to be respected, not conquered.

The Memory of Buddha

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Suen, Gaia – 12

I survey the Grottoes, resting my gaze on a cramped cave, just barely enough to crawl through. A dim, glowing light is cast on the rough cave wall, gleaming its way through, until it melts into the endless darkness. My feet sloshes on the sand again, sending little flecks of sand and dust brushing against my skin in the light breeze. I am getting closer... closer... closer at every step, until steps turn to jogs, and jogs turn to sprints. Until without realisation, I am sprinting to the cave. The cave of my fortune. And soon the sand blurs into amber jewels and I savour the sensation as it sprays across my face, sprinkling newfound hope. My vision soon makes a vague fog, and the world begins to spin, my legs feel numb, as if I am floating, but still I keep running. I keep running until I collapse, out of energy, on the entrance to the cave. The cave of my fortune.

The cave itself is even smaller on the inside. The rough and occasionally sharp edges of the rock in the cave is covered in a shower of sand. As I crawl through squeezing every part of my body, my fingers turn to an ashy grey colour, and soon start to ache with pain. The sharp rock cuts my hand defiantly, streaking thick red blood as it oozes out. I shake my head in my daze. I mustn't get distracted by trivial matters. I came here for gold, secrets, priceless artefacts, and it is finally my time. I rub my cut hand ruthly against the smoother areas of stone and sand, making a makeshift seal with tiny rocks and tape I had luckily packed. Heaving heavily, I continue my way, as the cave walls seem to gradually widen, as if it were welcoming and beckoning an intruder to its doom.

I step onto the stony tiles brushed with dirt and occasional heaps of sand, as I stoop under a miniature stone archway, entering the first room. All around me, there are tiles of inscriptions, drawings, symbols, that enveloped the room. But in the middle, rested a low rectangle of symbols, that towered up to a cube of sculptures surrounding it, the Buddha in the very centre of it all. I walk sceptically around the room, gazing at each inscription and flicking my fingers along the patterned tiles, wondering how much it would be worth. Deciding I should explore further, I venture into the tunnel leading to the next room of mysteries and wealth.

The tunnel is unilluminated and starts to fade into black ink as I get further from the light of the sun, until I feel as if my eyes have been shut down and occluded. I heave my backpack over my head and run my hands over the slightly rough fabric, as I try to locate the zipper. My hands continue to crumple the bag, until a sudden tang of coldness from my fingertips tells me I've found it. Quickly unzipping, I begin rummaging through the bag blindly, searching for my only flashlight. As my fingers brush across a switch, a sudden heat burns my face with the burst of radiance, blasting my eyes with pain. I rub them, determined to be eager and focused on the one thing I had sacrificed so much for.

Finally I see the tunnel widen again, and I lower my head to step into the...golden room. There is nothing else to describe it except...gold. The halls are surrounded with golden tiles of ancient stories and wonders, stretching out to the roof about 6 metres high. But even with all this gold, it wasn't what stood out the most. At the very end of the room, lay a 5 metre tall statue of the Buddha sitting cross-legged. As I stare, the luminescence sets my eyes on fire, but I can't bring myself to look away. The Buddha isn't in gold. A small crack left sunlight seeping its way through the room, casting its lustrous blaze directly onto the Buddha, almost as if the Buddha was glowing. "In the darkness, there will always be a path to light." The words engraved in the stone allure me, captivating my attention.

Shaking my head, I blink my eyes hard and tell myself to concentrate on what mattered most. On top of the stone Buddha, the treasure of the Mogao Grottoes lies on the Buddha's head. A golden crown. But it isn't just the gold that strikes me. Golden swords with swirls and marks are clasped around the base of the crown, with golden lotus flowers tainted with tints of red. Patterns and symbols swirled into each other, connecting and forming the golden wonder. And right at the centre, the very mark of the crown, is the knot of eternity. It seems like squares that connect into each other, and against each other in a never ending cycle. I laugh. Finally I have found it. My whole life, searching, crawling, running, pulling through and I am finally, finally there. Tears begin trickling down my eyes, as I cover my mouth with my hand in shock and disbelief. All that desperation and pain wouldn't have to come anymore. I have made it.

I get my rope out of my bag, tugging it and attaching it to myself, the chains clinking together echoing through the room. With all the force I can muster, I hurl the rope over the statue and push myself onto the Buddha's shoulder, my hands gripping the smooth stone. I heave myself up and hunching over, I walk to the crown whilst keeping my support on the shoulder. The crown

is so near I can almost smell the heavy sulphuric richness of the metallic gold. My heartbeat thumps louder and quicker until I feel as if I would explode. And then, I touch the crown.

Suddenly I feel light-headed and my vision begins to blur as I wobble and try to steady myself. The dizziness gets worse and my throat seems as dry as sandpaper. Coughing uncontrollably, my mind begins to lose consciousness, and the last thing I feel is falling, an eternity of falling.

My eyes flick open. I am in a palace with towering pillars, gilded walls, and red tiles spreading across the hallway. Beside me is a royal-looking man in his late-twenties gliding gracefully, head high, eyes focused in front. He holds a light smile as he walks along the hallway, but his eyes show something different. Almost like a feeling of being trapped. I scramble to my feet and call out to the man sheepishly. Silence. The man continues walking as if I never said anything at all. I look down at myself and nearly scream out loud if not for my instinct to cover my mouth. From head to toe, I am barely visible. I seem more transparent, blending into the air. It is then I realise: I am in a memory.

I follow the man outside and hear muffled voices of guards loading bags onto a lavish chariot engraved with the name 'Siddhartha' as I watch the man thank them and step into the chariot. Deciding I needed to know what was happening to know how to get out, I jump in after him without hesitation. As I settle into the cushions and silk pillows, I feel a punch of envy swelling up inside me. The royal man and his perfect life. But as we drive further, I start to see couples and commoners hunched together hugging each other for support; I spot a young girl about 5 years old wandering the streets alone, arms hugging herself and head staring solemnly at the ground. From the man's expression I see that he has noticed too. I notice his forehead begin to wrinkle, his shoulders tense, and his eyes begin to show signs of panic. I feel his shock as he stands, ready to put a stop to this. Suddenly everything begins blurring and blinking in and out of focus, and the last thing I see is the man stepping out of his chariot before I lose consciousness again.

I wake up to see the same man but a few years older than before, except not dressed in royal robes, but instead sitting peacefully cross-legged. This time, however, I don't feel as if I am in a memory. It is more like shards of memories blurring across my brain, the man helping others, teaching others, abandoning the life for him that could have been perfect for helping others that had no impact on him at all. And that is when I understand. His life wasn't perfect. He was trapped. Trapped in the naive darkness. But time came when he was faced with the true, harsh realities. But he didn't shove it away and ignore it. He stepped into the light.

And then I lost consciousness again.

If Only You Knew

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Tam, Ashley – 13

A tear, a single tear, rolled down my face as I stared at the last picture we ever took together, our beaming smiles and sunlit eyes. It felt unreasonable for me to have to search for you, the person that was the closest to me only a month ago. If only you knew how much I loved you, then you would never have left.

The bus to the Mogao Grottoes. I persuaded myself that this was a good idea. But I don't believe myself anymore. My bloodshot eyes, worn out, and dreadfully tired from crying, drift to the dusty scenery situated just a mere five feet away from me, but the glass window, covered in handprints that are not my own, stopped me from feeling the soft, smooth sand particles sift away in my fingers, live in the beauty and pure terror of what these caves hold. That was how it felt with you and I, a longing sensation for something beyond my reach, beyond *me*.

My 'friend' chattered on with glee and excitement, not realizing that not a word she said sparked any emotion in me. Her words were silenced out by the infinite pool of distressing thoughts that drowned out everything else I could feel. I knew you didn't deserve what's coming but I needed to grasp that feeling once more, even if it meant losing someone else in my life.

I led my 'friend' through a hidden trail in the midst of ancient oak trees, each one having lived through an era of humanity, storing secrets that no one will ever know about. As we walked past leaves so captivating, I felt entranced, almost forgetting my purpose of coming here, to the Mogao Grottoes. After endless wrong turns and dead ends, we ended up at the Huiyi Temple. I knocked three times on the time-worn door, hearing the sonorous echo continue on and on... and it swung open. I whispered into my friend's ear 'Go in first.' My hands turned clammy as my companion took small, cautious steps down the endless hallways to her fate, the fate that I would be inflicting upon her. A bright beam of light blinded me as I heard a scream like nails going down a chalkboard, goosebumps immediately wrapping my body tight. Before I could ponder what had happened to my supposed 'friend', I fell to my knees and felt as if some invisible creature was holding me hostage, a feeling of helplessness wafted over me. Strong steady hands pressed on my shoulders and almost immediately I felt incinerating heat slowly carve away a fragment of my broken heart.

The hands released me from their grasp, my face was plummeting to the ground, the tip of my nose slightly grazing the hard granite of the floor, milliseconds before crashing into the stone beneath my feet, I suddenly shot up to the sky, frozen in mid-air. My posture softened, as if a force of drowsiness came over me like an invisible blanket, I was lulled into deep slumber as I drifted into another world, incredibly far from the one we lived in. An imaginary one, but one with you just within my grasp. I opened my eyes and everything was tinged a wondrous shade of cobalt blue, a reminder that this wasn't real. But revisiting the memories I had with the person I loved most was dazzling, magnificence at most.

We were side by side, holding each other's hands tightly. I turned to look at you, those locks blew with the wind, matching the current of the waves in the ultramarine sea behind you. Your eyes, a stormy grey, bore into mine, so irresistible. You were everything I needed, my eternal passion and love for you was all I felt, because we worked perfectly together, we fit together flawlessly and our personalities intertwined majestically with each other... You were all I needed.

I could feel my eyes brighten with each passing moment I spent by your side, I almost felt like it was exactly how it was before, us, together, forever. And then I heard it, the subtle ticking at the back of my mind... tic tic tic. The ground below me split wide open and I fell down the seemingly endless hole. I wanted, craved for some sort of control over my body, I wanted to thrash, scream, burst out in anger of injustice I had to face in leaving you. But something stopped me from wanting anything, from being able to want anything. At a rapid speed, I reached the bottom of the hole that somehow just appeared and as I rolled on the ground, hearing heavy thuds, I remember thinking to myself 'I will do this again and again no matter the price, because those moments are priceless. I am determined to do anything to feel you and your presence.'

And so, my never ending journey to relive memories with you continued. I traded things that used to be precious in my life for some sort of recollection of what you looked like, how you were and why I loved you so much. And if those memories seemed to be slipping out of my mind, I would bring something else, someone else, solely for the short flashes of you, with me, without even the slightest thought that we would be separated, without the slightest thought of us never seeing each other again.

But the materialistic things started running out, my house full of trinkets that I'd accumulated from multiple countries and places we explored together. They were frozen objects of time, each one holding a vivid story that no one would understand except us. I traded all of them off, because what's the point of mere objects when I could see you instead? My friends either left, or were traded off, well killed, by me. I sold everything I owned, leaving me with one last thing to trade, the one piece of me that I actually felt an urge to keep and didn't want to trade off because it held everything. My mind, my memories, my stories, my life.

With just a fragment, a sliver of my broken heart left, I walked again to the Huiyi Temple. I've been here an endless amount of times, yet I remember every single moment of it. I remember every single flashing memory and every part of me that has vanished, memories gone. My sanity was broken, grief took over me at every possible moment, I began to hate you for it, I wanted to feel myself live, without the regret of you not being at my side, but that wish was impossible, just as it is impossible to bring you back to life, but I still had hope.

I walked alone, this time, through the creaky wooden door, like how I forced others to, and took wary steps, one foot in front of the other, breathe in, breathe out, down the narrow corridor, stones etched with vibrant images in the worn out stone, thousands of memories of people that humanity still hasn't discovered, visiting because they lost something crucial for their survival.

An incinerating light flashed in my eyes and I felt everything drain out of my body. A waterfall of bitter tears flooded onto my cheeks as I caught sights of my past, together with you, the times I felt happiness and was not condemned to this shell of a body. I could live and breathe and appreciate every minute part of daily life. I waltzed through my existence like it was a bed of roses, took the exhilaration of life for granted, and when I was left with just the spindly thorns, the crimson red leaves wilted and gravitating themselves towards the floor, I couldn't survive, every moment was suffocating. I centred my excitement and enjoyment around you and when that was taken away from me, I was taken away from myself too.

I thought if I went to that damned temple one more time and left myself and my memories with it, I would be satisfied, my suffering would end, I could leave my past behind me, leave it marked on the walls of secrets along with all those who were heartbroken, anguished, devastated before me. My wishes were heard. Every part of my colourless life disappeared into thin air. I left my survival on this planet, Earth, for a fate unknown to me, the endless path of death that awaited me beyond that incinerating light and beyond those tragic memories. I will vanish off the face of this Earth and no one would remember me, because I made sure of that. I destroyed everything for you. I broke down, and couldn't build myself back up again.

The last futile tear tumbled down my cheek. If only you knew how much I loved you, then you would never have left...

A Different Form of Magic

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Tse, Laila – 13

761 Tang Dynasty

A cross. A cross on my left cheek. It sizzles hot at the slight touch. The two onyx lines meet at a centre point...The place where I cried the most tears, the place where my face wrinkles when a sense of misfortune comes my way. The two lines carry the burden of my past, the aching grief and utmost expectations I was destined to meet. It's torn me apart.

My older brother Chang carries a single tear on his cheek, never falling, never leaving. It stays there, a part of him. Its single drop of ink bears his tragic past, the family he's lost, the silence in the dark, cold-blooded night.

Born or Bred.

I was born to carry the weight of my father's doings on my torn shoulders. My father was one of the top men involved in the Ānshǐzhī Luàn rebellion which automatically meant I would be too. Even before I became of age, I was immensely woven into their secrets, plans and attacks, so tight, the moment you cut the string it would break. I hated it. I hated how people stared, how people whispered to their friends, if only they knew I could hear every syllable, every hatred remark and every insult they muttered. So I ran, ran far away from the chains of power and duty. I fled to the southeast. More specifically the Dunhuang oasis. That's where I met my brothers.

My brothers were all limply shuffling across the vast silk desert. Broken and shattered beyond repair. I could see it in them, sorrow leaking from their sullen eyes. Hurt. Aching deeply, further, than any scar could go.

My brothers were all bred to be who they are today, all changed by their eerie past, the things they've seen and the things they did. No matter how hard you try, they affect you like tiny dots of watercolour on a clean, pure white canvas.

It's a symbol of our past and a daunting reminder of who we were and are today.

5 years since we fled from our prisons. We fell into hiding. In the deep, inexplicable Mogao caves.

—

The spiralling paint strokes seemed to curve up somewhere else, the lines never-ending, never starting. Their hands twirled into each other, indulging in a life of their own. The coral diamonds flowed in a wavy pattern, they stretched up, pointing towards the bright blue hidden sky. It is a firmament, a sacred place, so holy and out of this world, we don't dare ruin the silence. My hands lightly trace the spiral patterns across the cold stone wall, my body instinctively follows my hand still fixated on the golden rimmed cerulean colours splashed across the wall. This goes on until I reach the final spiral, my hand then falls limply to my side as my eyes roam somewhere else.

The petal-like caves towered over the gods, the paintings telling a story, so deep no one can understand them. Below the layer of dust lies memories that are too precious to lose.

It's still silent. It has always been. Do not underestimate her. Over the years I learnt silence was loud. Deafening. I think maybe I spent my whole life trying to avoid it. When you have silence, everything you neglect gets in. She is still and quiet; the reins of destruction and havoc. She's a monster, the worst of all.

I slowly sit down, my body relaxing as I hit the stone floor. My heart jumps, once then twice. My eyes are barely open. My head is heavy, too lumbered with my thoughts. My brothers have fallen deep into slumber, their own dreams playing in their minds. I feel the reticent walls acknowledging our agony, their bright smiles barely visible as they pierce through the thin gap between my eyelids. They understand and I know, in my heart we are safe.

My head spins back to our accomplishment: 1801 days. 1801 days we have survived. My eyes slowly close as I hear my unconscious voice echoing in my head. *"One more day to go."*

The Man Behind the Caves

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Wang, Paris – 12

My father had always said that living a safe life was always best. To never venture where you didn't know, to keep safe. He was our leader. The man who we all trusted to guide us correctly in life and give us a purpose. He was the one to keep peace in a place that was slowly spiraling into pandemonium.

Our caves were a majestic place. Everything you could ever think of, everything you ever needed. Everyone was warm and welcoming, and I had never met one single unpleasant person. Little did I know, my perfect world was about to split into two.

As I reluctantly opened my heavy eyes, a bright ray of light shone into them. Blinded for a moment, I got up onto my feet and stumbled around, but something didn't feel right. I noticed that with each step I took, the ground that I was standing on moved a little. Slowly regaining my vision, I looked around and realized that I was walking on water. I froze. I didn't move, for fear that I would sink. I looked down and took a cautious step. It didn't feel like water, and after all, I was walking around on it.

Suddenly, with a great rumbling sound, the scenery surrounding me shifted. The walls turned, and the ground flipped. A second later, I stood there, in the middle of a dim cave. The place looked so familiar, I could recognise it but for some reason I couldn't place it in my mind. It was as if a glass panel was blocking me from remembering it.

It felt strange.

Then, a thought popped into my head. 'My name is Daiyu. I am 16 years old, and this is my home now'. After this, I tried to grasp and remember different things. Where I came from, who my parents were, and who put me here. I couldn't recall any of it. The basic facts were in my head, but not the personal ones. Frantically, I searched and searched my mind for any trace of anything from my past life, but it was all gone.

That's when I noticed that I was wearing a jumpsuit. It was pure white, without a stain. I didn't have any shoes or socks on. My long black hair was tied back with a small rubber band that barely fit around my wrist. The surrounding of the room was grim, with dirty cave walls and spiderwebs in the corners. I walked over to the wall of the cave, but something hit my body before I could reach it. It was like I had just walked straight into a door. I carefully touched the air. There was an invisible panel blocking me from reaching the cave. I traced the surface with my fingertips. I strolled around the room, and the surface made a complete circle around it. Then, something clicked in my mind. I was trapped.

Sitting back down on the water-like ground, my breathing became quicker. I felt my body heating up, and the room started spinning. I could visualize a person dressed in a black jumpsuit putting a black fabric over my eyes.

I woke up hours later, with the same bright light shining directly in my eyes. Looking around, I saw that the image of the familiar cave was gone, and now the walls were painted white, and a minimalistic bed had appeared. A white tray sat on the floor, blending in with the changed white ground. On the tray, there was a cup filled with a clear coloured liquid and a plate filled with a greyish white sludge.

A high pitched ringing voice filled the room. I covered my ears, attempting to shield them from the pain, but I couldn't escape it. After the ringing subsided, A deep voice flooded the area.

"Eat it."

Confused, I trudged over to the tray and sat down. I picked up the spoon that lay on it. Reluctantly, I started forcing the sludge into my mouth. It was as tasteless as it was colorless. After finishing the so-called meal, I sat on the floor, trying to inspect the tray and my surroundings.

Without notice, a door formed in one of the walls. The door swung open, and two tall, strong men dressed head to toe in black entered the pristine white room. They grabbed me roughly by my forearms, and led me along a white corridor to a black door. They opened it and pushed me in.

The room was pitch black; not a single light anywhere. The men pulled out a chair and gestured for me to sit on it. I sat, and suddenly, the scenery changed. The room changed to the strange and familiar cave that I had first started out in. The two guards left, and a man appeared.

When I saw him, the same feeling that I felt when I saw the cave washed over me again. I was starting to wonder who he was when he rushed over to me, excitedly saying, “Daiyu!”

I stood stiffly while he hugged me. After all, I didn’t even know who this man was. Seeing my reaction to his hug, he asked me, “Daiyu, what’s wrong? Why do you not seem happy to see me?”

“Who are you?” I asked, tilting my head.

A wave of sadness and sorrow washed over his face. It was as if I had just watched all the life drain out of him. He was like a deflated balloon.

“Do you really not remember me, your father?”

“No.”

As I tried to keep it together on the outside, emotions were bursting inside of me. My father? Who was he? I processed the new information slowly, the gears in my brain starting to click into place. Memories formed in my head. Slowly and slowly, pieces of my childhood started coming back to me. It was like missing pieces of a puzzle finally being pieced together.

Then, a memory escaped into my head out of nowhere. I had remembered that for my whole childhood, my father had abused me, lied to me, imprisoned me. Feelings of hatred and anger flowed out of me, and a sudden urge to hurt him took over me. The gears in my brain stopped. I lunged at him, clawing, kicking, punching. A beast took over me, I had no more control of my limbs. He fell to his knees, defenseless. I stood over him. I punched him, choked him, and pierced his motionless body.

I crouched down to his level, and held his battered head in my bloody arms. He started bleeding out onto the room. His arms were filled with scratch marks, bruises, and a deep gash with warm blood trickling out. I looked down at my body. My pure white jumpsuit was stained with a carmine colour, and instead of my nails, I saw black claws. The ends were as sharp as a dagger. Fueled with newfound rage, I sliced into his skin, opening up his flesh.

Wheezing, he uttered one last word.

“Die.”

With one last twist, I popped his head off. It rolled away, separated from his body.

The room filled with the warm, metallic smelling, dark red substance. The rush of adrenaline had taken its toll on my body, and I fell to the floor.

I lay there, in a pool of his fresh blood.

The memories had once again faded away, but this time, I was sure that I had done the right thing.

Gradually, the amount of blood doubled. The crimson liquid oozed in through the cracks in the room, and began to fill it. Peacefully, I closed my eyes and accepted my fate. The solution was suffocating me; I was drowning.

At that moment, the walls and liquid around me faded away. It was like I had just woken up from a nightmare, but I was still standing on the cave-like floor of the previous room. Swiftly, the ground gave away, and I fell.

Falling tranquilly, a feeling of relief took over my body. All I could feel between my fingers was the air and the wind. The air felt cool and comfortable, and a red hue overtook the empty pit where I was plummeting. It felt serene, as if time had stopped, and the world was finally letting me breathe. All my worries and problems seeped out of me, as I fell. One second felt like eternity. A million questions, but no answers.

Bitter Revenge

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Wong, Robin – 13

An Arrow grazed past my face. I couldn't have been discovered; I could move through the shrub without making any sound. Perhaps it was an errant shot. I had to warn the Quwcha that another raiding party was coming towards us. The bloodthirsty Manglish would not rest until they have exterminated us. The Khamerians.

The Khamerians had always been a peaceful people. We had lived on this land since time immemorial. We hunted only out of necessity, and we planted two trees for every one that we cut down for fuel and shelter, everything changed two hundred years ago.

The Manglish descended on our fertile valley from beyond the mountains like a host of locusts. They pillaged and burned with the ferocity of a pack of wolves. We tried to reason with them and negotiate with them, but it was a terrible idea in hindsight. The Khamerians fled from the onrushing tide to the hills, surrendering our fields and homes. Within a hundred years, the Manglish have nearly cut down all the trees and farmed so extensively that the soil was blown off by the wind or washed away in the rain. The Manglish retreated to where they came from but they also refused to allow us to reclaim our homeland by sending marauder parties and raiding parties to enslave one they could get their hands on. We hated them with a passion that threatened to consume our souls.

Running as fast I could, I ran back towards Quwcha, our new home in the hills. Quwcha used to be the sacred Mausoleum of our founding ancestors. It pained our elders so much to find sanctuary there, for it meant disturbing the spirit of the dead. We had no choice. To the Manglish, the caves carved into the side of the mountain meant certain death. They couldn't navigate the elaborate labyrinth of tunnels that connected each cave to an inner sanctum deep into the mountains. Most got lost in the tunnels or became isolated and were picked off one by one. They succeeded in thinning our numbers, but my grandfather resolved to never let them approach Quwcha again. He started the scout regiment to look ahead and warn the people of the approach of any signs of invaders.

I, Michael, was now the leader of the Scouts, and I was different from my grandfather. The elders of the Khamerians still abide by the pacifist ways of our ancestors. They wanted to negotiate with the Manglish instead of fighting them. I intended to cleanse the land of their scourge.

The time was ripe too. The cool temperature and mountain springs, mushrooms and the terrace farming on the other side of the mountains meant our numbers swelled while the Manglish's numbers dwindled slowly in the desert. Most importantly of all, the Manglish couldn't have known that we were not on the verge of extinction but thriving and biding our time. Judging by the constant raiding parties, they still thought they had the advantage. I would grind their bones to dust and free all the hapless Khamerians they had enslaved. That included my parents.

The scorching heat on my skin dissipated nearly as soon as I stepped into the cave. Fresh smoke and the familiar scent of cooking greeted me. Once we get out of the caves, I would love to try the baked bread the elders kept telling us about. How the bread was baked in such a way that it was soft and fluffy on the inside and crusty on the outside. The scent of our ancestors had the wisdom to carve the caves out of the flat side at the foot of a mountain. I was grateful it existed. It was home.

I had to find the elders quickly and tell them to evacuate deeper into the caves before the raiding parties could trace the cooking smells deeper into the mountain. Then a moving shadow tripped me. My body trembled involuntarily. The raiders could not have come so quickly!

"Haha – you should have seen your face!" a familiar voice echoed around the walls.

"Liliana, that is not funny! There is a raiding party coming," I managed sheepishly while trying to cover from the fright.

"What are we going to do? Run with our tails between our legs like always? Why don't we ever fight back? This is the perfect time. We have hundreds of warriors and we can trap the raiders to make an example out of them." Liliana's eyes gleaned dangerously in the dim light of the cave.

Liliana was the love of my life. We had grown up together, fought together and laughed together. She's strong, helpful, calm but she can also be a bit of a daredevil. Liliana has lived a hard life, she lost her father during the fight with the Manglish, and her mother was taken away and enslaved by them. Ever since she lost her parents to the Manglish, Liliana has had to single-handedly take care of her baby sister, Penelope, while still fending for herself. Having her risk her life would mean risking Penelope's life too, but I could never say no to Liliana.

“Okay – gather our people and don’t alert the Elders. I am going to lure them in through the south cave.”

Liliana nodded determinedly and disappeared into the shadows of the cave. We Khamerians have learned to blend in the shadows and move swiftly without making a sound. The caves amplified any sound we made. I was confident that our ambush would succeed. The Manglish wouldn’t be able to move silently like we could, and we could pick them out one by one from the shadows.

A long whistle pierced the midday haze. In the open space of the desert, sound travelled far. A short distance away, the Manglish raiders heard my whistle and marched steadily towards the cave. The trap had been set.

Signaling with my hands, I motioned for our warriors to be in their place of ambush. There were 90 of us and only 30 of them, but they were heavily armed and armored whereas we only had stones and blow darts as weapons. However, I knew we had the advantage of knowing the cave system, and we were more determined than they were. It was our first time fighting back and taking initiative.

My heart was pounding rapidly in my chest. It was my first time facing these murderers, and I had put the lives of my people in danger. I quickly banished these thoughts in my head, I must not allow self-doubt to cloud my judgement. The echoes of the footsteps of the shooters can now be heard near the entrance of the cave. I made a signal with my hand. It had begun.

Liliana and I came out into the open and unleashed five poisoned blow darts into the evaders. Yells of pain could be heard clearly in the cave. Before they could retaliate, we had already vanished deeper into the cave. I wanted these evaders to disperse, so we could pick them off one by one. They were as blind as bats. The raiders chased us to a cross section of the tunnels. With only a moment of hesitation, they split into smaller groups. Their complacency would be their downfall.

Each of the tunnels were booby-trapped with at least five warriors who would be shooting and attacking from the shadows. Liliana and I led our pursuers deeper into the tunnel then we turned around. The cries of anguish and fear reverberated the caves. The captain of the raiding party and ten of his warriors facing us now had a manic look on their face. They realized they were cornered and were determined to fight with the ferocity of cornered animals. I gulped hard. We were ready.

They were wearing toughened leather cuirasses and shields dulled our weapons, and their blades were metal and each cut was lethal against our bare limbs. Three of our warriors fell. The Captain and two of his surviving warriors started to push us back. Our darts were spent. In an act of desperation, I lunged my stick at the captain. He feigned left. I fell, and I could see his smug sneer as he brought down his sword in a high arc. I closed my eyes. This was the end.

Liliana’s lifeless body was on top of mine. The blood was hers. She had sacrificed herself to save me. Guilt and anger blinded me. I wrestled the captain to the ground, took his sword and stabbed him with all my strength. Over and over again. As if killing him would undo all my mistakes. I did the same to his dazed companions as well. Soon, it was all silent in the cave. Victory had never felt so bitter.

At Liliana’s funeral, I promised her that I would spread her ashes once I had taken back our homeland. She would leave these caves, if not in life, then after death.

Deserted Fruit

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Zhuo, Chloe – 13

366 BC

I first witnessed the boy sitting on the steps outside his house, where the sun benignly gazed down, and fixed upon it a wistful glow. He had gotten into a fight before coming outside— not with the kind of bloodthirsty violence so many men are guilty of, but of the more innocent sort that manifested in badly—thrown punches and weak yanks of the hair; he was very young, no more than 6 years of age, slight in build, and had sullenly rooted his gaze to the ground. As he leans forward and scowls with resentment, a passerby mistakes him for a beggar and lopes ahead hastily.

The boy begins to sketch a portrait of a woman into the sand— albeit unflattering, it is detailed and thoughtfully structured. There! He begins to laugh, and what a lovely sound that is. When he flourishes his last stroke, the sun has quietly tumbled down, and he runs back home for dinner. Now, I was not in any sort of urgency then, so I bided my time and waited for his talents to develop. Over the years I learned more about the young boy who keenly drew and created. He liked the sweet taste of ripe peaches in spring whilst attending to menial tasks, the chorus of warmth that rang in the air after a toilsome winter, and the greeting of dragonflies after it rained. Humans, who grow more dissatisfied with each blessing of industrial development, have long since disregarded nature. Yes, I am fully aware they are meant to go about in all aspects of life— but as the deity of art, I was dispirited to watch the artistic world crumble, and watched the boy blossoming through his enjoyment of creativity.

It seems like my plans should have all continued smoothly, doesn't it? But as the boy's drawings began to display a kind of mastery only achieved from years of practice, his mother died.

The peaches he picked that new year in spring bore putrid smells only he could detect, and the heat of the sun was a bitter nuisance to the growing demands of his deadbeat father in summer. For what devilish gift would be born than the stifled tumour of mourning; void of tears and emotion, but bearing a pain just as extreme as a sea of dramatic heartbreak?

372 BC

It has been many human years since I last saw the boy, not regarded as a child anymore but as a young adult tackling the throes of new responsibilities.

Frankly, I had expected him to grow out of his forlorn ways by the time he became an adult. In many ways he had matured, taking a job at his uncle's farm and labouring until his hands bristled with calluses, but remained the village outcast, who shirked from familial gatherings and looked at the world with a gaze of utter contempt. It was not the grief of losing his mother, who died so long ago, but rather a repressed feeling that resented its status as prisoner.

When I finally decided to visit, I found him trekking through the vast nothingness of the desert, the sand blurring in fields of white and orange. I do not know why the boy had run away, but I cleverly took advantage of his situation. With careful deliberation, I concocted a plan to revive the creative world, which had suffered damage only repairable by the most fortunate circumstance.

I did, unfortunately, overestimate the manpower of one teenaged boy, as he failed to travel the distance I keenly expected of him. In only a few days he had fallen victim to the blinding, unforgiving glare of the sun. Torn clothes clung on to him like the final decaying layer of flesh from a corpse, and as his packed food rotted and his trembling legs grew weary without the support of his abandoning mule, the boy figured he was the only thing that had survived the suffocating desolation of the desert. He had run out of water by then. His lips cracked as he drew his mouth open with each dying pant, and the feeling of his wounded feet crackling under stray pebbles seared into his mind like the shriek of an injured lamb. Helplessly the boy fell victim to the torments of the sun, the heat and the desert, and sank deep into the sand, awaiting the inevitable. Only then had the boy noticed the wind's croons, not just a noise to fill the empty space but a warning, like the shake of a rattlesnake's tail when it shies upon a predator.

Obviously, I would not allow the boy to die at that particular moment. I had invested far too much time and energy to watch everything crumble away. It took only what humans call *divine intervention*, and what I call jerking one's heart from a deep sleep back into its wakeful position, for my plan to continue.

I disguised myself as a traveller bearing the gift of a wooden carriage, and offered a trip to the nearest shelter, a series of caves inhabited by Buddhist monks.

The next day we had arrived, and the erratic slew of the carriage slowed as I sent the boy off. Of course I was still watching him then, and quietly anticipating the unravelling of my plan.

The boy gazes upon the unseemly sight, a block of sandstone colossal in size and punctured at the bottom. He walks inside, nose tickling from the sting of incense, as lamps flicker to swaddle him in warmth. He finds a room decked with swathes of murals, and gapes in quiet amazement of the sight it beholds. Its paintings are arrestingly beautiful in their rare sheen of gold and jade green, as ornate patterns and subdued lines scatter throughout the portrait to form tales of women in musical play, a deity swathed in glistening robes, and a demanding emperor with hordes of followers at his side. These garishly elaborate images cover the room in its entirety, and the boy closes his eyes to prevent the shock of vivid technicolour from seeping in.

The boy lumbers on, drowsy with the rich sights, and wanders through a series of hollowed-out tunnels, the flickering light of daybreak finding its way through the cracks in the coarse walls. There are few rooms left, but each is stocked to the brim with various works of art and literature depicting divine events. Finally they reach the last one, where monks erect a sculpture of the Maitreya Buddha, vision-devouring in its magnitude, and bathed in the decorations of floating deities against auburn light. The boy feels like the workings of his heart have been laid bare against the silken clay, and a strange feeling of fulfilment bubbles from within.

One of the monks takes notice of the newcomer, and watches him wistfully. "In the caves' years of creation, we've never had a single visitor. I'm fine meditating and living on my own, but the gnawing thought that our work remains unnoticed by everyone around us places me in a state of great distress. The paintings and sculptures have brought us a great deal of peace and healing, I am sure others would feel the same. But we have no forms of transport, the nearest monastery is far away, so effectively we are stranded here."

373 BC

The sound of hammers against hardened clay ripples through the air when the boy steps out of the cave opening and stares at the sun. It has been a year since he tirelessly made the trip on foot back to his old village, encouraging those swept in a state of apathy and bleakness to visit the sandstone caves, and delighted to find many have chosen to stay. He had set up a transport system, started a farm bearing rich produce, and the isolated land soon grew into a communal grounds for those seeking reassurance and faith.

The boy soon began work on a cave of his own, his emotions finally expressed through the mark of his efforts painted in glorious murals. In that glistening heaven; under the new-born sky that left complete peace in its wake, through the untethered bliss of artistic expression, his wounded calibre began to heal.

He watches the desert, molded into gentle slopes below the firm resoluteness of the sky, the light blanket feeling as humidity collects around him, and bites into the flesh of a peach, fresh from the recent harvest.

Found

Heep Yunn School, Tang, Hui An – 12

The sun boiled above her head. A vicious ball of flames was mercilessly burning the ground, sucking the last drop of moisture out of every creature. The sand sizzled under her feet, crackling and squeaking.

Months of traveling under the insufferable heat, her mind was on the brink of collapse. The antique land held nothing but the endless mountains and hills of bare sand, stretching far beyond the horizon. She moved across thousands of miles like a mindless zombie, never stopping the endless cycle of walking, walking and walking, miles and miles through the abandoned land of the foreign country. The colours of her body and mind had been washed and drained through and through, by no-stopping gears of time.

Her father was a cultured man of southeastern Germany, violinist of the Berlin city opera. Married a wise woman devoted to archeology and raised a lovely daughter, yet the humble family life he had hoped for was not in line for the unfortunate man. 5 years after the child's birth, his wife sailed across the Pacific waves on the fleets of the Imperial Navy, along with the dozens of scholars and explorers recruited, bearing the imperial dreams of expansion in the Far East. They never returned, leaving nothing behind but the dusty collection of artefacts, maps, and thesis.

The night air was freezing, the sky was lit by millions of stars, each scattered throughout the boundless universe of infinity, millions of light-years away from the humble planet of Earth. Not once in her life, not even in the summer evenings in fields of the Rhineland-Palatinate had she ever seen such glamour of nature. Was her mother astonished by the same gorgeous scenery 34 years ago? She struggled to sprint onto a nearby hill, ignoring the staggering pain in her feet.

There were no words to describe such beauty. She laid down and gazed at the night sky in silence, her mind blown away by the view. The night wind slit her face like a knife, her lips chapped and stung, yet her mind was numb to the pain. She thought about her father and his untimely death: a young soul filled with passion for music and the wonderful symphony of life itself, cut short by a British Zeppelin bomber on one dim October day. She wished he could live to see this beauty of the world. There are so many places he had never got to go, so many things he had never got to do.

She wondered while traveling, how was the lone traveler doing at the moment? Leaving her husband and toddler to seek adventure in the country of the Far East, of dragons, emperors, and palaces. She could never understand her, and her collections of weird bottles, bowls, statues, and charms. The world she dreamt of is reckless and foolish, the world of her little stones and charms, the world of her own.

And she decided to stay in her world, by never returning to her family. One world war blew by, the world had turned upside down, decades passed yet she never cared to return.

The Mogao Grottoes, the last place her mother had supposedly ever gone to, as recorded in the files of the archeology team's headquarters in the imperial colony of Kiautschou Bay, is where she is heading to. The archeologist set out for the site alone on the 11th of November from the headquarters to locate the monument and collect a set of artefacts.

She had walked throughout China, posting search notices on every street map and telephone pole. For countless sleepless nights, she fantasies of reuniting with her mother and traveling back to their homeland together. These dreams filled her heart with hope and energy, but at the same time, she wished nether less to slap her across the face at the moment of reunion – the damage done to her heart was too much.

She laid down, gazing at the galaxies afar. Her senses started getting fuzzy. Her eyelids started to weigh heavier and heavier as she struggled to remain conscious. Days and nights traveling long distances with little food had drained all her energy. Yet she forced herself to stay alert – the rattlesnakes and scorpions had no manners. They tend to disturb your sleep. She rubbed her eyes roughly, hastily swept her fringes out of her face, out of the corners of her eyes. A distant shadow was dangling along a cliff.

Her mind stopped for a second. What... was that...?

Like it was some sort of conditioned reflex of her body, without a single bit of hesitation, she sprinted down the sandhill, sudden energy bursting into her veins, as though the strength of the almighty god had been injected into her. She bolted down the hill, her boots sending sand flying into the cold night air. She tripped and stumbled, but the joy and relief at heart outpoured in the instant. Her eyes erupted into tears as the caves in the distance became closer and closer.

The colossal wreck stood upon the cliff of the bare land, such breathtaking architecture made by men centuries ago, such extraordinary work of art and culture. Is this the place that her mother was to seek and venture? She gasped as she laid her body onto the steep wall and began to climb. With each step, her leg trembled from a mixture of excitement and disbelief. This is it. This is her last hope.

Finally, she stood upon the entrance. She took a step cautiously onto the crackling stone steps of the archway into the temple, careful not to break the architecture that has already been worn out through hundreds of years. Lost in the light of the star sky, the inside of the temple was pitch black. She could barely make out the silhouette of a grand room. Digging into her bag and for her old glitching flashlight, the blinding light sliced through the darkness, tearing the mysterious veil of darkness apart, revealing the long-awaited beauty.

Her eyes were met with the most marvellous and astonishing architecture and art she had ever seen. She gasped. In front of her was a creation that had wandered for countless years, waiting silently in the small corner of the world, waiting to see the light of day again. The walls and ceiling were decorated with ancient paintings of birds, people, and gods, in vivid colours. The drawings are compressed together onto walls, with a breathtaking sense of unique dynamics. She had seen paintings in portrait museums and the opera her father worked in, but this felt like a brand new kind of art, one made of beautiful shapes, lines, colours, and culture that had been accumulated through thousands of years. As she slowly entered the dark chamber, a huge statue appeared at the end of the room. The statue's surface was mingled with moss, dirt, and dust, spider webs leached on every corner: How many years had it laid in this empty darkness?

Rocks cracked and crippled under her feet. Her forehead dripped with sweat though it was freezing. The chamber was becoming steeper. She looked around the surroundings. The paintings' pigments were chipping off the small chips of gold, silver embedded into the paintings and sculptures. She laid her fingers gently on the giant statue. The god sat peacefully on its throne. Remaining on its skin only the last tint of colour. Smaller statues aligned along its side, creating a mysterious aura of dignity.

She observed the surroundings, all of which had already been encrusted with dust and hundreds of spider webs. The colors had been washed away, parts of statues had fallen off their places. With each step, layers of thick dust and sand were dragged along the stone floor.

This is it. This is what her mother was looking for. This is what was worth sailing across the globe, traveling through dozens of countries, walking for miles and miles. This is it. A sudden feeling of loss and emptiness stretched throughout her shivering body, as though all the energy and hope were being squeezed out of her fragile body. She had traveled so far to look for her missing mother. And now, here she is, standing at the final place of both of their journeys. Yet, she still had no clue of the long-lost voyager's final fate. If this really was the last place she had been to, where could she be now?

She let out a sigh and trembled down to the floor. Slowly, she crawled into a ball and retreated into a dark corner of the room. The drenched feeling of loneliness fell upon her. Where...where could she be...how could she just disappear like that...

She crouched in the dark, defeated, for a seemingly endless amount of time. Until she sensed the presence of something to her left. She reached her hands out to the glittering object calling upon her...

A human skull.

Redemption

HKCCCU Logos Academy Campus 2, Chan, Bo Wen – 13

He groans, the sound barely escaping his parched, scratchy throat. The sun beats down relentlessly, burning his sweat-drenched back. Golden yellow sand stretches as far as the eye can see, a seemingly endless sea of gold grains glittering in the glare of the sun. Cacti stick up in his peripheral vision, reminding his hazy mind of fingers reaching for something unattainable.

Visions of his life before this torturous agony swim across his eyes: celebrating wildly with his colleagues after unearthing century-old relics in the Sahara Desert, kissing his wife goodbye, celebrating his child's (Clarissa? Carrie? Carly?) birthday..... They all seem an eternity away now, as if he was watching somebody else's life flick by from afar; yet another mirage of an unreachable haven. For a minute, he ponders whether to just relent to the inevitable, looming grasp of Death and let the vultures take him ——

No.

He had been searching for something. What was it? Perhaps his car keys? Letting out a high-pitched giggle, he pulls himself forward in this scorching golden land. He remembers the rumbling of a van and the receding lights of a city; the weight of a bag of tools long since dropped; the delicious taste of greed he'd savored as he had trekked through this very same desert.

An involuntary shiver passes through his body like a ghostly phantom, for the sun was nearing the horizon – and when the sun vanished, the cold came. The bone-chilling, punishing, ruthless cold, which lashed against his frail body like cat-o'-nine-tails.

He had to seek sanctuary.

Fueled with fear, he hauls his listless body through the flat landscape, finding somewhere, *anywhere*, where he could take shelter against the cold. Going as fast as his water-deprived body can manage, he advances through this painful domain of gritty sand. Time passes, only felt through the impossibly fast descent of the sun and the steady cooling of the arid environment. Panic sets in, a lead-weighted blanket on his frayed nerves. His breaths coming in short, shallow puffs, his eyes almost pass entirely over the oasis in the distance. His breath catches, gaze fastening on the sparkling sapphire crescent on the dusky skyline, winking at him in lieu of the sunlight. Surrounded by lush trees and backed by a multi-storied pagoda, it was too good to be true.

Which meant it probably was. Even so, he braves forward resiliently, trying to brush away the worry that it would be a mirage – albeit an extremely detailed one. He crawls closer and closer, until truly towering in front of him were the dense trees, backed by the imposing pagoda. Distracted by the beauty of the sight before him, he doesn't realize he's getting overly close to the crescent lake until it's too late. Not even being able to utter a sound, he plunges full tilt into the sapphire lake.

Closing his eyes, his last coherent thought is that drowning in a picturesque lake is at least better than perishing of thirst in a scorching desert.

But then.

He opens his eyes, blinking blearily, his thoughts incohesive and muddled. *Is this heaven?* He thinks. *If so, it's more Buddhist than I thought.* Colossal walls completely awash with Buddhist art surround him, depicting medieval scenes of culture, religion and arts. Directly in front of him is a vibrant polychrome sculpture group on a raised dais, looking so lively it's as if they are about to step off. Footsteps interrupt his train of thought and he stands up, surprised at the strength his legs seemed to have regained. Just as he turns around, a monk steps through the archway set into the wall facing the group of sculptures.

The monk smiles kindly, the crow's feet around his eyes crinkling. "Ah," he remarks. "You have awoken." His words are tinted with a heavy accent which the man cannot place. Startled, he bows hastily to the monk. The monk smiles again, inclining his head. "I have been treating you for the past few days. You must have a lot of questions, and they will be answered in due time. But first, please drink this water." Handing him a wooden bowl filled to the brim with sparkling water, his mood turns serious.

"I have glimpsed your ways of life, and they have not been satisfactory, archaeologist. You have been dishonest and greedy, disregarding your family and colleagues. With your consent, I will lead you on a cleansing period to teach you a more satisfactory way of life, much like drinking this refreshing water to flush out toxins."

He chokes on the water, half of it slopping down his front. "Wait, wait, wait. Slow down and dial back to the 'glimpsing' part. How were you even able to do that?"

"My visions. They have shown me how you planned to excavate a region in this desert, alone, to claim the artefacts found and sell them to the highest bidder; in the process abandoning and betraying your colleagues, dismissing their efforts – when it was them who figured out that there were artefacts to be found in that region, to begin with. Furthermore, you have neglected your wife and young child, favouring greed and deceit over their love and care. You —"

"Okaaay, you can stop now. Who are you to accuse me of anything, anyway? I don't know you, and you don't know me. Why don't we just forget this encounter entirely and I'll be on my way. Thank you for the water and offer of 'cleansing', but I'll have to bid you goodbye."

And with that, he steps through the archway and into the dimly-lit space beyond.

"You'll just get lost again, you know," The monk says mildly. "I was just like you once, a stubborn, selfish village boy named Yuezun."

The archaeologist pauses, a hand clasping the stone doorway. "Okay, let's say, hypothetically, that I accept your help. What would be in it for me?"

Yuezun, as we now know, pauses and seems to think for a moment. "Enlightenment. Redemption, self-discipline. Inner peace and balance. Need I say more?"

The hand on the archway releases its grip and drops down. "Alright then," the archaeologist sighs. "Teach me your wise ways, Brother Yuezun. But first, you have to answer me how you transported me here through the scorching desert."

Yuezen allows him only a mysterious smile.

And so begins the cleansing. The day after, Yuezun wakes the archaeologist with a singing bowl, giving him a dhonka not unlike his own.

"Put this on," he commands. "And follow me."

He obliges, slipping it on over his underclothes, and follows in the monk's footsteps. They go up a seemingly endless flight of stairs, leaving the archaeologist huffing and puffing in the wake of the monk's billowing tunic. At long last, they arrive at a precipice overlooking the desert, at which the monk promptly sits down and closes his eyes; he keeps balance on the craggy rocks as if he had been there for centuries, unshifting in the face of the dusty wind. The man scoffs in disbelief and immediately refuses.

The monk lets out a huff, saying, "To change your ways, you must first adjust your mindset to accept change itself. What seems impossible is only improbable — fear and doubt will only hold you back from your true aspirations."

The archaeologist only grunts in response, but duly positions himself next to the monk. He tries his best to achieve a state of zen, swiping away the fear that clouds his mind. Eventually, he attains a mind clear of clutter, succeeding in detaching himself from external distractions. Of course, that's when the monk rouses him, leading him back down the stairway to a secluded, comfortable chamber. He sits crossed-legged and invites the archaeologist to do the same. Without waiting for him to comply, he begins bestowing wisdom upon him, lecturing him on redemption and self-improvement. After the clifftop incident, the archaeologist has learned to trust this venerable figure. As if he were a child eager to learn, he mimics the monk's position, turning his face up to the wrinkled benevolence before him.

As time goes on, this routine becomes the usual for this unusual pair. However, ultimately, Yuezun the archaeologist up earlier than usual and gives him a melancholy smile. “I am afraid I have taught you all I can, archaeologist. May all your journeys be fruitful.” With that, he claps his hands together.

The archaeologist awakens in a cool van. His colleague is watching over him wearily, but his eyes widen when he sees him regain consciousness. “Thank goodness you’re awake! We found you about a mile south of our campground; where have you been?”

“I—”

“And what was the pendant around your neck? When we inspected it closer, it turned out to be an artefact from the Tang Dynasty. How did you end up with it?”

But the archaeologist only gives him a mysterious smile, a mirror of the one that Yuezun gave him what now seems so long ago.

Memories

HKCCCU Logos Academy Campus 2, Chen, Siguo – 11

Interpol Headquarters, Lyon, France

“So, now that all of you are here, let’s start immediately. As you all know, the world-famous criminal only known as Rick is now running rampant in what he calls ‘Operation Briefcase’, using briefcases filled with explosives to detonate and destroy all UNESCO World Heritage Sites, one by one,” the Interpol president informed all delegates in the room.

“So, I heard you’ve already traced him?” a French delegate asked.

“That,” the president replied proudly, “is exactly why you’re here.”

After a tremendous cheer from everyone in the room, he continued, “A mysterious plane was spotted to land somewhere near the city of Dunhuang, China. When the local police came to intervene, he killed them all with his gun, and he is currently being tracked by a Chinese satellite. Descriptions of the man given by the police before they were killed perfectly matches our record of Rick. The city of Dunhuang is already evacuated, but we are faced with a great threat: from what we observe, his next target will likely be...” at that moment he paused theatrically before continuing, “the Mogao Caves,” he finally finished.

Silence descended on the room.

A few hours later

Mogao Caves, Dunhuang, China

A man named Rick jumped cautiously over the barricade blocking the Caves’ entrance. He can hear the faint and distant sound of tanks and aircraft, as well as several thousand heavily armed soldiers and police officers, about a few hundred meters away. As he slowly walked up stairs and corridors with his infamous briefcase in hand, he started to remember things, things that had long since been forgotten. However absurd it was, however hard his brain was trying to tell him he was wrong, his instincts were correct: this was not the first time he had been here.

He rushed into the Library Cave, past the thousands of manuscripts to the end of the grotto. His fingers brushed along the rough cave wall, searching for a crack that he had known for a long time. When he finally found it, he slipped his fingers through it. A fingerprint detector scanned his fingers and the wall opened. Proceeding slowly into the cave, he heard the wall close before he was covered in darkness. Plodding further down, he soon saw two specks of light, signaling he had come to an end.

The light had come from two very small holes on a cave wall. Looking out of the holes, he saw the incoming troops and vehicles. He knew they would never find him here, but can he escape? His thoughts then immediately returned to his surroundings, the familiar cave that he had not been to for a very long time. He closed his eyes, and took a walk down memory lane...

Thirty years earlier

Mogao Caves, Dunhuang, China

“Wow! I reckon there must be at least fifty thousand manuscripts in this cave, mum! It’s unbelievable!” a boy said enthusiastically to his mum.

“Shh! Rick, please be quiet! I know this place is great, but please mind your manners here!” the boy’s mum replied, trying to ignore the glares from the security officers around.

So Rick continued on his own, marveling at the scrolls and paintings in the grotto. But suddenly, the end of the cave disappeared and men after men came charging through the cave, with clubs, axes, guns, and cannons. One by one, everyone was killed and poor Rick, who was hiding behind a corner, watched in agony as his parents were slain brutally by the leader. Before her death, his mum stammered weakly, “The spirits of God will always protect you and help you, Rick, and I will always love you!”

And her words indeed came true. Rick was not harmed; instead, he heard them discussing something about “the boy has a lot of potential” and “he can join us once he’s of age”, and then they put a helmet over him. He couldn’t remember much after that...

He heard something like, “Get his fingerprints so he can access our secret cave before the cops come,” ... and then something like, “We’ve got his memory wiped clean, now put on the ‘memory insert helmet’ for him so he will always obey our orders,” ...

Reality

Mogao Caves, Dunhuang, China

And now everything seemed to make sense. He always thought that he was the leader of the notorious “Briefcase Band”, and that everyone in the gang had to serve him obediently. However, whenever his personal advisors give him a suggestion, his mind always forced him to agree, as if he was their servant and they were his leader. Now, he realized that it was because of the “memory insert helmet” which basically altered his brain so that he would always obey them, no matter the situation. If they were caught, most of the blame would also fall upon Rick, the puppet leader.

But he can remember most of the things now, and if his blurred memory was right, the antidote to the memory altering process (a liquid substance) was spilt across the floor, and even its smell could remove part of the effectiveness of the helmet, so their secret base in the Mogao Caves was abandoned in case Rick would smell the antidote one day. After decades, the smell started to spread, and when Rick smelt it, his memory was finally recovered.

The sound of over a dozen soldiers storming the Library Cave brought him back to reality. He was certain they would never find him in the secret cave, so he was safe. He looked down at his briefcase. He turned off the bomb’s timer and put it aside. While he might have wanted to just blow everything up, along with himself, he knew it wouldn’t be a good idea. What, indeed, was the point of doing that? Not only will his life be lost, but lots of other innocent lives will also be lost as well. For once, he felt mercy for everyone in the world; he felt compassion for the ones who are risking their lives to stop the “Briefcase Band”; and he felt a deep feeling of empathy for everyone he had killed, wishing them all a good time in Heaven. He also felt quite hopeless, a redeemed man trapped in a cave with soldiers surrounding him.

Suddenly, his mother’s words came back to him, “The spirits of God will always protect you and help you!”

So, he bent down, closed his eyes and clasped his hands together, believing that God’s help would come one day. He knew it would come. And thus, he waited. And waited. And waited.

He kept on waiting.

The Secret of the Golden Book

HKUGA College, Chan, Chung Ka Giselle – 12

I was lying on my bed, daydreaming, when my sister Liv yelled from the dining room, "Oh my god! You have to see this!" as she dragged me to the TV, where the reporter was just saying, "Another sculpture was found in the Mogao Caves, which the scholars believe to be a sculpture of the well-known general Huo Qubing. The book in the sculpture's hands is believed to be the first book written on gold paper."

A few minutes later, the TV reporter declared that the book had been separated from the sculpture. Also, it was shipped and put in a museum, a 1-hour drive from our home! Liv yelled in delight and immediately phoned Mom.

"Come on, you have to take us there! The Christmas holidays are coming, we'll go there then, please! My friend Ginny works there, she can take care of us!" pleaded Liv. I snatched the phone from Liv and yelled, "Pretty please!" This was Mom's favorite thing to say when she wanted handbags. "Ok, we'll discuss when I'm home!" said Mom.

At dinner, Liv kept badgering Mom to bring us to the museum, so that Mom finally relented. She'd take us there three days later! We galloped around the room, shrieking in delight.

The 3 long days passed like years, but finally, the day came. I shoved random stuff into my bag and scrambled into Mom's car. The 1-hour drive was indeed very long. As soon as we got there, we were shoved out of the car, ordered to go home at 5 pm sharp, and then Mom drove away.

There was a lengthy queue, which I and Liv had to squeeze into. The atmosphere smelled of someone's armpit sweat, and my feet often got stepped on. However, the museum was worth the wait and suffering.

The museum was massive, with a luxurious chandelier on the ceiling. A chilly breeze flowed in from the many windows around the rooms. This was so much better than the queue!

Firstly, we waved to Ginny. Afterward, we saw the lifelike sculpture and the golden book. There was a throng around them already. Therefore, Liv and I made use of our small stature and squeezed through the crowd. The sculpture was glorious. It was frowning at something in front of him, likely the enemy, with chin tilted up, and looking down his nose. Even the armor of the sculpture was meticulously sculpted, with each piece of armor precisely angled. Meanwhile, the book sat in another glass container. While the sculpture was living in glory, the book sat, isolated. It's the first book written on gold paper! It shouldn't be left alone like this! So, I walked over and peered at it.

The cover was battered and torn and yellowed. Immediately, I was drawn to it. I looked at the introduction panel beneath the exhibition.

"According to our experts, this book talks about how general Huo Qubing fought with the Huns: Wild people who lived in the north of China. The author of this book was Yeshan Muonu, which means Witch of Wild Mountains. Experts have not been able to determine the identity of the author yet."

After reading, I still couldn't identify the mysterious atmosphere around this book. It was like a treasure chest, ready for me to open. I had a peculiar feeling about it.

As soon as we got back home, I turned on my computer and typed Yeshan Muonu into Google. It showed a picture of the book from the museum and a cartoon witch. I rolled my eyes. Then, I typed Huo Qubing. Only 5 results came out. They mostly said that Huo Qubing was a general in the Han Dynasty and that he drove the Huns away from the borders of China. That's it? I thought. The book in the museum was quite thick! I sighed, turned off the computer, and went to dinner.

Since I tossed and turned all night, I was exhausted, but I had a plan. I told Liv about this, but she thought it was absurd.

The next morning, I went straight to work. First, I wrote a letter, consulting the receiver about Huo Qubing and Yeshan Muonu. Next, I wrote a random Chinese address on the envelope. Lastly, I biked to the post office and mailed the letter, praying that the letter would be replied to.

A few weeks passed. I had almost forgotten about the letter when the reply came. I was stunned, as I didn't expect to have a reply. Thanks to my stupidity, the receiver had to use Google Translate to translate my letter to Chinese to read. But thankfully, the receiver wrote in English that's fluent enough to understand.

The receiver was a 14-year-old girl. She claimed that her history teacher mentioned that Huo Qubing used harsh methods to drive the Huns away. Some of his armies disagreed with his methods, but he persisted with his plan and succeeded. He was later praised and rewarded by the Emperor, so nobody dared to tell the truth.

While thinking of the next step, I fumbled with the map of China. My eyes swept across the north of China. Suddenly, I snapped wide awake. I realized that in the north of China, there were many mountains. Right there and right then, everything fitted in my brain like a jigsaw puzzle. The Huns lived in the north of China, mountains! The author of the book named herself Witch of Wild Mountains. Huns were wild people, and they lived in mountains. The author of the book was a Hun!

There should be a reason why a Hun would write a book about how her enemy won over her tribe. At that moment, I was ninety-nine percent sure that this book had something to do with Huo Qubing's method of driving the Huns away.

I shot up, turned on my heels, and sprinted like a mad train to the sofa, where Liv was watching a TV program. I dragged Liv to the computer and explained everything to her.

"So, you have to help me find out if my guesses are true!" I finished.

Then, Liv asked, “How?” That was a good question.

Of course, two brains are better than one. With Liv’s help, I quickly thought of a plan. Benevolent me let Liv participate in the plan.

History websites expert Liv told me that there was a link that led to the fully scanned pages of the book in the museum. Within minutes, we found the website. Unfortunately, the page showed “Sorry, you do not have access to this page.” Liv scratched her head in frustration.

We switched to Plan B. Liv called Ginny and told her everything, which took five minutes. Next, Ginny explained the risks to us, which took another five minutes. Luckily, Ginny finally relented.

We could hear Ginny’s groans and moans of frustration through the speaker of our phone, as she tried to log in to her museum working account, to get access to the scanned book. All the while, mumbling that this was illegal.

After goodness knows how long, Ginny let out an exclamation of delight. She had done it! She quickly sent out the scanned document of the book. I pressed open the document with trembling hands. The screen in front of me showed black symbols on a gold background. Liv quickly translated the symbols with her phone.

From the fragment of words, I picked up that this page was a Table of Contents. Running my finger down the screen, I found the word “Death” and scrolled to that page in the document.

We finally understood the meaning of that chapter.

General Huo Qubing had followed the armies of the Huns after wars, to the homes of the Huns. Whilst the officials of the Huns did other work, Huo slaughtered the families of the Hun armies. He torched the houses and barns. He demolished the Huns little by little, till they were too scared to remain on the borders and fled.

The author was only 14 when her home was destroyed. Luckily, she escaped and went into a Chinese city. She was devastated over the loss of her parents and brother and despised Huo Qubing. However, she had to hide that she was a Hun, so she was entirely alone in the world. Then, she wrote this book, hoping to publish it and let people know the real Huo Qubing she hated. But she was rejected. Eventually, she followed the monks who accepted her. She put this book into monks' sacred caves, which were the Mogao caves. They were left unfound and untouched when the monks left, till now.

A few months after our discovery, this information was announced to the public by an "anonymous" source. The public finally knows what the Witch of Wild Mountains wanted people to know.

Sometimes, things aren’t what they seem to be. Maybe the result is positive, but what’s most important is the process of making or doing, and whether it is right or wrong. Whatever you do, there is always a consequence. It’s just whether it hits you hard or not.

Treasures of the Mogao Caves

HKUGA College, Chan, Wing Tsun Valerie – 13

The sky was gold.

A mere illusion, so why did it seem so very real?

Li Qing thought it was another unwelcome side effect of forced proximity with her travel companions.

“An auspicious day for going to an auspicious place,” said one of the aforementioned companions, and Li Qing sighed in exasperation— how much worse could it become?

The horizon was drenched in gold, yet they paled in comparison to the sandy dunes stretched throughout the desert, enveloping their little vehicle in its warm embrace.

And the view was promptly ruined by the shrill, *tourist-like* voice of her other companion. “We’re there!”

The car ground to a halt, sending trails of sand flying. And in front of them?

It was the Mogao Caves.

In the barren desert, under the glow of the sun, the historian, the photographer, and the monk ventured into the depths of the caves.

Being as popular as it was, the entrance had been restored sometime over the past century, leading into a hollowed-out cavern which split off into different caves.

Li Qing rubbed at her temples. Surely she was unfortunate enough to be sent to the Mogao Caves with *this* team; on top of spending two hours of transit with them, she would now have to explore the caves with those two.

In her defence, she thought the Chinese Guild of Historians was *the* most prestigious society in the field— which was why she accepted the commission to write an article. That was before she found out who she had to work with.

An amateur photographer who acted just like a tourist and spoke in an eclectic mix of three languages? Acceptable.

A monk who was only here due to the superstitious manager of their project and never stopped meditating long enough to hold a conversation? Also acceptable.

But both of them together?

Horrifying.

They stepped into one of the adjacent caves, one that featured prominently in Li Qing’s research papers.

She couldn’t help but gasp, awed at the stunning display of living history. Mosaic tiles lined the floor, a reflection of the painted ceilings— a kaleidoscopic mix of colours that formed patterns of flowers with delicately unfurled petals and deities with flowing sleeves.

Statues line the circular walls, sitting in alcoves decorated with the same swirling symbols and barred by velvet ropes, and Li Qing could barely restrain the urge to lean in and *touch*, leaving her own, lasting testament to the place that she had spent half her life researching.

She still remembered, clear as day, how she had been young and curious, stumbling upon a dusty replica of the first artefact found in this exact same cave, reaching out with chubby fingers to touch the yellowing pages of the copy—

And that was the moment that she knew that the Mogao Caves were her calling.

Li Qing snapped back to attention as her eyes trailed absentmindedly across the mural spread across the walls.

She’d been studying these caves for so long that she could feel that something was off, something that had shifted and was now off-kilter, in a sense.

There was the Buddha, ever benevolent in the centre of the painting; elegant bodhisattvas in elegant robes and glittering necklaces; heavenly kings in armour-like robes—

But where were the disciples?

Li Qing furrowed her brows— she was onto something, she knew it— but at that moment, the incessant click—click of a camera jolted her out of her thoughts, cutting the threads of thought that had been *so close* to connecting.

Huffing in frustration, she turned back to the familiar patterns, but just then, Feng started to chant.

It wasn't his usual meditative mantras, but a loud, piercing chant, and Li Qing absolutely lost it, whirling around to snap, "Can you two stop?"

Her companions looked up with identical expressions of confusion and shock, and yet, Li Qing continued to rant. "I've had enough! Enough of your chanting and praying. I wouldn't care if you kept it to yourself—" She pointed at Feng, who started to say— "But, Li Qing, there's something wrong with this cave—" and continued on, "But you never stop chanting long enough to have a chat about what we should do. And you—" She glared at Marie, the photographer, who blinked, baffled— "You keep going click—click—click and yelling like a tourist, and it's starting to get annoying—"

In her frustration, Li Qing had placed a hand against the faded mural, and just as she took a deep breath, the patterns began to whirl in fractals and colours, and before she got a chance to scream, the world morphed and everything disappeared.

Li Qing regained consciousness to the frantic shaking of Marie. "Where are we?" She murmured groggily, noticing the blinking of Marie's camera.

"We're in the Tang dynasty," Feng said grimly, hands clasped in a meditative pose. "And we don't know how to get back."

They were outside the Mogao caves, and yet, Li Qing recognized the entrance as that of the Tang dynasty. So Feng was right— it had yet to be the familiar red arches that she knew it to be, yet scholars bustled in and out of the caves, holding scrolls and talismans and charms and speaking in hushed, panicked tones.

"Have you tried speaking to them?" Marie nodded, her camera clutched in her hands and miraculously working. "They're praying in hopes that the plague will stop."

The plague.

A memory clicked into her mind, and Li Qing leapt up with a gasp. "I remember reading about the cave that we were in. The mural I saw was created shortly after this plague, which is probably why we've been transported here."

"So you're saying..." Feng said slowly, "If we manage to recreate the circumstances, will we be able to get back in time to where we were?"

For the first time on their expedition, Li Qing smiled, a radiant grin blossoming across her face. "Exactly."

They sprinted towards the caves, unnoticed— partially because of the orange robes that Feng was wearing, and in part because of the sheer disarray around them. The main cave was exactly how it looked like now, albeit more brightly colored, with scrolls of parchment strewn across the cavern floor, ink brushes lying atop half-finished and hastily scrawled protective talismans.

Marie winced. "This place sure is in a bad state, huh?"

Feng nodded, carefully sidestepping the statue that stood in the centre of the hall. "That's why we have to go back as soon as possible."

The three entered the cave that they had been transported through, strangely bare aside from the murals that decorated the walls and the statues of Buddha and the heavenly kings— the three disciples were still absent— that were placed in front of them, offerings strewn on the hurriedly-built altar.

"This place looks so rushed," Marie commented, and Li Qing nods, lips pressed into a thin line out of worry, recalling how the books had mentioned that this had been a last resort for desperate, plague-ridden disciples.

“Marie,” Li Qing said, contemplatively. “Do you remember how this place looked when we got transported out of our own time?”

Marie nodded enthusiastically. “It’s like a film set, you know? You should take the place of the disciple standing here, Li Qing,” She said, holding her arms in a demonstration of what Li Qing should imitate, her dark hair bouncing around her shoulders as she moved. “Feng, you can kneel on the floor in the cross-legged pose.”

Feng obliged, his right foot moving to settle on the opposite thigh with a practised grace. “Padmasana, you mean?” He turned to incline his head at Li Qing. “I believe that you should stand in the zhan zhuang pose, the one that’s shown on the wall.”

Marie settled herself next to the statue of Buddha, shivering. The air seemed to hold a sort of nervous anticipation as Li Qing spoke, trying to keep her voice from shaking. “Feng, what should we chant? I think I read that the disciples recited a mantra back in the Tang dynasty.”

Feng took a deep breath, his orange robes billowing. “*Om mani padme hum.*”

As he spoke, the world warped once more, and this time, the bright shades seemed to diminish into their faded counterparts of the modern world, time and space contorting to return the three back to their own time.

“It wasn’t that bad, was it?” Marie grinned, her bubbly demeanour restored as she bounced around the caves. “And besides, I got the shot that I wanted! Our work here is done. We can start on our article now.”

Li Qing smiled, holding her hands up for a high five. “We do work together pretty well, and I think that our teamwork got us back here. Let’s hope for more adventures together in the future!”

And they left the caves, not only with new, groundbreaking discoveries, but also the valuable, warm acquisition of new friendship.

A Tale from the Mogao Grottoes

HKUGA College, Chee, Melissa – 12

In Buddhism, the Buddha has the highest dignity, followed by the Bodhisattva, and then the Arhat. Arhats are also known as “Lohans” in Chinese. Arhats have a golden physique, a high level of development, and the ability to accept popular offers from both heaven and earth. They are said to be capable of assisting humanity in overcoming all of life's obstacles and hardships, as well as preventing reincarnation and alleviating suffering. Arhats are free of sickness, birth, and death, and their six sense organs are all pure. They are the pinnacles of Buddha's disciples' achievements. This is my own account of how I became an Arhat.

In the year of 521 BC, in India, a kingdom known as Kosala flourished. I was born into a family of poor shoemakers. Because we were in dire poverty, we couldn't even make plans for the next meal since Babu was never sure we'd be able to afford it. Among the ten brothers, I was the youngest and shortest. This was the only number I knew after counting all my fingers, thus I always got it right. Babu always made my oldest brother a new pair of shoes. You can imagine that by the time I "inherited" my brothers' shoes, they were already riddled with holes and filth.

That was the year when I turned sixteen, I had to join the other five hundred or so strong guys in paying our village a tribute. We made a promise to help each other's families by working together. Even though I was not as physically strong as my brothers, I was frequently pulled along to fight alongside them. Because arithmetic was not a mandatory subject in my elementary school, I was never sure how many people were in this enormous gang. Because of my infamous shortness, I was usually the last to be summoned during roll call, which began with our clan's tallest giant. The chief presented me with a goat-skin badge bearing the number 501. In fact, to all of us, the number 501 didn't mean the exact amount of five hundred and one since, frankly, we didn't know anything about numeric numbers. Despite this, he made it clear to everyone that I should be watched after by all the taller brothers and should not be left behind after each "mission."

As there were no cows to raise or fields to plough, we had no choice but to begin occupying hills and villages, blocking roads to stop people traveling. Eventually, this had led to looting, plundering, torching homes, and even murdering, among other serious crimes. Merchants, visitors, and peasants in the area were all targeted.

Kosalas officials had sent soldiers to fight with us countless times over the last decade, but the soldiers never won. We were never taught Chinese martial arts, but we were skilled at throwing spears, building booby traps, and laying landmines. I was gifted with the ability to sneak into the battlefield and place traps and mines without catching the enemy's attention due to my short stature and mastery of abilities.

The Kosalas soldiers were required to inform the Indian king of their failure to fulfill their obligations. The king then sent his well-trained warriors to battle in Shohaha the Great's second year. The five hundred belligerent outlaws were finally subdued after a three-month war. In chains, we were all transported to captivity.

The king intended to execute all five hundred of us as a penalty for robberies, murders, and arsons since we were said to despise people so much. On this day, the execution site was well guarded and solemn. Armed with sharp knives, the soldiers gouged out the eyes of the naked, ragged brothers who were bound to the execution stakes. Some even had their noses and ears cut off before being exiled to the wilds of the highlands and forests. With wolves howling and tigers screaming, this valley was lush and verdant, but it was also dark and terrifying, with no food or clothing. The brothers were sad and inconsolably crying.

You might wonder how I was able to withstand these tortures and narrated in such detail without getting harmed. The king's warriors, like us, were not taught arithmetic well. When the commander was told that there were only 500 bandits in total, he began counting with difficulty due to the large number. When the total came to four hundred something, he was irritated. "Let's release this little child," he laughed when he noticed my badge with the number "501" on it on my chest. He's not one of the 500 bandits, I'm sure. This king is merely looking for 500. This kid is number 501. He must have been arrested by accident."

Since then, I had been able to slip into and out of the deadly valley where my brothers were imprisoned. Even though there wasn't much left in our town, I brought water and goat skin for them as a brief relief. The pitiful cries reverberated throughout the land, even reaching Buddha Shakyamuni's ears. He used divine might to send the herbal medication from the Fragrant Hill,

which was blown into the criminals' eyes, knowing that this was the pleas of the five hundred bandits for help. In an instant, all eyes saw light again.

"You have today's sorrow precisely because you have done a great deal of evil in the past," Shakyamuni preached to the valley's five hundred bandits. "If you change your mind, reject evil, and follow virtue, and convert to Buddhism, you can atone for your misdeeds, generate virtuous fruit, and escape the sea of suffering." Shakyamuni bellowed, "Welcome to the pure land of Ultimate Bliss." With so much regret and remorse, we all fell into tears, bowed our heads, and repented after hearing the Buddha's teachings.

Since then, the valley's woodland has been called "the forest of eyes." After many years of hard work under the guidance of the mighty Shakyamuni, we were all able to cut the "roots of suffering and affliction." Attraction, which led to greed and desire; aversion, which led to rage and hatred; and incorrect distance, which led to illusion were examples of "the roots of suffering." We also eradicated incorrect beliefs and ignorance, as well as any connection to a sense of self that would allow selfishness or an attached ego to emerge in any form. Finally, the five hundred bandits were transformed into the five hundred Arhats. Shakyamuni, in his knowledge and love, was, of course, including me. Shakyamuni, with his wisdom and kindness, was, of course, counting me in as well. My loyal acts as a comforter to the brothers were appreciated even though I did not suffer much during the time when my brothers were captured.

After all, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are recognized for treating people with kindness, benignity, and compassion. They join to save the world, and they even make sacrifices at critical moments. The Arhats, who devote their lives to cultivation and are unconcerned about the rest of the world, are incomparable to these. Shakyamuni is known for preparing Arhats for this reason, portraying them as "scorched buds and wrecked seeds," so that they can learn from Bodhisattvas and fully develop their minds. Because Arhats' training and accomplishments are insufficient, we are not equal to Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, and hence our standing is lower than theirs; as a result, we can only live in a "hall"!

If you go to the Mogao Grottoes in Dunhuang and look for the No. 285 Grottoes (Western Wei Dynasty), which depicts the scene of 500 bandits becoming 500 Arhats, you might be able to spot me in the right lower corner with the shortest stature.

Until then, I'll bid you farewell.

The Tale of The Legendary Mogao Cave

HKUGA College, Cheung, Kit Lam – 14

More than one and half millennia ago, a monk decided there was something special about a cave he found at an oasis in the desert on the Silk Road in China.

Over the centuries, thousands of pilgrims arrived and decided to stay, digging more caves, and spending their time creating sacred art and literature.

But time passed, and more than 1000 years later, travellers started taking other routes. The Mogao Caves in the Dunhuang district of Gansu province in west central China were forgotten, becoming little more than a dusty legend.

Then, in the 1900s, local and international scholar-explorers rediscovered the caves. They gradually unlocked its breathtaking secrets. There were hundreds of caverns containing some of the world's finest paintings, sculpture, and literature—including the oldest dated, printed book in the world.

It was like a tunnel to a lost world in the past, scholars said.

What other secrets are hidden there? Whose stories can be found in this treasure house from so long ago? What can the tale of the Mogao Caves teach us?

As grandpa closed the book about the tale, I was fascinated about the mysterious cave and the treasures that lie in it. I said to myself, "I must find the Mogao Cave when I grow up."

As time passed by and as I grew up, I have slowly forgotten about the tale I used to be fascinated by during my childhood. Until one day, when my mum decided to move, and saw the exact book my grandpa used to read to me in my childhood. I wiped away the dust and re-read the book once again, the fascination and excitement from my childhood hit me abruptly.

I switched on my computer and researched about the Mogao Cave for months. Though I saw many comments about how the Mogao Cave is just a tale that doesn't exist under videos that talk about it, I still insisted that it was true.

After a year of research, I flew to Gansu province and arrived in Dunhuang district according to geographers online. However, the cave is in a desert so it definitely wouldn't be a piece of cake to find a cave that I didn't even know what it looked like in the middle of nowhere.

Therefore, I enquired from experts both physically and online. Though they said that what I was finding was nothing but a myth, they still gave me useful information. "Dunhuang, Jiuquan, Gansu, China, 736206. Good luck finding a myth." They said mockingly.

After discovering the exact location of the Mogao Cave, I bought different equipment such as an off-roader, metal detector, satellite phones, and more. Then, I set off on my journey into the unknown.

As I drove my Defender into the desert, it took me 3 days to drive to the location of the Mogao Cave. When I arrived, I checked my map and the location I marked. "It should be right here! It should be here!" I dug through the sand desperately, hoping that the cave wasn't just my imagination.

After hours of digging without any discovery, I threw my shovel to the ground, gave up, and muttered, "Everyone is right, Mogao Cave is nothing but a phoney story scamming 3-year old kids."

When I hopped in my car and started driving back, I felt a shock to my spine. I exited the car and saw that the front wheel sank into a hole that felt solid. I grabbed my shovel and unveiled a stone platform with a dragon symbol sculpted on it.

The dragon was so well sculpted that I couldn't help but to walk towards it and take a more thorough look. As I walked towards it, I tripped on a rock and fell onto the dragon platform. It sank.

As the pressure of my body got applied on the platform, a rotating cylinder stone floor was revealed. A hill of sand in front of me started to collapse, I thought I was doomed so I immediately entered my car and drove towards the opposite direction. However, when I looked back, I saw a temple-like structure slowly revealing itself. A strange energy attracted me to drive back.

I left the car and walked towards the temple. On the door of the temple, I saw a dragon symbol that was identical to the one I saw on the stone platform just now. When I pressed on the dragon, the hill of sand fully collapsed and revealed the entire architecture. A breathtaking temple.

As the architecture started to reveal itself, the door of the temple slowly opened and I saw a long corridor with walls that were sculpted with many strange paintings and symbols.

I studied the peculiar paintings on the wall and figured out that it talked about the tale and the origin of the Mogao Cave.

The Mogao Cave was a spot where the ancient ruling families of Northern Wei and Northern Zhou hid their valuables such as jewellery, gold, and more.

As I walked down the corridor, arrows were shot out of the blue and platforms started to lower. And below the platforms was a deep pool. And toxic gas started to be released into the air.

Fortunately, I have parkour experience in my youth. Therefore, I jumped on the platforms while dodging the arrows and holding my breath.

After all the hardships, I reached the end of the corridor. There was a door. I pushed it open and I entered the room.

It was incredibly tall. There were large statues of Buddha and more Buddhist characters. Under the spectacular statues were many wooden chests. Every one of them that I opened were impeccable jewels and gems such as jade, diamond, amethyst, and more. Every chest I opened was at least worth half a million. My heart was pounding extremely fast as the waves of excitement and joy splashed across my heart.

“My hard work paid off! All those months I spent finding this cave paid off!” I exclaimed in excitement. I brought the chests to my trunk one by one until I took all of them.

3 days later, after I flew back to Hong Kong, I was offered a membership by the International

Tales From the Mogao Grottoes

HKUGA College, Lam, Tsz Ling – 12

Once upon a time, there was a monk called Lezun. Lezun was tempted to build a cave near the oasis in the desert near the Silk Road of China. However, lots and lots of people disagreed. He insisted that there was something very very very special about the silk road, but there was no clue of anything special. There was only water in that space, nothing else.

Lezun was very disappointed by these people who disagreed with him, so he ignored them, and found his own way to build a house at the cave. He found some iron, to make as a knife, just to try to carve the beautiful decorations inside. He also bought lots of things with all the money he's got from working. Even though he's not really good at carving and building, he found his friends and they helped him design it. The whole process was very successful. When he decorated it, he put some superbly special things in it, which pretty much no one noticed.

15 years later, a building was finally built there. Lezun was impressed by his own work and lots of other people were amazed and pleased with it. Although they loved it, they still didn't see anything special in it. People thought that it was just a normal house with some basic things inside it, so no one actually really cared about it. It was getting more and more unpopular and no one ever saw that again.

Until in the 1900s, some scientists found the cave again. The scientists were shocked about why there was a cave there, and when they walked into the cave, the people were shaken up. A hundred or more caves. Basically impossible to do!

A fact that is more breathtaking was that there were alluring drawings from the past. The drawings were full of life and it was just like the people drawn there were back to life. The explorers' eyes were caught by these paintings. "Just amazing," murmured an explorer.

One scholar walked through the other door and a thick stack of books ran into his eye. Slowly reading the books there, he was startled with disbelief. The books were amazing and the content was lively. As a bookworm, the scholar was definitely pleased with the literature. After some time of reading, he checked a book called 'The Diamond Sutra'. It was the oldest printed book in history. He was on cloud nine. Quickly, he went to meet his teammates and showed them what he had found. The teammates were astonished by it too!

On the other hand, another discovery was made by an adventurer. There were lifelike sculptures in another room! The sculptures were really beautiful and it was surely made by top-notch people who knew how to make them. It was even better than the one we saw in the museum! There were lots there, but these were the best ones they could find.

After they saw the whole cave, people wanted to get the things that belonged to Lezun. A scholar even greedily got away with all of the artworks! The people quickly told him not to, because it belonged to the cave and they shouldn't get it. Yet, the scholar was as stubborn as ever, and he took away all of the things he wanted in the cave.

When the greedy scholar wanted to leave the cave, it was rumbling and the others couldn't go in and save him as the door was blocked by lots of rocks and sand. A voice showed up and growled, "I am Lezun. No one can steal my things and leave the cave. Now, you took away my things and you're trying to get away with it. Get ready to die!" The rocks from the entrance smashed the greedy one and killed him. When everyone sympathized with his death, the leader of this exploration said calmly, "There is no need for you to be sad about the man's death. He did something which offended Lezun. It is wrong for him to do it." The leader was right. Lezun was the owner of the thing, but now others came and tried to get their stuff.

"The story is passed through generations and stands till now. Being greedy isn't actually good and you will suffer if you are." Le'an told the children. "Yes, teacher!" the children chirped.

The Tunnel To The Past

HKUGA College, Liu, Yau Nam Justin – 12

The autumn came with regal and sophisticated ease, the mood from the bipolar angst of the summer changed to the flamboyant fall. Leaves were drizzled in amber shades, swooshing rhythmically along the strains of wind. It was a tempestuous night for me, strolling in the park. The birds were chirping mellifluously and the sudden sense of adventure prancing accompanied by the seemingly predetermined, but irresistible fate.

Majestically, I stumbled inside the Grottoes, panting steadily, with my eyes staunch to the surroundings. A horse galloped from a painting, the soldiers slaughtering and annihilated; a magnificent fire soon surrounded me, the heat cracking, the war songs ringing enchantedly in my mind.

Without warning, a squeal of light dashed across my eye. Everything was transcribed into red blobs of ink. I screeched in agony as the slithering pain from the light rushed into my knees. Kneeling in trepidation, angelic voices rushed inside my head, bellowing in excruciating pain. Pictures and pictures soon scampered through the tunnel, me running opposite of them. I soon fell into a void, hollow and unpredictable. “I regret coming here”, murmured the idle body.

I was a merchant, stuttering, hoping to find fortune.

Fall, 1345, Dunhuang

A bearded merchant walked towards a gathering of distributors.

“We are all hallucinators. We are here to seek a dream, to seek the light gushing to our hopes, to seek prosperity and health.”

“Advocators, our time has come,” a short mushy merchant, Xiri said.

“Yes, yes. Imagine the income we can obtain, the fame we can grasp,” the bearded merchant exclaimed.

“Peonies are blooming, narcissus flying.” the merchant wrinkled a petal, it flapping. It glided towards the sand, into this unknown journey.

“Speaking of this, have you heard of ‘the tunnel towards the past’ my dear friends?” a merchant named Tianhua said.

“Where is it.....” they all exclaimed.

“Somewhere, a cave called the Mogao Grottoes.”

Their eyes flickered in hope. They then set foot, walking on the fragile flocculent sand, the songs blooming and blustering. Soon a cave was to be seen with quite a red-tilted, stone flower engraved entrance.

“The entrance. The entrance of the tunnel of forever glimmering hope.”

“Us imaginers will pledge. We will find the secrets underlying.”

“Good luck my comrades. Success may be equivalent to ruling, to our riches and welfare.”

Walking inside, a Buddhist sculpture could be envisioned. It was caressing a torch, the flame burning with rage. The sculpture was elegantly settled on a stand, its eyes magnificently glancing at the top of the Grottoes. Lying in front was a small passage. Xiri took a deep breath, and trekked into the passageway courageous but timidly.

Harmonious Buddhist paintings were scattered throughout the two walls; priests worshipping the ultimate goddess; carrier pigeons, its head clutched an olive pad; soldiers handling artillery, wearing bulletproof vests; horses hastening and the lilies blushing in pink. The temple was curated with a turquoise roof, with curtains hanging and gold speckles.

Walking in the tunnel, they didn’t know they would be transferred in a world, to when the Silk Road had not been set up.

Winter, 112, Shanxi

A war.

A hall of enlightenment soon leaped out, with one hundred rhetorical Buddha’s settled together, soaked in radiant lustrous gold. Though originally embellished in a deep black, they now gleamed in an exquisite yellow.

The monk stared at the blood raging in the battlefields. Tempestuousness and agony rushed in the Monk’s heart, as the monk inchmeal walked inchmeal out of the sacred heart of the universe.

“Wudi your highness, I found the place for defence and commemoration,” the monk muttered.

“Luck will prevail, “the monk stated.

The day the soldiers marched into the Grottoes, the sun shone tempestuously. Mountains seemed to be coated in lush green and brown, and the peonies were doing pirouettes.

“Let us attack, as fortune seems to be on our side, “Wudi chanted.

“Our songs will prevail!” the soldiers replied with etiquette.

A rupture of moonstone yellow light appeared in the carnal black sky, as they were clobbering against the wall.

It was unknown for now whether they regained territory, as the merchants were soon transported into another century.

“Maybe, maybe the place is blessed with luck. But why?” the bearded merchant suggested.

No one could give a reasonable explanation for the fortune blessed in this place. They walked and walked, as sparse graphs of victorious soldiers and the strong country blazed into their now blurry eyesight.

Summer 1234, Xi'an

The Mogao Grottoes flourished with sellers and buyers selling Buddhist related charms, spells and religious items.

As the Merchants walked through the tunnel, they saw a piece of paper on the floor and picked it up.

A poem was written:

“On the ancient Silk Road,

A sandbar with blue sky and white clouds drifting over,

There is a pearl that has gone through the vicissitudes of life,

The Mogao Grottoes in Dunhuang are in high spirits.

I can't describe his dazzling starlight with words.

The master who integrates art into every inch of wall,

The master who melts his soul into art,

The tragic years of history, the wounds that pierce the bone marrow,

Art that has been plundered and destroyed by robbers, the blood flowing.

Greet the East with polite words,

This is the power of Chinese art”

Xiri said, “The gleaming lustrous stars are shining brightly. Perhaps we did not interpret the Cave righteously.”

The group of merchants out stared at the flustering market, the exchange of cultures and goods vivid.

“Maybe it’s not about prosperity. Maybe it’s about how things that would be suppressed outside this place would be accepted here. The plundering of robbers wouldn’t be here because of the sacred feature of the Mogao Grottoes. The oppression of the government would be vanished because the Buddha’s here would treat everyone rightfully with respect.”

The merchants stared at the blistering sun. They had run across centuries, ran across hopes, ran across the secrets that could be discovered. The Mogao Caves is, yes, the place of lustrous and exquisite Buddhist art, the place for trade and merchandising, but also a get-away. A get-away for those who desire good fortune; who are suppressed and want a place to cleanse and mend souls; to remember and commemorate history, feel the journey to the past.

It was midnight, but the bunch of merchants felt especially vivacious.

Treading on Dried Mud

HKUGA College, Ng, Chi Kuan Jane – 14

I watched from above, watching the tourists scramble around like ants. Their square boxes flashed and made a clicking noise, and their excited voices rose from the ground.

The Caves used to be much grander. But the sand and the wind have eaten away the colours, smoothing the surfaces of the sculptures. Everything has become so dull, and the Caves don't hold a spark to their former glory. Yet, I am glad that the stories have not been lost – the important literature, the essence of the Caves – they are still here, and once again, our words are travelling through the wind, to the wise and the foolish, the rich and the poor. We have been rediscovered and awakened, ready to continue our journey.

It is a shame that people forgot about us in the first place. But would the Caves still be complete if they had not been forgotten? What was to stop the prying thieves from taking our words, selling them as if they were no more than common cattle? No, I like to think that it was for the best. The sculptures could be saved; people would bring them to life once more, with methods that were unimaginable in our time.

And though the beautiful craftsmanship has slowly chipped away, the sculptures stood their ground, their eyes still glaring with a fiery spirit. Losing their colours means nothing to them, for in the end, they are still here. They are the stories of the craftsmen, like the literature woven.

I smiled a bit.

The Caves have done their job, and I slowly moved into a sitting position, watching the strange tourists in their ludicrous clothing move. I remember my last day at the Caves, watching the beautiful sunset from a higher floor of the Caves.

That day still rings clear as bells, and I remember touring and admiring the Caves like never before.

~

I placed the manuscripts in the centre of clay and mud. It was the last set of scriptures to be stored in the library, which the architects had built with clay, mud, and some other materials. I, for one, am not quite certain as to what they use for their buildings, as I am not an architect. Looking at the library, the scriptures were all stored in good order, and I felt satisfied.

The sheer amount of work we have here!

They came from China, India, Tibet, filled with different languages, culture, religions – it was positively beautiful.

Perhaps one of the best things about the Caves was that they were so near the trading routes, that almost anyone could come and visit, and so all kinds of cultures mingled with each other in here, allowing the library to grow richer and richer in scripture and knowledge. In fact, the library reminded me of a brewing pot of soup, holding all the best things one could ask for, concentrated into a place as common as any library.

I smiled. I believed myself lucky to be able to witness the Caves being built, seeing that I was already an old man, with crumpled skin and a thin, wispy white beard. Yes, truly, it was an honour to watch this place grow.

I wandered out of the library and led myself into the chamber filled with statues. This one, also made of clay and mud, held the statues of the most well-known Buddhas. I took my place where the followers prayed and poured out my respect to Guanyin. As for these sculptures, they were made with utmost care. The sculptors had chiselled with incredible detail – the guards had intimidating, well-guarded expressions, the Buddhas had stern, but understanding and gentle expressions, and even the Buddhas' steeds looked like intelligent creatures. And it was as if the sculptors had not yet been satisfied with just the shape of their work, and they painted the massive sculptures with great care, covering every nook and cranny with vivid colours that never failed in catching one's attention.

Concluding my prayer, I continued my little venture around the Caves. You know, like an old man.

I ran my hand along the stone of the Caves, feeling its coolness, and its shape. And a small smile tugged my lips as I thought of the little prophecy which brought the Caves to life. My pilgrim brothers and I had been allowed the luxury of seeing into the future. At that time, I was so much younger than the others, and it had been quite frightening to be suddenly pulled from rolling dough to a strange, new world. It was alien, and the people had built large shining pillars penetrating the clouds. A great deal of land had been soothed into gentle, shiny roads, and rivers ran unnaturally straight. Men and women strode in luxurious clothing, and they lived in clean, beautiful spaces that were hidden in the shining pillars.

As a child, I was too panicky to see any of the details, but when my brothers had held a small discussion about the vision all of us saw, I realised just how many things I had missed. They described the doors and houses being decorated with red paper, and children and adults alike setting off small fireworks. It was clearly New Year, and the people were celebrating. Yet, my brothers were worried, as even though they saw people returning home to visit their parents, a great batch of people didn't, busy buying clothing and jewellery, while old men and women sat at home, so used to having no visitors that they behaved as if they were apathetic, though sadness glimmered behind their tired eyes.

The vision did not end there, and my brothers all agreed that they had seen other festivals – some left entirely uncelebrated, and some where people were only bothered with purchasing more and more items. To be completely honest, I, as a child, did not understand much about my brothers' urge to do something for the future. Back then, I was just a bit too preoccupied with rolling dough.

Now, I suppose I understand better.

My brothers deduced that it must've taken place in the future, since their world was so sophisticated that it couldn't have possibly happened in the past. They were troubled. What made the future people act like how they do? They thought perhaps the emperor had forbidden some festivals, but then the palaces were all empty. Then they guessed that maybe the people they saw didn't even have the same ethnicity as us, but we looked far too alike.

They were, quite frankly, completely baffled. Then, one of them decided that we wouldn't be able to deduce a completely accurate reason, but since our culture was slipping away, perhaps all we had to do was to preserve for the people in the future. And so, they tried to search for a good location for preserving the culture – this spot along the trading routes was soon decided to be perfect, and the building of the Caves began.

That was such a long time ago. When I became the one in charge, all I had to do was to go along with my brothers' previously made plans, and sometimes I wish I had done more for this beautiful place.

I slowly moved into a sitting position, just slightly aware that I was on the highest floor of the Caves.

The sun was just setting, and the sky was dyed a gorgeous orange, soft and gentle, clouds shining with a brilliant gradient, like it was burning with a golden flame.

I sighed, a smile still on my lips. The end of the day had come.

~

The pride and glory of the craftsmen is still standing.

I gave the scattered tourists one last look, and I retired to where we belong.

The Mural

HKUGA College, Shiu, Lok Kiu Athena – 14

If one journeys deep enough into the Mogao Caves, unseen, unheard— armed with nothing but a few candlesticks— past the guards, past the cameras, past the tourists and archaeologists, they will find beautiful, detailed paintings decorating the otherwise blank cave walls with their faded colours.

And that's if they don't get lost first, mind you.

But if you continue to venture on, deeper and deeper, chances are that you'll find *a* cave that catches your eyes among the many that reside there.

This one in particular isn't all that special, bu— wait, what did you just say?

Where did you get the idea that I'm going to *lead* you there? No, no. I'm just a storyteller.

Hush now, let this old man tell his tale.

If you ever find this chamber... well, I wouldn't encourage you to go, but chances are that you'll find a painting, stark against the plain cave wall.

If I remember correctly, the painting itself is simple but beautiful, depicting the Buddha in flowing clothing staring serenely, peacefully at the viewer, every bit the god they are.

Of course, compared to the countless other paintings in the caves, this one is but a drop in the ocean, but there are stories about this particular painting and how it came to be there — the one I am about to tell is the one that my mother did before me, and my grandfather before that.

Settle down, now.

Imagine that you're a pilgrim.

With religious material fastened to four camels and bags of supplies on your back, you trek across the desert for weeks on end with a few other monks, searching for the Mogao caves — a hub of Buddhism that's every pilgrim's dream to venture to — but the journey is easier said than done.

The sun kisses your skin with its scalding touch by day, and the biting wind always finds a way to slip inside your robes, settling in your bones by night.

By this point, two in your group have perished in the harsh terrain and weather, supplies are dwindling by the day, and you just want nothing more than to fall over and sleep forever and just *not* care about the pilgrimage.

But you are a good monk, and you continue to push on with the others despite the threat of death looming over you all.

More and more arguments break out between the others these days.

You even join in, sometimes, even though it goes against a lot of things you stand for.

It feels good to release some of your pent-up stress.

A few more days pass, and you think you're lost.

The terrain doesn't even match the map anymore, and the compass stopped working a week ago.

There's only enough food and water to last you all another day or two.

The largest argument yet happens over your evening meal that night, when one of the others stands and points to *you* – the one who reads the maps – saying that if it weren't for *you*, they all would be at the caves by now.

Slowly, the others join in, all of them angrily pointing fingers at you and occasionally each other, but mostly you.

You sit there not quite shocked but still frozen, guilt churning in your gut at the accusations.

If you weren't the one who read the maps, would you all be lost right now?

The shouting goes well into the cold night, but you stay silent throughout the whole of it – there's just not enough anger in you to fire back witty retorts or defensive quips.

You pray extra hard that night, cross-legged and prayer beads grasped in your numb hands.

The Buddha will save us, you think.

The night passes without any other incident.

The atmosphere is tense between you and the others the next day, but they're no longer shouting at you, only shooting angry glances your way every few minutes.

The day creeps along, morning passing into afternoon and afternoon passing into evening, and you're just about to resign yourself to another day of being lost until something that's decidedly *not* sand starts to peek over the horizon.

You all think that it's a mirage until it's not, and then you suddenly need to restrain yourselves from just straight-on *running* towards it because you're too tired and it would seem unsightly for experienced monks such as you.

You think, no, *know* that your prayer worked, but you decide not to tell anyone in case they think it's glory-seeking.

It's well into the night when you all reach the caves, and you're so exhausted you almost fall asleep reciting your dinner prayer.

The others apologize to you after they get a full meal in for acting so rashly, but you're not exactly inclined to forgive them so quickly after so blatantly pointing fingers at you.

It's not until another day or two passes and you calm down a bit, the initial frustration fading away.

You remember your Buddhist values then – that giving up hatred and forgiving the harm done to us by others allows one to move on and to achieve peace of mind – and you recite a prayer before setting off to find the others.

The days after you make up with the others fall into a similar routine – you've already unloaded the scriptures and statuettes from the camels on the first day or two, and the only thing left was to help out around the cave – but one day, while cleaning a gorgeous painting of the Buddha, inspiration and motivation strike.

You tell the others all about your idea as you sort out scriptures, as you all clean up after prayer, as you all get ready to sleep.

They agreed, albeit a bit hesitantly, either because they were tired of your endless gushing or because they wanted to make it up to you, but you were so excited you didn't care.

You were always the most artistically-inclined of the group.

You asked the monks who took care of the caves about it, and after another day of debating they said as long as the painting was Buddhist in nature and you didn't disturb the other religious artifacts, you were good.

And so, you all got to work.

It wasn't anything that stood out from the crowd, in the end, but you and your friends still felt proud that you were able to leave your mark on the famous caves, something that contributed to the wealth of Buddhist artefacts and art that filled them.

I really hope that you get a chance to visit the caves one day. It's really a work of art, even if the only things you'll get to see are the ones they sectioned off for tourists.

Yeah, yeah, it's a shame— *why are you asking me to be your illegal tour guide?*

I've already said that I'm only an old storyteller!

Even if I didn't have these old bones stopping me from going off adventuring, we'd still get lost in those caves.

You're asking about the directions I told you? No, they're not going to be accurate. I'm not a reliable source, you know.

...agh. Old age is getting to me. Go on now, shoo. Shoo.

A Journey of Discovery and Self-discipline

HKUGA College, Wong, Kai Ho – 14

The Mogao Crottoes have always been a place filled with secrets, stories, and artefacts. Starting from 1000 years ago, after a monk decided that the cave he found at an oasis in the desert is special, countless pieces of art and literature piled up in the new caves, which were dug by the pilgrims, who stayed and became creators of arts inside the Mogao Crottoes.

Along with the increasing amount of country—worth art and literature that are deep inside the Mogao caves, more and more stories about the caves appeared. Some say that under the cave is a secret society, where the citizens are people with some of the smartest brains the whole human race has ever seen. Some say that it is a tomb of an alien, and the creators of the arts and literature made and kept their products in the Mogao caves, as a farewell gift to their highly respected leader. Some say that the caves are the laboratories of a bunch of freaks, performing cruel experiments on humans inside.

A brave amateur explorer, Curt Bing, was deeply attracted to the mysterious aura of the Mogao Crottes. He decided to pay a visit to the caves in the oasis located in a desert on the Silk Road in China.

After a year of planning, and a month of booking flights and preparing, Curt finally stood in front of the mysterious place he had been thinking and dreaming about for a year. He set foot inside the caves, but was then yelled at by a guard.

“You are clearly not a professional anthropologist! Go back to the visitor’s zone!”

Curt wasn’t really pleased. He hates it when others call him an amateur, but not only did this guard imply that, he yelled it out as loud as a lion’s roar. People close by started turning their heads to look at Curt. His cheeks started to feel a little warmer than they usually are. He was embarrassed and furious at the guard.

He ran deeper into the unexplored caves of Mogao Crottoes, originally as a revenge to anger the guard, but as more and more people turned their heads and looked at Curt, his ears and cheeks both felt like they were burning, so he ran faster and faster, not holding himself back at all. He ran and ran until there were no people around him, and finally, he sat down and tried to catch his breath.

After a quick break, Curt quickly realised how lost and deep inside the caves he was. Darkness was the one and only thing that surrounded Curt. Even the light from the entrance of the cave couldn’t reach so far inside the cave. He opened his bag, and the zipping sound of the zipper on his bag echoed in the cave for what felt like eternity. Curt was so surprised that he didn’t move or make any sound for a while.

He switched on the flashlight he took out from his bag.

“click... click” and the echoing continued for what felt even longer this time. Curt slowly explored the cave, for fear that he might miss a corner of the cave, and leave that tiny part unexplored.

Curt could clearly feel that the cave was very old, yet he couldn’t even find a single spider web or a single ant.

There was a small pond on his left side, and above it were naturally organised dripstones. Curt could feel the tranquillity of this beautiful natural phenomenon. From time to time, a drop of water fell from the tip of the dripstone into the pond, causing two mini ripples to spread across the pond, along with the echoing sound of the drop of water of course.

This was the perfect spot for quiet, peaceful meditation. The cave was filled with drawings. There were drawings of dinosaurs, asteroids, volcanic eruptions and cavemen hunting. All the drawings looked like they had been there for ages. Curt put his hands on the wall, and tried to feel the texture of the drawings.

His smartphone accidentally fell from his pocket onto the floor. The moment the phone hit the ground, the whole cave lit up, not with torchlight or light bulbs, but with a kind of transparent glowing rocks.

The rocks were as smooth as marble, but their insides emitted light like that from diamonds. This was the most beautiful thing Curt had ever seen. He couldn’t even take his eyes off the rocks for one second, in fear that the emitting light would disappear if he blinked.

After a while, Curt finally took his eyes off the rocks. He looked at the cave's walls, and unlike the ground, there were no pebbles of glowing rocks. Instead, the transparent rocks were cached into fragments, and then put onto the wall.

From far away, these fragments seemed like powder, but a closer look revealed that it was actually crushed rocks, each one unique and very different from the other. On the same walls, they could perfectly fit with each other, as if they were made for each other, creating a harmonious aura.

Many pieces of fragments formed a clear dot on the wall, the dots formed lines, and the lines formed figures. Once the figures were clear enough for Curt to see, he was shocked by what he saw. He saw a figure of the solar system and the Milky Way. He saw a figure of modern society, covered with lights from the neon advertising signs.

All the rocks had been stuck onto the wall at least 900 year ago. How did they have this information?

As he was thinking, all the rocks stopped glowing, all except one. The spot of light became brighter gradually, and started shifting. The spot shifted from the wall to the ground. Now, the rocks on the ground were the ones glowing.

The spot kept spinning around Curt, as if it was telling him to follow it. Curt was terrified, but driven by his curiosity; he still followed the spot of light, walking deeper into the unknown.

To Curt's disappointment, the spot of light actually led him to a dead end. Just as he was turning his head around, planning to leave, a hovering pharaoh popped out of nowhere. Again driven by his curiosity, he decided to follow the pharaoh.

After a few steps, the dead end became a maze, revealing multiple paths to undiscovered and unexplored secret rooms, each of them emitting their own unique, mysterious, magical light. Curt's was slowly filled with a desire to explore and observe every cave revealed and every kind of colour emitted by the stones.

"You have unlimited access to every cave until you step out of the cave," the pharaoh said before disappearing into thin air.

From then onwards, Curt has never been seen ever again.

This cave feeds on humans, on people who go as deep as Curt did. This is the mysterious legend of the Mogao Crottoes.

Be mindful that beautiful things are always dangerous. The secret of the Mogao Crottoes might be shocking, and stunning, but there is a lot we haven't discovered. We only understand around 5% of the universe and 15% about our own planet. A lot can't or haven't been explained or explored yet. We have to be curious enough to find it, but self-disciplined enough to hold back from the dangers the discovery of the knowledge might bring.

There are a lot of mysterious secrets and stunning phenomenon about this world, waiting for us to be discovered, but you should be fully prepared before your embark on the journey.

The Traumatic Cave

HKUGA College, Wong, Tsz Ching – 12

A long, long time ago, a monk was travelling through the Silk Road, and found a cave. It looked perfect, too perfect. The cave had a light shining upon it. There were more plants growing near it, and the cave was extremely smooth. The monk believed it was a cave made by the Buddha, and that it was made to serve purposes, so he stayed there for a day and a night to draw pictures about the tales of his religion. For centuries, pilgrims came to this cave, they would draw on the walls of this cave, and they dug more caves. They stores treasures to worship their god, putting in traps and making the place complex just to keep the treasures safe. The story went on, and on. And the treasures were not the only things that piled up. Bandits and pirates would try to take the valuables, but none of them succeeded; they only resulting in bones and corpses to pile up along with it. However, as time went on, people found shorter, safer routines and stopped going to the cave. Soon, this religion also disappeared, leaving this unfinished and lost cave to be covered in dust and hidden away.

“Why’re you so slow! You look so weak! Hahaha!” Alex yelled.

“Alex! Language! And slow down and wait for your classmates!” Ms. Wilson called out. The class was out on a trip on China’s famous Silk Road.

“I have to admit, we are moving way too slow. I’m going to get a sunburn on my beautiful skin...” Lorine complained. The sun was indeed giving no mercy, as it burns the people exposed in broad daylight.

“Are we there yet? We’re all tired.” Jason groaned.

“Where even are we?” Olivia asked, looking at her map in confusion.

“I– uh...” Ms. Wilson stuttered.

“You idiot! We’re lost! Isn’t it obvious?” Alex’s brother, Ash answered, rolling his eyes at Olivia. Alex and Ash were the class bullies. They just love tormenting others, but they never really got physical.

“Look! There’s a cave there! Maybe we can take a break there?” James the class daredevil suggested with hopeful eyes.

“Yea!”

“Please?”

“Good idea!”

The whole class started agreeing on the idea, even Alex and Ash.

“Alright, I suppose it would be a good idea to take a break while we figure out where we are...” Ms. Wilson sighed, agreeing to let them stay here for a while.

Immediately, everyone seemed to have absorbed energy from the sun and rushed to the cave in a blink of an eye.

“Woah! This place is bloody huge!” Alex yelled, hearing the echo coming back to him.

“It’s really dark in here...” Ash mumbled, shivering in fear. He hated the dark because of some personal reasons that mustn’t be questioned.

“What are you? A baby? You laugh at us while you’re scared of the dark? You’re such a hypocrite!” Olivia laughed.

“Hey! Don’t say that!” Alex defended, “You’re just as mean right now, you’re the hypocrite! Now back off!”

“Shush! Stop arguing kids! Ash, you can stay at the entrance then!” Ms. Wilson said.

“No! I’m staying with Alex!” Ash yelled. “But–”

“No!” Alex tried to persuading him just to be cut off.

“Alright, but stick with me ok?” Alex smiled.

“Okay, that was really sweet— anyways! Can we explore the cave?” James suggested again, having a huge grin plastered on his face like Christmas came early.

“No! That’s dangerous!” Ms. Wilson screamed.

“Too late Ms. Wilson, he’s gone off already,” Jason sighs, looking in the never ending cave.

“I guess we’re all going in then!” Olivia yells, running into the cave along with the rest of the class except for Alex and Ash.

“Wait! Stop!” Ms Wilson tried to stop them. Well, she tried to. All the kids were ‘gone with the wind’ already.

“Can Ash and I stay here?” Alex asked.

“Don’t worry, I have a flashlight. It wouldn’t be safe to leave anyone behind.” Ms Wilson answered, ensuring them. So, they followed the footprints in the sandy ground.

“Woah!” “Wow!” “Pretty!” Exclaims could be heard echoing through the cave. Drawings were laid out across the walls of the cave. The pictures often had the same character, with huge horns, black hair and angel wings.

“That dude looks like the devil had a kid with an angel! Heh!” Olivia laughed, along with some snickers and giggles from some others.

“Ah! What the—” screams from the girls could be heard. There were piles of bones stacked up to mountains.

“We’re going to die here! And it’s going to be your fault!” Jason points at James with tears in his eyes.

“Calm down boys, no one is going to die, and it isn’t anyone’s fault.” Ms. Wilson separated the two boys.

Suddenly, a huge rumble came roaring in. Sand started to blow in. They panicked and ran deeper into the cave. Soon, they realised that that was an idiotic mistake. Unfortunately, the entrance was blocked and they weren’t able to get back.

“I guess we’ll have to find a way out from the other side now…” Alex announced.

“We don’t even know if there’s an opening on the other side!” Someone shouted.

“Alex is right, although we can’t be sure that there would be an opening on the other side, we should at least try.” James said with a determined look.

So they went deeper and deeper, alongside with more paintings. They started to make out a story. It all started with peace, until a mass murderer killed half the village. The gods were angry, so they decided to make a creature that is that equally an angel, a human and a devil. That creature represents good and evil, and balances the earth. The story went on until they met up with a difficult choice of two roads. One with a painting of the creature whipping a person with a whip, while the other with an angel with a whip.

“I say we go to the one with the demon painting,” Olivia started. “Only demons punish people!”

“That’s true. Let’s go there.” Everyone agreed and they continued on.

“There’s nothing to be afraid of! Watch!” James yelled, running forward.

Suddenly, his screams were heard and everybody rushed to see what had happened. All that was seen was his body bleeding out, and his stomach pierced through with a sharp rock. Suddenly, another scream was heard, sending chills down their spines.

“The rocks are moving! Run!” Ash yelled. They all ran. Blood was splattered everywhere. This was a trap!

“Huff, huff…” everyone was out of breath. There was at least half of the class gone. The only people remaining were Alex, Ash, Olivia and a few other students.

“That was close. What should we do now, Ms. Wilson…” Olivia asked as her voice faded, realising that their teacher was not with them. “No, Ms. Wilson must be coming right? She has to!”

All hell broke loose upon the news. People were crying out of fear and sadness.

“We have to keep going guys... The flashlights gonna run out of battery soon.” Ash says worriedly. As if on cue, the flashlight turned off.

“Okay! Calm down everyone, let’s just walk forward. This is our last hope!” Olivia yells, trying to motivate everyone.

So, they head straight forward. But then, Ash noticed that there were less, and less footsteps heard.

It suddenly struck him. There were less and less people with them! He immediately started dragging his twin brother, running as fast as he could. He was scared.

Fortunately, they soon saw the light ahead.

“Quick! Alex!” He yelled. They both rushed towards the exit.

“Wait! Help!” Olivia shouted. It turns out that she had tripped and could not stand up.

‘What to do?’ The twins struggled to choose. It was either to risk it, or leave safely.

“I’m sorry!” Alex yelled, and he ran towards the exit along with his brother. Soon, a hissing sound was heard mixed with blood curling screams.

“We made it out!” Ash exclaimed, hugging his brother. “We should probably go; the snake might be after us.” Alex took his brother hand and walked away.

“Hey, what are kids like you doing here alone?” Two travelers were shocked to see Ash and Alex all beaten up and covered in their classmate’s blood.

“Well... that’s a long, traumatising story to tell...” they both said in union.

Arrogance

Hong Kong Baptist University Affiliated School Wong Kam Fai Secondary and Primary School, Ho, Wing Nam – 13

A cock of his perfectly trimmed eyebrows. A flash of his perfectly white teeth. A lift of his perfectly smooth lips. That was all it took for girls to lust and desire for him. They would often stare at him without any shame, but with obvious want in their eyes. Sometimes, in extreme situations, they would also attempt to flirt with and seduce him. He watched all this with clear amusement in his eyes. He was used to being fawned over by everyone. He enjoyed being in the center of attention. He liked being adored by the opposite gender. Their actions only fueled the certainty of his superiority over them.

He glanced down at his phone in boredom. What time was it again? In bold numbers, it read 12:23 p.m. on the screen. He sighed. Great. It wasn't until hours later that the shuttle bus would arrive and take him home. He looked up. He had, just for the tiniest of moments, forgotten where he was currently. The name of the place was something like...Mogo Caves? Magau Grottoes? Ah! It was Mogao Caves, he remembered. He shook his head. The name of the place wasn't relevant, as he would just forget later anyways. The only thing that mattered was the time. How he wished he could speed up time itself and return to normal civilization, instead of being trapped in lousy, abandoned caves with no wifi signals. He would literally give anything in the world only for a minute of internet service.

"...sir. SIR. Are you feeling unwell?" The tour guide asked in concern, waving his hands across his face. "May I suggest a little break from the tour?" Suddenly shaken from his reverie, he startled and forced a smile on his face. "Ah...not to worry, mister tour guide. I was feeling a bit drowsy. Perhaps a little break will do, yes." He lied smoothly. The guide creased his eyebrows in worry, "Very well, in the meantime, please, feel free to wander around and admire the pieces of works nearby." Excusing himself with a polite nod, he headed to a blank stretch of wall and pretended to lean there in exhaustion. Just after the guide and the group rounded the corner towards another section of the cave, he picked himself up from the wall, and reached into his pocket, when suddenly, something flashed out of the corner of his eye.

He spun around and squinted in the direction of the flash. The only thing that he saw was a painting. He shrugged. It was probably just a trick of the light, he reassured himself. Still, against his will, an unknown force dragged him towards the strange piece of art. The painting was of a monk, with his arm crooked backwards and his forlorn face angled towards the sky. He was adorned in russet robes and his foot was embedded in a crevice. Dozens of other monks lingered in the background, with desperation etched on their faces.

There was something about the painting that entranced him. As if he was in a trance, he reached out a single hand, intending to touch the ancient piece of work. His movements were slow and sluggish as his arm tentatively stretched and moved forward...

Cold was the surface of the painting, like the surface of an ice cube. As his hand came in contact with the painting, it pulsed. The whole wall of the cave trembled uncontrollably. Boom! With no warning, he was thrown backwards from the painting and towards the entrance to the cave. The cave shook. Dust and loose pieces of stone flew everywhere. He groaned. Blood trickled down his forehead, and he was covered in bruises and scratches. His expensive outfit was torn in several places and was covered in a faint layer of dust and grime. He winced. The set of clothes had cost him just slightly over ten thousand dollars and they were specially tailored for him. Attempting to stand, all of a sudden, an unexpected stab of pain echoed through his entire being and he yelped. He looked down at his body. The throb of pain had originated from his ribs. Fearing the worst, he tenderly placed his hand on his ribs and pressed gently. He bit back a gasp and quickly took his hand away from his chest. His ribs were bruised. He couldn't muster the strength to stand up. He was stuck. He screamed, "Hello? Is anyone there? I need help!"

Suddenly, the mood in the air changed. Dust parted. Footsteps sounded. The remaining torches flickered and went out. Faintly, he could make out a distant outline of a shrouded figure in the cloud of dust as it slowly drew closer to his slumped form. Relief overtaking him, he called to the approaching figure, "Help! I think I bruised my ribs from the explosion, and I need medical treatment right away. That explos..." He trailed off, as his eyes widened at the horrendous sight that lay before him.

"Help, eh? I'm afraid there will be no one to save you from my grasp," it chuckled.

"Stay—stay away from me, whoever you are!" he cried.

His eyes widened impossibly further as the being came into the light. He realized in stunned disbelief that It was the monk from the painting. But there was something distinctly different with the person in front of him and the person in the painting. The colossal creature standing in front of his slumped body was partially deteriorating. Flies, roaches and all kinds of insects crawled in and out of the holes of its body, devouring its rotten flesh. But no, it wasn't the insects that terrified him the most – nor the torn open face with its bloodshot eyes, crooked nose and drooling lips. It wasn't the wrinkled, pale hands nor the rotten body nor the missing foot – none of those features compared to its milky white eyes, which bore through his entire being, as if it was judging his soul.

Terror flashed in his eyes. The monk had just somehow appeared *from the painting and spoke to him*. He coughed, attempting to regain his nerves, and steeled his expression, trying to appear calm and collected. He faltered as the monk grinned at him menacingly, displaying its rows of sharp, bloodied teeth.

The monk cocked his head, ran his tongue over his chapped lips, and flashed his dented and uneven teeth, *"You reek of fear, and yet you still radiate arrogance, as if you believe that you are above me. How curious..."* It smiled, *"You would do well to remember the name of the person who brought justice upon you. My name was once Devadatta, brother of the Buddha, his greatest enemy. Be prepared for justice."* Without warning, it lunged towards him.

Forcefully throwing himself to the side, he gasped in agony. The landing had jostled his ribs painfully, further injuring them. Devadatta whirled around and snarled in anger. With its claws fully stretched out, it rushed at him, intent to kill clear in its movements. He furiously scrambled back, stood up wobbly, balanced his weight on his left foot, and threw his right fist out in a curved punch at its grotesque face. Turning ninety degrees to the side, Devadatta brought its right forearm up to counter the blow, formed a fist with its left, and threw it at his outstretched jaw. He was in trouble. Its fist connected with his face, and the force of the punch sent him sailing backwards towards a wall, cracking his ribs, and forming new gashes on his body. In a flash, Devadatta was suddenly upon him, raking claw after claw on his face, completely mauling his face.

Through sheer willpower, he flipped their bodies over, slammed its head against the ground and let his rage take over him. Fury roaring in his mind, he delivered punch after punch on its face, believing that he had overpowered it. In his anger, he had let down his guard, and Devadatta, seeing its chance, smashed his head against his temple, leaving him disoriented. With a snarl, it lowered its mouth towards his arm, and tore, dismembering his arm. Pain flooded his entire being. Blood gushed from the wound, and gathered on the floor, forming a pool of blood around his body. His other hand grasping a fallen stalactite, with his remaining strength, drove it through Devadatta's chest, impaling its heart, and killing it.

As he sat, slumped against a wall, with his body drenched in blood, he choked. He had never gotten to fully admire the wonder and beauty of the ancient art that decorated the place. The curtain of arrogance had covered him throughout his entire life, shrouding him from the wonders of art. As life slowly trickled out of his broken and tired body, the last thing he saw, before he died, was a magnificent piece of art that stretched beyond his vision, which deciphered the meaning of humility.

A Letter from Mogao Caves

Hong Kong Baptist University Affiliated School Wong Kam Fai Secondary and Primary School, Ip, Wai Yiu – 12

Lost world of the past, mysterious tales deep down – Mogao Caves. Curiously, I turned off the TV. What exactly is down there? What lies between it? I can't help but to visit the cavern myself.

There were flashlights flickering and my heartbeat pounding. The atmosphere was crazy, really. I step inside the cave, crossing through an unstable path of rocks. I saw a trail of light in front of me, so I ran to it. I tripped, falling on the ground, when I saw a dark, black hole that leads to nowhere below my weak legs. I held onto the ladder, carefully going down, not knowing if I'll ever get back up to the surface.

My legs touched the ground, it was soft. It was like sand, it had a unique texture and a kind of nostalgic feeling. I looked backwards, it was like a museum. No, it was not a museum, but there were sculptures, paintings and statues. The vintage sighting calmed me down; the view was attractive. My fingers stuck to the statues, ignoring the signs beside it. The old generation was very fascinating. It wasn't anything like the modern me. They drew people with a custom textured, giant special hat. They had tiny chains and ropes on it. I took a few pictures.

It looked bland, but I could at least list 100 historic and cultural meanings behind it. In my sighting, there was an unlocked treasure chest, glowing in the dark. I ran to it, slowly opening the wooden treasure chest with golden keys and locks treasure chest. I thought it was going to be poems, but it wasn't. It was a long letter to a future world, to 2021, which was last year.

"By 2021, I hope we have something to use instead of walking to another location. I hope a virus doesn't infect us and we can all stay healthy!" I stopped reading, I don't have the excitement in me inside anymore. I went back home.

I've seen everything I need, I scrolled through the pictures, but they don't satisfy me. Is it because we failed to stop a virus, or is it because we keep on polluting, and make our future worsen than it should be?

Whispers

Hong Kong Baptist University Affiliated School Wong Kam Fai Secondary and Primary School, Lee, Yan Wah – 13

An occasional nod. A well-timed smile. That was enough to convince these people that, yes, she was knowledgeable. Yes, she was trustable.

After hours of coaxing, her PR team finally convinced her to fly all the way to the Mogao Grottoes “to appear knowledgeable and likable in front of the press.” The troubles of being a successful CEO of an international corporation...

You will always be weird and unsuccessful.

She glanced around. She was in a room-like cave. Paint flecked the walls, coming together in swift curves and delicate lines to form Buddhas and monsters. A mammoth statue of a Buddha sat crossed-legged, with both eyes closed, a serene smile on his face.

The guide’s voice droned on, “...and a huge part of Buddhism is about how our past influences our identity now. The past whispers in our ears, telling us what we can or can’t be. But to defeat those whispers, you have to learn to let go. Nothing in this world is permanent. Not your anger, not your hatred. Only after realizing that and letting go would you be truly happy.”

Never had she considered what the tour guide had just said. Yet here she stood, perfectly happy. Whispers from her past never affected her, she told herself.

Eww, get away from me before you infect me with all your grossness!

Her phone buzzed in her pocket. Compared to the grotto’s relative silence, the noise seemed disturbing. Still, she welcomed it. Excusing herself, she sauntered to a nearby wall and casually leaned there.

Suddenly, she saw a fissure forming. Entranced by shock, her feet refused to budge. She watched as the crack snaked into a crevice. Then, rock was violently ripped from the walls, plummeting down a lightless void. Only then did her feet respond and she darted forward until, like an idiot, she tripped, and the darkness engulfed her...

For a second, she felt invincible, like a bird soaring in the sky. Then the fear set in. She shrieked, arms flailing, her voice raw with terror. Using her arms and legs, she barely avoided falling on her face.

Thud! Quickly, she surveyed herself for injuries. Fortunately, apart from a few scrapes and cuts, she was uninjured. The pain didn’t bother her – she had learned to get used to it.

Stop crying. If you want me to stop hurting you, then stop weeping like a baby.

The light emitted from her phone’s torch illuminated her surroundings in an ominous glow. She was in a cave. Pieces of jagged, craggy rocks fused together to form the walls of the cave. Mist seeped from somewhere – a pearlescent veil, constricting her view. Somewhere, a river’s howls echoed like hollow screams.

She stared closely at the walls. There were drawings etched there, as well as statues hiding in the crevices of the cave walls. While the style was like the artwork above, there was something fundamentally different about them. Crude, harsh strokes of blood-red and charcoal black paint formed the paintings. The statues’ outlines were harsh against the torchlight. One statue was of a monstrous, blood-curdling demon, with three huge blood-shot eyes and a crown made from linked human skulls. He was doubtlessly a monster, yet there was something strangely familiar about him. In a nearby drawing, the same demon stood under the Bodhi tree, his presence menacing.

She knew enough about Buddhism to recognize – “Mara,” she gasped, breathless, “the lord of demons.” She looked around. Every single piece of artwork here included him. “This cave...It’s dedicated to Mara!”

There was light at the end of the cave. Gazing upwards, she saw nothing but endless darkness – a void separating her from the world. Seeing no choice but to venture forward, she took a deep breath, and trudged onward.

One foot in front of another – her footsteps echoed in the tunnels, counting down her impending doom. One foot in front of another – she saw engravings on the walls – gruesome scenes of people holding up weapons in front of them, hatred twisting

their features into a grotesque snarl as they faced something inhuman. Still, she forced one foot in front of another. The wind was whispering.

“Have you seen her smug expression? I hate her already,” the hallways whispered.

The whispers became louder. She tried to stay in denial, like she had done her whole life. “You don’t affect me. I am perfectly happy,” she cried, but her voice was hoarse – a mere rock, about to be submerged by the tsunami of whispers.

“This is where you belong, in the dumpster, with all other discarded trash,” the shoves whispered.

Her body was a heaving volcano. Waves of fear, anger and hatred threatened to spill out like white-hot lava.

“You’ll forever be worthless and hated,” the notes whispered.

The light was getting closer now. She forged ahead, thousand-pound chains entangling her, weighing her down. Black spots danced, taunting her. Suddenly, the black spots solidified into one humanoid being, standing in front of the exit. She was sure she had never met him, yet he seemed oddly familiar.

His voice was distorted, as if it were made of a thousand whispers, “Hello, my old friend. I’m Mara.” “I... I don’t know you.” He tilted his head. “Oh, but you do. In fact, your bond with me is so strong it cracked the cave walls.” He approached her, face twisted with amusement, like a predator toying with its prey. “Thousands of years before, this cave was connected to the Mogao caves. The monks dedicated this cave to me. Every year, they send their highest-ranking monks to me. They had to defeat me to make it out alive. It was a test, I suppose, to prove their worthiness.” He leaned towards her, his outline harsh against the light. “As you can see from my engravings, I demolished them completely. And now,” he grinned, “it’s your turn.”

If she reacted just a millisecond slower, she would have been shredded by Mara’s knives. Instead, she rolled away. Next to her was a sword – a razor-sharp blade made of jade. Gripping it so hard her knuckles turned white, she swung it wildly, a deadly arc of destruction.

He scowled and whispered, “you’ll forever be useless.”

She faltered. Mara took the chance and pounced on her. She barely had the time to dodge.

The locker doors slammed shut and they whispered, “you’ll always make the world a worse place.”

The closer she got to Mara, the louder the whispers became. With a jolt, she realized that he was triggering them. “You’re not real.” He laughed – a feral bark, “you feel a resentment towards the world all the time, and yet you still refuse to acknowledge your past as the cause?”

She hated Mara, her past, and most of all, how easily she was affected by it. Scalding anger coursed through her. She needed to obliterate Mara. But the more she loathed Mara, the stronger he became.

“Freak.” “Weirdo.” “That’s all you’ll ever be.” The cafeteria whispered.

She could no longer distinguish Mara’s voice from the whispers. “You became rich and successful to prove them wrong, but deep down, you’re still that bullied girl.”

She screamed and swung her sword blindly. She believed the whispers – she could never become anything more than her past. Mara advanced slowly, savouring the taste of victory. He raised his knife –

Then suddenly she remembered – “But to defeat those whispers, you have to learn to let go. Nothing in this world is permanent. Not your anger, nor your hatred.”

Letting go of her hatred? How? And how was nothing permanent? Mara’s knife was inches away from her throat. And suddenly, she understood.

Mara was only powerful because she let him. He was feeding on all her negative emotions – the hatred, the anger that had been building up inside her. The more she clung on to those emotions, the more power she gave Mara.

Letting go – that was the key to true happiness, hidden deep within the Mogao Grottoes. Years ago, some monks found that treasure through defeating Mara. Now, it was her turn. Letting go wasn't about ignoring one's whispers. It was about acknowledging them, while also knowing that they were, things that weren't permanent.

She looked Mara in the eyes, and finally saw him for what he was. Mara was familiar, because for years, he had festered inside her as whispers. She had fought so hard to stay in denial. Now, she was done fighting. She had to *let go*.

Clang. The sword fell as she finally let go. Mara looked at her, seconds from killing her, shock embedded in his face. "What are you doing?" he asked, fearfully. "I'm letting go. Now begone." With a horrible wail, Mara started to disintegrate into a harmless shadow.

Her experience in the Mogao Grottoes was what finally made her smile genuine when she whispered,

"The past doesn't define me. I can change."

New Tales from the Mogao Grottoes

Hong Kong Baptist University Affiliated School Wong Kam Fai Secondary and Primary School, Siu, Cheuk In Cheryll – 14

More than one and half millennia ago, a monk decided there was something special about a cave he found at an oasis in the desert on the Silk Road in China.

Over the centuries, thousands of pilgrims arrived and decided to stay, digging more caves, and spending their time creating sacred art and literature.

But time passed, and more than 1000 years later, travellers started taking other routes. The Mogao Caves in the Dunhuang district of Gansu province in west central China were forgotten, becoming little more than a dusty legend.

Then, in the 1900s, local and international scholar-explorers rediscovered the caves. They gradually unlocked its breathtaking secrets. There were hundreds of caverns containing some of the world's finest paintings, sculpture, and literature—including the oldest dated, printed book in the world.

It was like a tunnel to a lost world in the past, scholars said.

What other secrets are hidden there? Whose stories can be found in this treasure house from so long ago? What can the tale of the Mogao Caves teach us?

STORY

"This is some good china!" Shi gingerly picked up a white china vase with ornate deep blue drawings on the sides that weren't washed away by the river of time. Hok pursed her lips in disapproval.

"Shi, even if you are wearing grippy gloves, treat that carefully! You know how clumsy you are."

"Hok, relax. Shi is indeed a total butterfinger, but it's at least not to the point of....."

"W..... Whoa!" It was as if Tse's words made people do the exact opposite of them. Shi immediately dropped the wrist-to-elbow long vase. Hok immediately dove and caught the vase. She got up and patted the vase, irritated.

"I'm not surprised by now."

Shi smiled sheepishly.

"Sorry."

Hok carefully placed the vase in a sturdy, cushioned wooden box. Hok, Tse, and Shi were in a cave, decorated with paintings of old tribes that disappeared with the continuous flow of history, lit by an electric lamp that they had brought. Hok and the others had been tasked with bringing these ancient artifacts back to Beijing for logging by the PRC.

Shi had raven black short hair, tanned skin, and her big eyes shone like stars. Tse has a buzz cut, tanned skin, a silver earring the shape of a teardrop, and narrow eyes. Though he looked distant, he was sociable; a people person. Hok had long, dark brown hair in a ponytail, tanned skin. Her eyes were cold, shaped like a cat's, and she had a tattoo of a Qing Long on her back, down to the waist. Hok impatiently furrowed her brows.

"Pack quick. I want to be out of here in three days."

"Boss, isn't this a bit too hasty?" Tse said, using a brush to dust off a ring of Buddha beads made from jade, green as the leaves in the summer.

"As far as I know, there are still three caves left for us to clear out, so get working!" Hok snapped.

Two days passed, quick as a flash.

'One last cave left.' thought Hok. 'Or is it a cavern?'

According to the reports, the other caves in this maze had been cleared out by other volunteers. The cave was the last, decorated with paintings of gold Buddhas. Shi and Tse were behind Hok, working slowly, trusting of Hok's hurried but careful movements. Unlike Shi and Tse, Hok immediately had dove into the heap of work that had been waiting for her.

"I just don't get why we need to be in such a hurry," Tse said.

"The Organization told us to return four days later. I want to be on time," replied Hok, not looking away from lightly dusting some bamboo scrolls. Shi and Tse looked at each other, shrugged, and joined Hok. A few hours later, the sun cast slanted, golden shadows outside the caves. The party of helpers was waiting for Hok.

"Miss, is everything alright in there?" A leader of a group put his mouth to a walkie.

"Fine. If you're impatient, then you may go back to the hotel first." Hok said indifferently. The leader shrugged, and in a few moments, everyone was gone in the jeeps, leaving only one.

"I take it that they're all gone?" Tse asked. "Ugh, this lock is hard to pry. Shi, crowbar."

Shi handed Tse a crowbar from the toolbox, and Tse continued working on wedging a dark, rusted metal lock off of a moderately sized wooden box. The lock was firm and didn't give. It took all three of them to wedge open the box finally. Inside was a book cushioned with the finest quality of silk. The book was a light yellow, hard covered with tiny flecks of ruby stuck on its covers. Hok gingerly lifted it out. Weirdly, the book had no dust on it, new as can be. There was a golden clasp. Hok unfastened it, and the book opened up. After a brief skim, inside were all the stories ever since Pan Gu created the lands. Then, on the last pages, they found logs by the monk Wang Yuanku. He told of his adventures across the Silk Road, tribes he met, and how this place was sacred. Suddenly, the writing stopped, and all Hok was faced with was a piece of blank papyrus paper.

"Already?" Shi said with disappointment on her face. "I wish I knew everything that happened....."

"Tse, don't blow in my ear," Hok said, annoyed. Tse looked surprised.

"I didn't do anything. I swear."

"The book!" Shi cried. Hook looked back just in time to see the book flip through its pages frantically, and new pages blossomed out of nowhere. A wind-whipped up in the cave, and everything rattled. The walkie on Hok's belt fizzed with static. The lamp went out. Everything was shrouded in darkness. The wind howled in their ears, the cold penetrating the bone. Then, blinding white light appeared, and they shielded their eyes. The wind howled more viciously than ever, and the sands rustled.....sands?

Hok, Tse, and Shi opened their eyes. They were outside the caves; it was night, the stars twinkling up above them, and nothing was in sight. Just sand stretched to the horizon, and the giant full moon cast silver down to the ground. Hok bent down and took a handful of sand. It slipped through her whole hand. For a moment, her hand rippled.

"What, a.....are we GHOSTS?!" Shi shrieked. Hok winced.

"This is still the Silk Road. Behind us is the cave and the oasis." Hok pointed behind her. A distance away was the oasis, with its trees and bubbling springs. Then, a flicker of firelight. They investigated and saw a middle-aged monk sitting there, writing in a very familiar book.....

"Isn't that....." Shi started. Hok nodded. They somehow traveled back millennia ago. The landscape rippled, and they were in front of the cave, behind the monk. The monk was sweating profusely.

"Stroke," said Tse, but he couldn't touch the monk, just like Hok couldn't touch the sand. The monk saw mirages. He looked up at the caves and the cliffs above it, his eyes misty.

"B..... Buddha.....a thousand of them.....this is the place I seek. Amitabha, thank the Buddha."

The monk walked directly into the caves, cut into shape by millennia of winds. Inside was a beehive of corridors, rough walls, and swarming with creatures inhabiting the dark. In the cave, the sound in the caves reverberated with the rhythmic jingling of the monk's staff. The monk was muttering something in a language Hok and the others couldn't understand, and he finally

stopped at a large cavern. Isn't this the cavern where they had found the monk's diary? Except that the walls were plain. The monk rested in this cavern. The next day, he went out. Shi tried to follow him but was bounced back by a barrier.

"Ow!" Shi whimpered. Their surroundings rippled again, and workers bustled around, chiseling the walls of the caves until it was flat, echoing throughout the network of caves. The monk was in the cavern, drawing Buddhas and tribes he met, where they would be seen in the future. Inside the cavern was only a wooden box on a stone table, open. Inside was the book. Their surroundings rippled yet again. The chiseling faded into the distance. The monk had continued drawing until every cave was filled, aging rapidly as he did. The cavern they were in, now filled with precious treasures, never changed. Now old with age, the monk sat cross-legged in front of the table, fumbling with his Buddha beads.

"Amitabha, Buddha, protect anyone who finds this book, grant them a wish. Your loyal servant will join you, buried under..... it's not long now....."

"A wish.....Shi!" Tse finally understood. "You wished to know all that happened here!"

"I didn't know! I just said it out of disappointment!" cried Shi. The wind whooshed in their ears, and Hok knew that they would be going back. She braced for that bright flash of light, but it never came. They were in the cavern, in her hands was the book, around her was Tse and Shi. The three of them looked at each other. Was what happened just a dream?

Hok closed the book up and placed it back into the box. She knelt in front of it.

"Thank you, Monk Wang, Buddha, for this journey," Hok said, her hands clasped together. "We will not disturb his eternal rest anymore."

Hok turned to her companions.

"Let's go—no more point in staying. We shouldn't be here in the first place anyway. The man deserves a rest."

They left, leaving only the book behind. The sand rolled behind the roaring jeep as the sunset.

An Amazing Adventure in the Mogao Grottoes

Hong Kong Baptist University Affiliated School Wong Kam Fai Secondary and Primary School, Tsang, Chun Hin Moses – 12

“Hey Jack! I think I may have found something!”

“I’m coming, Kate. Hold on!”

Somewhere along the Silk Road in Chin, a pair of daring explorers – Jack and Kate – had journeyed there in search for the secrets of the Mogao Caves. Most people thought they had already discovered all that was there. But there were some who have heard rumors of more hidden tunnels, caves, secrets, and most of all, treasures.

“What did you find, Kate?” Jack asked.

“I think I may have found one of the major hidden tunnels,” Kate replied.

“Let’s find out, shall we?” Jack suggested. “Let’s follow what he told us to do. Look for the red markings, and search for the passageway around it.”

The pair did just what Jack said and looked for the red markings at the entrance of the hidden tunnel. Some people heard of the rumor that certain hidden tunnels had red markings beside their entrances, and that somewhere near the markings was a passageway around the entrance. There was an earthquake in China a few hundred years ago, and that was the reason there were so many dead ends in some caves. Perhaps a cave-in also occurred which blocked up most of the hidden tunnels.

“Jackpot! I found the red markings!” exclaimed Jack.

Kate said “Now, all we need is to locate that passageway. Let’s get to it!”

Jack and Kate kept on searching for the passageway around the markings, looking in each and every corner and crevice they could find. After a long while, the duo family found what they were looking for and yelped in excitement.

“We finally found it, Kate! Are you ready to see what’s waiting to be found?” Jack asked,

“You bet I am! Come on, let’s go!” Kate exclaimed.

The two explorers walked through the passageway and soon ended up on the other side. As soon as they got through, they marveled at what they saw. There were many large cave paintings along the side of the tunnels, and some other smaller caves could already be seen.

Jack and Kate continued walking forwards and saw a room full of the most intricate and amazing sculptures anyone had ever seen. They took pictures and inspected them up close. After walking for many more minutes, the duo found many more sculptures, small caves, rooms and branching tunnels. They also discovered some tools and pieces of literature and did the same thing to everything they saw – took pictures and inspected it up close.

“Hey Jack! I think I see some light up ahead!” Kate exclaimed.

“Really? We have to go check it out!” Jack declared, and ran ahead with Kate.

Not long after, the two reached what seemed to be the end of the tunnel and where the light was coming from. A humongous cavern was where the tunnel ultimately leads to, with bright torches lined across the cavern roof which reached up to dozens of meters up from the ground. Lanterns, statues and many old decorations could be seen on the ground, and in the center was a big raised platform.

“Hey Jack, I think I see something on that platform!” Kate pointed out.

The two explorers headed towards the raised platform in the center. After walking up a few stairs, they got onto the platform and saw a stone tablet on the pedestal. Jack and Lara got a closer look at the tablet and saw Chinese writing carved onto

the tablet. Since it was in ancient Chinese language, it took a bit of time for Jack and Kate to translate it. Eventually, they ended up with the translation –

“For the treasure that you seek, everything lies around you. Gold and gems and treasure are not as gorgeous as the view,” Jack read out loud.

As soon as Jack finished reading the last word, a golden-tinted wisp-like trail of smoke appeared seemingly out of nowhere. It zoomed down from the cavern roof onto the platform, where the trail of smoke transformed into a slightly transparent ghost-like woman. She had a slight fortune-teller look, and the pair of explorers were in awe.

“I am the Oracle, guardian of the Mogao Caves,” the ghost-woman spoke. “Have you come for the treasure?”

“Well yes, but we also –” Kate began, but she didn’t have a chance to finish.

“Then perhaps you both are the same as all the other greedy treasure-seekers who have come before you,” the Oracle said. “I guess I shall take care of you like all others.”

With a simple snap of the fingers, the Oracle summoned three beastly hounds which were quite aggressive to the duo. The hounds charged at them, while Jack and Kate had to defend themselves from the hounds’ attacks using bayonets and trench knives that they brought.

“Wait, Oracle! Listen –” Kate said, while fending off a hound. “We’re not here to – ugh! We’re not here to steal from you! We’re just here to discover the treasure and let the world know more about the Mogao Grottoes!”

That caught the Oracle’s attention, and so she made the remaining hounds disappear. “If you truly are telling the truth, then climb to the top of this mountain and look around you, everything will be shown. If you are lying, I can surely promise you both a terrible death,” the Oracle said.

“We promise we’re not. Anyway, thank you,” Jack told the Oracle.

After that, the two explorers went out of the caves and back to the surface, which took nearly an hour for them to do. When they got out, they looked back and saw the tall mountain they had to climb. Fortunately, the duo had the necessary equipment to climb the steep cliff. Even though it took them a long time to do it, Jack and Kate eventually got to the top of the mountain.

When the pair of explorers looked back onto the ground below, they finally understood what the poem and the Oracle meant. Not too far away from the entrance to the caves was a big green field along the Silk Road with a colorful Buddhist symbol in the middle of it. Nature was the world’s greatest treasure, and not even all the gold, gems or riches in the world could replace it. Surprisingly, there was a bag behind where Jack and Kate were standing, and it was filled with valuable ancient treasures. Kate figured that one must truly realize the lesson of nature being the world’s greatest treasure in order to earn the bag of ancient valuables. In the end, Jack and Kate climbed down from the top of the mountain, went back home, and told everyone about their amazing adventure.

Solitary Bliss

Hong Kong Baptist University Affiliated School Wong Kam Fai Secondary and Primary School, Yeung, Sum Yuet – 14

A storm broke.

Raindrops cut through clothes; sand shot into my eyes; I howled with the torrent for my friend and I to take shelter in the Mogao Caves – the closest place to a home in the barren desert of Dunhuang.

His response was a mere rejection.

My friend, like the monks, thought that solitude was bliss, as precious as gold. To me, they caused scars and bruises to etch upon my skin; they starved me, filling me to the brim with despair, chaining me down with sands and stones – my looming coffin and tomb.

Orphaned in this desert by merchants too immature for a child, I begged for survival each moment I breathed in this desolate place, hoping for a friend, a companion.

“Please! Let us seek shelter in the Mogao Caves!”

My friend simply shook his head; his cold eyes glistened with pity, yet wisdom outshone it.

“But we’re dying in this place! The sand, the winds! Who knows how long the storm lasts?”

“Patience my child, patience.”

“I’m tired of being patient, and rejoice in your so-called solitude and peace!

“I have slowly died – rather than lived – in this barren land ever since I was child! Abandoned to fend for myself alone, anguish beyond agony burrows deep inside me because of loneliness! And yet you choose to follow a being who doesn’t even know the hidden horrors of solitude, asking for what has caused my suffering?”

My friend merely smiled. His grin struck the trees like lightning; smoke recoiled in the air, entering my lungs, my bloodstream.

Knocking him down, his head hit a fallen tree. A crack sounded in his skull. His hands rested limply in the blood-filled pond.

The thunder signalled to a monk in the caves that I could not survive alone. His gentle hands brought me in; and in the broken fireplace inside my heart, the deepest warmth of companionship kindled.

Silence and guilty pleasure reigned alongside the storm within me.

Laughing away my sorrows and chasing them all away with embraces and people; I rejoiced in finally having company even if I had killed someone in the process.

Little did I know this was a condemnation, a misbelief ready to be ruptured soon; hidden under the burials of dust and forgotten memories; as the population of monks dwindled, and the laughter and conversation, like sand trickling away between my fingers, were to be silenced.

Yet, brushing past the crowds of monks praying and talking in the Mogao Caves was enough pleasure to fill me up for ages; having the monk teach me in Library Cave about speaking of poetic verses, broke the silence that would eventually crush me; his brush sent ripples upon the otherwise clear and reflective surface of the ink when painting, shielded my face – scarred with guilt and shame – from the judging eyes of reflection and behind his veil of company; his presence gave a privilege I never had – hiding, forgetting the most loathsome parts of myself.

“Soft, neat strokes against the paper... That’s it. Add a little bit of colour, but not too much. Painting resides not with quantity, people or companionship, but the mind’s thought and solitude,” said the monk.

“As the Buddha says, ‘In order to heal the wounds buried the deepest within, you must face solitude.’

“Or more specifically,” he continued, pausing for his sentences to linger upon the air, sinking deep into my skin, “these wounds mean your regrets, memories of yourself –

“A cowardly murderer too afraid of his reflection.”

I spilled an overflowing cup of tea over my blood-stained fingers.

A killer, a coward, surfaced before me as a reflection on the pond of cooling tea spilled on the table and pools of guilt-ridden tears: dug from the pleasure of companionship, shining directly beneath the lonely moon for all to see.

“The moment the storm broke; it wasn’t your friend’s choice to have his skull cracked on the burning tree, nor the storm’s fault whose torrent broke his spine; it was yourself alone who caused that tragedy.”

Upon his ink-stained skin, my erased mistakes imprinted on his palm; truthful words he uttered, without the veil of lies, fronded his lips, surfacing and surging out like a flood of moonlit water; uncontained by the broken dam I called company.

Disbelief followed by loneliness confined me indefinitely afterwards – my well-deserved punishment.

Days, months or even years passed while the crowd of monks dispersed; I was trapped in the desolate caves once flowing with people. The frequent murmurs which filled the corridors diffused; countless Buddhist sculptures, etched on every cave, scrutinized my every move more clearly than before; from the painting of the Thousand-Buddha motif to sculptures of the sitting Sakayamuni, they all drove me further to insanity.

Loneliness condemned me. Nightmares, screams and tears had filled the countless silent nights.

I went to the ancient Library Cave, hoping that I could reawaken some part of me which remembered friends long dead and gone. I dug for a semblance of their companionship in pages of manuscripts and scrolls, rummaging for their presence through painting their silhouettes.

Applying too much force on a canvas, the slightest drip of colour blotted the parchment in scarlet.

The string binding my screams and chaos and cries together throughout the years, had snapped.

The storm broke out again.

Lightning struck the trees; his skull split; the moon brightened the maroon hue which stained my fingers. The depths of the pond, the water, the ink, the paint reflected all of it.

“Please! Please!” cried I. “Stop this madness! Stop it! I can’t handle it anymore!”

The remaining monks leapt out of my path as I ran for my only friend.

The engravings of the zodiac signs, Nine Luminaries, Buddha, and countless inscriptions speaking of virtues I no longer had, flashed by me with their watchful eyes.

“You have to help me...” I begged; kneeling before the monk’s feet; tugging on his cloak.

My breath hitched as he began to speak; fear faded out; sweat, snot and tears stopped surging down in his presence.

“I’m leaving,” he said.

Ice scorched his eyes once glimmering with passion; forming the cold pools of water; reflecting myself in the depths.

“The Mogao Grottoes have been forgotten by our people. This place will die out sooner or later anyway.”

The thunder, rain, and blood pelted back into view, recoiling in the Big Buddha’s ominous dwellings. He continued:

“You never knew what it was like to be unable to stand in those crowded cities that you claim are a paradise.

“The crowds make you forget who and what you are, turning you into a hollow cadaver, merely gliding on air, spilling out meaningless words.

“Have you ever thought of how murderous the public, who doesn’t bat an eye whether you live or die the next day, could be in order to fight for the last drop of water and morsel of food?”

Before parting for the final time, he uttered, “I never thought so.”

Not waiting for the echoes of his words to fade, the rest of the monks left; undigging my fears for the light to shine on.

“Wait for me!”

Rising, a monk’s trailing cloak caught at my legs. Falling over, I hurried to get up, only for another wave of people to compress and crush.

Shoulder to shoulder, limb to limb, the crowds of monks and conversations silenced my pleas.

I willed the gaze I missed to turn in my direction; but the suffocating murder of people obscured the slightest glance from view.

Left dazed on the ground; the last of the monks, who ruffled the slightest of my clothes, evoked the largest fear. Not towards the air being choked out of me or injuries inflicted on my ribs was fear directed; but being ignored, unheard, forgotten, haunted the bravest parts inside me.

With the polished floor and ponds of tears reflecting the abandoned Mogao Caves, I would have lost my composure, drowning in uncovered guilt; but the flashing memories of the crowds of stifling madness, continued to squeeze me.

Crowds never stopped my suffering, but muffled it with their own; until all that bustles in my mind was layer upon layer of noise; barely leaving the last fragment of myself intact.

Solitude far transcended the need of finding people to forget what I feared, who I was, and all those memories too precious to throw away. Rather, it offered acceptance, solace, and let me understand who I truly was – not a monster, nor a saint, but a someone with regrets and flaws.

Within the now abandoned Mogao Caves, moonbeams shone light onto the ponds of tears, reflecting me in the watery depths; fingers danced upon many murals, written about heavenly happiness, resting within the caves.

I returned to the rows of manuscripts, scrolls of paintings and printed books, leaving lost friends well behind me; rejoicing in this newfound solitary bliss.

Trapped in the Mogao Grottoes

Hong Kong Baptist University Affiliated School Wong Kam Fai Secondary and Primary School, Yue, Yue Joyce – 14

She was a solitary soul. Trapped in the depths of Gansu, in the Mogao Grottoes, her soul imprisoned in this cave, in sorrow of her regrets of the past. She wails during spring nights. “How can I bring my aching heart to rest?” Her spirit cries. She cites the last sentence of her husband's written rhyme.

Her spirit lives in agony, regretting being insecure of her looks even when her husband begged her to show her face, though she refused as she stayed in her locked room, abandoning all her followers as they left in despair. Lady Li still weeps about her family. Missing her siblings and parents, she strolls out to the balcony of her husband's, named the Mogao Grottoes, heartbroken, she would not stop weeping on bitter spring dusk till dawn when the north wind blows.

This story was told long ago. I forgot where I had heard it, but I always thought it was an elegant story, a depressing folklore about Lady Li, the wife of Emperor Wudi in the Han dynasty. Chinese history was never really interesting to me. I'd rather be enticed by Hitler's way to conquer and rule the world than to listen to each dynasty rise and fall for the same reason, let alone their beliefs on Buddhism that I have absolutely no interest in.

Chinese is a complicated language, so is their mindset that I just can't seem to understand.

But here I am, on the deserted land of Gansu, staring up at the named peerless tower, as a college student, desperate for a merit to get my scholarship. And this excursion would be just enough for me to do so.

But as I arrived alone on a spring night, I found myself dazzled by the sights in front of me. Enraptured by the carvings on the wall, I wandered around.

There weren't supposed to be any visitors at this time. I unintentionally sneaked in. Not knowing it had passed closing time and that the night guard had fallen asleep.

With a bit of wariness crawling up my skin, I continued to venture. There were buddhas in each room. There has to be a story behind each one of them. I am eager to find out.

I walked along the corridors and reached the balcony. The wind was gentle when it blew.

But then it was a miraculous sight. It was impossible, paradoxical.

A woman wearing a red gown with yellow flowers planted on it. The long silky hair floated above it all, her face was pale and her legs were unseen. I froze in place.

She was crying next to me.

“How can I bring my aching heart to rest?” She cried. The wind roars in response.

In shock, I took out my phone and snapped a picture. The woman wasn't seen.

It really was her. Lady Li's spirit.

“Who must thou be?” The ghost wailed, “Nobody visits me, but thee...”

Lady Li sways around me, I stiffened my shoulders, not knowing what to say.

“How...surprising. A mere human like you, able to see me.”

Lady Li floats through my body. I was stunned, then I was not. “You went into my body,” I mumbled.

“Why of course, I'm a free floating ghost.”

I forgot that I should stay on my guard, unaware of the situation I'm actually in. I snapped my consciousness out of the shock, I stumbled back.

"Don't you dare possess this body," I said breathlessly. "I don't care about how desperate you are to leave the place you're imprisoned in, but you will definitely not use me and my body as my tool."

The ghost scoffs. "Human, why would I use that flawed body of yours?" Her eyes wander up and down my body. "Bold of you to assume that this body would be useful for me."

"Don't insult me as you please." I furrowed my brows.

"Then perhaps you should learn to stop being so defensive." Lady Li then floats toward me.

I relaxed a bit, or so I thought. My heart was thumping louder than thunder and I was at a loss. What do I possibly do?

"Now bow down to me," said Lady Li. "Kneel."

I gap at her. "Excuse me? What—"

"Kneel," she repeats sternly. I refused to do so.

"Why should I?" I asked.

Without another word, she dives into my body.

It was horrible.

I couldn't breathe, I couldn't feel, I couldn't hear. I couldn't get it out, this is painful, too painful, someone help me, get it out, this is too much for a punishment—

Then she was separated from my body.

I felt weak on my knees, I grasped for air desperately. Choking on air, I felt Lady Li's presence hover towards me. I stared into those soulless eyes of hers. "How pathetic, you should've thought this through," she taunts. "As if I'd let some mere human like you speak to me."

I quivered in fear, I found it hard to speak, a lump in my throat, I was helpless. "You...I trusted you.."

The spirit chuckles a mocking laugh, "Oh dear human, you should have never." She turns to look at me again, staring deep into my soul as if she was trying to suck it out of my body. "As weak you are, you will be my slave, and you are not to object."

I gritted my teeth, "No I will not." ‘

"Oh? Is that so?"

"...Yes, Lady Li."

I am afraid to object, she would only drive me insane by diving into my body, and it only felt like death, I don't want that anymore. She doesn't even need to possess me to take complete control over me.

This Lady Li, isn't a normal ghost. She was never like the stories I was told; she isn't a queen to be pitied.

She's a monster.

Xin

Hong Kong International School, Cheung, Vanessa – 12

May, 2018

The beetle was purple. *Bright* purple.

Seeing that color here, amidst the dullness, was about as surprising as witnessing a lone flame making its way along an everlasting sea of cold ice.

Then that also meant you also would have to watch those tongues of fire go out, too.

Shrieks followed the bug's dramatic dive into a pot of tea. I had to bite my tongue to keep from laughing as I watched the teacher almost fall out of her chair— this was the only entertainment I'd had in a long time. Learning about the Mogao Grottoes— the entire reason the Dunhuang Camp existed— was *boring*. An old, pale red structure with layers resembling temples. 'A treasure to Asian history.'

The teacher, Mrs. Liao, let out a long breath, and shakily announced, "You know what, we should end the class here. Close your textbooks— I know the stories of this town are interesting, but I'm sure a lot of you are tired."

Truthfully, Mrs. Liao seemed a lot more weary than anyone else here.

The camp we were at— the Dunhuang Teaching Center— was all about teaching kids the history of the grottoes and the village the camp was based in. Truthfully, I thought it was pointless. I sighed. Maybe I'd take a trip up to the Mogao Grottoes soon. The benefits of living in a high mountain village so close to the grottoes was that I could go anytime I wanted.

I lay in the dormitory, my roommates sleeping soundly. What time was it? I didn't know.

That hike to the Mogao Grottoes— it made me feel weird. And I'd seen this painting— this mural of a band of travellers. It was *beautiful*. I couldn't stop thinking about it.

The nearest schoolmate— Kate, I think— was probably the loudest snorer I'd ever met. I was as tired as humanly possible— but finally, I felt my eyes start to shut.

"Hey, get up!"

Shut up and go away.

"Come on!"

I finally turned around to look at whoever was disturbing me. It was Kien Laghar, one of my school friends. "How are you allowed in the girls' dorms?"

"Look around," he pleaded.

And so I did. Multiple alarms went off in my head at once. The usual piles of blankets on each bed weren't there, and the room didn't reek of bubble tea due to my addicted classmates anymore.

"What? Did it get renovated at night?"

Kien shook his head. "It's either an elaborate trick... or something else."

We found that it definitely was the latter.

People were milling around, women wearing straight, floor-length dresses, and men donning strange, buttoned-up robes. A strange chattering noise grasped my attention, and I looked up. It was the same beetle from yesterday— the one that could be mistaken for a LED light.

"Déjà vu," I muttered.

We kept walking until we reached the front doors. "Strange... the center is much bigger than this," Kien noted.

I gingerly pushed open the double doors, and exclaimed, "Wha—"

It was basically a scene straight from a Chinese opera. People wearing long—abandoned clothing were heaving loads onto carts, riding horses, and transporting wares. But it was as if a gray sheet had been put onto everyone in the town.

But before I could open my mouth to say something, I noticed the beetle skitter into a wide alleyway.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"Following that beetle."

"Why?"

"I mean, it's not like we could tail some random stranger back to their house," I snapped

"And you think following a *bug* is better?"

Suddenly, the beetle changed course and entered a large inn— and naturally, I followed it.

It was quiet. Soft voices could be heard from a room, which I decided to take a quick peek into. "*Stop!*" Kien hissed. "We don't know where we are or how we can get back home!"

A few foreign men were inside the room, mulling over something displayed on the large table. Straining my eyes, I could see a painting laid out. "Isn't that..." I started, and gasped.

He was right. It was the painting from the grottoes, the one that was somehow linked to my falling ill. And why did I suddenly feel so much better? Maybe it was sleep that helped.

"Aren't the grottoes guarded 24/7 though?" Kien whispered.

Suddenly, I heard a sharp bark. A man from inside the room suddenly shot up, and rushed to the door. "Who are you kids?" he asked, raising an eyebrow, voice laced with a British accent. A fox terrier rushed up to the man, panting. "Ah, Dash the Great!" the man exclaimed fondly.

"Huh...?"

The man chuckled. "I have seven dogs, all named Dash. But this one is the one that has accompanied me for many journeys. He has earned the name."

Okay...?

Kien – July 1907

The man's name was Aurel Stein, and he was here to essentially rob the Mogao Grottoes.

When the first man exited the grottoes with a bag that was previously empty, Xin's eyes narrowed. The exact same thing happened with the second one.

"*Thieves*," she hissed.

She immediately got up. "Stop! *No!*" I cried, but it was no use. Xin never listened to anyone; not even the teachers. But surprisingly, she didn't tackle Stein to the floor—instead, she peered inside a wooden cart.

"That's a *security* camera," she breathed. "What? Stein took all these things. How dare he!"

Suddenly, a familiar voice distracted us.

"Now, now, children, didn't your parents teach you not to take things from adults?"

We both stared at him as he continued, "I want you to know that I am not just some thief with funds. I understand Asian history. After all, I was a professor in India for quite a long time—"

At this, the boy's gaze shot up from the floor.

"—and I'm basically reawakening all of the secrets buried deep in the dust,"

Stein finished. "What more reason to not trust me?"

"He *was* a prof—" the Indian boy started, but the girl cut him off.

"Even if all of that is true, it doesn't take away the fact that he's stealing stuff," she hissed.

"Oh, I'm sure that in the entirety of one's lifetime, even if they weren't allowed, they've taken at least something," Stein said airily. "So, will you return the artifacts to me? I'm on a tight schedule."

Something flashed in his dark eyes—something I was very familiar with. Whenever I returned a science book that was overdue, the librarian and his assistants would have this look; one that said, *I know I thanked you for returning it, but since this is the fourth overdue book this week, I'm angry—however, I did mean the thank you, though.*

"I believe you, Stein," I said. "I know everything you said was true, even the India part."

A smile crossed his face. "Thank you, lad."

"But..." I paused. I could literally *feel* Xin's red-hot glare. "You're still taking artifacts that were created from years of hard work. I should know—I've read a lot of books on the grottoes."

Xin grinned, catching on. "And *that's* why we're gonna use the grottoes to go back home. *With* these artifacts in our hands, of course." She gestured to them. One of the murals caught my eye—the same one we'd seen back in our timeline, which, maybe not so coincidentally, Stein had taken.

Stein sighed. "Look—"

We were already gone.

Xin – 1907

"Huh?"

I blinked. Kate, one of my roommates, stood over me. "You slept in. This isn't really like you."

"Yeah... sorry about that." *It couldn't have been all a dream, right? Right...?*

"Since this is the final day of camp, we're going on a field trip!" Mrs. Liao exclaimed. "To none other than the Mogao Grottoes!"

I sighed. Needless to say, I'd been there a couple times already.

The bus trip was pretty boring. I stared outside the window, at shrubs and grass and trees, while gaggles of girls behind me giggled about something.

The Mogao Grottoes hadn't changed since my maybe-dream. Still, I had to awe at its magnificence and grandeur. No matter how long it would stand there, that wouldn't change.

"Hello," Kien greeted me.

"Hi," I replied halfheartedly.

The painting of the group of travelers— that Stein had also stolen— it was... still there?!

But it had changed. There were two added figures— one with dark eyes, and another with long, black hair. It wouldn't take two seconds to guess who they were.

“Why are *we* in the painting?” Kien gasped. “All we did was take a bunch of security cameras and drawings away from a guy in his forties!”

So he does remember. “I don't know. But that means we *did* travel back in time. That's pretty crazy, right?”

Kien nodded, eyes sparkling. “Yeah! It's like the grottoes knew they needed us.”

“Yeah...”

An Autumn Leaf

Hong Kong International School, Choroensiddhi, Kornkanya – 13

The autumn leaves fell from the trees, each speaking bliss to Longwei as he traveled down the stone path. Their bright colors littered the street while the trees bent their heads and swayed with the breeze. Unlike the usual bone-chilling cold, the air was fresh and crisp; the chirping of birds could be heard as they settled into the branches. He continued his walk along the path, looking around, enjoying the tranquility of the morning.

Longwei approached the Monastery. From where he stood, he could see the stone staircase that he climbed every day, flanked by two stone lions, their eyes hollow and blank, sitting stiffly on the steps. As he looked up, the golden specks on the roof caught his eye, glinting in the morning light. The sound of low voices chanting their daily mantras could be heard from a distance. The others were there already, all clothed in bright orange robes. Behind them, he could see the narrow window of his work cell, tucked away in the corner, as well as the art hall, with its wide, arched window. It sat in a conspicuous spot—right in the center of the Monastery. Longwei stared longingly at the art hall until a voice pulled him from his trance.

“You are late again, Longwei.” Longwei turned around, startled as Master Yan’s dark shadow loomed over him. “This is the third time this week already. You simply can not keep this up.” Longwei nodded hastily, cowering under the master’s cold, hard stare.

“My sincerest apologies, Master Yan,” Longwei stuttered. “I must have lost track of time on my long walk here.” Master Yan waved his hands around, exasperated, but said nothing more. Longwei, too, stayed quiet and scurried towards the door of his dark work cell.

Longwei felt relieved to finally be alone again, but reality rushed back to him as he saw the parchment and manuscripts that he had yet to finish copying. He rubbed the sores that had begun to form on his palms as he took a seat at his desk. His fingers found their way to the quill, and he picked it up to finish what he had started the day before. Like always, questions kept bubbling to the surface of his mind while he muttered the words written on the manuscript and copied them down onto the parchment. His quill moved rapidly. It was then that a question came and hit him so hard that the words that he had grown up reading suddenly seemed foreign and danced on the paper, teasing him. Longwei stared up at the autumn painting on top of his desk. He remembered all those restless nights that he had spent up in the art hall trying to grasp the idea of becoming an artist one day. The painting’s beauty now mocked him.

“Why am I here?” Longwei asked the empty room as if waiting for an answer. “I am different from all the other monks. Why am I still here?” he repeated the question with such intensity that the papers that he had been copying for years seemed pointless. Shoving them aside, Longwei picked up the neat stack of parchment and stood to leave the room. A clatter could be heard as his knees hit the edge of his wooden desk and he sent his chair flying.

“Is everything alright here, Longwei?” a voice appeared from the doorway. Longwei looked up to find Feng standing there.

“Everything is fine,” Longwei rushed, picking up the chair. “I was just getting these delivered to Master Yan’s office.” Longwei strode confidently past Feng in the direction of his Master.

Master Yan studied the papers with great intensity. The tension in the room was palpable, and the master’s stillness only agitated Longwei even more.

Master Yan cleared his throat and spoke shortly. “You did fairly well, Longwei.” Longwei waited for more, but Master Yan said nothing else. Standing there, Longwei gave an almost imperceptible nod. He did not notice his belt dangling loosely from his robe. He did not notice a splinter in the battered, disorganized desk. He did not notice the tug on his robe as he left the room. The entire desk overturned, causing ink and parchment to fly everywhere.

Master Yan stood abruptly. “Enough!” His voice boomed throughout the entire Monastery. “You have been nothing but trouble. You can do nothing right! You have ruined not only your own work but also that of others. You have been a terrible disappointment to the community. Return to your cell. I do not wish to see you causing any more inconveniences

elsewhere.” As other monks began to pile into the room to clean up the mess, Longwei dropped his head and trudged back to his cell.

In his dreams that night, Longwei saw a cave. This cave was unlike any he had seen in all his lifetime, yet something about it seemed so familiar. It was lined with different kinds of art – paintings, sculptures, writing – objects of all different shapes and sizes. Any kind of exquisite art from the past all gathered in this one cave. The collection stretched down the long corridor as far as the eye could see. Longwei could walk down this cave for eternity, but something felt disturbing. He had seen it before. But where? Longwei stood deep in thought admiring the artwork displayed all over the walls of the cave. His eyes drew themselves towards one painting of autumn. The colors and brushstrokes looked so similar to his own. It was then that he saw the painting of the Silk Road. It seemed important. It was only when he stared at the painting a little bit longer that the answer came at him all at once. The floor disappeared around Longwei, and he was falling into a deep dark pit with no end.

“Our errand. The caves. The Silk Road!” Longwei explained to Feng quickly. “The artwork!” Feng just looked at Longwei, his face a mask of irritation. “We could make it happen!” When Feng did not respond, he added, “Just imagine! A hall filled with artwork of all kinds. The landmark of the century!” Feng just stared while Longwei’s eyes glistened with hope.

“Longwei, I do not have the slightest idea of what you are talking about, but you have caused enough trouble already. Must I remind you of the chaos you caused yesterday in our master’s office? Please do not make it any worse.” Feng stood and headed back to his work cell, his orange robe flapping in the wind. Longwei sighed, defeated. Feng was his friend. His only friend. Who else was he to turn to if his only friend would not even listen? His heart ached. The light streaming through the window dimmed faintly. A tall tree stood by the window, its leaves turning gold, red, and orange, immune to the tortures of this world. Silence covered the room like a blanket.

“I like your idea,” a voice floated in suddenly. Shaolin took a seat on the floor next to Longwei. His hands were stained with ink. He smelled of the pigment and paint that he worked with in the art hall. “I thought that perhaps I could teach you to paint. I can help you.” Longwei’s face lit up. “Come. Let me show you what I do.” Longwei trailed behind Shaolin as he led him towards the art hall. As he passed the large doors, Longwei entered a fairy tale. He breathed in the familiarity of the room: the woody aroma, the smell of fresh clay, and the colors. The colors were everywhere. They were like the thick mist that hangs in the sky on a cloudy day, hiding in every corner of the art room. Longwei could almost feel the colors tickling his fingers and taste the sweetness of each hue and shade. He followed Shaolin and took a seat in front of a blank canvas.

“Do you see this empty canvas?” Longwei nodded. “This canvas holds countless possibilities. As artists, we choose what kind of life to give this canvas. Art can reflect our lives, our hopes, our thoughts. What you put on the canvas is yours and is unique.” Shaolin picked up a paintbrush, and with a few flicks of his hand a single autumn leaf was brought to life.

“Each piece of art has a special meaning to the person viewing it. You will look at this leaf in a different way than I do. Then anyone else does,” Shaolin explained. “Each piece of art is peerless.”

“The caves are peerless,” Longwei murmured. “The Mogao Caves. The Peerless Caves.” An autumn leaf drifted into the room, landing on the table. He picked it up and smiled.

Desert Halo

Hong Kong International School, Ellis, Anne Catherine – 13

Uncertainty floated around his head like an invisible veil.

He couldn't have been very old, but his face was solemn as if all of his years of living were weighing him down. Layers of grit covered his face, blown in from the dusty wind. His irises were black as obsidian, so dark it was hard to tell where his irises ended and where his pupils began. Beneath his eyes, however, hung dark, heavy bags, telltale signs of an ordinary human. Dried sand collected in the corners of his eye. His cheeks had hollowed out from a lack of food, and a bitter crust colored the corners of his dried, cracking lips.

The man's attire, when made, had been suitable for his vocation. But now, his simple crimson robe was tattered and had been worn out from his arduous journey, though its dark red color made him all the more noticeable in the endless expanse of gold. Were his robe to shift in the wind, one might catch a glimpse of his ribs, poking out in aggressive angles, exposing his hunger. His skin clung to his bones feebly. Over his bony shoulders hung a near-empty satchel with only a few crumbs residing on the bottom.

The sun burned the top of his shaved head and his shoulders painfully in the oppressive heat. Sandals laced up his ankles to protect the soles of his feet from sharp and scorching particles of sand. Sand had made its way onto his scalp, under his nails, between his fingers. His rag covering his mouth was a shield against the endless sandstorms. Long ago, the piece of cloth covering his mouth may have been a colorful beauty, but the mud-stained rag's glory days had long since passed.

Around him, in every direction, were miles of sand, as far as the eye could see. It was a perfect display of a sea of salt, waves frozen in time. The sun shined through dust, which slowly lifted from the smooth golden surface. Each sparkle of sand gleamed like crystals under the midday sun, which mercilessly beat down on the earth. Nature disguised a death trap as a paradise.

He wearily trudged along the sandy silk road. Gravity was grabbing him by his calves, pulling him down. After each step, his print was implanted into the dune beneath him, forever tainting the picture. Half asleep, he dragged over a particularly steep dune. His feet disturbed the sand, causing puffs of dust to explode like confetti into the clear atmosphere. His eyes flickered. As the peak of the dune neared, his legs shook. He forced his eyes open and his legs onward.

With a gasp of air, he arrived at the dune's peak. Breathing a sigh of relief, he peered ahead. An immense pool of crystalline water lay ahead, the sun shining through it. It was glass; a single ripple would alter its placid surface completely. If water had memory, this pond was a landmark to all points in history. As the sun shifted, the man's eyes settled on its gentle ripples and shifting colors: purple, indigo, and turquoise. Plants decorated the pond's edge. Life bloomed along its edge. Cattails sassily swayed in the air. Vegetation colored the sandy shore. As time slowly passed, new plants extravagantly redefined the old. Now, bushy trees flaunted juicy fruit that they bore. Leaves glowed emerald green as if light made each branch gleam with life. A wall of sand surrounded the oasis as if a celestial being had carved it right out of the honey lands, the touch of the being's silver spoon giving birth to beauty. Geometric caves lined the wall of sand. Each was filled with calm shadows and peace; it was a shelter from the weather, wars, hatred, and pain.

At the heart of the oasis loomed an immense temple eight stories high. Air drifted playfully through beautiful pillars and arches, spaced evenly across each story. Every column was etched with simplistic but enchanting designs. Ornate cornices capped each level. Elegant, artistic, shining, topping tiles spiked out over each corner, orange, red, and yellow. Two stone lions majestically guarded the temple and its pavilion from evil spirits.

The temple had been built right into the caves, indestructible. Such firm shelters were typically constructed by the wisest of hands—hands that shaped humanity's future through their creations. The oasis had made itself a proud name in society. People were everywhere: in the temple, in the caves, and relaxing under trees. Some had set up a market of temporary tents, from which they sold the most exciting of creations.

From one stall, a savory aroma drifted around the market. The man observed clay pots in another booth etched with the most enchanting designs where a young apprentice delicately balanced a few pots in each hand. Another stall sold exquisite stroke paintings on thin rice paper. There, a balding man poured his soul into a passionate dance of ink and paper. A sweet woman sold sweet sugar candies on wooden sticks in another corner and tasseled satchels filled with perfume.

Like a siren, the paradise of the oasis pulled him in, enchanting him with its magic.

He hurriedly rushed down the dune slope towards the sweet pond waters. One dip of his fingers into the calm and clear water sent his mind into a flurry—it was heaven on his fingertips. After drinking his fill, he wiped his lips with the back of his hand.

With his few remaining copper coins that dangled eagerly on his wire, he set out into the market. The market was

the same inside as it appeared on the outside. People bustled, creating an excited but soothing

atmosphere of chatter and footsteps. He heard sellers hawking and people gossiping. A group of older men sat around a wooden table, oblivious to their surroundings, enthralled by an intense mahjong match. A caravan trotted through the commotion, attendants clutching the ropes of two enormous camels.

A sweet scent caught the man's attention. He followed it under silk blankets and around merchants. The market's noise faded.

At last, he found its source, drifting from a giant dusty green tent. Although it was a temporary structure, it stood defiantly among its neighbors. At the ends of a dense tangle of ropes, planks carved from bamboo plunged deeply and securely into the ground, anchoring the mighty structure.

A light wind drifted through the oasis, fluttering open the tent's entrance flap, revealing a residence inside. Thin rows of beds lined up neatly; the beds were empty now, but once night fell, this hotel would be packed with people.

The man's legs ached, and he desperately needed a place to rest. The sweet scent of glutinous rice balls simmering in hot brown sugar water inside the tent convinced him this was the place to stay. An older woman suddenly appeared in the doorway.

She was short and a little plump, with a jolly demeanor. Laugh lines spread across her round cheerful face. Perhaps her most striking feature was her thickly powdered cheeks. Her eyes were slim, like a tiger's, and she wore curlers in her hair, which was growing gray. A hint of cheap perfume floated around her and her flowery garments.

"Hello?" she said with an inquisitive tone as she rested her hand on her hip, holding a wooden soup. The man squirmed as he suddenly realized he had been staring. He stammered a raspy, awkward reply, "Um, hello. How much is it to stay for the night?"

"Five gold coins." She pursed her brightly colored lips and considered his hunched frame. "You know, a lot of people come by here from the silk road. The journey is long, and sometimes one can get lost. Remember, although the journey may be tiresome, you will eventually find your way."

With that, she tossed her gray hair and flicked the tent flap open with the wooden spoon. The man turned his head to the horizon before she could catch his reaction. Her words hit dangerously close to home. In that brief moment, he saw the desert as if for the first time.

The sky was dimming, and a chill filled the air. Sand gleamed deep orange as shadows desperately stretched out, attempting to escape the trees that imprisoned them. He saw the sun sink over a dune. Purple, orange, and pink colors filled the sky and reflected on the crystal sands. The first few stars had started to sprinkle across the sky. It was a canvas. Solid colors blurred into gradients confusing the line between land and sky, creating a quiet atmosphere without contrasting colors. The painter of the skies had flicked white dots for stars with a brush with a subconscious purpose.

"Well?" the older woman shouted from inside the tent. "Are you coming in?"

The man took one last look at the sky before striding inside the tent.

He may get lost in life's paths, but the horizon would remain, waiting for him always.

The Memory Chasm

Hong Kong International School, Kang, Ye Eun Emma – 12

Once upon a time.

There was a cave.

Its secrets are whispered in the howling wind, in the pallid glare of moonlight bathing the quiet city with silver, in the luminous jewels strewn across the night sky.

And if you dare to listen, you would hear, the tale carefully coaxed into secrecy: the tale of the Mogao Caves.

Not only ancient sculptures and drawings are hidden in the caves. Deep inside the caves, where none but dust and air know, lies a secret chamber. If you cast aside the colossal pyramid of books, a small trapdoor will soon emerge into view. If you grip the trapdoor with enough potency, it will fling open under your touch, taking you into a maze of twists and turns until you reach another chamber with identical bookcases lining the ceiling. Whereas instead of books, pools and pools of what seems to be yarns fill the compartments.

Some of the yarns, or some *parts* of the yarns, glow blazing red, garnishing the walls with orbs of eerie colors. If you look closely, you can see flashes reflected in the light. Each illustration shows children racing, mothers beaming, and families laughing: love, warmth, and happiness imprinted in each glimpse.

But there was one thing that rendered this happiness as vulnerable to all hazards: the touch of a knife was fatal to these memories; one small snip and these memories would fade forever, replaced with dark oblivion. So it was determined: the location of the secret chamber was never to be revealed.

But such a secret would never be kept.

Here's the irony about secrets: a secret is never a secret. If there is a presence of a secret hanging in the air, a keen creature is bound to sniff it and figure it out.

This secret was no exception.

In the dead of the night, when the city was draped in a cape of ignorance, a thief clambered through the dark walls, nothing but longing and desperateness guiding his way.

And in his pockets was a small knife, its sharp tip gleaming wickedly in the obscure moonlight.

"Mother," Lei shrieked.

She rushed down the stairs, skipping two at once, until she reached the small room around the corner. She was a spindly girl of twelve, tall and skinny, with dark waves braided down until her shoulders and shining dark brown eyes staring at whatever seemed out of place to her young mind. But her usual rosy cheeks had lost their color, and her normally bright eyes were gazing far away.

Lei tumbled in through the door, which groaned as it flung open to give way. She leaned onto her mother's bed frame and frantically shook her shoulder.

Her mother's eyelids fluttered open.

Lei heaved a sigh, dropping her head onto her clammy palms. "I just had the most peculiar dream ever," she started, words slipping like water past her lips. "I dreamed of this bizarre place with millions and millions of yarns stocked in this gigantic bookcase. Can you fathom? Millions of *yarns*!" She laughed, as if it was the most absurd idea to ever register in the universe. "Then this man materialized, pulled out a knife, and grabbed this shining yarn. And the strangest thing was... I think I saw you in it.

"The man just took it and began to snip it. The fragments all turned the color of ash, the magical glow dwindling to nothing. He folded the snippets of yarns in his palm and knitted it into the shape of a heart. A dull grey heart."

Lei finished quietly, her gaze lowered to the floor. "I don't know why I thought you were in danger." She closed her eyes, then opened them. "I don't know, I just thought—" She stopped mid-sentence, registering the look of terror in her mother's eyes.

"Mother?" Lei faltered.

Her intense eyes were focused on her daughter's face. "Who are you?" She demanded. "Why are you here?" Lei stared at her mother. "Mother?"

"Who are you?" Every inch of her mother's face was etched with thin-veiled anger and terror that Lei could no longer ignore.

"I'm Lei," she whispered. "Your daughter."

"No," her mother shook her head. "No."

"Mother—" Lei tried to reach for her mother's hand, but her mother shied away from her touch, eyes wide and panicked.

"Don't call me *mother!*" She cried. "You are no daughter of mine."

"I'm Lei." Her eyes were pleading. "Lei, your daughter."

"I have no daughter!" Her mother sprung from the bed. "No *Lei!*"

"Mother, please!" A tear glinted from the side of Lei's cheek, to see her mother staring at her with such disgust and horror. "This doesn't make any sense."

Then the truth dawned on her.

Lei's eyes widened.

"The yarn," she whispered, "They were your memories."

Night engulfed the city in darkness again. The Mogao Caves stood unyielding in the overpowering dark, its lines and curves barely distinguishable in the nebulous moonlight.

As the sky grew darker and darker, a shadow emerged from the darkness, his footsteps quieter than the legs of a ladybug. The shape slipped into the entrance, casting glances behind, as if he was afraid the mere air might betray his presence.

He reached the entrance to the secret chamber in a flash. When he clutched the trapdoor, he was no longer anxious about his identity being revealed. In fact, he was so sure of himself that he did not even notice the presence of another close behind.

A girl crept through the trapdoor, her brown eyes staring intensely at the figure in front.

His eyes were full of longing, his heart empty, when he touched the ball of yarn.

Instantly, he felt a surge of happiness shoot through him.

He knew it wasn't real. He knew it wasn't right. He knew it wasn't his to have.

But was it right that he was never even given a chance to grasp a vague idea of the feeling, when others were basking in the brilliance of this wonder?

He thought this as he reached for the bright red yarn, the brightest one he had yet seen. He licked his lips, dizzy with anticipation, pulling out a pocket knife.

"*Stop.*"

His blood turned to ice.

He turned, slowly.

A girl stood at the entrance. She was young, no more than twelve, but her eyes held fire. Her trembling fingers were clenched into fists so tightly that her nails dug into her palms and her knuckles turned white. "Stop," she commanded.

The thief took a step backward. "Why?"

"Because that's my father's memory you are holding. You took my mother from me. I won't let you take the only person I love left in this universe from me, too."

He said nothing.

"Drop the knife."

"No."

“Drop it!”

“No!”

The girl met his eyes. And she saw the loneliness in them.

“Why do you do this?” She asked gently.

“Because this is the only way I can be happy. The only way I can live.”

The girl shook her head. “Stealing memories, just so you can feel the rush for a second? This isn’t happiness,” she said softly. “Why don’t you find real happiness?”

He said nothing, just took out a ball of yarn from his pocket, grey although whole. The yarn seemed endless, yet there was no single glow in the thread.

He met her eyes. “Every day I wake up in the same soulless, neverending void, unable to withstand the mundanity of life. With no family, no friends, no *love*. So for once, I’m taking control of *my* life—” “It’s not your life,” she cut him off in an even tone. “All these memories you’re planning on stealing, they’re not yours. Do you think you can be truly happy with someone else’s memories?”

He didn’t reply. The air around them was shrouded in a claustrophobic silence.

“I understand that you were hurt in the past. But that doesn’t have to define your future. If you are so unconfident that you need someone else’s memories, they’re not going to make you happy either. Do something that’ll make *you* happy first. Appreciate that mundanity.”

He stared at her for a while. His lips trembled a bit too vulnerably. Perhaps he was a boy, too, running away from the evils of the world. Maybe he was the villain in her story. But in his mind, he was his own protagonist.

Then, slowly and quietly, he dropped the knife to the floor.

“Your hand,” he said.

He guided her hand to another yarn, this one embedded with countless red glows. He detached a small fragment from the heart shape he had knitted and handed it to Lei, who gingerly attached the fragment on the yarn. Lei watched as the spools of yarn connected seamlessly.

“It’s love, you know. What binds the threads together.”

She looked up at him.

And for the first time, a dazzling red emerged on the ball of yarn in his hands.

The Price of Life

Hong Kong International School, Kim, Seungmin – 12

Nan

Life is incomplete without death. Without death there is no life, and without life there is no death.

“What’s that supposed to mean,” snorts Antonia, her pale face wrinkling in confusion.

I peer over her shoulder, poking aside her bouncing blonde curls. I scan the words engraved above the entrance to the final cave of the Mogao Grottoes. We’d wandered off from the main group when Pitt found a small hole in the side of the wall. We’d been walking for some time now and I was more than relieved to see the end of the cave.

“No idea, but sounds interesting. Let’s check it out!” Penn says excitedly, bouncing like a child. He pulls Luna in behind him.

“No way big man, that sign screams “beware” to me,” snorts Sebastian, pushing his glasses further up the bridge of his nose.

“Never took you for one to be scared off so easily,” scoffs Pitt. He stops in front of the door, quickly reading the sign. He shrugs, “Might be worth my time. I’m gonna check it out.” He saunters into the cave, hands in his pocket like nothing fazed him. Penn grins like he won the lottery, practically dragging Luna in. Luna staws back at me, her wide eyes begging me to follow her in.

“Let’s go, Antonia.” I sigh, tugging on the hem of her skirt. I pull my phone out of my pocket and flick on the flashlight.

The final room was full of treasures.

“What the hell...” I say, staring ahead. The others already ran ahead to explore the riches inside, opening every chest and laughing with delight at each discovery.

“Hey guys, what’s this?” Luna says, her voice trembling.

I walked over, taking in the view. In her arms, Luna holds a completely ordinary looking box. I take it from her and read the inscription on the side of the box. ‘Box of Eternity.’ My eyes widen in horror, nearly dropping the flask.

“What is it?” Penn asks excitedly. I turn to him with wide eyes.

“The Elixir of Immortality.” Penn’s mouth drops open.

“No way,” He grabs the box from my hands, reading the words aloud. He looks down at me with skepticism.

“This is dangerous, we should get out of here.” I say, frantic. I turn to run, but Pitt stops me in my tracks.

“Hey, hold on, if this is the real deal, I want to be forever young. It’s only fair that one of the cowards here pays the price, right?” He says menacingly. He suddenly grabs one of the bottles and chugs down the contents. He smiles as the concoction goes down his throat.

“Just as I thought. This is real” He grins creepily. I look at him in horror. His eyes dance with unworldly colors, boring into me

“What have you done, Pitt?” I ask, horrified. “There’s only enough for five people.”

“And, that’s not going to be me or Luna.” Penn grabs two vials, one for him and Luna, and they both down the contents. He tosses the other bottle to Antonia, and she silently drinks the blood red brew.

“What are you guys doing, are you not listening to me? One of us won’t leave!” I whisper with fear. But there’s only one bottle left. Sebastian pulls it out, lowering his head shamefully, not looking me in the eye.

“Please, dont,” I beg. I stare at him as he swallows the last of the scarlet drink. I turn to try to run, but instead slam into Penn.

“Life is only a strand of fate, Nancy. Yet it’s the most important thing.” He smiles, but the greed in his eyes reveal his intentions.

I turn to look at all the people in our group. Not even Luna looks back at me without avarice. My fingers start to fall to the ground as I reach out to her.

“Help m—”

Penn

I sweep my hair back on my forehead, my fingers brushing the locket hanging around my neck. It had been seventy years since Nan had died, seventy years since the day that I brought the locket home.

I flick it open, and stare at the images inside. Pitt with his ever present smirk, Sebastian trying to run from a bee flying around his head, Antonia sitting on the grass, Luna trying to hide herself behind Nan. And me, in the midst of all that chaos, smiling like the naive idiot I was.

We sit on the grass, quietly listening to the sounds of traffic. Luna lays back against the ground, sighing as she does so. She tilts her head backwards to stare at our house, the old building with the porch light barely hanging on, the roof practically falling off the sides.

“Grandma died when I was little.” Luna suddenly says, her hands resting behind her head. “Mama cried a lot because of that, and when she did, I would grab her hand and point to the stars. ‘Don’t cry, Grandma’s still alive. She’s just in the stars now.’ And then she would just laugh, even as tears continued to stream down her face.” She smiled wistfully. “I never once thought that I’d never see them again in the skies.”

I turn around, surprised. Luna rarely talked about our ‘gift.’ I look back at our house, smiling wistfully. If my parents were still alive today, they’d be around 116 years old.

“We should head in now,” I say softly. But we just sit there, and stare at the night sky together.

...

I wake up, my eyes slowly fluttering open. Luna’s head rests on my lap, the morning dew lining the edges of the grass. I gently push her off, and she mumbles incoherently. I walk back into my house, stretching and yawning as I do so.

I set a cup on the coffee machine, and pour some milk from Luna. She walks in, her hair all rumpled up.

“Hey Luna, I put your milk over there.” I say, smiling faintly. She smiles back as she tentatively picks up her cup, sipping her drink. I grabbed my coffee, and laid back on our couch.

“You know, I’ve been thinking recently, maybe we should go back.” She says tentatively, as if I might blow up at any moment.

“Go back where?” I ask, putting down my cup. She throws a side glance at me, as if she were a sailor testing uncharted waters.

“The Caves.” She says quietly, sipping her milk again.

“Sure,” I say as if I don’t really care. But in reality, I was relieved. I’d been wanting to go back for a while now, I just never knew how to approach her about it.

“Wait what?” She says confusedly. “That was not the reaction I was expecting.” I laugh at her bewildered look.

“No, I totally agree, we should go back. We have unfinished business there.” I say, getting serious. “Well, at least I do. I am sick of feeling guilty every morning when I wake up.”

“How about going today? Later today?” I ask jokingly. She looks up at me even more surprised.

“Why not?” she says. And now it’s my turn to look shocked.

“I was just joking!”

“Well, I’m not. Pack your bags, we leave in an hour.”

Luna

Penn snores softly in his seat on the Port-Runner. The automated vehicle was a lot like the cabs from our childhood, except they were like a first-class version minus the driver. My texts to the others, Pitt, Sebastian, and Antonia were all read, but none of them had replied. I took this as a sign that they were so busy with coming to the Caves that they didn't have the time to reply. Hopefully. I didn't even want to consider the alternative.

I nudge Penns' shoulder, my eyes straining to see the outlines of the cave beyond the darkness of the night.

"We're here," I mutter to him. He blinks sleepily and stretches his limbs as he stands. He unlatches the lock and slides it open, his artificial blonde curls falling lazily in front of his eyes. Outside stands a man in a leather jacket, a rare sight these days, black jeans and a white shirt underneath. I recognized him immediately.

"Pitt!" I squeal, feeling as though I'm only twelve as I sprint towards his tall figure.

"Pitt, you're here. We can save Nan." I say excitedly, stepping forward. He smiles at me sadly.

"I'm sorry Nan. But there;s nothing we can do for Nan." Tears pool at the corner of his eyes. "Just because we live forever, it doesn't make us Gods. If God really did give this to us, then the only person who can give life to Nan is God." Pitt steps forward, his arms encircling me. "It's alright. It's time to let go."

The Cave of Lost Souls

Hong Kong International School, Kim, Tori – 13

“Grandpa, grandpa! Tell us a story!”

The children tumbled into a giggling pile at their grandfathers’ feet, pushing each other playfully as their grandfather smiled. The sun’s golden autumn glow dipped into the sea, casting a warm light across the falling leaves on the floor of the courtyard. Around them, quiet servants scurried to and fro within the great gates of the large home, sweeping, dusting, and cleaning like a nest of busy ants.

“Alright, settle down, children,” their grandfather relented, chuckling softly. He leaned back in his creaky rocking chair, and the children grew quiet, crossing their legs and leaning against each other’s shoulders. “Hmm, let me think,” he murmured. His eyes lit up. “I know! But children, you must believe me.”

“I’ll believe you, Grandpa!” exclaimed his youngest granddaughter, her eyes shining with excitement. He leaned in close, and so did the children. “This is a tale of magic crows, and secret caves, and paintings that come to life,” he confided in a low whisper, his face mischievous and filled with untold secrets. The children gasped and urged him to continue, already hooked on every word.

His eyes grew distant as he stared briefly into the horizon, and the wrinkles on his face relaxed. Closing his eyes and inhaling slowly, he began speaking.

...

Long ago, in a time before the stars grew old, I was a young explorer traveling the world. I would go on countless adventures, seeing breathtaking sights, buying the most satisfactory goods. And yet no matter who I met or how happy I told myself I was in the exotic places I went to, I never quite found a place that I could call my home. I held the quixotic hope of finding the ‘perfect home’ for myself— I could never be satisfied.

During one of my voyages, I found myself wandering aimlessly along the Silk Road, alone. Somewhere as I trekked along the sandy desert in the Gansu Province, I stopped in front of the mouth of a gaping cave. The cave attracted me most peculiarly.

Li Jie! It seemed to say. Li Jie! Come inside!

The sun was setting in the sky, and my bones were weary from walking. I decided to stop and take a rest for the night.

The moon glowed in the ink-black sky, providing enchanting incandescence to the desert around me. I set up camp beside the cave, cooked myself some warm soup, and sat before my fire, watching the embers fly upwards and disappear. After a while, I lay on my blanket and drifted to sleep.

I sat up in a cold sweat. It was dark, so dark that the night seemed to loom towards me, whispering ominous nothings and clawing at the ends of my robe. Something tickled the back of my neck as if I was being watched by an intangible pair of eyes in the black ether.

Unnerved, I decided to take a brief walk around my tent to calm down.

I was relieving myself in the bushes when I heard a soft *caw*.

Silence.

Craw.

There it was again!

Crawwww.

It was the unmistakable call of a crow.

I peeked around the bush, and sure enough, there it was, perched upon a branch.

But this was not just any bird. The crow was beautiful. Her feathers were sleek and shiny, and her beak was sharp and pointed. And yet I only saw her piercing eyes. Something in them urged me to follow her, something seraphic and otherworldly.

She gracefully glided away, and I followed her in a trance-like state.

The crow led me to the mouth of the immense cave, wide and gaping. Still feeling as though I was dreaming, I entered.

Inside was frigid and moonless. I could hardly see in front of me and navigated solely off of the *pitter-patter* sound of the crow's footsteps on the stone floor. We walked for what must have been at least an hour. My legs were growing cramped and stiff, and my lungs were tired of inhaling the damp, musty air inside the cave.

Finally, just when I was about to give up and go back, I felt the air around me grow crisp and fresh. Instantly, the dark walls opened to an extensive cavern. I gasped at what I saw, blinking incredulously and wondering if my eyes deceived me.

There were beautiful murals splattered everywhere— countless depictions of people and places. They were intricately painted to the smallest detail, from a street vendor's rotten fruit to a little girl's toys on the ground. And even more remarkable: they were *alive*. A mother called out to her children, telling them to come eat. A blind man moved slowly along the street. A grandmother sizzled rice in a pan, and the familiar aroma wafted around the cavern.

I slowly walked along the wall in astounded silence, trailing the tip of my fingers against the murals, trying to soak in every single detail.

Then I noticed the treasure lying on the ground. So much treasure. There were gold coins and jewelry galore, splattered all across the floor resemblant to a piece of expensive artwork.

Gasping, I knelt down and scrambled to take as much as I could. I greedily scraped it into my shirt, my pockets, anything that could fit

Suddenly, the magical people portrayed on the walls stopped moving. They all slowly turned and faced me, their tiny faces eerily emotionless. They simultaneously opened their mouths and began to chant.

Touch not our treasure, for you will see

An unfortunate outcome will come to be.

Centuries lost souls have been cursed into these walls

After lusting for fortune and stealing it all.

Heed our warning, leave your greediness unsown

And leave us something of your own

A token from your pockets you must deposit

To find the lock to your heart and the key that unlocks it.

They finished speaking and slowly resumed their tasks, their spine-chilling message still echoing across the walls.

My breath quickened, still doubting what I had heard. Cursed into the walls? The lock to my heart? It all seemed... impossible. Just hours ago, I had been safe in my warm tent, wondering where my travels would take me next. *I must be delusional*, I thought, and yet all of it seemed so very real.

Leave us something of your own.

I was faced with an impossible choice. I could take the treasure and be rich beyond my wildest dreams. Or I could listen to the absurd paintings on the wall and leave something of my own, throwing away a fortune that could change my life.

"Why should I listen to them? They are merely tiny humans painted on the walls, brought alive by unholy magic or simply an illusion," I said to myself.

Perhaps it was how befuddled my mind felt at that moment, but I listened to the talking people on the wall. I slipped something from my pockets into the pile and walked towards the mouth of the cave. As I got up to leave, I turned back to look at the mystical cave one last time. Somehow, I knew I would never see it again in this lifetime.

A sudden fogginess started to come over me. My eyes fluttered, and my limbs grew weak. My vision swam, and the cave distorted before me. The last thing I remember was the murals, stopping to watch me crumple to the ground.

A light breeze stirred at my face and hair, tousling my uncombed locks and dancing playfully across my skin. I groaned and opened my eyes slowly, rubbing my face and sitting up. I was back in my tent, with no sign of what I had seen

the night before. Dismissing it as a strange dream, I carried on with my day, packing up my things and continuing my search for a perfect home.

All seemed to be well, until one day, as I was walking, I discovered a small slip of paper inside my pockets. I slowly unfolded it and squinted at the tiny words written on it.

The greatest treasure is found in the journey, not the destination.

...

“The end.”

The children sat in silence before erupting with questions.

“Can I go to the cave too?”

“How did they talk?”

Their grandfather laughed. “Children, children!” He glanced up at the sky, his jaded eyes instinctively searching for the silhouette of a crow. The moon was now out, its solitary figure casting haunting shadows around the courtyard. “It is time for bed. Hurry now, before your parents start looking for you.”

The children reluctantly obeyed. They stood up, stretched their small limbs, and hurried back into the house, chattering excitedly as children do.

Only his youngest granddaughter remained behind. “Grandpa?”

“Yes?”

“What did you leave behind at the cave?”

Her grandfather winked, his eyes glimmering. “That, my dear, is for you to find out.”

Never Invisible

Hong Kong International School, Sung, Ha Jin – 12

I have vague memories of my mother, Xiuying. Her black crown of braids perfectly placed on the center of her oval-shaped head, her misty obsidian eyes contrasting with her pale, pink-tinted cheeks. Her hands resembled the luxurious velvet texture while her long nails tapped across the marble countertops. Her golden qipao fit tightly over the slender curve of her body, thick black lines traced over her eyelids with crimson-colored lipstick spread across her thin lips.

However, despite her seductive appearance, if you studied her long enough, you could see the sheer layer of frost placed above her eyes like glass and, even more salient, the sharpness behind her seemingly melodious voice. She had labored arduously for nine months, creating a brand new soul inside of her, soon to be born into this world.

Nine months of work—yet she left after only four years of her reward, a reward that was supposed to last years and years more.

She left without a goodbye, the reason beyond my perception, like always. I was never ready to understand the true rationale, wasn't I?

Stop it, Hezhen.

I briefly closed my eyes, waiting for the sharp pain in my chest to ease.

“It does no good holding onto those memories...” I mumbled.

After she had left me, my grandmother, Li-li, became my caretaker. Ever since my youth, I would listen to her soothing voice telling me about trenchant old legends as she cradled me into her arms, rocking me back and forth, her intent gaze fixed on something in the distance.

Her stories sent electric ripples through me as I envisioned incandescent eyes and a cloud of bright chroma—a mythical bird spreading its cerulean and crimson wings for eternal flight as it soared through the skies in a conundrum of technicolor.

She had an infinite number of stories, but there was one particular favorite of hers.

Her words formed a world where an abandoned cave contained the most sacred pieces of artwork dating back millennia, when the first people had decided there was something special about this cavern they had stumbled upon. However, thousands of years soon passed, and this cave became invisible to all the inhabitants. Previously, it had been scarred by millions of pilgrims that it had let in, each making a unique mark on its walls as if each imprint was recognition for who had contributed to its beauty. Yet now, it was no more than a locked up dissolution of limestone, waiting for someone to rediscover the secrets it contained.

I felt immediately connected with the cave—it seemed like we both had many precious secrets stored inside of us, yet we were brushed off to the side, appearing to be living in mundane, humdrum lives while we waited for someone to unlock our truths.

Most of my life has been spent with my grandmother and no one else. I was pulled out of school from a young age, a couple of years after my mother had left me. However, even in school, I lived a hermit kind of life. I mostly stood against the wall, watching people pass by without even noticing me.

I was invisible.

Nonetheless, being with my grandmother was enough. However, as each year passed, her chest started to heave, her breathing labored. She told fewer stories and spent more time in bed. I tried to treat her the best I could, buying the best medicine I could afford, but eventually, she too left me.

I was alone, and I would be forever.

Frequently, I ascended up the dilapidated staircase up to the attic, where I kept all my grandmother's treasures. I would rummage around a few boxes, pick up something, gently blow the dust off, and sit down with it, reminiscing back to the past and all her tales.

However, this time, I picked up something completely different. There had been a scroll poking out of a box pushed back to the end of the attic. Cautiously, I neared it and picked it up. The paper felt as if it would crumble with my touch, the corners ripped. I carefully took off the band placed around the scroll and laid it out in front of me.

My heart fluttered, and I gasped. It was a map showing a journey through the silk road... *Wait.*

I leaned in closer at an X marked on the paper. There were several arcs around the area... caves? I squinted to read the tiny writing beside it. *Mògāo kū, the Mogao Grottoes.*

Caves...

Could this be the reality of my grandmother's legends? The very one that I had felt so connected with? Maybe, just maybe, my grandmother had sent this out for me to find. I had to at least *try*. ★ ★ ★

I had been walking for an hour already. My legs ached, and beads of sweat stippled my forehead. How much longer would this take?

From time to time, I would cast a look back over my shoulder, longing to head back home and sit down in my soft armchair with my head against the window, curling up with my favorite chrysanthemum tea, letting the gentle aroma gently cleanse my mind. Yet, I couldn't. I could virtually hear my grandmother calling my name, her voice growing louder every progressing step I took. I had grown up alongside her stories, and these caves were the last part of my grandmother I had left.

I had to keep walking.

The roads around me were bare, and I was unsure if I was even heading in the right direction. I glanced back at my path again, estimating that I had already walked around 2 kilometers. *It has to be here somewhere.* I kept my eyes glued onto the map and quickened my pace when suddenly, I stood inside of a colossal, dark and looming shadow. Slowly, I lifted my head for my eyes to focus on what beheld.

In front of me stood the reality of my grandmother's treasured lore.

I took in a sharp intake of air and entered the cave slowly. My footsteps seemed to echo through the walls of the empty cave, but when the light illuminated the room, I held back a gasp.

It was real.

There was an omnipresent collection of paintings and sculptures, all designed precisely to the smallest element. I could feel the raw emotion of the artists, openly expressed in the smooth walls of the caves, speckled with the thin onyx spheres, a palette of colors blended into their abstractions. I traced my finger around the closest painting, captivated by the intricate lines and mesmerized by the combination of deliberately chosen colors. Delicate patterns looked like an entanglement of crisscrossed veins. I glanced up at the massive sculptures lined the walls, feeling Lilliputian compared to them. Their frame had been made with such care, not a single bump or rough patch to be found around the curved edges.

This was what my grandmother knew. She knew something others didn't. She knew the beauty beyond what is seen at first glance.

I pressed my palm against the walls of the cave, almost feeling its pulse beating against my hand as if we were one. This cave lived in a desert oasis, hidden from much of the world, yet, thousands of years and history were etched onto its walls.

"You were never invisible to my family," I whispered.

When I finally stepped outside of the cave, the moon, a perfect circle, dimly lit the glistening surface of the ocean as it reflected scintillating diamond-shaped figures. I untied my braids, my black curls tumbling down my shoulders.

"Grandmother," I whispered, "I've found it."

You knew that there was so much more than what you see at first glance.

I glanced back at the cave one more time.

"I'll be back," I breathed. And with a smile, I turned away from the cave and began my trek back home. ★ ★ ★

All of a sudden, there was a rapid knock on my front door. I lifted my head in alarm. I hadn't been expecting any visitors. I picked myself up and slightly creaked the door open. Outside, there was a young man wearing a blue changpao.

He smiled, his pearl-white teeth shining in the afternoon sun.

"Ah, Hezhen, I have finally found you."

Something about his voice felt familiar. I shook my head.

“Who are you?”

He dipped his head, and I noticed his luscious coal-black hair spiraling around his head. “My name is Yang Donghai, and I have been set to find you.”

His name had a familiar ring to it. Have I met him before? Childhood friends, perhaps? No, that didn’t seem quite right. I haven’t had any “friends” since...

Stop. I silenced my thoughts.

“But why? Do I know you? How do you know me? Everyone I know has left.”

“I believe you do not know me. My father is Yang Qianfan. His wife’s name was Cheng Xiuying. Hezhen, you were never invisible to my family.”

The Golden Grotto

Hong Kong International School, Tan, Ethan – 13

David squeezed his eyes open, blinking groggily. Soft rays of sunlight beamed through the window, illuminating the small room. He sighed, forcing himself up. However, this lethargy did not last long. Soon, he was rushing downstairs, preparing to travel to work. David was an archaeologist, and he was fascinated by all artefacts from around the world. Today was the day he could be assigned a new location. There were rumours that a mysterious cave had been discovered in rural China, and he jumped at the opportunity to explore it and make a significant discovery. He was unable to suppress his nerves as he slipped through the office door. 'Welcome!' his boss said, beaming brightly. 'I heard you applied for the chance to explore the new grotto.' 'Yes!' David answered. 'Well then, it's your lucky day.' The boss replied. 'You are on the job!' David could barely contain his enthusiasm and jumped jubilantly in the air. 'Thank you!' As David returned to his desk, he looked smugly at his coworkers, who simply shook their heads, wondering how he managed to get the job.

One week later, David was boarding a ship headed to China. Due to the long journey, the ship had to stop in India to restock. At the dock in Mumbai, David walked around, admiring the vibrant atmosphere. There, he spotted a familiar man, quarrelling with a merchant among the general cacophony of port business. He recognised him as his colleague, Robert. Robert, while a celebrated archaeologist, was infamous for his controversial discovery of a tomb in Germany, where he pocketed one of the gems within. Intrigued, he approached him and asked, 'Robert, do you happen to be travelling to Dunhuang?' 'Why yes indeed!' Robert replied. 'Pleasure to meet you on this journey.' Robert glared at the merchant once more before checking his watch. 'If we do not make it back on time, we may not be able to catch the ship. So they ran back to the ship and boarded it just on time.

Soon, they arrived in China and quickly travelled to Dunhuang, not without difficulty. Notably, a horde of bandits, a sandstorm and the desert environment proved particularly troublesome, resulting in minor casualties. At Dunhuang, however, they were swiftly escorted to an excavation site, where different scientists and historians were at work restoring and exploring these caves. David noted the beautiful crescent-shaped oasis in the nearby desert and wondered if the caves offered even more surprises. When David entered the cave to note down ancient art pieces, he saw an old Chinese man sitting on a rock. The old man said to him, 'Do you know what these caves were intended for?' Puzzled, David eyed him suspiciously. 'No... do continue.' Finally, the man cleared his throat and began.

'You may have heard of the silk road. Long, long ago, the emperor Wudi intended Dunhuang to become a trading city along this road, allowing the region to prosper. A Buddhist monk saw a good vision within these caves, so he was inspired to make this place into a Buddhist destination. His monks and followers built up the cavern into a place of worship and peace. The emperor was delighted and gifted the Buddhists a golden pearl, a silver cup and a jade ring. Together, these items can do great things. However, these items were hidden to protect them. Many expeditions were led deep into the caves to find these treasures, but these efforts were fruitless. Thus, as the last descendant of that original founding monk, I hope you can help us find it and restore the caves to their former glory.' David, excited for adventure, instantly agreed. 'Of course, I'll do it!'

David informed the site manager about the treasures, and the manager hesitantly agreed, sending David to find the gems, coincidentally, along with Robert. As David and Robert trekked along the large cave, they discussed where the treasure might be found. They both agreed to start at the very back of the cave and work their way forward. However, when they reached the back, Robert noted a small glowing object. A button that David excitedly pressed. After a moment of silence, nothing had happened. 'Well, that was useless.' Robert remarked. No sooner than he had said that, the wall slid open to reveal dozens of ancient books and texts. 'My goodness!' exclaimed David, immediately fascinated by the discovery. They ran back to the cave site to document their extraordinary find, and when they returned to the books, they noticed one book was glowing faintly. Robert picked it up and opened it, revealing the words:

If one wishes to find the treasure, you must solve these riddles.

To find the golden pearl, you must go to the earliest painting.

To find the silver cup, you must find the Buddha at the mouth.

To find the jade ring, you must simply Ask.

Confused, David said, 'We should try to figure this out.' So David and Robert ran to the cave entrance, where they knew where the earliest painting drawn here was located. Behold was a pile of round stones on the ground under the drawing. David felt that one of the stones was rounder than the others, and David picked it up, his heart racing, and brushed off the dirt. The stone shone a brilliant pearlescent yellow, and David popped it into his pocket. David and Robert pondered the second riddle and realised it referred to the famous Buddha sculpture at the cave's mouth. They ran there and saw a brown cup-like object behind the dull bronze sculpture in a hidden crevice. Picking it up, Robert blew on it, revealing a shiny silver goblet. Finally, there was only 1 more object. David noticed a small jar in the crevice further behind the cup. He pulled it out and opened it to find one piece of golden paper. Within was also a thin brush, and then it hit David. He had to ask the bronze Buddha for the jade ring. He carefully wrote "Jade Ring" on the paper and carefully placed it in the jar with a shaky hand. The Buddha sculpture began to vibrate, and crack began to appear. The statue began to split open, revealing a magnificent jade ring on a shimmering glass stand. David and Robert had found the last Artefact. As David was admiring the ring, he heard a smug voice. 'Not so fast.'

David spun around to see Robert clutching onto the treasures. David was mortified. 'How could you do this?' Robert sneered as he yanked the ring from out of David's hand. 'Did you think I would let you get away with these priceless treasures?' David was stunned. 'These treasures are not for money, but for the greater good of science and culture!' 'Don't try to stop me.' Robert sneered. As Robert bolted to the exit, the old man from earlier suddenly appeared in front of him, freezing Robert in place. 'Greed is a sin.' The old man declared. He began to wave his arms and muttered a spell. Robert disappeared into a golden cloud. All that was left was a black stone. The old man sighed sadly. 'His heart. Corrupted by greed and envy.' He picked it up and placed it within his robe. He then approached David, who was in utter disbelief after witnessing what just happened. The man smiled warmly. 'You, however, have shown dedication to helping others.' He pulled out a coin from his robe. 'You deserve this.' David was delighted. 'What is it?' The old man leaned in and whispered 'It's very valuable. It was given to the first monk by a traveller as thanks for inspiring him. The first monk cherished this coin for as long as he lived.'

David then watched in amazement as the man put the pearl into the cup, then ripped a small emerald from out of the ring. He took the pearl and cracked it open, revealing a shiny liquid. He poured it into the cup and dropped the emerald inside. The cup glowed bright green, emitting a golden aura. The old man poured the contents of the cup onto a particularly large flower bud, causing it to bloom and spread lush vegetation all over the cave. Glowing vines hung from the ceiling, and huge pink blossoms released fragrant aromas. 'This was the previous beauty of this place. Now, thanks to you, it is restored.' The crowd that had slowly gathered watched in amazement as vibrant paintings took shape on the rock. Elaborate art pieces appeared on once empty shelves. Crystal clear water gushed from a cluster of boulders in a corner, washing dirt and dust off hundreds of silver stones around the floor. Everyone stared in amazement, especially David. The manager congratulated David for helping preserve this grotto and its many secrets. David stared in amazement at the old man, and asked in wonder 'What is this place?'

The old man beamed. 'The Mogao Grotto.'

Back to School

Hong Kong International School, Tang, Bryant – 13

I have always had a hard time falling asleep, but this time was different. Tomorrow would be the first day of the second semester, which fueled my giddy excitement. It was a few minutes before bed; I was furiously typing the text of a new story, this, to be precise, as I knew the writing competition would end in a few weeks. There was a lot on my mind, but I tried to clear my thoughts, finger landing on key after key. It was clear I had lots of energy within me. Soon, my mother barged in for the umpteenth time, demanding I sleep, so I hastily entered my bed, switching off the light then closing my eyes. The door closed, cloaking my vast, filled room in shade. Nothingness appeared before me, and the lullaby of rumbling cars far away and the occasional mysterious shouting prompted me to fall asleep. Though relaxing my body, my mind refused to, and the sensation led to the familiar, dreadful thought: I couldn't sleep again, as the warmth of my hands from typing and the outline of my bright screen on the dull shade of my eyelids inundated my thoughts.

In the dark I stared blankly at the ceiling, counting the seconds of my alarm clock, bound to ring sometime. How long has it been? I asked myself. I groped blindly, reaching for the clock. The small, orange light blinded me as the clock lit up. It's been fifteen minutes. Fifteen! My mind screamed. I tried to take my mind off of the time. I became vigilant, observing the surroundings around me. Something moved among the shadows on the moonlight wall to my left, but I would never find out what. Maybe it's the wind blowing on the curtains, I concluded. A soft light flashed on and off on my ceiling. What could that be? I asked myself. Silence. No matter how much I tried to clear my thoughts, it was impossible.

Then came the feeling; hot, uncomfortable, I could feel my skin pressing on the mattress, my hips were stiff from sleeping sideways and my eyes were heavy. They stayed open from the wave of insomnia that ran over me whenever I tried to fall asleep; I could hear the rustling of my blanket as I tossed and turned for what seemed like an eternity. A few hours later, I lay eyes open, flickering between consciousness and sleep. My mind was finally clear, drained of thought and energy. My eyes began to close as black dots orbited the center of my vision in a stunning pattern that cannot be described, despite seeing it many times. Suddenly, finally, I slowly drifted off to sleep.

Through the haze of my dreams, there came a disturbance in the silence, growing louder and louder, like a drill tearing up the ground. In an instant I jolted awake, looking to my left. There lay my brother, also awake from the irritating beeping of my alarm clock. I immediately smacked the alarm, shutting the noise off, only to collapse sideways back into bed. I was still exhausted, perhaps still groggy from waking up. Using my willpower, I hoisted myself up, grasping the wall, then I was up. Flopping forward, I took a half-hearted step, then another, then I slouched forward into the already open door. Furiously squinting once again as I turned on my harshly bright bathroom light, thirty minutes seemed to zoom by as I got changed and mundanely ate my breakfast in weak light. Soon, the curtains grew light from the sunrise, and it was time to go to school. Brimming with newfound energy (from the food, energy doesn't come from nowhere), I greeted my driver downstairs, and climbed into the family car quietly rumbling as it made its way to school.

I haven't been to school for some time, so I reminisced about my first day of first grade, many years ago. I remember hopping on the bus, seating myself at the edge of the first row. I stared out the window that day, watching the view shift by, and now I did the same. The grey road transformed every now and then into different shades, flipping back and forth between the colours of an ocean of stone. Trees zipped by occasionally in front of towering mountains surrounding a vast reservoir that reflected the growing beams of the sunrise. In a moment, I was at school, hopping out of the car and stepping back on the school after weeks. Excitement filled me as I entered the gate with students scattered around the lobby, already chatting about their perhaps enjoyable holiday. I found my returns to school after holidays quite orthodox.

Upon arrival, I ran into one of my classmates. He noticed me and I was quick to start a conversation. "How was your break?" I began.

"Eh." He blurted. Our conversations were stale, but this encounter was a whole new level of boring. I noticed a new student as I walked past, pondering how now being in the top grade of junior high has caused twice as many unrecognized faces before me. It was much different from earlier on; my first years at school where no student was a stranger. After a brief stroll, I arrived at my locker and opened it gingerly, only for stacks of long gone work to fall into my arms. Sighing, I got my books and briskly took off to the following weeks of school ahead, as the melodic trill of the school bell rang for the first time in weeks.

New Tales of the Mogao Grottes

Hong Kong International School, Wong, Ming Yan Addison – 14

The Singing Sand Mountain. A land made of sand that sings melodies into the air with faded tunes and drifting grains.

He, a wandering monk, trekking across the lands of the Singing Sand Mountain. The moon's slivers of silver rays brought light to the shadows that flickered across the grounds as the grains of sand sang their drifting melodies.

Matters of the past and worries of the future faded away; the only thing that remained was the songs of the sand, the moon, and himself.

The path of enlightenment was the one he chose, leading him to find homes in unlikely places of nature, yet it felt as if it were second nature as he continued on the path. From the four noble truths of overcoming suffering to the virtues of wisdom, kindness, patience, generosity, and compassion— these are what he chose to follow.

The wind brushes against his skin as he continues along the path of the silk road; sometimes, his gaze would flicker towards the mountains before continuing his path with a slight hum.

Suddenly, a vision of a thousand golden Buddhas blazing upon a cliff flashed before his eyes. A sight of grandeur it was; their presence full of tranquility, like a breath of fresh air after being in a room filled with smoke for years. It was warm, like a blanket wrapped around him after years in snow. It brought a sense of peace, giving him a reason why he chose the path of enlightenment.

Feeling inspired, his eyes flashed towards the nearest solid he could find. It felt as if his limbs were moving on their own as he chiseled a small meditation cell into the rock. He could touch the cool surface of the stones cooling his heated flesh, yet he felt as if this were nothing but a faded dream.

As he worked, he couldn't help but wonder.

Was this how enlightenment felt like?

It was as if the weights of worries had washed away, feeling as if he could finally stand up straight after years of slumping from the weights on his shoulders. It didn't feel like something tugged and unraveled the ropes that pulled him away from inner peace. Rather, it was as if he was finally floating after staying underwater for so long; his body pushed towards the surface as he moved along with the waves of life.

The corners of his lips twitched upwards at the feeling of his heart cleansing itself of the negativity he once had as he entered the meditation cell.

Eyes fluttering shut, breath slowing, heartbeat acting as nothing but white noise— he couldn't help but think.

Maybe he had finally reached enlightenment.