

Fiction

Group 3



The Blood of DUNHUANG

International School of Beijing, Niu, Qiming – 12

They still call this part of the desert “the Oval of Death”, even though it had been almost half a millennium since this, as its villagers like to know it, “disturbing” event had happened. It was an oasis that appeared quite abruptly in the middle of the Gobi Desert, and which stretched for miles. The sky was a pure, crystalline blue and the air was warm and still.

It all began on a damp winter night, at twilight, with the moon glistening palely behind the clouds like a shy child. The troop of men had appeared out of nowhere, packed together in a close formation, under the shadow of the wall. They crouched down, as a guard approached on the battlement above.

“Orders, sir?” the tallest of the soldiers hissed, as he stepped forward, an arrow notched on his bowstring.

“Scale the walls, Captain,” their general commanded. “Kill the men. Burn this *pathetic* town to the ground.”

The captain shot his arrow into the battlement and gestured for his platoon to follow. There was a distinct, mute *thud*, and instantly a whispering hail of arrows followed it upward. Cries of terror filled the air as men struggled in the darkness and tumbled from their posts.

Amid all the chaos, one man had made it to the watchtower and lit the beacon, which blazed across the cold night breeze. His cry seemed to rise above everything else: “Betrayed!” the voice wailed, “We’ve been betrayed.”

From the safety of his tent, the general watched as the town was engulfed in a sea of fire. He let out a cruel, high-pitched cackle and barked, “Captain!”

“Yes, sir?” the man quivered. Lips tightened, brow furrowed, the captain’s broad shoulders grew tense.

“The name of this town?”

The captain scratched his head. “I’m not sure, sir.”

“Good. I want this town to be remembered as the place of the Blazing Beacon – or even better – *Dunhuang*–.” The general paused and turned, staring back into the fire. Everything about him was alert and tingling.

There was a billowing roar, and a flash of emerald light had surrounded the general and his men, pulling them into a bottomless pit of darkness...

The carriage raced through the countryside and into the desert, rocking the boy awake with a start. He took out a two-inch-long fragment of mirror and a boy, or young man, around the age of fifteen stared back at him. He was tall and lean, with dark brown eyes that flashed with curiosity.

The horses began to slow down and stopped directly in front of the mouth of a cave, which was cut into a cliff, sheer and faceless. “This would be the place, young Master Allan,” said the driver, who handed the boy, a long, leather-bound object. “Your father left it in my possession before he died. Use it well.”

The boy, Allan, took the object and slid out four inches of steel. The dark metal seemed to gleam under the sunlight. He nodded his thanks and strode into the cave.

The cavern was a raw room of earth and stone, with a ceiling that rose into nowhere, and a great underground lake occupied most of the floor, its water hazy, dark, and still.

Suddenly, deep ripples appeared on the mirrored surface of the lake, and a small boat materialized out of the fog, making its way to the shore. As it got closer, Allan could make out that the boat was piloted by a boy who looked to be his age. He wore a dark cloak, and his face was hidden by the shadow of the hood.

Allan unsheathed the sword and hollered, “Who’s there?”

“Friend.”

The boy lowered his hood and revealed his face. He had unkempt brown hair, wide-set cheekbones, and a slightly bent nose. His eyes glowed like two sapphires. He snapped his fingers and the ground disappeared beneath their feet.

Allan could hear the sound of tall waves slapping against rock. The sound seemed to get closer and closer, but he just kept falling...

Bam. He slammed onto the deck of a ship. It was daybreak and the morning sun hung lazily on the horizon, casting a pink and gold hue over the sky. Clouds clustered densely overhead; the air was warm and heavy with salt.

His thoughts were cut short, however, when a man appeared in front of him. He wore a chain mail tunic and battle leathers. “Well, lad, seems like you—”

There was a swishing in the air, then a soft *thunk*, and he fell to the wooden plank. Two inches of arrow had protruded him from the back. His lips went tense and the light slowly left of his eyes. “You—” he managed to choke out, clawing helplessly at the thing in his chest, before his body tumbled into the sea.

“Watch where you’re going, my friend,” the boy said, emerging from the shadows, with his hand extended. “I am Loris. Thank you for joining me.”

Allan just looked at him. “Why did you bring me here?”

Loris shrugged and took his hand back. “The same reason you came to the portal. In search of this *treasure*.”

“What’re you talking about?”

For the first time, the boy looked annoyed. “You know what I mean: the Locket. Now hold tight.”

As he spoke, the cliffs on either side of them started to slope down toward the water, and a harbor opened up. Beyond that stretched an endless forest green.

“Ah, my army is quite a sight, is it not?” said Loris and gestured for him to look into the forest.

For a moment, Allan didn’t understand what he was seeing. Then, he gasped, for the forest was alive with movement. He could hear a faint, far-off sound of banging and pounding and shouting, of a deep, rhythmic drumbeat, and the clatter of marching feet, as thousands of soldiers paraded around large beige tents. At this, he pitched forward into darkness.

“Wake up, my friend! There is little time.”

They were racing through a narrow, twisting path of the woods, and a thin ring of black rock appeared, quite abruptly, around the base of the walls of the mountains.

“I believe this is the place,” said Loris.

“What?” Allan said.

“This is the scorched stone. Where the Locket is hidden. Look.”

There was a wild grin on his face now, like that of the wolf in a fairytale. He pulled out his knife and cut a thin red line across his palm, letting three drops of blood fall onto the stone. For a moment, nothing happened. Then, the stone simply vanished, revealing the silhouette of an arch, carved right into the face of the mountain.

“You see, my friend, the words spoken eons ago, at the birth of the universe, in the darkness, were all recorded in a single object. Now, look into the silhouette tell me what you.”

“I see—”

—and something heavy clattered to the ground. They both dove for it.

“LET GO!”

Allan saw a flash of steel and unsheathed his sword, too late, he realized it was a faint, and Loris' kick caught him full in the chest. He dropped to his knees. Loris was above him.

"Time's up."

He drew his knife back. Then, Allan thought about the Locket, and it was not on the ground, but in his hand. A sturdy blast of light flung Loris into the void and out of sight.

Leaving the mountains, he had sprinted the short distance to the trees without anything spotting him. But since then, the going was slow.

At some point, something cold fell on his scalp, and a raging storm had soon turned the forest into a swamp.

"I hate stupid rain!" he wailed, as the boy landed face-down in yet another puddle of mud.

But when the rain had finally stopped, he found himself staring at a woman who sat before a small cabin tucked into the hillside. There were no windows, so the only light came from the doorway.

"Excuse me?"

The woman looked up. "Yes?"

"I'm sorry," Allan said haltingly, "...Could you . . . help me?"

"Well, why not. Let me see what I can do."

The woman stood and opened the door. "Come in."

Nodding, Allan stepped into the cabin. To his surprise, the inside was warm and cozy. A squat black fireplace heated the room nicely.

"First things first," The she said, passing her a mug that smelled strongly of peppermint. "Have some tea, you look exhausted. Now..."

And the woman had morphed into a radiantly beautiful young maiden. She wore a flowing white robe and a sparkling crown. In her hands were a vase and branch of willow. It was the goddess Guanyin.

Allan fell back in astonishment and dropped to a knee. "Ma'am... I..."

Guanyin smiled and said, "Bring the Locket back to the people. It will guide them towards a brighter future."

Allan bowed low and answered, "Yes, ma'am."

Lost And Found

International Christian School, Lam, Zanna – 12

At this moment, the only thing that mattered was the small, dusty piece of paper located in the small box sitting in the palms of my hands. My hair stood on end as my fingers gingerly lifted the crumbling artifact from its location. A piercing scream escaped my mouth as I realized what I had just discovered from the cave. I am part of a group of explorers, and for the past 3 months, we have been trying to discover secrets from the past in this special cave in China. The rest of my team rushed over to my side immediately, all eager to find out breathtaking secrets from the past. I took a deep breath and began to read what seemed to be a diary of a forgotten princess from a lost clan in China.

“With a heavy heart, I leaned against my windowsill as strong scents of fresh herbs surrounded me. I took a deep breath while my mind swirled with thoughts about my life. My name is Huiyuan; and today, it’s the fifteenth day of the first month. I live in a ginormous palace belonging to the Yao clan. Although my father promised we would rule the kingdom together, our constant disagreements have turned the clan into a mess. People think I’ve got everything: the wealth, luxury, and what they thought was a caring family that loved me. But as every day passes, my heart aches knowing another boring day is waiting for me. Even though I could get whatever I wanted at any time of the day, there was only one wish in my heart that was waiting to come true: to be a good ruler to my people. However, my father has turned into this frightful monster who only cared about keeping me from doing anything. I was never allowed to leave the palace unless I got permission from him, which was a nicer way to say never. This palace that was my world suffocated me, and I knew I was doomed to be trapped here forever.

My bodyguard Haohong was my best friend. He was only three years older than me, and as time passed we became as close as ever. On this particular day, I heard the sound of Haohong calling my name echoing through the corridors. I smiled and waved him into my room. As soon as he entered, I knew he sensed something was wrong. I don’t know when it hit me, but something in my heart told me that this was the right moment to tell him about my secret thoughts. I started sobbing and gathered the courage to ask him to help me escape the palace. Haohong looked taken aback for a moment, but then a small smile grew on his face. He squeezed my hand and told me he had a plan.

That night, I ran to the gates to meet Haohong. We climbed out the window and landed with a thud on the ground. We spotted my father’s boat on the pier and instantly ran towards it, as Haohong’s plan was for me to escape to a nearby island and start a new life. I had a million questions that I had yet to find out, but I knew I had to trust Haohong.

After a long journey, the boat gently bumped the sandy beach on the island and came to a halt. As soon as we stepped foot on the new land, I was mesmerized by the amazing sights and the sweet smell in the air. As I inhaled this new scent on the foreign land, I had a feeling that my life would finally be perfect, just me and Haohong. We reached an ancient temple that looked as if it had once been burned down. To my surprise, Haohong stepped inside, and I cocked my head in confusion but followed him nevertheless. All of a sudden, Haohong turned around, and his soft expression slowly morphed into a creepy smile. He instantly grabbed my shoulder and twisted my arm behind my back. A loud groan escaped from my mouth as I tried to fight him off, but I couldn’t even think straight. What was happening? His fingernails dug into my skin as I screamed in pain. On an impulse, I tried kicking him on the side. Or I would’ve kicked him on the side, if he hadn’t yanked my foot and pulled it forward. He darted in front of me and kicked me in the stomach, his foot forcing air out of my lungs. It hurt so badly I couldn’t breathe.

I pushed myself up, but Haohong was already there. He forcefully grabbed my hair and shoved me back onto the ground. This pain was different, less like a stab, and more like a crackle which spotted my vision with different colors. He forced me on my knees in front of the giant statue of what looked like a god. He pushed my head to the ground and I shut my eyes, ready to feel the pain, but I was pulled back up. What’s going on? Then he did the same thing twice before something in me clicked. I came to the realization that he was making me bow to the god and marry me to become a prince in the clan! I immediately punched him with all my might before he could make me bow the third time. I got to my feet and started running.

My head was spinning, and a rush of tears and pain took over my body, making my vision go blurry. I blinked and lurched to the side as everything around me dipped and swayed. I paused and realized my whole world just went black. I lost everyone; my family, my home, and now my best friend. It was like I was the only person left in the world. I couldn’t scream, I couldn’t breathe, but I felt every bone, every vein, and every nerve buzzing in my body as I wondered when the pain would end.

I looked around to see nothing but a huge boat parked on the side of the docks. I managed to stumble my way towards it and jumped on. After six long hours, I finally saw the land of the Yao clan in the distance. I anxiously stepped off the boat and entered the palace. The moment I entered the clan, it was like I was under a spotlight. All eyes were on me, and I could barely walk as my trembling legs stumbled forward. Once I reached the palace, I saw my father sitting in the dining hall, all alone. He looked deep in thought, and something about him seemed different. His pale face was contorted and his teeth were gritted. But when he saw me, his eyes softened and he ran towards me as he pulled me into a hug. For the first time in my life, I saw tears falling from his penetrating eyes. Surprisingly, he didn't ask me any questions. All he did was hold my hands and apologized repeatedly for the way he treated me, and told me he only did it to protect me. For the first time in my life, I felt sorry for him. He was just a father who wanted to protect his little girl from the cruel world. He was not wrong with his purpose, only wrong with his means.

Soon, days turned to weeks, weeks turned to months, and months turned to years. I leaned against the windowsill and stared out into the distance as a happy sigh escaped my mouth. The life I was living now was all I dreamed of. I looked to see everyone doing their job with smiles on their faces and food on their plates. I let my feet touch the hard-wood floors and skipped towards the palace gates. I couldn't be more thankful for my freedom, and I breathed into the wind as I heard my new found friends calling my name.

I didn't know if I was Huiyuan, the princess of the Yao clan, or Huiyuan, the friend that everyone adores. I suppose that now, I must become more than either."

Everyone was speechless after reading the diary. "The secret of how the Yao clan came back together!" I mumbled to myself. My eyes lifted to the sky where there were no stars; only a round moon peeking through a thin layer of clouds. My thoughts and feelings all rushed to my head at once, making me realize something that I have never given a single thought about. Despite the limitations that certain circumstances may bring, we have to live life to the fullest. Even in the worst moments, you can be your best self and make the most of the situation. Blaming the situation only makes matters worse, but breaking through the situation can allow you to live a happier life.

Mogao Caves

International Christian School, Sung, Charmayne – 12

Hazel glanced around, taking in the pitch black, awfully spooky surroundings of the cave. The sound of four groups traveling through a vast cave system echoed around and back to them, the quiet tapping making the journey seem spookier and spookier.

She had been doing this for several months, ever since the orphanage sold her into a strange company. Every day since then, her group, along with other small teams ventured into the uncharted cave system not far from the main building where she was forced to work. Her group consisted of four other children, around her age: Hairong, Niko, Jack, and Hilary. She wasn't very close to them, but she still considered them as friends, the closest she ever had to family.

"Keep up!" shouted their commander, a tall man who led them down into the cave system every day.

Hairong nudged her and gave her a signal with his hands. Time to escape. Ever since she had gained her group mates' trust, they had finally decided to tell her about their plan to escape. According to Jack, they had planned it for a while now, but without much idea on how to do it. Being taken to a different place almost every day didn't help. Without glancing back, the commander yelled: "NO ONE IS COMING BACK IF YOU GET LOST!"

As the others turned a corner, her friends, as quietly as they could, dashed towards the other side of the forked tunnel, pressing themselves against the wall, and she followed them.

Niko desperately tried to cover his lamp with his cloak but flinched as his hand brushed the hot glass. "Quick," Hilary whispered, but the others were already sprinting down the small, claustrophobic tunnel, the only light emanating from Niko's lamp. The tunnel seemed to go on forever, twisting and turning. They could hear distant echoes of their leader screaming furious, indecipherable orders at the rest of the children.

Finally, the dark tunnel emptied into a gloomy cave. On the far end of the cave, the floor broke out into a short cliff, the splashing of an underground river informed them of its presence. "Where to we go from here?" Hairong asked. "I guess... we try to go up? It might lead to the surface." Jack responded, peeking over the cliff.

They poked around the cave, trying to find another way.

Finally, Jack told them: "I might have seen a little strip of rocks next to the river. If we can stay on that, we might find another way out."

After much arguing, they all finally agreed to jump down the small cliff and take the risks.

"I-I'll go first," Hazel said, almost immediately wishing she hadn't said so. Knowing she couldn't take it back, she stepped towards the edge, eyeing the river, fear pulsing through her whole body. From up here, she couldn't see how deep it was, how fast the water was flowing, or whether dangerous things were lurking underneath.

Hazel felt her heart pounding as she stepped closer to the edge.

She took a deep breath, dove off the ledge, and plunged into dark, freezing waters.

After they had all made it to the river below, they continued to venture down on the dry stone by the river. The group stayed quiet as they made their way by the rushing water, and finally, the river dropped down into a tall waterfall, and it was so far down that even Jack didn't want to risk the jump.

The other option that lay before them was a suspicious dark tunnel, and after several glances down the mysterious waterfall, their little group decisively made their way through the tunnel.

After a short trek, they walked into another small cave, most of the doorway shrouded with sand. But through the hole at the top, they climbed through, and Niko held his lamp up, trembling, and brought it to the wall.

Murals swarmed the walls, the colors fading but still recognizable. The ceilings slightly slanted up towards the center, and the walls which might have once been painted white had yellowed with age.

On the far end of the wall, there was a statue of Buddha, which Hazel knew little about. The statue had dust draped all over, making the statue look grayer than the real light-tan tone that had been part of the rock. Its eyes closed and face in a peaceful half-smile, and his hands were resting on his crossed lap.

Behind her, Hairong climbed over the sand halfheartedly and stepped into the room. But his eyes widened when he spotted the broken statue and the fading murals. “Where are we? This is Chinese—I have learned of it when I was little!”

He turned to them with shining eyes. “These are the Mogao Caves.”

After many conversations and facts from Hairong, they moved on through a carved doorway into another room, similar to the previous one.

They wandered the caves for what seemed like the whole day, walking in and out of what seemed like thousands of caves.

Finally, they found a cave close to the underground river, big enough to accommodate all five of them. Niko set down the flickering lantern on the ground next to him and removed his rucksack that only group captains were allowed to keep. He brought out a bundle of stiff flatbread, passing it to each of them in turn. Although the bread was stale and hard, as was all the food they had eaten at the facility, Hazel’s stomach growled loudly and she took the bread gratefully. “Thank you,” she said, looking Niko in the eye.

Although Niko seemed to have a surplus of food in his sack, they couldn’t live off that forever. How long had they been down here? Two weeks?

By now, all of them were exhausted, running out of food to eat and with only strange water from the river to drink.

But the biggest impact of being trapped underground seemed to affect Hilary the most, instead of being her usual wild, enthusiastic self, she confined herself to the first cave and stayed there, mournfully watching the river flow all alone. Hazel and Jack had tried to cheer her up, talk to her but she just shook her head, ending their conversations quickly and blandly.

Hazel returned to their settlement, tired. But what she saw next horrified her beyond what she could have imagined. Hilary, having picked off a shard of glass from the old, cracked lantern, stood behind Niko, kneeling on the rock floor, who was organizing the little things left in his sack. She raised the shard in her hand quietly, and reality seemed to play in slow motion as she stabbed down at Niko’s undefended back.

Niko’s hands let go of the rucksack with an agonized cry, tearing a hole in her heart, and his belongings clattered to the floor. Hazel wanted to bolt, scream, fight, *save Niko*, but she couldn’t seem to do any of those things. Before her eyes, Hilary pulled the shard out of Niko’s back, hands covered in blood, and stabbed back down into his neck. It was real and happening and she could do nothing about it – or was too weak to try. Suddenly she felt someone tug on her arm, jerking her back into reality and pulling her along with him, running as far away as they could. It was Jack, returned from exploring the far sides of the caves.

Their sprinting footsteps alerted Hilary to their presence, and she could hear her snarl with crazed anger behind them. Her heart was pumping with fear instead of blood, like drumbeats in her chest. She realized their former friend was right behind them and chasing. Jack and Hazel ran along the dark, haunted corridors of Mogao Caves, her heart thudding with terror every time they turned a corner, hoping not to run into a dead end.

What was wrong with her? Why didn’t Hazel save Niko? She could have tackled Hilary from behind or distracted her from making the killing move. Why was she too weak to even try?

And Hairong – where had he gone? Killed? Like Niko? Or escaped, or out and exploring, to be safe initially but to return to such a horrible sight?

They passed through many more caves, hallways, and decorations just a blur to her during their frantic escape. She heard something click beside her, and a massive, thundering cascade of sand rained down after them as Hazel staggered back. Jack pulled out a matchbox from his pocket, struck it, and brought it up. They were trapped in a

small stone room. No natural light could be seen, or any other doorways to other caves. There was no escape from this stone coffin.

She sank to the floor, tears streaming down her face. She would die here, to become forgotten skeletons never to be found again. They would never gain the freedom they had always wanted, and never see the daylight again.

A Fractured Story

International College Hong Kong, Chen, Tony – 12

The silk road, a trading route used by merchants, had been quite notable. All seemed ordinary, but behind the mundane trading route laid the darker stories; myths. And that had been what Kyle sought to find. In the past month, he had spent his days alone in the desolated desert. He had taken a plane to arrive at the remarkable silk road, though he had been disappointed to find the silk road only to be a path in the desert, with seemingly no route. Though he hadn't come to witness the magnificent silk road, instead, he had come to find the Legend of the Five Eggs.

It had been told that the Legend of the Five Eggs had been forgotten as the continuous marching of time continued, though it had been a fractured story, as researchers had found four fragments of the story; four eggs had been found, and as for the last one, it had been told that it would be able to explain the entirety of the story. However, since discovering the lengthy yet mesmerising tunnels, the fifth egg had never been found. It had been said each of the five eggs had been made of tungsten, though such information had to be yet confirmed.

Kyle stood at the entrance of the dark, crooked tunnel. Looking over his shoulders several times, avoiding all security as he had entered the restricted areas. Despite his unfamiliarity with the landscape, he knew he was at the right place. Kyle stepped into the darkness, innocent to what had laid beyond him. Kyle walked through the sullied tunnels and the cold, dry air as he held up his flashlight, passing the artworks he had never seen before.

As the hours went on, Kyle continued his stroll down the passageway; every so often, scorpions would hurriedly run behind the boulders of stone, though occasionally, a dark silhouette would flash in front of Kyle's eyes. Unbeknownst to him, he had been walking in a loop for several hours. Finally, Kyle understood as eventually, he passed the koi symbol once again. It had been chipped into the stone with intricate details.

How? I have already passed this symbol! Kyle thought as he pushed his hand upon the stone wall. Then suddenly, he heard multiple continuous echoes of metal colliding against each other as the wall suddenly fell back as it began to lower itself into the ground, revealing a dusted room.

Kyle, mesmerised, walked in as he held up his flashlight into the room. Then, a chill ran down Kyle's spine as he had looked upon several skeletons. Covering their bodies had been armour that warriors of the Han dynasty would've worn. Kyle walked into the dusted room as he left his fear behind. As he held his flashlight and scanned across the room, a glare shot across his eyes. Then as he turned his flashlight towards the radiant object, Kyle had realised what it had been.

He stood in silence as he began to breathe more and more rapidly as he stood in front of the egg. Kyle shone his flashlight at the egg as he walked closer and closer towards the spherical object. Then, suddenly, he heard a click that echoed throughout the room as an unidentifiable change to the room occurred.

Kyle regained his focus on the egg and walked towards it, lifting the heavy egg. It had been quite obvious it had been the most valuable of all artefacts that had traversed through the long and treacherous silk road. Kyle carefully began to lift the heavy and oversized egg as he dropped his bag from one of his shoulders and unzipped it as he slid the egg within his bag. Kyle zipped up the bag as he had a rather difficult time due to the sheer weight of the egg.

Left on the podium that lifted the egg had been a scroll. Kyle shrugged as he lifted the scroll and unwrapped the string that kept the paper scroll intact. Kyle then held the flashlight in his mouth as he unwrapped the long scroll and laid it on the podium. He then began to read the Chinese characters. He read along with the words as eventually, the tedious characters forged themselves into a picturesque scene.

The emperor stood before the mighty tiger as they granted the tiger gifts, bearing benevolence. The enormous tiger stood at a similar height to an elephant as it roared, capable of shaking the ground, capable of summoning thunder, yet its calm nature had ensured the safety of the kingdom. The emperor bore the gifts of meat, and they also gave out artefacts of sacrifice.

The monks expanded upon the networks of caves, which eventually became a set of caves so mesmerising, they had been filled to the brim of artworks, literature, vases, cauldrons. Then, the gods decided to call the great tiger from its life on a fateful day as they summoned an excellent lightning strike. And soon, there had been no trace of the

tiger. However, the monks had written the story within the scrolls and eventually decorated the eggs with the artworks of the once-great tiger.

Kyle hadn't been sure how long he had stayed within the caves, though, as he wrapped the scroll once again. Then, a voice behind him suddenly spoke, 'Drop the scroll, hands in the air!'

It had been the security guards. Kyle sighed as he turned around, handing over the scroll to security to take out the egg from his bag. The guard took the scroll as his eyes glimmered with excitement. Kyle scoffed as he grinned and nodded towards the guard, who had nodded at the sight of the egg. The guard led Kyle out of the network of caves as he freed Kyle of any disciplinary actions and brought the egg to a museum. Kyle felt accomplished as he drove his way back home and also the pride of the first person to have ever come in contact with the fifth egg.

Several days later, Kyle turned on his television in his house as he then watched the reporter explain the discovery of the egg and retell the story written within the scrolls. He had sat back on his couch as he listened to the story once again, reimagining the story, the very same way he had as he first witnessed the words printed across the scrolls. And at that moment, he had grinned from ear to ear as his heart had been full of glory.

The Mogao Grottoes

International College Hong Kong, Liu, Lami – 11

He had a feeling. A strange, pulsing feeling that was no stranger to anyone. He had sensed that this wasn't the first time he had encountered this strange feeling. It seemed to lift him off his feet, a force that pushed him to go near nature, the outside world, a light beckoning to come forth, the feeling that there was something pulling him to what he wanted, and if he didn't come for it sooner, he would be in great distress and regret not reaching for it in the first place.

Torn between choices, he considered for a few minutes before deciding that he should do it, it was a special cave, after all, then he made the right decision, though if not, then he could just go back. So he ventured out to the distance, seeking the special cave, an oasis in a desert, seeking for it, and looking forward to finding out all of the secrets it contained, no matter how useless or powerful the secrets were, no matter if it was just a useless hole. But that night, all we know of is the amazing rumor and discovery the monk had started.

Wait, what? Where am I? Keily suddenly snapped into reality, standing in front of a Chinese-looking imperial temple that emerged out of a vast hill that was made entirely of rock. *Oh, yes. I'm in China.* She felt vague about this entire thing, yet somehow knew what was happening.

Wait. Who am I going to China with again? She paused, then suddenly realization hit her. *Oh, yes. Not with my parents, but with my class. That's good. I don't want to think about Mom and Dad bickering until their heads explode.*

She looked around—surely she was with her class. Yep—there were the girls, and then the nerds, and then her best friend Chloe, and then the Jocks, and then the Jerk—boys. And then there was also one singular girl and one singular boy standing in the crowd of children, not knowing where they fit in, and being kinda shy and keeping to themselves.

The tour guide beckoned them to go closer to the temple, which was fenced off by imperial yellow gates, where people were standing inside and looking around, like tourists, others that believed in the path to heaven and stood outside, wary of the grottoes and petrified some summoning demon would rise up from the rocks and torture all the people moping around below, or some sort of god would curse them as some sort of punishment if they broke something delicate in the temple. They were usually the ones who believed in all that monk nonsense.

Keily wasn't scared about this whole ordeal like she usually would. Her and her entire class, including the teacher, who was standing metres away from the group, chatting to some other tour guides and some security guards. She wasn't really interested in how it was made or found or something. Yet she somehow passionately wanted to go in and seek all of its mysteries, only caring about the fact that they thought that it was a path to heaven where Keily passionately wanted to crawl through it and discover if it was a path to heaven. She wanted to crack all of the mysteries, but yet again, not earn any fame.

She was deeply immersed in the thought when suddenly she snapped out of it and heard the teacher saying that the buses were going to arrive. 'The buses are going to arrive, don't panic, don't walk out into the road, and please don't run into the bus as fast as you can or you'll immediately be sent out and you'll be the last to arrive. And, Mrs. Wang, Has anyone actually found out that it was a path to heaven?'

The tour guide smirked as the buses came over. She turned towards the teacher, and the buses, which had just parked right outside the Mogao grottoes, on the little road that winded around it and led into the carpark. Then the tour guide opened her mouth to speak. 'Not really, but I'm sure there's bound to be some mysteries there.'

The bus driver, eyes heavy with exhaust, and the entire bus, excluding the outside, smelled of Monster and Red Bull. They all arrived on the bus and went off, tired and some sleepy, some even sleeping. They all tumbled out of the bus in an exhausting, sweaty heap and all collapsed into bed the second they arrived at the hotel.

Well, not everyone. Surely not Keily. She walked calmly as the others chatted and couldn't open their eyes and sat at a chair whenever they could. She opened the door and instead of collapsing on the floor like the other girls, she stepped over them, and walked calmly to the bed, and sat down without any signs of tiredness.

While the other girls were chatting about the new magazines that had come out recently and how the tour was really boring, Keily decided to search up Mogao grottoes online and she just found a bunch of websites, so she decided browsing through them as the girls continued rambling about girl stuff and ignoring Keily, like usual. Chloe was in a different group, so she couldn't talk to her, yet she couldn't just pop out for a while and go into Chloe's room for a while.

Keily's mind was still full of the Mogao grottoes. How she really wanted to find out more about it, how she was extremely obsessed with it. That was it—she'd go crawl in the Mogao grottoes to find the path to heaven. She continued daydreaming as she didn't notice the time pass by, and her friends slowly drifted off into sleep quietly.

It was in the middle of the night when Keily woke up, startled by the thing that shook her shirt and pulled at it, an alarm that would result in not waking anyone up and therefore casting more unpopular-ness upon herself. She quietly unzipped her suitcase, making a quiet sound.

She, quiet as a mouse, jumped off the bed and slowly walked her way to the bathroom, where she took a quiet shower, the water only coming out as a slow trickle, then she quietly got changed and got her money for a bus ticket out. Then she slowly opened the door, a quiet creaking sound that echoed through the darkness. Yet the girls would've probably thought it was somebody going to the bathroom or something. Totally normal. Then she walked all the way, down the stairs that winded through the floors, down the hall and the lobby and the amazing waterfall and plants, outside the sliding doors and out of the gates, down the road, where there was a bus stop right outside.

Using the money that she snuck in, she paid the fare and nervously rode the stuttering bus ride all the way from the Shanghai 7-day Motel to the Mogao grottoes. It was 36 kilometres long.

You're going to visit the Mogao grottoes? She could hear the girls saying in her head (definitely not Chloe), *That's unbelievable. Everyone knows it isn't real. What is real is my dream of being an American Cheerleader.* She could hear the girls making nasty comments and she was sick of it. But she was still going there, no matter if it was fake or not.

As the bus stopped to a halt, Keily woke up from her daydream and she slowly stood up. She grasped the cold yellow rails that glimmered in the bus as she grasped it, and she slowly stepped out of the bus, as it finally rolled and stuttered away.

Keily had no shoes on. She was barefoot, to avoid causing any noise, as there were clumps of guards around, chatting. Her outfit was a black one, as it was dark—therefore making her less suspicious. She hitched herself over the imperial yellow fences and ran into the cold, dark tunnel.

Suddenly, she sensed that there was a slow, growing bright light that was coming. It was getting brighter. 1 minute later, she could see the silhouette of her hands. 5 minutes later, it was normal. Then suddenly, 10 entire minutes later, she was blinded.

Huh? Is this the end? Is this really heaven? A hand reached out from the light as a woman with white, silk robes reached towards her. Keily took it. Suddenly, a screeching voice peeped in her head.

'KEILY, THE GOLDFISH IS DEAD!!!! WHAT SHOULD WE DO????'

Keily shot up out of bed and turned to face her nervous, sweaty but smiling sister, Cally. The next thing she knew was that she was rapidly chasing her frightened sister down the stairs, where their parents slept calmly.

Dun Huang Survival Dragon Egg Legend

International College Hong Kong, Yip, Mona – 11

At the sandy desert at Dun Huang Taklamakan a few mates Max, Tom, Philip and Sam decided to face their worst fears. To reach the Temple Crescent Lake Oasis, seeking the legend of the dragon, rumoured of laying a legendary egg.

They have all been friends for a long time but their aim was to get that egg. They gathered equipment, large backpacks and everything that they thought they needed. They started to set foot after bringing the map they also needed.

It wasn't too challenging at the start, they felt pretty good about it. They sat down on the hot sand and took a break after walking, checked their water supply and seemed determined. They decided to put on a hat after they were feeling a bit unconscious.

Time was ticking. The sun fell once, and they endured a cold, freezing night. All of them woke up to the sunshine that was so bright it could even be seen through the skin of their eyelids. They continued hiking along the sand dunes and realised they were all getting sunburns so they were almost dark tan. They thought it was hard standing weather but also thought they could have a chance to make it but little did they know, they wasted water on the way walking to the temple by spilling and pouring over themselves. Still a long way, the Crescent Lake Oasis still couldn't be seen yet, once again the 4 men checked their water supply and decided to start to save more water frequently. They were going to die without enough water and were going to starve to death with just a little food left.

They all tried to cheer themselves up with joyful things like singing. They also chatted and thought of their success to find the dragon egg legend. They danced in a row and made music with plastic bottles or clothing, when they settled down to the ground once again they started to drink drops of water in tiny sips.

"It is going to be the end of our life" Phillip thought.

"I SEE THE TEMPLE!!!! I FINALLY I SEE THE TEMPLE, IT'S RIGHT IN FRONT OF US"! yelled Max.

They ran for their lives as fast as they could, taking short breaths step by step. They were running so fast they thought they actually made it, they didn't know the sad news, it was just a hallucination. They panted hard after that far never ending run, they didn't know what to do now at this point, they all didn't have enough energy and water, they sat down and all took a rest sleeping for a while.

One man from the 4 s woke up at night, he realised he woke up at night which was cold and freezing, he woke his friends up but only one woke up. They looked around thinking there might be predators to eat them. They then looked back at their partner Sam.

Sadly, Sam didn't make it through the night. He couldn't stand the heat and the cold at night. The rest of the men cried with sobby tears and heavy drops of tears fell on the ground 1 by 1. they prayed for Sam to leave the world and that he would have a more comfortable life up to the sky. They buried Sam under the sand and found a wooden stick to write his name next to his dead body.

The men slept back until the next morning. They kept hiking but only found a cactus which they thought might help with the juice inside, so they grabbed a knife from their bags and cut a bit of the cactus open. It wasn't easy but inside the cactus was dried out and empty. One of the men, Max, was dehydrated and collapsed on the hot sand. Even though the other two friends Phillip and Tom were still conscious they weren't going to leave another friend behind, they had little water left but no choice but to give 2 bottles of water to Max so that he would live even though those 2 bottles only had a little left.

One bottle couldn't help three people last for longer and they would have to die if the temple wasn't close enough. They 3 kept hiking and tried to keep focus, they all spared a bit of water in case someone went dehydrated again. In front of the 3 men they saw a little well that may have water, they walked closer this time to make sure it wasn't a

hallucination and stared into the shallow dark well. It seemed to have a bit of water but the bucket was gone. So they grabbed the rope that was supposed to be tied to the bucket and tied it to their 3 plastic water bottles and lowered it down to the well. The well wasn't deep, it was pretty shallow so it was easier to lower down with the string without it being too short.

One by one they took turns taking sips even though the water was dirty, they tried blocking the dirt using their teeth. A while later which was quickly turning night they saw something dark which was a quick flash that was running about 1 second across their eyes. Tom Searched his backpack in which he forgot he had matches.

"That's it! All we need to do is grab some sticks and light a fire, animals are scared of fires, let's light it to protect ourselves!" whispered Tom.

They started to gather sticks together and kept close. They put it in a pile and lit the fire but it was way too windy, So Tom kneeled down telling his friends to protect him and told his friends to step back a little, Tom then felt the wind direction and used his hand to cover the match stick and lit it by using his other hand to light the fire, he then placed the match stick to the sticks and blew the sticks lightly which lit the fire. He gave one stick from the pile and gave it to Phillip. They didn't know where the creature went but they didn't sleep that night thinking the creature would eat them alive.

The next morning they started to walk again continuously following the map again. They walked for a few hours and drank some water. They were out of water soon after the last sip, they each drank a lot of water last night so they ran out. They hid in a corner and decided to use their urine as something to at least drink. They all tried to take a sip.

"That's the worst thing I have ever tried to drink before". Said Max

"It's the only thing we have". Exclaimed Phillip.

Tom Took out his Map and stared at its direction for a while, he realised it wasn't far and that they could still make it within 2 days if they didn't stop. They didn't know the time anymore but they could still estimate.

"Don't worry guys. I Looked at the map and it was not far, I know we can do this if we keep on going. It may take a lot of hard work but we can still make it "...within at least two more days by estimate". said Tom.

The three didn't stop for a day and they were so tired their legs were about to crack wide open. Their feet were bleeding with skin peeling off.. They walked another day, and finally saw the Crescents Lake Oasis in front of them. They couldn't believe their eyes, the Crescents lake oasis was right in front of their eyes! They cheered for joy and leapt with energy. They dashed to the front of the Crescents Lake oasis and jumped into the water, they got out and went into the small village.

They found a small tower which was called Mogao Caves. Inside the big tower the three men found out it was about buddhists and was also known as the Thousand Buddha Grottoes or Caves of the Thousand Buddhas, Some of the buddhas were painted and even some were hand made. Max and Tom went in and let Phillip pray for Buddha because he was one of the beliefs for them. Then the 3 men then saw other parts of the small village and went to explore the restaurant, they ate faster than a cheetah and gobbled down "all" the noodles and beef the restaurant had. They then drank a lot of drinks and went into the DunHuang Gansu Province. They entered the room and saw no one was there. They explored the place and went backstage. They saw a gigantic golden egg hidden in the corner, it looked like it had words on it and cracks too, they wondered and thought it was what they were looking for their whole life. AND IT WAS! IT WAS INDEED! They twisted the egg and suddenly... A humongous scaly fierce dragon came out and roared like a lion. The 3 Men escaped but they didn't know what that creature was and how that egg was there. The egg was the legend and has never been found though it was hidden backstage, who did it? How was it hidden?

The Sea Cave

Island Christian Academy, Serban, Luca – 11

part 1

Ridiculously hot

As I walked on the hot sandy dunes of the gobi desert I saw a shadow in the sand just then a huge serpent shot out of the ground sand flying everywhere. I shielded my eyes and once the cloud of sand cleared a huge, black serpent stood reared up venom dripping from its gleaming fangs. Quickly pulled out my machete, the blade sparkling in the sunlight. The cobra lunged at me narrowly missing me, and with one quick swing I sliced the serpent's head clean off.

As I trekked on I spotted a huge red brick and sandstone temple carved into the side of a mountain and this a good thing because I had run out of water. As I neared the mountain the sun sank lower into the sky the temple grew larger and larger until it stood towering over me. I decided to make camp and explore the temple in the morning. I woke up to the sound of wind blowing. I stood up and set out to explore the temple I soon reached a large sandstone bridge covered with strange symbols. I tried to cross but when nine metal spikes shot out of the ground I quickly realised that if I stepped on the wrong tile I would get skewered. Just then I noticed a family of Beatles crossing the bridge so I figured out if I followed the Beatles I would be able to safely cross the bridge. And a few minutes later I made it across in one piece. Once I was on the other side of the bridge I saw a huge circle on the ground with two huge crystals on each side and a pole standing nearby just then I realised I could use the pole to move the crystals so I picked it up and put it in a hole that looked like the pole fit in and so after a lot of pushing it wouldn't move any more but just as I was about to give up a massive door opened but I did not know where it came from!

After a few minutes of staring at the door that came out of nowhere I finally went in just then the door shut behind me and the ground under my feet disappeared then everything went black! The next thing I knew I was still falling and I looked down and saw a light at the end of the tunnel but soon I realised I was not falling. Then I looked up and saw that my vest got stuck on a rock. So I quickly got myself unstuck and finally I was falling again. Then I realised that what was below me was water.

part 2

Extraterrestrial

I have not been able to write for a few days because my notebook got soaked but now it has finally dried. The contents of this cave is very interesting; it seems to be a vast subterranean ocean with small islands jutting out of the water every now and then. There were also huge blue crystals that lit up the cave. The food here is very interesting too. On the islands there seems to be a kind of palm tree with glowing blue fruits. I wasn't sure at first if they were safe to eat but I had no food left. I tried the fruit hoping it wouldn't

Kill me but it seemed safe so I waited for a while to see if anything would happen but nothing did. So I gathered a few fruits and started exploring my island. I soon found an interesting bone that looked like a harpoon. It did not look man made so I was quite confused. Either way it would be useful for fishing. I also forgot to tell you I was stuck here. The next day I found a stream which was quite useful because I had once again run out of water. I have just discovered a new species of fish! I was testing out the harpoon for the first time and I caught an interesting little fish with two huge yellow eyes and a beak-like mouth and four tentacles. I did not know what to do with it so I left it alone and put it back in the water since it was not dead and seemed to be quite alive even after I harpooned it! The next time I caught a fish it was a cod so got a fire going and had a relaxing end to a weird day. I have just discovered the most peculiar thing: a door on the side of a hill. I was confused and excited this could mean another person was here so I went inside and there was no one there. I continued looking around and there was a table with a book on it so I went to the last page to see what happened to the person who used to live here. It said in the book it has been five months now. I have constructed a boat and I am preparing to set sail. It has been a week now I see strange shadows in the water and.... I had so many questions how, did the book get here, what happened to the person. After this I had to explore the rest of the island and it paid off! The results were a large canoe, some supplies and some spare firewood but the most interesting item I found was an ancient alien artefact. It was an interesting greyish cube with green circuits I fiddled with for a few minutes before tossing it in my bag. The next day I gathered some supplies and set out on the canoe hoping to discover more. As I was paddling I saw a strange shape gliding through the water as I leaned over to get a closer look. A huge creature that looked part bug part squid lunged out of the water at me I ducked. Quickly I missed me I looked again to see where it was. Then I saw it circling under me. I grabbed my bone harpoon and prepared to spear it. This time it did not get another chance to get me as it jumped. I speared it in the heart. After that adventure I decided to call it a day and head home with my trophy. But when I finally spotted my island I was engulfed in a huge

whirlpool then everything went black. I woke up in a strange alien looking structure that matched my cube. I looked around confused then I spotted on a pedestal a rifle that I have never seen before. It looked like a railgun but much smaller so I decided that it was best to use it to defend myself in this strange place just as I picked up the rifle a strange looking creature appeared in the doorway. Once it saw me it attacked but I picked up the alien rifle just in time and disintegrated the creature that attacked me.

For the next few hours I wandered around looking for an exit. But finally I found a way out. As I exited I realised that I was in the cave that I found the notebook in. So I quickly made my way to the door and headed back to camp. When I finally got back I saw that my boat and all my supplies were still there. I was very confused but I wasn't complaining. After this discovery I decided it was time. I had to leave but not before gathering some specimens. I took the seeds of the strange trees, caught some of the fish and wondered what to do with what to do with the big one. So instead I decided to practice my shooting with the alien rifle. But this time I noticed something I hadn't seen before. It seemed to have settings and I was surprised that I could read it this was all very strange. But as I read I realised that one of the settings was shrink so I set it to shrink and blasted a tree. And right before my eyes it started to shake and get smaller until it was the size of a small bird. So I quickly shot the huge monster that attacked me and just like the tree it shrank to the size of a small bird.

part 3

Headed Home

It has been five days now and I have been sailing the ocean with no problems. It has been two weeks now and I have spotted the end of the cave and right at the end an ancient door which I am assuming leads outside. I have finally landed and the door is right in front of me now for the moment of truth. As I pushed on the door it opened quite easily and what was on the other side was unbelievable. An entire hallway filled with jewels and gold I quickly stuffed as much as I could in my backpack and exited the cave. For the first time in two months I could see the sun and more importantly a jeep and an entire group of people. After I told them my story they said that they had come looking for me and we jumped into the jeep and drove off into the sunset.

The Cave

Island Christian Academy, Varvitsiotis, Leonidas – 11

On one hot summer's day in the middle of the Gobi desert, two palaeontologists were driving their Range Rover across the dry barren desert. It reminded Sam of the day that he first met Jim, a hot summer's day like this one at a shooting range. He peered at the window. And remembered all the palaeontology expeditions with him when they just graduated from Columbia! Suddenly Jim hit a hidden rock as their car swerved off the sand dune crashing down the slope smashing the GPS and Sam's phone! They crawled out of the vehicle to check the engine only to find it busted!

A giant puff of sand flung up from the ground! As a yellowish figure pounced on Jim and opened its mouth showing its fangs!

Quickly Sam opened the car door! And grabbed the creature from Jim's back and chucked it as hard as he could into the Range Rover. And slammed the door in its face! Now as they got a closer look they could tell it was some sort of sand spider. Sweat was dripping from their eyes. But as they were just about to give up looking for an awasis they saw a patch of green in the distance! They sprinted to it as fast as they could without stepping on the dangerous rattlesnakes all around them, until they finally got there. It was a gigantic sand dune littered with shrubs and a small patch of bamboo they walked closer to sit down. But just as they thought they had got a break they see two bullet-riddled jeeps parked next to the tree line with a dead body! Suddenly the corpse started shaking rapidly as it rolled over revealing a sand spider tearing at the flesh.

Not knowing what to do they scrambled back as the spider hissed at them and ran under a jeep they slowly turned around only to see a sand storm approaching! They thought they were done for after seeing the river had piranhas in its waters! but at that moment Jim saw a bridge! They ran across the bridge as fast as they could. They staggered inside just in the nick of time as the wind banged against the giant wooden door! They heard a faint stepping sound coming from the corridor! Silence... crunch! A noise came out of a chamber! And at that moment they knew they were not alone...

They sprinted through the corridors! Jim saw a figure walking from room to room! As the figure slowly turned around it seemed to peer at them for a moment! Before pointing an equally blurry figure at them! Unaware of what it was, they waved their hands in the air and yelled "Hello who are you!" Bang! A flash of yellow pierced the inky darkness. They dashed behind a giant stone pillar to hide from the barrage of bullets as other people started to shoot and say stuff like "Don't let them get the treasure" or "I know it's here somewhere".

Just as Jim and Sam were about to lose all hope, a bullet struck a tile on the wall making all the doors seal shut, trapping everyone inside the cave.

Realising that they needed each other to get out they started to search the walls and floors of the chamber for a way out, conserving their flashlight batteries. One by one they started to give up. The eight men started to hatch a plan to kill the palaeontologists once they got out with the treasure.

As they were discussing. A trapdoor opened up a hole and swallowed a person making him fall into a pit of 4-inch spikes! But upon seeing an exit they spared no hesitation on jumping on the corpse to get out!

Totally ignoring the ancient text on the wall one of the men went inside and blocked everyone else out! Just as he started to laugh he was cut short by screams and banging against the hard cold stone door followed by silence... They ran as fast as they could back up the trap door and slammed it shut so whatever that thing was would not get them too! It has been hours since they saw any light, they thought they were all done for! Left to be slaughtered by booby traps or starved to death.

In frustration, Jim unwillingly accepted the knowledge as he kicked a rock as hard as he could; which ended up hitting a tile on the wall which started making a slow crackling noise...

As the crackling noise on the wall started to get louder and louder the wall started to break away! Revealing a mound of diamonds, gold, silver, beautiful silks, and spices they were all behind the shattered wall! Confused, they all looked at the treasure... out of nowhere, a giant boulder came crashing down the small corridor, smushing traps and crushing huge rocks into the smallest dust! They ran backward as the boulder followed. Until it hit a fallen pillar and went off course and smashed into the wall ceasing to go forward.

Determined to get the treasure Sam squeezed around the boulder; followed by Jim. Just as they thought they got lucky for once the men started shooting at them! Worried that they would steal the treasure and run away.

Out of nowhere, a spear was flung at the men hitting the guy who devised the plan in the eye; penetrating to the other side of his head! Killing him instantly. More spears started flying towards them as a hoard of locals started to charge at them. Not knowing what to do, the men started shooting into the jet-black darkness as they kept charging! To get a better look of his surroundings, Jim turned on his flashlight and to his surprise, they started worshipping him thinking he was some sort of god!?

Seeing this the men turned on their weapon-mounted lights, leaving the locals with a tough choice. Some of the locals chose the bad guys. But the older, smarter locals chose Jim and Sam instead because they knew that they were the ones to pass almost all of the booby traps.

As Jim and Sam were about to run in the wrong direction the more experienced locals ran in a different direction forcing them to follow. As Jim and Sam followed. The bad guys chased them down the same corridor hitting and setting off almost every booby trap; buying them some time for them to escape down a hole in the corner of the room as Jim grabbed the treasures and got in the hole last.

As they fell down the hole that was overgrown with plants and moss the men started shooting down the hole hitting plants and chunks of the hole away! As they barely dodged it, getting wet and dirty in the process. Sam noticed the air getting more and more compressed. It seemed like it could go on for miles! But eventually, everyone heard a big splash. They finally fell into a small lake of freshwater. They looked upwards, the Cave was a huge underground amazon littered with moss and bogs could fit a small city in it!

But after seeing the ancient text on the wall Jim realised that they only scratched the surface of what was going on. Sam peered through the text he saw strange pictures of humongous things that... that were eating humans! Sam quickly tried to get his notebook but instead found an old camera that he used to take pictures of his major fossil discoveries along with his notebook! He took a couple photos of the cave and the ancient text to stick in his notebook to study! But upon seeing the prehistoric plants Sam started to empty out the bags of treasure to collect them forgetting about studying the pictures! How did he know they were special? Well, he is a huge nerd on plants, that's why he started to collect them. As he blabbered on and on about them, the only thing that Jim seemed to listen to was: "They're worth billions of US dollars!"

Upon hearing billions of dollars Jim raced to pick up as many plants as possible. Suddenly, something moved in the bushes! A faint rustle of leaves! There it was again! A snap of a twig was heard in the distance! A flash of blue scurried through the tree line the only reason that they saw it was because the ground was littered with small natural bioluminescent crystals! Then it was dead silent! Out of nowhere a humongous beetle pounced on one of the locals and opened its mouth letting a bubbling dark green slime ooze out onto his face! As it was broken down into a puddle of dark red mush! The beetle let out a shriek before slurping up the mush and darting away into the forest like it was scared of something...

Arc 14

Kellett School, Bolchover, Isadora – 12

“Countries were destroyed and burned. Our blindness to global warming setting fires that reap our forests, freezing winters that freeze our food. That was what we have turned our backs to and created a new future. Something organized – order and civilization. No more will you have to live in fear. Relics of the past were destroyed as so not to tempt you. From these words, we bring to you – Arc 14.” The VisionScreen droned on as Lian Hua stared at the white wall. Everything in the room was white – the bed, the carpet, the wall, and the chairs. As her gaze shifted and she looked out the window, all that was there was a grey and white landscape. After the great burning, the national leaders met together to discuss what to do. After much discussion, they had decided to create a blank landscape in the corner of the world. Humans that weren’t killed during the Disasters were sent to Arc 10,11,12,13,14 or 15. Lian Hua and her family were sent to Arc 14 after narrowly missing the center of the strike point. White they thought was the blank of the colors. Something that was a page for imagination, but just the page. Lian Hua had often thought about what her life would have been if not for the disasters and the heartbreaking loss of her sister during the Tsunami.

“Lian!” Her mother shouted, breaking her train of thought. “Come downstairs!” Lian got up from the chair and shouted back “I’m coming!” She walked down the stairs and went into the kitchen where her Mum had prepared some bread, rice, and fish for dinner. “We are having an early dinner. Your first day of school is tomorrow and you know it is an important year.” It had been 10 years since they had moved to Arc 14 and she had been homeschooled. She was an only child and had never known other children. “I know. I’ll be ready for tomorrow.” she replied.

The next day dawned bright and early as the daily alarm went off in all the houses in Arc 14. Lian Hua got out of bed and got dressed in white denim jeans and a white t-shirt. She went downstairs and found her Mum scrambling eggs. “Hey, Lian are you ready for school? I’ve got a cab coming in 15 mins.” “Ok! I’ll be ready” she replied. She got her backpack ready and hopped in the cab, butterflies flying around in her stomach. The time passed all too quickly and in no less than 20 minutes she was at school, kids hugging and laughing as if they had known each other all their lives. She slowly got out and walked into the school where it was even busier. She went to her locker and opened it, noticing in its reflection a girl staring at her. “Hey,” she said as she turned around. The girl smiled and started talking. “Hi. I’m Mi Hu. Are you new?”. Lian nodded and pulled some books out of her bag and put them in her locker. “If you want I can show you around.” Mi hu suggested. “Sure.” Lian Hua nodded and put her bag back on. Each class was different and yet the same. In history, they talked about the Disasters. In English, they learned poetry that had been written after the disasters. And each teacher was the same. Almost programmed. By the break, Lian felt as though she had gone through the same thing over and over. Mi Hu met her outside in the break area and said “Hey!” Lian Hua waved but felt unsettled outside. She looked out, into the desert that had been created during the drought that had come after the fires. She wondered what was out there, in the mountains. Mi Hu caught up to her and spoke. “Hey. What are you looking at? There's nothing out there.” “But what if there is? What if we have just been too afraid to explore the world?” Lian looked back onto the horizon as she spoke. Mi Hu shook her head and cheerfully replied “The heat must be making your brain hurt. Let’s go back inside.” Lian followed her back into the school but felt a strange tugging as if something was calling her.

After another series of mind-numbingly boring lessons, Lian decided she had to do something. She went home, grabbed the essentials, and set out into the desert. After an hour, she had still seen nothing apart from the mountains in the distance and the hot desert sand. She decided to turn back home. When she turned, the path that she had taken looked exactly the same as the one that was facing forward. Confused, Lian Hua span round, but each direction looked exactly the same. With a sigh, Lian realized she was lost. She decided that the only thing she could do was to keep going. After a couple of hours, Lian was tired, hungry, and hot. She looked in her bag for the food and water that she had brought and ate a quarter of it. She realized that she needed to save her food and water if she was going to make it out of the desert. After almost a whole day of trekking in the desert, Lian was getting desperate. She was out of food and water and could not walk any longer. She collapsed and felt her eyelids close as she saw the birds circling overhead.

Lian woke up with a jolt. She looked up and saw the sun setting on the cold desert horizon, and with a flash of dread, she realized she was still out in the desert. She stumbled to her feet and realized someone was watching her. She turned around and saw a boy, with clothes in tatters and smears of grime all over his face. “Who a-are you?” She

stammered. There was something about the boy that was different from all the others, but she just couldn't place it. Maybe it was.... Oh! It was that his clothes were blue and red. Those were two colors Lian had not seen in a while. But why wasn't he wearing white? He must have been apart from civilization. "What are you doing in the desert? You are a blank, you shouldn't be out here." He was sure as he spoke and had the accent of someone who had lived in a world before the Disasters. "I wanted to see what was out here, but I got lost. Who are you, and what is a blank?" Lian replied. "I am Vi. A blank is someone that lives in one of the Arcs. We call you a blank because you only wear white clothes. The colour of your buildings, of the cloudy sky." Vi replied. "I will take you to my shelter" They walked through the desert, with Vi giving Lian some water every half hour. In less than a couple of hours, they arrived at a series of caves. Vi spread his arms out and said "Welcome to the Peerless caves. They contain walls and walls of art and culture but are also my home."

Lian gazed up at the caves. "How come no one has discovered them?" "Well, as you know, they're surrounded by desert and are hidden." They walked inside one of the side caves and Lian gasped. Walls and walls were covered with breath-taking art, statues stood tall and majestic, documents were stacked neatly into holes, bursting with knowledge, and books were scattered in piles, each with a unique story or truth. "How come no-one has seen these? Documented them? Why haven't you told the world?" Lian asked breathlessly. "Because humans have evolved. If they found out about the Mogao grottoes they would destroy them. They are afraid of themselves. Because so many humans made mistakes and caused these horrible disasters, they are afraid to let their imagination run free, they are afraid to let humans be themselves. But imagination is not what caused this. It was ignorance and fear. That's why they have chosen the colour white. It's just the page, not the color, no uniqueness. But that's not what pages are for. Pages are meant to be written on, painted on, drawn on. They are not meant to be blank. A ship in harbor is safe, but that is not what ships are built for." Vi looked around the grotto and shook his head. "What have we done to ourselves?" Lian said quietly. Vi smiled and said "It's not too late to change. We can remind the world what culture and art are and start a new generation where we find the elements of history that have not been destroyed, and create art and music, and writing. We will solve this. We just need help."

Sources –

- <https://blogs.getty.edu/iris/14-facts-cave-temples-dunhuang/>
- A ship in harbor is safe, but that is not what ships are built for – Albert Einstein

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mogao_Caves

The Memoir Ends Here

Kellett School, McGarrity, Alice – 12

Once upon a time in 4th century AD, there was a monk who traveled on the Silk Road. He had a vision of a thousand buddhas bathed in golden light near the Dunhuang district of Ganu Province in West Central China and he built a cave there. More caves followed over time and they were filled with sacred arts and literature by scholars, monks and travelers. The Mogao Caves (as they were known) became an attraction for people traveling along the Silk Road. They also became an attraction for thieves and tomb raiders.

There was a famous gang of thieves called "Cinnabar". They were a particularly unpleasant group, who were skilled, organised, focussed and, occasionally, deadly. They liked to operate in a coordinated gang, planning their ruthless thefts meticulously. They did not care about human life or possessions. They were driven by greed, money and the thrill of pulling off a robbery. The following extract is from the memoir of a Cinnabar gang member.

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"It was a long, dusty trek through the desert to reach the caves that everyone had been talking about. We had heard that they were full of gleaming treasures, more riches than we could possibly want. The gang wanted me to stay behind and wait for them to come back but I begged to join them – I didn't want to miss this for the world! I may have been the youngest Cinnabar but I was the quickest and bravest. It was my chance to prove that I really belonged in this gang.

We set up our camp near the entrance to the caves. They were huge and there were lots of tourists hanging around outside. Luckily they were all hungry and thirsty so we sold them fruit and cake to give us a chance to be undercover and watch and listen.

We waited for 3 days selling our fruit and sleeping rough next to the caves like all the other stall owners. Our leaders realised that we have got to take out the guards who stand at the entrance to the main cave. We planned to sell them some of our mooncake on the day with a big dose of cinnabar, our signature poison, coating the tops. It acts slowly but should knock them out around midnight so we can strike in the early hours of the morning. The plan was to collect up our spare, hidden sleeping bags and enter the caves, and fill the bags with all our loot. Some of us will carry the loot to our new secret hiding place, a large rock behind the camel camp. It's a clever hiding place as it is smelly and dirty there. We will bury them in camel dung and then return to our camp and go back to sleep. By the time we wake in the morning, the guards will be dead. It's a shame but it's not my fault. I just obey the orders of my leaders. The last person who did not obey their orders was never seen again.

Inside the caves it was amazing. I admit I was shocked. All the gold, the loot, the glow and the scrolls. The scrolls. They looked incredible. I can't read but just seeing them made me want to learn. I snapped back to attention when I saw the others already filling their bags. I knew what I had to do – I grabbed as much as I could, just taking and taking until the cave was empty. It was more than enough to last all ten of us a lifetime. We turned around and headed for the exit. One of the gang left a cinnabar rock on the floor – our signature move. Half of us went to the camel waste pit and threw the bags in. The other half of us ran back to our camp and grabbed the bags of camel waste then dumped them on top of the bags, covering them up completely.

The next morning is a blur, the guards were lying dead on the ground, everyone was going crazy. It was easy to slip away unnoticed grabbing the bags and scurrying away through the crowds making our escape.

We were rich! We were singing and laughing and sifting through the treasure at our hideout. Of course, with all our precious loot there were always some relics that no one buys, for example, scrolls in ancient Chinese that have been stored badly and are slightly rotten. No one wanted them so I put one into my bag, hiding the others in a bag behind a rock.

I sold all my treasure and had a few weeks enjoying myself as a rich man. Then one morning I found the old scroll in my room. There was an old monk at the orphanage where I was a boy – I wondered if he could help me read it.

The next morning I visited the monk. He gave me a strange look when he unwrapped the scroll. I told him I found it but I don't think he believed me. Then something amazing happened. He read a poem on the scroll to me and my life changed forever:

Near the caves where the river flows,
Where the willow sits and the chrysanthemum grows,
Fish bathe in the shallows,
And the wind blows.
Guarded by the cranes,
Lie my dreams,
My hopes,
My deep pains,
My thoughts
My shames,
My heart,
My treasure.
Am I worthy,
Or will I hide,
In what shadows the willow provides,
A humble monk,
That ship has sunk,
The past is done,
But the future,
That has just begun.

'I know that place!' I exclaimed. 'Haha no you don't, son" said the monk. It could be anywhere!'

"No," I said, "I do, I do!". I was practically yelling as I sprinted out the door.

I was there by early morning light, running past the caves. I knew the way like the back of my hand. I was here. I was at home. Not really of course but this is where I used to go everyday with my father before he died. He used to take me here to fish. He used to say that it was the perfect place as 'the fish bathed in the shallows'. I remember sitting under a willow tree and picking flowers to take home to my mother. I stood and looked around. My eyes fell on some chrysanthemums growing near a large rock where some cranes were perched. The rock rang a bell in my head. I went over to it and brushed away the moss. It was the grave of an old monk. Of course! I started digging with my bare hands, and then a stick I found nearby. After digging all day, I eventually hit something hard. It was a chest.

Scrolls. Hundreds of scrolls buried in the chest in the 'grave' of a monk. There was a letter too. Later I discovered that it explained that the monk was in fact one of the monks that discovered the cave and he made these scrolls for the cave, however he was worried they were not good enough so he buried them, leaving a clue for anyone who was worthy. Worthy. After my parents had died and I was thrown out of the orphanage, I had turned to crime. I was dishonourable, a thief, a murderer. I was not worthy. I know I fooled myself that I was just following orders but I was not worthy. Maybe I could be worthy though. I knew what I should do.

I took the chest back to the caves and handed it to a monk there. It turned out to be an important historic find and was the center of the display. I confessed everything to the monk and he arranged for my Cinnabar gangmates to be arrested. I was imprisoned for six months – some of the others were imprisoned for more than 20 years but I got less as I gave the judges everything they needed. On my first day out of prison, the monk was waiting for me. He took me to the monastery and I began to study. 20 years later, I am a well respected scholar, an expert about the caves and I help find new discoveries. I feel worthy now although I still feel sad that I helped kill the guards."

—

The memoirs end here. Further research shows the writer was murdered shortly afterwards. No one was ever arrested for his murder but several eye witnesses saw the writer eating a mooncake, covered in red sprinkles, which had been offered to him by a man. The witnesses said that the writer seemed to recognise the man offering him the mooncake but he collapsed shortly after taking a bite. It was later found that he had been poisoned, by a rare poison called "cinnabar".

You Just have to Dig Deep Enough, and Believe.

Kellett School, Seltz, Maya – 13

“Every legend, every myth, every story surrounds a truth. You just have to dig deep enough, and believe. Those of us who do seek. Once, thousands of years ago, stories were told, stories that many, until today, would search for the truth. Stories that would pass down for generations, slowly burying the truth deeper and deeper every time it is told. Stories that would over time, fade away until everyone around us believed they were myths, legends, children’s tales, told only to amuse us with the impossibility. This is one of them. This is the story of the Mogao Grottoes, or more commonly known as the peerless caves. Many centuries ago, a young explorer searched for these caves. He had heard stories of wonder, stories of the caves filled to the brim with art and history. But every story has two sides... every story has an ending, whether it is a happy one or not, is up to how you look at it.”

“Everyone he told these stories to would laugh and tell him he was stupid to think an old wives tale was real, but he still searched. He spent his life searching for the caves, searching for something that was now calling out for him, begging him to find the truth, something he knew was there but he just didn’t know where. Every route, every road he took led him back to the same empty cliff face in Gansu. What did it mean? How would that help him? He knew others searched in vain, attempting to best him with something they didn’t believe. However, He was different to the rest, he didn’t want to find the caves to gain fame and fortune, he wanted to see, feel and be a part of a bigger history, something that could help the world improve with knowledge that was inside. This, his pure heart, was the reason the he was rewarded with the vision. “

“He started a new road, once again, counting the lush green trees as he passed. He noticed things he had never noticed before, the sounds, the smells, the sights. The long and twisting roots sank in the ground like claws and the white cold stones were scattered along the ground taking no particular order. He followed them until he arrived once again at the cliff face. However this time, he saw something he had never seen before. Sitting there plain as day were the caves he had been searching for all his life. He had spent his childhood dreaming up the treasures that would fill the caves, but none of his imaginations did it justice. Everything in the room had its own story, had its own history of the person who created it and how it had survived throughout the thousands of years. Faded drawings of all shapes, colours and sizes touched every corner, each one telling its own tale of how it came to be. Books of history and knowledge scattered on the floor, as if thrown roughly to the corner. Manuscripts ripped, sculptures crumbled to pieces, bundles of scrolls tossed to the floor. Blood splattered the walls, lost weapons dotted the area and other remains of a lost battle filled the floors. Something terrible had happened here...”

“Who would come here just to destroy something so magnificent? It was proof. Proof of sacrifice, proof of betrayal, proof of what lengths someone would go to, just to hide and save the secrets. But why? What was hidden among them? What did someone want so badly? The explorer knew somewhere among the wonders something hid. Something so deep that someone had attempted to destroy the cave. Something that had caused fights, wars and deaths. Something he knew would have to stay hidden. Something he knew he would have to leave his life behind to keep safe. And the willingness to sacrifice all proves hearts of stone do not exist. He became the first keeper of the cave. His one and only job – to keep the secrets of the Mogao grottoes – passed down for generations to his family. Father and son, mother and daughter and now to you.”

The young boy looked up intently towards his father. After hearing his father’s story, he finally understood. He finally felt like he belonged. Memories of him and his father playing in the caves, reading, painting, and playing filled his mind. How odd it was now to look at the view, so familiar and yet now so different.

Caverns

Kellett School, Sung, Monica – 12

July 5, 1839

“It’s going to be fun”, R said. “It’s going to have artefacts that leave you in awe”, R said. The sun’s been scorching my back and grilling my innards. This is anything but fun. How do camels stand this heat? I’m happy that we are going to a cave. At least, that’s what he says. Damn idiot thinks trekking through miles of cursed sand is something fun.

July 6, 1839

We are here where R swears are artefacts, pitching up tents in front of the rather large and dusty building that he says houses the caves. He’d better not be lying. I hate this desert. So full of sand. And sand mites too. I hate this place.

July 7, 1839

We went into the cave today. It’s all paintings and statues of gods and tellings of old stories. Last night I heard suspicious sounds coming from somewhere. Sounded like someone in pain. Eh. Nevermind. It’s probably some desert critter unlucky enough to be caught for supper by another desert critter or somethin’ like that. The stories are rather more fascinating than the statues. Rather gory stories, I’d say. On a scale from 1 to Macbeth, I’d give it a solid 7.

July 8, 1839

There’s something about the silence here that’s disturbing. You would think to hear some sort of little desert critter or somethin’. No, it’s just the wind, sand, stone, and us. No other living thing to be found. Apart from those Goddamned sand mites. The caves are exciting, though. I’m starting to see why R would be so fascinated.

July 9, 1839

I’m starting to get royally creeped out. I heard another unsettling sound in my vicinity again. It was a hawk’s cry – not hard to hear usually, but in the middle of the night. Right next to my tent. I was bewildered – what sane person would go hawking at night? This must be the wind or something. I took a chance to peek out of my safe tent and immediately shrunk back. It was horrible – now I can’t unsee it. Thinking about it sends pins and needles cavorting around on my skin. I never want to come back here again.

July 10, 1839

At least today is somewhat peaceful. I’ve seen more caves and artefacts, and it’s fine. Nothing has haunted me – not anything that matters, that is. I’m still hoping that the hawk from last night wouldn’t come back. This place is fascinating, but it would be nice to get away from these god-damned sand mites. Stupid little beings.

July 11, 1839

Finally! R and I have found something of worth. Finally, we can leave this place. It’s an underground cache of precious scrolls, all containing manuscripts that I could spend years decoding. R suggested that we could move our tents into the room underground. He’s checked it, and says it’s sturdy enough to let us be there for the rest of our stay. At least I’ll get away from that nightmarish hawk and its seemingly deceased master.

July 12, 1839

R. He's dead. I woke up inside the room, he seemed to already have gone out in search of more things. Spread-eagled on the sand, staring up at heaven like there is an angel waiting to swoop him into the sky as they did to Galahad. He was mutilated—possibly tortured to death. His eyes were torn out. One was lying half-buried in the sand the other's nowhere to be found. On further inspection, his skin's been cut up and sliced like fish, and there were tufts of suspicious golden-orange fur around him. I think he was killed for a cult's ritual or something. It's unsettling, to say the least. Wouldn't he have gone out with a fight? R. was always a headstrong person. Either the thing that killed him was too fast for him to hit, or it's supernatural. Either way, I've got to bury him and leave the area as fast as possible. I fear for my own life if I stay. I will leave tomorrow, early in the morning. Time is of the essence.

七月十三日三更半夜

他死了。

Magao Grottoes

Kellett School, Trojanow, Setarah – 12

When you hear about the mogao caves, what do you think? Luxury, Riches, Secrets. You would be correct. All of those things are contained in the heart and soul of the mogao caves, but I didn't have the slightest clue how deep these mysteries went. I finally understood it a few weeks ago when all the things I was sure of in my life crumbled to dust before me.

Nature was in harmony, a perfect balance of all powerful forces that keep us alive. So I saw it fit to walk to my favourite spot up on a mountain in Gansu on top of the famous Mogao caves. When I finally arrived my soul felt free from all the worries and stress in my life and with serene steps I approached the edge. I sat down and gave every miniscule piece of me to the earth, wind and sky and I reached total tranquility. Mere seconds passed when cracks in the ground appeared with alacrity. The terrain imploded and my body felt weightless as I tumbled towards the ground. Landing on the broken dirt and rock left my body in agony and when I glanced ahead, numerous thoughts immediately flooded my brain. The walls were decked with treasures and relics of all kinds. As I took a look around, I started to realize how immense these caves were and how many secrets they revealed about our ancient history. After taking a moment to recollect myself, I arose from the rubble and brushed off any debris on my clothes. To hear about these ancient artifacts is one thing, but to be surrounded by them is simply astounding. The precious gemstones on each sceptre and crown was blinding, the gold vases lining the corridors could even make the emperor appear mediocre. But I just couldn't believe that in all the 1,000 halls of wonder, the entirety of its collection was heirlooms.

The Two Secret Agents

Korean International School, Chan, Man Wai Vean – 11

So, it all started with a secret agent called Charlotte who was in Year 10 in school. She was always popular among the students because whenever something happened, she always got to the bottom of it. Eventually, she was asked to be a secret agent, she agreed and was in training. Amazingly, she had already handled five cases in a week. It had just been three weeks since she started Year 10, and she had been asked out by the most popular boys in the school. However, she was never interested in any of these boys. One boy was named Nathaniel and he was the most popular boy in the whole of Year 10. Although he had many admirers, Nathaniel had been in love with Charlotte since Year 5 and still wouldn't give up.

"Charlotte, wait up!" Nathaniel called. "Nathaniel, you have said many times you love me and have feelings for me, but I don't feel the same," Charlotte confessed. "Hey! I am the most popular person in this school and to reject me is a huge mistake in your life," Nathaniel replied with confidence. Charlotte did not care and ran to the nearest female bathroom, feeling fed up. "Just because I have brown hair, blue eyes, long hair, cute blush, a small mouth, a pink phone, pink clothes and a cute voice means I'm someone's crush?" Charlotte asked herself, frustrated. She thought she would be loved for her personality but she was wrong. Why did everybody only care about appearances? Besides, Charlotte had a crush on a humble boy who was shy and got bullied a lot. His name was Mark, and he was always in the same class as Charlotte since Year 1. But Charlotte wanted to know if he had the same feelings for her.

The next day, the Year 10 students had a field trip to the Mogao Grottoes to see all the ancient artifacts. They were normally paired up in twos or threes. Much to her surprise, Charlotte was paired up with Mark, and he seemed pretty pleased too so Charlotte wondered if he possibly liked her back. "What! It's not fair that I'm not in the same group as them!" Nathaniel shouted. Charlotte was then asked to choose if she wanted Nathaniel to join or not. Charlotte thought for a very long time and figured that if she and Mark had a trip together, they would bond with each other. Being rejected, Nathaniel rolled his eyes because he had to sit with Rosie, who had a crush on him.

"Charlotte! Wake up, we are there!" Mark whispered in her ear, making her wake up to his voice and then blush after she knew that he had woken her up. Charlotte soon traveled to the bottom of the Mogao Grottoes. They had to take a shuttle bus up to the cave. After they arrived, the students were divided into separate rooms with them paired up. There were 6 floors and she was chosen to be on the sixth floor. After she and Mark went to the sixth floor, they had to fill a worksheet out. After they finished half of it together, all the rooms became dark and the air ventilation stopped for a second. Because of this shock, Mark fainted on the floor but Charlotte stayed still. In the meantime, Charlotte received a text saying that the Mogao Grottoes were moving and coming to life on the fifth floor. Charlotte knew she had to help, but she could not leave Mark behind so she sent a text saying that she had to do some work before helping out. She decided to put Mark in the corner and put a drink at the side with a wet towel on his head to make him feel better.

After a short while, Charlotte left the room, sighing and leaving to rescue the people on the fifth floor. She changed before going there so people won't notice, one of the agents gave her some clothes that were black to change into. After she finished changing, she went down to the fifth floor just to see the other crew there, seeing an unexpected view.

They ran and ran until they stopped since they were getting chased by alive objects so they ran around until they chased them off, eventually they went away. "Phew!" Said Lila, one of the other agents who were invited on this trip. They started walking towards a big door that says 光. We were confused for a moment and realized it meant light in mandarin. They went in and saw the strangest thing on earth.

No way they are moving! It is real and not fake! They thought for a while and thought for around 5 minutes. "I know! We can run around the three anonymous creatures flying around the room till they get dizzy." Cho said everyone agreed so they went to a corner and waited till the creatures flew there. After a short while the creatures went to them.

“Argh! I’m getting dizzy, Amari help me out this once!” said the creature that flew around the room. Cho, Charlotte and Lila all sighed in relief and after a few seconds they sat up straight to talk to three girls. “Alright, we will admit, these times of the year no one really comes here so we stay there awake and looking to see if anyone stole the parts. We never knew that visitors would come so we just had to wake up and check on the ancient artifacts.” The creature said.

“So, let us get this straight, you were the queen of the island exactly 800 years ago? And then the war began so that is why you died and now live in this Mogao Grottoes?” Charlotte asked while Lila and Cho were writing notes about the conversation. “Yes, everything you said was correct but we found out a boy looking like this” Queen told them “Anyone familiar?”

“No way!” Charlotte said “It’s Nathaniel?” Charlotte asked. Lila and Cho both nodded their heads. Now the investigation is over Charlotte went to find Nathaniel to get back the crown that was stolen. “Charlotte! My beauty! Where have you been?” Nathaniel asked. “Nathaniel! I am not your beauty and for the last time we are not getting together!” Charlotte screamed. Nathaniel felt sad and said “If we are not getting together just leave” “Why would I leave? I know you have a crown, hand it over before I call the cops!” Nathaniel handed over the crown and then felt ashamed so he went away. Everyone was glad that Charlotte finished the case once again! When Charlotte went back to the room to finish the work with Mark then the strangest thing happened.

“Charlotte, you have been my first love for a very long time so please accept this offer, will you be my girlfriend?” Mark asked with happiness “Yes, I accept and I will be delighted to be your girlfriend” Charlotte replied with happy tears. After they finished the assignment, they started dating for around 8 years, Mark decided to take it to the next level.

“Going back to this school brings a lot of memories like how we met and how we confessed to everyone.” Charlotte spoke while running around their old school. “There is a reason why I brought you back to this school.” Mark said while going down on one knee “What do you mean?” Charlotte asked. “Charlotte, you have been the love of my life for a very long time, after that trip I wanted to be with you forever in your life. We have been together for 8 years so I want to take it to the next level. Charlotte, I want to spend the next few years with you, will you marry me?” Mark asked while proposing with one leg kneeling. “Yes, I will accept it” Charlotte replied with tears in her eyes. Then a bunch of people came out with cheering noises. “Congratulations!” Everyone shouted with happiness.

“Come on, it’s time!” Said a person. “Charlotte, do you accept Mark as your husband?” said the Lawyer “I do!” Charlotte replied. “Well then, Mark, do you accept Charlotte as your wife?” Asked the Lawyer “I do” Mark replied. “Now you may kiss the bride” The Lawyer said delightfully.

Mogao's Secret

Korean International School, Lee, Kingsley – 11

There was once a middle-aged jobless old man called Elijah, who lived a lonely life in an abandoned place called the Mogao caves.

The Mogao caves have over 500 temples. It is located at the northeast of Dunhuang City. It takes around 45 minutes from the Dunhuang City towards the Mogao Caves. The Mogao Caves are Buddhist caves with magnificent artwork including statues and wall paintings. Therefore, it is also named as the Thousand Buddha Grottoes. The Mogao caves were first constructed in 366AD and discovered in 1900. It was first discovered by the name of Wang Yuanlu. This person was a monk, who helps to restore the site and passed away in 1931.

Elijah had no home and had been staying in the Mogao motel for so long since he could ever remember. Elijah had nothing to do but just stare at the buddhas that surrounded his room. One day, he decided to search for secrets around the Mogao Caves.

He had been searching for many days, from cave to cave, and yet had discovered nothing. He went to the biggest cave in the Mogao Caves and searched everywhere. Until there was a little corner and a camouflaged door opened.

So, he went inside, but it was empty. When he lit up a candle, a giant buddha appeared in front of him, it was the Nirvāṇa Buddha. When he continued walking there was a door....

The door led him to a slide. He opened his backpack and searched for a candle and a lighter. He lit up the slide to check if it was safe for him to ride.

He slid down into a basement where the only way out was up a broken ladder leading back to the surface. He was stuck between a rock and a hard place. Since he couldn't think of a way to leave. He used his handy camera to take pictures and to see what was in front of him. All buddha arts were nearly collapsed. He saw jewels lying on the floor and a secret book in a display glass box. He broke the display glass box to take the book. Then he opened the book. After that, he read through the words in the book. However, he did not understand what it meant.

Suddenly, the Buddha stood and walked in from of him. It was sculpture and suddenly became alive, then the floor was shaking. Then the buddha stared at him and said he should never touch the buddha's items again. The buddha was so angry that it casted a magic spell and teleported him to place called the Dunhuang city. Dunhuang City is a place located in the northwest of China, close to Mongolia. Luckily, he wasn't hurt. Impatiently, he had to take a long trip from Dunhuang back to the caves. He wanted to further investigate the buddha magic.

At Dunhuang city, Elijah found a motel and stayed there for a few days. He met a new friend at the motel. He was called Moray, a criminal, who had been stalking people and had killed around half of the Dunhuang Police Department. He was sentenced to jail for 5 years. After he had been released, he decided not to rob banks or kill anymore. He wanted to do other meaningful work. He decided to go to Mogao to visit the Buddha and see Buddhist art in person. Elijah took Moray to the place where he found the biggest buddha.

They arrived at the Mogao Cave and they walked down to another basement. Moray saw the first buddha art which was enormous and magnificent and hasn't been seen by anybody for centuries.

"Wow!" Moray exclaimed.

"I have been searching this for years and yet never found it. Well, thanks to you that's all changed. I wouldn't have made it this far without you."

"No problem." Elijah said.

They were walking in the cave until they found a lot of booby traps. Each trap is a teleportation device into the fiction world from films and books. They were avoiding the booby traps carefully; however, there wasn't enough lights making them step on those traps. They weren't concentrated that much on the traps when they were walking around the basement. So it teleported them to two different places in the fiction world called JUMANJI AND BABY COOPERATION.

Then, Moray got teleported to the world of Jumanji. Their objective in Jumanji was that they must win the game, but how? They must complete a few missions. Once the mission has been finished. A tour guide will come to you and tell you that you have won Jumanji. By shaking his hand, you will be teleported back to real life. Moray spent 10 days to pass each level and returned to the second basement.

Meanwhile, Elijah got teleported to Baby Corp that was a company founded by babies called “The Board of Directors”. Everybody in that company are babies. Elijah was the only adult in Baby Corp. His mission is to beat the board of directors in order to return. Elijah spent 10 days to complete his objective and returned to the second basement.

After 10 days, they have finally come back to real-life from the fiction world. They saw two new people, who were Dr K LEE (KINGSLEY LEE) and Dr Binocs, at the basement.

“Who is Dr K LEE and Dr Binocs?” Elijah and Moray said.

“Oh. Hi! I’m Dr Binocs and he is Dr Kingsley Lee, but you can call me Binocs, and you can call him Lee for short. We are doctors from the same hospital in Santiago, Chile. We are taking a vacation to Dunhuang to visit Mogao Caves to see the Buddhist art too. However, we can’t find a way out. Until Lee just discovered an escape route two minutes ago.”

“Let’s go then!” Dr Binocs said.

When they were walking to the end, they had gone past many doors, each looking no different to the other and without any handles. Unfortunately, it had come to a dead end. So, they had to find which door would be the exit. Dr Binocs found a clue in the carvings surrounding each door. They had accessed every door until they found one riddle that stood out. “When a bird is stuck in its cage, it cannot fly, until the bird opens its door.” Lee said, “This must be the exit”, he charged through the door, and it crumbled. Once they entered, a mysterious portal came out and teleported them to the room that everyone had been looking for over centuries.

They were in the room. This is the exact place where Elijah first saw the Nirvāṇa Buddha at the first time, but everything looked different except the buddha. There were a lot of brightly coloured Buddhist art drawings. Despite this, these were better than the other ones Elijah seen. There was only gold as its most precious jewellery in the room. Everything changed, except the positions. The book in the glass box was different and it was opened with some weird words.

From Elijah’s experience, he can only read it because if he removes the book from the display glass the Buddha will get angry and likely teleport me to another place again.

There was a paragraph in the book, and it said...

“One door leads you away from the Mogao Caves and one leads you right back outside the caves. It is now your decision to choose which one you are taking. The doors also have no notes stating which door leads to where”

After reading the note, they chose the right door and it led them outside. Their lucky guess was correct. The four of them felt that the trip was very adventurous, and they would like to revisit the place again.

“It was the best day ever we had. That was amazing, you want to find some more secrets?” Lee said

“Sure, let’s meet again. I’ll call you guys. Okay? Keep in contact.” Elijah said

“Okay”, Lee, Dr Binocs and Moray agreed.

For the next to weeks, they had nothing to do and nowhere to go. They wanted to find more secrets that people have made in 366AD when the Mogao Cave first discovered. They met back at the caves. The doctors had an idea, they told everyone they were opening a private clinic and Elijah and Moray were to help in any way they could. By

day, they worked at the clinic in the city after their working permits had been granted. By night, they researched more about secrets of the caves and posted their findings online. They have many followers and were able to afford a research centre to show people their findings about the caves. Lee and Binocs also wrote a tour guide book for all people to learn about this special place and its secrets. After some time had gone by, the Mogao Caves and the research centre had become a popular tourist destination in Dunhuang.

The Painting

Korean International School, Roy, Kenisha – 11

“Over there! Look!”

The other two turn their heads, noticing a cave in the distance. The three made haste towards the cave, Joah clutching his shoulder.

They lean against the mouth of the cave, gasping for air, Joah slid down the wall, Farin sits down next to him.

“Are you okay?”

“Well, as okay as one can be after getting shot.”

Farin sighs, looking away. Xiao glanced outside, the clouds having tripled since they escaped, "looks like it might rain soon, we should head inside..."

Farin and Joah hum in acknowledgement and stumble up to start moving, Xiao semi-carries Joah as they walked into the cave. As they got deeper, the cave was filling up with artifacts of all kinds, from paintings to antique vases. Joah noticed an interesting looking painting out of the corner of his eye as he slows to a stop. "Joah, you okay?" Farin asked, glancing at Joah.

"No, it's okay."

"We can take a break if you'd like."

"..."

"Joah?"

"Okay, we can take a break."

The three sit down as the sound of rain drops could be heard, attacking the cave and the forest surrounding it. Xiao takes out a med kit from their bag, and asks Joah if they can change his bandages, Joah nods and they carefully change his bandages. Farin notices an interesting painting leaning on the cave wall, she scoots over and holds the painting by the frame in her hands. It's a painting of a traditional village, townsfolk busying themselves with daily tasks, warm colours used expressively in the art. She observes it in wonder, "Hey, look at this." The other two scoot over to see what's in her hand. "That's a nice painting," Joah exclaims, touching the painting's canvas.

The next thing they know, they're in the middle of a traditional village, townsfolk busying themselves with daily tasks. "Uh, what just happened?..." Joah asked.

"I have no idea," Farin responds.

Xiao is too shocked for words.

A merchant hollers at them, "Get off the road you annoying pests! You're disrupting my work!"

They get up and apologize swiftly, the merchant grumbles something like, "wretched children," and shoved Xiao's shoulder as he stomped away, the three leave the area and go to the more quiet side of the town. "Well, that was rude." Joah grumbles, Farin giggling, "what did you expect? We were in the middle of the square after all," Xiao nods in agreement.

"Oh come on Xiao! You should've at least said something!"

"Farin's right, Joah, what could've I said that wouldn't make me sound like that old man?"

Joah groans, "You've got a point there... but still!"

"Okay Joah that's enough for today," Farin put her hand on his shoulder, "how about instead of bickering about Xiao's choices, we figure out how to get out of here?"

"You sound like my mom."

"That's exactly what I'm aiming for."

Joah rolls his eyes, Farin smiling at his sass, they walk towards a forest clearing, brainstorming ways on getting out of wherever they are. Eventually, Xiao comes up with an idea.

"Maybe, we could find the painting again?" The other two stare at him in confusion, Xiao sighs, "The one that we found in the cave? I think that's why were somehow here."

"That would make sense," Farin agrees, Joah hums in agreement .

"Alright, then lets head back to the cave."

The trio walk into the cave, travelling in near silence, with little sharp intakes of breath from Joah, gaining worried glances from the other two. After a little while, the cave comes into view. "Well, took us long enough!" Joah exclaimed, running towards the cave.

"Joah, don't run!" Farin scolds, "You're wound could open!"

"But it didn't!" Joah shouts from the mouth of the cave, Farin groans, questioning her life decisions. They rush up to Joah, Farin about to give him an hour-long speech about his incompetence and survival instincts, but Xiao shuts her down . The trio head inside the cave, keeping light conversation as they walk down into the depths of the black ink. This time, Joah notices the painting first, "Hey! I found it!" he points eagerly to the painting, rushing over towards it, "Hurry up! We could have a time-limit you know!" The other two head over towards Joah and the painting.

"Are you ready?"

"Yea, we're ready," Xiao and Farin responds.

"Great! Okay, 3..."

'2...'

1...

They find themselves back in the cave, the rain having completely stopped now, they hobbled up.

"Uh, so we were— we were in a painting." Joah points out.

"Um, yes, we were." Xiao says.

"Are we going to question this at all?"

"Is anybody going to believe us?" Farin grumbled.

"No, they won't."

"Well, there's your answer."

"Eh, makes sense."

Xiao looks around, taking in the surroundings, they noticed how there are a lot more artifacts than the painting, upon closer inspection, they realized that...

Perhaps this cave is more magical than they all thought.

The Mystery of the Mogao Grottoes

Korean International School, Tong, Sum Yin Sherry – 12

Once upon a time, a girl named Tina, was very brave and kind-hearted. Tina was 17 years old from China. She had long black hair, eyes as blue as the sea, and her big smile that bright everyone's day up. Sadly, she lost her parents because of an accident when she was at the age of 5. Her family member left was her grandmother, Lola. They lived in a village called 'The Manton Village'. Tina and her grandmother were awfully close, so as their villagers who were close with them too! Tina was a waitress working in a coffee shop. She was poor, but works extremely hard while also taking care of Lola every single day. This made everyone who knows Tina admire her a lot. But lately, a horrible news happened...

Lola had been sick, terribly sick. She had never gotten off bed since then.

"There is no improvement at all. I'm...sorry." the doctor seriously said to Tina when the doctor visited Lola.

"Thank you doctor. You have been taking care of Lola for years and you have always been nice to us. We really appreciated that." Tina said wiping her tears. Then she told Lola, who was laying down with her face all pale,

"Don't worry Lola, you'll be fine."

Lola said nothing but gave her a warm smile.

A week later, things started to change... While Tina was working at the coffee shop, giving a cup of latte to a customer, who was an old man with a black suit dressed up incredibly neat, stared at her strangely...

"Is there anything I can help, sir?" Tina asked the man confusedly.

"I overheard you and your friend talking about your grandmother just now by the door. I would love to help you."

The man lifted a rectangular yellow ticket from his brief case.

"Here, this is the *Mogao Grottoes* ticket with the location."

"Umm... Sir, Isn't *Mogao Grottoes* a cave with all those world paintings and sculptures? What does it do with my grandmother?", Tina asked him.

The old man laughed, "You decide what you want to do. But don't forget I warned you, it's not an ordinary cave. But this can help your grandmother. Believe me, if you give up, you will definitely regret it."

The old man then took his latte and left with a smirk.

It was late at night by the time Tina went home. She sat next to Lola, looking at her, feeling hurt to see Lola suffering from the pain. She then thought,

'Should I give this a try?' She then wiped her tears and went back to boil medicine.

By the next morning, while Lola was sleeping, Tina whispered to her best friend Ani by the door of her house,

"Please can you take care of Lola these days? Thank you so much."

"Wait! Where are you going?" Ani asked in a shock. Tina sighed and replied,

"The *Mogao Grottoes*."

Without another word, Tina packed her stuff and left hurriedly.

Eventually, she finally got to the *Mogao Grottoes* after a long and tiring journey. She jumped down of her dark-brown horse and looked around the place. It was totally unexpected. It was plain and empty. The only thing there, was a small old cave and 2 security guards. She then walked to a security guard and asked,

"Here is the ticket."

He glared at Tina for a second, looking like he wanted to tell Tina something, but without a single word, he let her to the cave.

So, Tina walked into the cave. The cave was black, spooky, rusty, and nothing like what others said it was! It wasn't interesting, it wasn't full of sculptures and paintings, it was nothing!

Tina switched on her torch and explored the cave. After a long time, nothing happened or was found.

"That old man tricked me!" Tina angrily cried. She started walking back, but right before she left, a bright light out of nowhere glowed hardly. Slowly, a girl came out and the light slowly went away. It was a girl dressing in white with luxurious accessories. She looked very elegant and unique.

"Who are you?" Tina asked.

"I am the queen of this cave, Belle. I told the old man to let you come here. You are very brave and really loving your grandmother for coming here." The queen introduced.

"So, what is this all about?" Tina asked.

"If you are able to get to the end of this cave, you will find an incredibly special herb, that can perfectly help your grandmother. If you don't... You must stay here forever and you will suffer a lot!"

Belle continued and laughed,

"And I am warning you that if you don't succeed in 1 hour, your grandmother, friends, will all immediately die! But don't worry, because you will never ever make it!"

Tina tried to escape as quick as possible. But the cave was locked and there was no way back.

"You can never leave this cave!" Belle yelled evilly.

She then disappeared with a wicked laugh.

Tina sighed deeply and thought, 'I knew they weren't any good. I can't believe this famous *Mogao Grottoes* cave can be so evil. But all I can do now is stay calm, brave and finish this adventure.'

Tina started her mission. There were traps everywhere. Suddenly she heard a friendly voice.

"Hello! I am Jerry! Nice to meet you!"

It was boy about 18 years old, looking like he didn't ever take a shower in his entire life. Tina immediately ran away, but the boy stopped her.

Finally, the boy managed to talk and explained that he was also here to explore this cave since the same old man gave him a ticket, but he got trapped from the evil queen Belle.

"I have been trapped from ages. But I didn't waste my time. I knew someone else would come to explore this cave as well, like me! So, throughout this whole time, I figured out how to get out of this cave, I was waiting for you!" Jerry told Tina.

He showed her a map and said,

"We need to hurry!" He pointed, "This way!"

20 minutes passed by, they were reaching to half way done using Jerry's idea and map. But they stopped because of a scream heard.

"Tina! Jerry!"

They looked back. It was the old man that gave Tina and Jerry the ticket! They were shocked. The old man looked injured and sad.

"Wait, it's you again." Jerry talked to him aggressively. Tina then continued,

"We know about you."

Tina and Jerry both walked away and ignored the old man right away.

"Wait! Let me explain!", the old man cried.

After a long begging from the old man, Tina and Jerry stopped and listened.

“My name is Albert. Everything I have done was all because I was forced to do it by the queen. One time, the queen saved my life. I was so grateful so I was willing to do anything she wanted me to do! But not long ago, I found out that she wanted to kill me and she was just tricking me the whole time! I am so sorry for everything I have done. I know I ruined your lives, so I am here to help you. I know everything about the cave and the queen’s plan. I can help you. Please, trust me...”

Tina and Jerry looked at each other and nodded. They forgave Albert.

“Let’s go!” Jerry shouted.

So, with Albert and Jerry’s help, the adventure went well.

After quite some time, suddenly, Albert cried,

“Ahhh!”

“What’s wrong?” Tina asked.

“A few hours ago, I was being poisoned by the queen.” Albert sobbed and began to beg them,

“Please, if you make it to the end, help my family! They...”

But without another word, Albert passed out.

“We must kill the queen. She killed Albert!” Jerry stood up and yelled.

“Let’s find the way to leave this cave, then take a revenge on the queen after. Albert gave us lots of clues. I’m sure we can do this!”

Then, Belle showed up again. She laughed,

“Oh, Jerry! You’re still alive! You two can never leave!”

Suddenly, an arrow out of nowhere killed Jerry. Tina looked at Belle and yelled,

“Why do you need to kill Jerry and Albert? What’s your point?”

Belle replied,

“You’ll never know...”

Belle disappeared and never came back.

At the end, Tina managed to succeed the mission. She got the herb and saved Lola just in time. She even discovered Jerry and Albert’s family and told them everything. Their family were poor just like Tina herself, but Tina helped them the best she could. Her strong personality touched everyone and from that day, people called Tina a ‘hero’. Currently, Tina is already 23 years old with her own successful café shop...but, she didn’t give up and decided to find out the truth of the *Mogao Grottoes*.

Cavern

Korean International School, Tsang, Pak Hei Maurice – 12

“These caves were made over a millennium and a half ago, by monks and of blablahblablah....” As the guide droned on and on, Marcus yawned. Marcus was a 13-year-old Buddhist, and this year he and his pals and the monastery were visiting the Mogao Grottoes, 1,500 year old caves constructed by Buddhist monks. They contained well-preserved paintings, libraries and statues. So far, Marcus’s only feelings for the caves were those of boredom. He was amazed initially by the stunning art, but listening to the monotone guide for three hours would make anyone bored.

As the monastery and the guide were descending through the caves, he felt all of the sudden uneasy and cautious. He looked around, and his friends and senior monks looked like they were uneasy, too. His best friend, Chris, was sweating even when the caves were not that hot. Soon, they reached a collapsed wall. The guide began to explain that the collapsed wall was going to be unblocked later on to see what was behind it. “The machines should be coming later in the day,” she said, “Who knows what we will—” She was interrupted by a loud, piercing shriek that echoed through the caves. The wall crumbled and all heck broke loose.

After the wall broke down, things crawled out of the hole. They had sharp beaks and fleshy bodies, gaunt limbs that resembled featherless bird arms but had sharp claws on the tips. They had slightly humanoid legs and heads, all contributing in making the creature nightmare fuel. On top of that, there was a massive monstrosity, which Marcus could not see. It was the one shrieking about and controlling the other things. Marcus and his pals were now separated from the rest of the monastery, and were hiding in a remote corner. One child got so scared that he started to cry. Everyone tried to comfort him but failed miserably. Then a Hookhand, as they now called them, came out of nowhere and almost took the crying boy’s life! They took off and ran like the wind.

Quite a while later and more than fifty encounters with angry Hookhands, the monks lost the creatures and stopped, gasping for breath. “Come on, those Hookhands are going to catch up to us again if we don’t keep running!” hissed Marcus. “Just let us catch our breaths for a moment,” gasped another monk. He leaned against the wall and just then, the wall slid away! There was a big hole behind the wall. The company checked the hole out and it looked like a man-made object. It had a monastery-style of architecture to it. The company agreed to go in and explore. As soon as they got in, a door slid down. They were trapped!

As the junior monks’ eyes adjusted to the darkness, they could see that they were inside a massive room, filled with gems and columns. The walls had murals on them and on the roof, there were transparent tubes with Hookhands inside them! Marcus was more interested in the murals, and started to inspect them. Then he gasped. The murals depicted Monks discovering the caves and settling in them. They depicted one monk building this room and making the Hookhands. That monk could control the Hookhands and used them to excavate more caves. In the next mural, though, the monk was losing control of the creatures and he had to seal them away in a deep cave. Marcus noticed the striking resemblance between him and the monk in the mural. He figured that if he managed to control the Shrieker, as they now called the big thing, he could control all the Hookhands! “But the question is, how?” he muttered to himself.

Everyone was milling around the room, gaping and gasping at the gems and tubes. Some time later, the company discussed what they were going to do. They concluded that they could not stay there, as they would starve. Yet they could not go out, as then they would be eaten by the Hookhands. They paced around the room, thinking, for who knows how long, until their stomachs growled and their feet became tired. “I would rather starve than be eaten,” decided Chris, “It won’t hurt, at least.” “He has a point,” muttered a very solemn Marcus. He was thinking of telling everyone about controlling the Shrieker, as they were really down in the dumps now, but it might not change anything. “Anyone got any ideas?” asked one of the junior monks.

A fool blurted, “Let’s mind-control the Shrieker!” and apparently, it was Marcus.

Some hours later, everyone was still laughing. “No, really, I have reasons to say this!” shrieked Marcus (What irony!). He told the others about the murals, the monk that made the Hookhands, and the resemblance between that monk and him. “You think, just because the monk in the mural looks like you, it means you could mind-control the Shrieker?” Chris laughed, doubling over. Marcus sighed. It was hot in the room and Marcus was sweating. He got a piece of cloth from the floor and wiped his face with it. When he did, the Hookhands in the tubes broke out!

Marcus hoped the Hookhands would be groggy but they attacked without hesitation. Marcus thought how nice it would be if the Hookhands would not attack them. Then the Hookhands paused! Everyone was surprised. Marcus then hoped the Hookhands would fall down and sure enough, they did! “It’s the towel, guys! It’s mind controlling them!” exclaimed Marcus, now draping the towel on his head. So, he made the Hookhands break the door and the cave wall, and protect them from the other Hookhands while the company ran for the other cave.

Soon, the company heard the sounds of other people coming. Someone went up to see what it was, and came back with the senior monks! “Where were you!?” The senior monks asked, and then noticed the tame Hookhands. “How did THOSE get here?” The senior monks were flabbergasted. Marcus explained everything to the seniors about the room, the murals and the towel. “We’re heading towards the Shrieker’s cavern to get it to stop eating us!” said Marcus. “If you can mind-control it, make it go to sleep and not harm anyone. We don’t need a thing like that around here!” instructed the senior monks. The enlarged company trotted through the tunnels and finally arrived at the entrance to the Shrieker’s cave. “Alright, who’s coming to the grotto with me?” said Marcus. Most of his companions looked away. None of them wanted to go in. With a sigh, Marcus looked into the grotto. It was dark, damp and creepy. He shuddered, then stepped in. “Wait!” Marcus looked back. “I’m coming with you!” exclaimed Chris. He walked up to Marcus, who smiled. “I knew I could count on you!” said Marcus happily. A few more people stepped up. Before you knew it, Marcus and his team were marching into the grotto.

After a while, they noticed that there were Hookhands! The Hookhands did not attack though. They just sat there, in nooks and crannies, watching them, menacingly. It must be the Shrieker’s doing! They finally reached the inner chamber, and there it was! The Shrieker was massive, over fifty feet long! It had gigantic claws, a pink, lizard-like body, and worst of all, a wolf-like head with a single eye! The team bravely walked to the Shrieker. Marcus was surprised that the creatures were not attacking them. Suddenly, Marcus heard a voice in his head. “Turn back,” it said, “Go back.”

Marcus asked in his mind, “Who are you?”

“I am the King of the deep, maker of caverns, rumbler of the surface, eater of sunlight, the Rockripper!” roared the Rockripper.

“Where are you?” Marcus asked.

“In front of you!” it said.

Then Marcus realised the Rockripper was the Shrieker! He tried to make the Rockripper fall down but it didn’t! The Rockripper noticed this and, in a fury, attacked the team!

Luckily, the company outside heard the noise and came to the rescue! The monks pelted the Rockripper with stones while the tame Hookhands attacked the watching Hookhands. This caused the Hookhands watching to defend themselves, and this soon melted into a full-on battle. The Rockripper, in the midst of the battle, lunged at Chris. Marcus, who was near, ran to Chris and pushed him out of the way. The Rockripper caught Marcus and proceeded to kill him. Then it stopped. Marcus noticed that the towel was glowing! He had used his mind control and subdued the Rockripper! At last, they emerged from the entrance to the Mogao Grottoes victoriously, riding atop the Rockripper, to the surprise of their mourning parents.

Mogao's Grottoes

Korean International School, Yap, Joshua – 13

As I slowly became conscious, I didn't know where I was or why I was lying down. How did I get here? All around this space I see what I think are hieroglyphics; They looked like animals but in words and around it there were drawings. Some of the drawings looked extremely sophisticated – one drawing looked like they were reading of a scroll and the other one looked like some sort of dancing. I desperately wanted to find any clues to where I was and searched high and low, staring at the drawings. Then, the worst came. I saw the drawings which looked like they were preparing a sacrifice because people were dancing around with spears and knives around a person on its knees to an unrecognizable thing.

I backed away, with my hands shaking uncontrollably. As I was backing away from the painting I tripped on something hard. As I gathered myself I realized that it was a rock I tripped on and that could help me escape this nightmare. The rock gave me an idea to search around the room to find more stuff laying on the ground. I started to look around and asked what could I use with the stone. As I was nervously searching around I remembered seeing some sort of wood on the platform I was on.

I started sharpening the wood to make a weapon but It broke in half. SHOOT! I need to think of a plan fast. I used the rock to cut apart my clothing and wrapped it around the rock – this made sure I would have enough range without getting close to them and I made sure it was sturdy enough to use. To prepare for battle I practised swinging the weapon like a cowboy until my shoulders burst in pain. I was ready, or so I thought as I walked ever closer to the door I started freaked out and ran back. What are my odds? All I have is my makeshift mace and my positivity to break free.

Once I gathered myself I burst out the door and started swinging with my eyes closed but to no avail. I swung for a good two minutes before realising nothing connected. I opened my eyes slowly. Immediately I felt a warmth on my neck every two seconds. The suffocating smell of rotten eggs entered my senses. I started to feel nauseous but had to see who was behind me. As I turned around I had to move my head towards the sky just to see a bloodthirsty ogre – looking human. His eyes bulged out bloody red and his teeth were sharper than a knife. As I glanced up at his eyes, there was a clear, focused attention to kill me. I panicked and ran.

As I was running like a coward I remembered that I promised myself I will stay alive. I needed to stop running. I needed to assert dominance. I tried to turn my body but that's when it happened. A tiny pebble trying to ruin my life. My whole body started to fall to what seemed like slow motion. I didn't imagine my end to be like this but luck was on my side. My mace, the only weapon that I had was suddenly lost. It flung out of hand as my arms were flailing back and forth. However, my hand lost grip when it was forty-five degrees behind my back. I could see the mace barely hitting my head as it pummeled the guard in the head. I realised it was my destiny to escape this nightmare, but victory was shortly ruined by the vibrations of the guard hitting the floor.

Are there other guards going to confront me? Will I die here? I didn't know what to do. It was like a horror movie – the footsteps echoed around me as they got frighteningly closer. I kept on thinking of my family and friends and if I would see them again. But I didn't feel like dying today. Not yet. I snapped out immediately of my self-pity and came up with a plan. I needed to run.

While I was running I saw many beautiful hieroglyphics and many paintings. The paintings looked like they were worth lots of riches with a remarkably gold frame on all of them. As I continued to run past painting after painting I stopped immediately. Turning my head forty-five degrees to see something out of the ordinary: a dark hallway with a glimmer of hope.

A relieving sensation passed my body. I approached the hallway and as I got closer a light got brighter and brighter. A giant door curved exquisitely with Chinese like symbols. My hands had a mind of their own; my hand moved like a snake around the symbols it was like my hand understood what the symbols meant. As my hand was following a specific symbol that led to a click from the door all of a sudden gears started moving and all the symbols moved in unison and made a passage and then everything unlocked. Both doors slowly opened backwards and the light blinded me.

Magic. That's what it felt like. Sculptures made of gold felt alive. The rubies, gems, diamonds, crystals are in big sacks around the room. In a glass box elevated above everything a gold buddha with Jade gems floating around it. I couldn't believe my eyes. It looked like a Harry Potter movie. It looked precious – could I use it to my advantage? I looked around the room to find something to break the glass window with. Desperately I threw everything that I could – gems, gold bars rocks on the floor but to no avail. There was only one thing left that I hadn't tried. The sculpture. I closed my eyes and I threw it as hard as I could to the glass.

The shattering of glass reverberated around the room. I think I made a mistake. The guard's footsteps came closer and closer. 'I'm doomed' I thought to myself. The only way to survive is for me to hold the relic hostage. I pulled and I pulled I realised it was harder than expected. One forceful pull and I fell down with the relic in both my hand I felt happiness for the first time in this nightmare. I got back on my feet preparing for the worst but a gateway under me suddenly opened and I fell through.

All of a sudden I woke up to the birds chirping around me, the blinding light shining on my face. I slowly gathered myself and looked at my surroundings I realised I was free after all the torture. I was finally free. I fell on my knees in disbelief and cried joyful tears.

After a few years of people thinking my stories are fake, I still wanted to share my story with people so I decided to write a book about my journey and to my surprise, my book sold out everywhere. People love my adventure. I've become famous only after six months of my book's release.

Eun and Legend of the Enchanted Mogao Grottoes

Marymount Secondary School, Lo, Vivienne – 14

Long ago, in the Tang Dynasty, the world was full of wonder. Most special of all, in the Mogao Grottoes, there was magic. Every weary traveller who stayed inside, in the middle of their trip along the Silk Road, gained power and wizardry that helped them invent gunpowder, gas stoves and countless astonishing creations. Men who gained power and inspiration in the Mogao Grottoes started to fill the cave with religious scriptures, countless Buddhist murals, sculptures, and artefacts, all over walls and ceilings, and left the world the finest artworks in the legendary Mogao Grottoes.

But as the Silk Road declined and the magical travellers passed away, no one had ever entered the Mogao Grottoes again, and the legend was gradually forgotten by the world. Magic disappeared, being left unremembered and unknown... until the soldier came.

Eun, an ordinary soldier who just came back from war, was struck with remorse and despair after finding himself surrounded by violence and collapse for ages. Facing the traumatization, he decided to leave the army and packed his luggage impulsively. After a while, Eun left his home without any messages and headed towards the Silk Road, hoping to find somewhere he could put aside his messy thoughts and gain salvation for the past killing and fighting.

There, Eun strolled restlessly along the Silk Road for days and weeks, he finally could not hold his fatigue anymore, and strode into a nearby cave to rest. While he dived deeper into the unknown cavern, he saw Buddhist artworks around him, with fuzzy scriptures and drawings carved on the walls and ceilings. They were so fascinating that he rubbed his eyes and thought they were illusions which appeared due to his exhaustion. But Eun did not mind them. His dusty body laid on the floor weakly. He sensed a weird feeling coming from beneath the ground and murmured, "I had fought and killed, I thought I did not deserve to get what I want." He increased his volume, "But God, I felt your presence here, may you grant me salvation, I would like to start afresh and I will behave according to your words." Then, Eun closed his eyes slowly and opened his mouth gently, hoping for a drop of water or a piece of bread crumb to come.

Eun thought he had mistaken the presence of God hopelessly, when a drop of water dripped onto his face miraculously. His dirty body turned clean from head to toe, he was lifted up into the air, with hands and legs spread open, followed by a shine of radiant light. A sound echoed behind, "Dear, I am the God of the Mogao Grottoes, and you are now forgiven because of your honesty and righteousness. Dear, I appreciate your actions and would grant you my magic of self-forgiveness and self-acceptance. To spread my love and spirit of forgiveness to men, will you sacrifice yourself to stay here and become the source of life beside me?"

"God, I will do as you wish." Eun's body started glowing more luminously, and was lifted higher until a bolt of blazing light beamed from the ground into the sky above. The magical energy of the Mogao Grottoes split and its pieces flew to six different parts of the world, waiting to be discovered again. In the cavern that lost its magic, water came out from the walls in between each Buddhist sculpture down into the troughs below, the blurry cravings on the wall became deeper and clearer, showing thousands of sentences, "A hero is someone who has given his or her life to something bigger than oneself." "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that." Covering all surfaces of the grotto, the words showed the appreciation for the sacrifice of Eun to spread love and forgiveness to men.

Since then, the Mogao Grottoes has been famous again. Now, pilgrims still visit the sacred shrine, following the 'beacon,' for the infinite resource of water, for the sake of salvation, to appreciate the finest traditional art in China and to thank Eun for his selfless act, learning the spirit of self-sacrifice there as a part of their pilgrimages.

The sight of the breathtaking Mogao Grottoes is later seen as the 'Lost World of the Past'; myths mentioned the story of the magical grotto; and it became a place to collect one's mind through reflection, to learn forgiveness and sacrifice. Hence, the Legend of the Mogao Grottoes remains one of the holiest places on Earth.

Journey of the Death God

Marymount Secondary School, Tang, Charlie – 14

2081–8–24

The cave of no return—The Mogao Grotto

The man in black's POV

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.

Many people throughout the ages have endeavored to explore the Caves, large crowds of people have gathered there, bringing with them recording devices and chattering loudly.

Yet there was a mystery that scholars haven't been able to answer. The records have stated that no man, woman, child or animal who entered the cave have ever come out alive, Yet people still go there, like the Pied Piper luring children into the unknown. Which means that many people are still in that caveassuming that they are still alive. I am journeying there now, in hope of freeing their souls. Those bastardly humans, I have tried to warn them many, many times not to go near those caves, yet they still go, like moths to flame, and my warnings fall deaf on their ears. I have complained enough, we have already arrived. You will hear of me another time.....

August 25th 2081

Tour guide's POV

Ah..... yet another day of dealing with annoying tourists, I really hoped that today people will be sensible and not come out in the sweltering heat, but the wheezing of the train and the chatter of people buzzed on, and it's time for me to put on my "Tour guide face", how annoying. I scan the crowd aimlessly, then I lock eyes with a stranger, that, despite the heat, they wear long flowing black robes with the hood over their head, and when they walk past, a flicker of a memory passes by: my mother, lying on a hospital bed, struggling to breathe, my father, lying on the pavement floor, a pool of red slowly growing larger beneath him. I shuddered at the thought and turned away, and when I looked back the stranger was gone, melting into the crowd. I turned back to my tour group and yelled "Alright people let's get to the hotel so we can check in before we go anywhere else!"

2081–9–2

Forging on— Almost there

The man in black's POV

Sigh..... I thought crossing the desert to the grotto will take at least a day, but because of a group of tourists getting lost in the desert, I had to make a small detour, but finally I am there, now the only thing I have to do is to figure out how to move the huge rock blocking the way and I'll be able to do my job.

Roman Male's POV

It's been year 200 in this grotto and honestly I am surprised that I lasted this long, the monk in the corner has been praying non-stop along with a man in a turban, and the barbarian is arguing with the churchman for the who knows how many times, I sit crossed legged on the floor in front of one of the many passages in here. I came here with my wife and daughter twenty days ago, as they have been itching to go somewhere near nature so Wife can get inspiration for her next book and honestly if she ever gets out, assuming she is even in one of the passages, she will have enough material to write a whole book series. Yet when we entered this place, we were separated and trapped. Suddenly, footsteps are heard from the right, where the entrance is supposed to be. The churchman pauses his argument with the barbarian and sighs "Ahh, another poor soul to join us in this devilish place, I see." I get up and peek over the entrance, there, standing all clad in black, was our new arrival, "I'm here to get you poor souls out, so get in single file and float out please." a voice says from under his hood. All of us stared at them. Then the barbarian bursts out "We've been here for at least 200 years already, how do we know that this is not a trap the Monster sent us to lure us out?" The stranger looks annoyed. "There is no monster, that's just a story your elders made up to keep you from going here, which rightfully, you should have. Now get in a line before I make you. Their gaze lands in me "You, Roman boy, go first. " I stare at him for a minute then move to stand in front of him. The others slowly

move to stand single file, the barbarian cursing under his breath. When we reached the entrance, a glowing doorway blocked us from entering. The man in black takes out a small bag and hands it to the monk. "When you go through the doorway, there will be a miser standing in front of you, each of you give him one of these coins in the bag and he will take you back to the places you each need to go. I trust that Monk here is trustworthy enough to not keep all the coins for himself." the monk nods. "But of course, but may I know the name of the person who saved us?"

The man was walking towards the inside of the grotto, where other passages lead, and at the monk's words, he turned around. We all gasped, he had no flesh at all on his face, only a grinning skull that stared back at us with mild curiosity.

"I am Thanatos, the god of death, and I am here to cleanse this grotto of your poor mortal souls."

The Endless Ambition of Man

Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Fong, Anson – 14

He should not have embarked on this journey. But now here he was, trudging wearily through the scorching rays of the sun, and the endless desert. He remembered a time when he had been lost, like now, only without the useless, worn map fisted in his hand, and with endless fear welling up inside him. He had thought then, in desperation, *Don't let me die. Please.*

Oh, how he wished for the end now, an end that would never come.

His food and water supplies had perished like a drop of water in this ocean of sand. His breaths came fast through parched lips. His body ached after days of hopeless trudging.

A glint of green caught his eye. An oasis. He had hobbled towards that green speck of hope that was steadily growing closer. When he finally reached it, it had not been a mirage. A cave with fresh, green trees and vegetation towered over him. His knees buckled, and the last thing he saw was a stone plaque in front of a cave.

He hadn't understood the words of the plaque then. He did now. In a tortured, broken voice, the weary traveller started reciting the poem that plagued him:

“Beware! all ye who enter
The doors of Knowledge's center
For within, perceived reward
lives a dangerous, double-edged sword...”

He had opened his eyes to a monk's smile, kind and pure as an angel's. “You were on your last breath,” the monk had said. “I healed you.” When the traveller inquired of the great power that could bring someone back from near death, the monk's eyes twinkled with innumerable secrets. “These caverns hold great power: the power of great wisdom. My companions and I, we dedicate our lives to guarding truths – truths that would cause irreversible consequences if let outside our haven.”

Power and erudition – every man's greatest desire. The traveller had found himself wondering: what sort of knowledge, exactly, did these caverns contain? Secrets for a better life? For wealth? A flame ignited inside him. Distantly, the traveller heard himself say, “I'm a monk.” He wove a story where he had left his monastery in search of another home, and got lost along the way, and could he please stay to join their noble cause of protecting knowledge? The monk deliberated for a moment. The traveller thought he caught a dark flash of something – something sharp and perspicacious and unsettling – flit across his gaze, but it was gone as soon as it had appeared, and the monk's gaze was as open and trusting as ever. “Since you wish to join us, you should have access to our library. Come with me.”

He led the traveller to a set of oak doors and opened them –

into an utopia of knowledge. Shelves of books stacked up, as meticulously arranged as layers on a giant birthday cake. In the middle of the furnished, carpeted room stood a single bookstand. The monk told him that it was the oldest book in history – containing the secrets to a life of luxury, richness, and most of all – immortality.

How he wished he had not been tempted. But surely; temptation was encoded into the essence of human nature, for he had not been able to resist. The traveller continued his recitation:

“Abnegation, its humble ward
Shuns self-serving Selfishness;
Blames blatant corruption
Of Human Nature – beware!
Enter only the pure of heart;...”

After leaving, he had encountered a quaint village, situated near the edge of the desert. He thought back to the conversation he had with the chief of the village – he, too, had been to the place known as the Mogao Grottoes.

"What secrets did you bring back?" the traveller had asked curiously. The chief replied, "I asked for the secret of happiness. They let me have it, then bid me leave."

The traveller was surprised. He had not known to ask for the knowledge of what he yearned for; rather, he had lied and then snuck out at the dead of night with his newfound knowledge. "What was the answer? Riches? Money?"

The chief pointed to the mural inscribed on every house in the village: "知足 – that's Chinese. Translated, it means being grateful for all that you have."

The traveller was sceptical. Why acknowledge your dearth, when you could have infinitely more? He stayed at the humble village for a few months, but he was bored and unsatisfied. "I have the greatest treasure of all: immortality," he thought. "But what use is immortality, if you cannot spend this eternal life in riches and magnificence?" So he found the map he had brought back with him from the Mogao Grottoes, and set off again.

And now – here he was. Lost in the desert with a map as useless as a snowboard would be in summer, with only sand in sight.

After what seemed like an eternity, his eye caught on a glint of gold. Heart leaping, he walked towards it, and saw – a man lying face-up in the sand. His whole body was made of gold, and from him, gold spilled out in all directions like syrup. The man's uncanny golden irises rotated, and fixed on the traveller. Thin, parched golden lips formed the man's name: Midas. He tried to speak, but what came out was a desperate gurgle. Gold foam bubbled out from his mouth. He choked, spasmed, and was still.

The traveller stared at Midas, fear rising in his throat. Forcing his eyes away from the horrific sight, he stumbled forward blindly – only to see a girl crouched in the sand, hands covering her face. A tornado of jewels rained down on her: diamonds, rubies, emeralds, sapphires. She took her hands away from her face to swat at the relentless jewels, revealing a face filled with countless jewel-sized bruises and cuts. A wail of despair sounded from her: a sound saturated with pain, remorse, and self-loathing. Her wails gradually faded into warbling cries: "No! Please! The Mogao Grottoes... I wish I'd never wished for this! Please...let me die..."

His panic steadily growing, the traveller tried to find his way back to the village he had stayed in before, but soon found himself utterly lost. He had no idea how long he had been suffering this torment of mind and body; no idea where he was going; and no idea what would happen to him in this cruel desert. *I want to die*, he thought; only he couldn't: he had doomed himself to the curse of eternal torture. His legs gave out. The traveller dropped to the ground, haunted by the last verses of the poem on the plaque that had, at last, come true:

"From this haven, Malevolence shall depart –
To an end of cruel ruination
Of his own creation."

Tales from the Mogao Grottoes

Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Ho, Kaylie – 12

Tales have many endings: happy, angry, sad. But one in particular, the tale of Eve, of a kingdom since long burned to rubble, has by far, the most useful ending.

Eve, the hundredth—and—one wife of a shining, golden emperor. Her smile touched the monarch's very soul, dipping his wildly beating heart into a stirring pot of emotions, filling his stomach with flying, fluttering butterflies. He fell for her beauty in a mere second, and he asked for her hand in marriage.

She obliged, with three requests to prove his love. Firstly, clever Eve asked for all of his other wives' wedding rings to be given to her, in order to prove his loyalty to her and her only. She knew she had not the power to ask him to let go of the others. Secondly, a willow tree, as sturdy as a rock, as their future marriage. Lastly, a position as his empress, to ensure that she would never fade into the background. The emperor thought on this, but blinded by her beauty, he found all of the rings, he found a rare willow seed, and he convinced his officials to let them be wed and make her the Empress.

After he fulfilled these requests, she agreed to the marriage, and they were wed in a haze of silk dresses and glimmering jewels. Within a matter of weeks, they were husband and wife. The entire kingdom celebrated the newlyweds, bringing gifts to their gates, piling up.

But one night, a dark reign of fear and pain and terror took the kingdom by storm. The plague had arrived, brought by merchants from the lands above. Bodies littered the kingdom's white tiles, crimson stains bleeding into the gilded ivory tiles.

Eve despaired of such a thing happening to her husband, of his body being lowered to the soil. But despite her hopes, one night, as thunder boomed and lightning struck the ground, death claimed his hold on the golden king. Eve could not bear the thought of losing the one she held dear, the one who she loved so.

She went to a sacred river and knelt by her white willow tree, gifted by her husband. She prayed until her voice was gone, a night had passed and she could speak no more. Her tears fell from her rosy cheeks. For how long she stayed there, she heard a voice, singing of the wind. It told her, "Dear, dear, do not cry. do not weep, for your husband is content in the afterlife." "But he is dead nonetheless, and I still live." The voice sighed, and whispered of a secret to her eager ears. "Before the sun goes down, pray to him for help. It knows what I do not." and it was gone. Eve sat and waited for the sunset, when the moon's silver glow would be found, and the rosy glow of the sun gone to rest.

When the sun was nearly ready for rest,
she asked.

"Oh Great Grandfather Sun, what might I do?"

The sun deity saw her persistence and told her to look for the moon.
the moon would know, she knew most things after all.

Soon, the moon came out, and Chang'e in all her greatness appeared.

"Oh humble moon goddess, what must I do to save my husband?"

Chang'e pondered on this and produced a silver necklace. "I will help you. I demand no payment. Your kingdom has always prayed to me and respected me. But the price will be high."

"Anything," Eve begged.

"Then know this at the price of your conscience. Water the king's grave with blood from an alive maiden. Your love will spring to life. But he will not die at the hands of anyone but you. You, whom the necklace will bestow with the curse of darkness. You will be an outcast, the only cure the death of your husband. Are you certain of this?"

"Yes."

And at that, Eve took the necklace and found a maiden, whom she struck down and took the liquid of life from her hand, and sprinkled the blood on the king's corpse. The scarlet flecks evaporated, and the King opened his eyes to find pitch-black orbs staring back at him, grey shadows flickering in that eternal darkness.

But instead of what Eve had dreamed about, instead of embracing her, he screamed, horror-stricken at the image of his wife with shadows at her beckon, flickers of darkness and moonlight glittering around her.

He ran from her, running to the palace, ordering shocked troops to attack the queen. Without hesitation, not recognizing the queen, they stormed the cemetery, where the distraught wife laid.

Eve's shadows wiped the mobs out, and tears, so alike the ones that had fallen from her eyes weeping over the very same king that spurned her, fell down her pale skin, streaks of despair crying out. Heartbroken, she formed a dagger of the darkest of her shadows, fueled by her wrath and pain, and kept it by her side.

Now, as the night approaches, legend warns of the dark Eve, chasing after her immortal king, forever chasing him of his cowardice, and of the golden-haired stranger that might just show up at your door and invite a certain raven-haired woman with a silver amulet to your very house.

Memories.

Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Loh, Claudia – 13

Memories from here, nowhere else. So many memories that make me want to get out.

The elders tell me when I was just a little babe wrapped in cloth and cotton, my Mother arrived here with tears in her eyes, a mouthful of cries, and me in her arms. They tell me I was a sickly child, embedded full of the most awful illnesses; they say I'd stay up all night with the most pallid cough that made me ashen faced. The elders told my mother I never stood a chance, that I'd be lucky if I made it past my first month.

"You were just a little babe wrapped in cloth and cotton," they say. I sense more tales of my Mother and I arriving with tears in her eyes and a mouthful of cries. I sense stories of how I was a sickly child, embedded full of the most awful illnesses. Apparently I'd stay up all night with the most pallid cough that made me ashen faced.

The calendar on the wall signifies my 14th year of being here.

Everyday I wake up and complete my daily routine— I wash myself and cook breakfast because the elders tell me that's what's expected of me, a girl with nothing to do. Everyday I stand over the burning stove, my cheeks flushed and my long windling hair tied up, cooking three meals a day. I break the eggs, I fry them; I scale the fish and cook them for the insolent, uneducated males who scoff down their meals without a single trace of *thanks* in their eyes. It is so mind numbingly boring, so soul crushingly boring, that I yearn to run and break free from this cage I call my world.

"Mother, can we, can we please?" I beg. But she's just so weak, so fragile. Every time I ask her she just shakes her head and purses her lips as if the very idea was meaningless. "Aren't you bored here, mother? Aren't you sick of their useless teachings?" I implore, shaking her.

But she isn't bored. She isn't bored and I yearn for her to be bored with every cell of my body. She flits across the room, laughing and joking and hugging with the elders and somehow, I feel a pang of *not enough* inside of me. She sits at least 5 feet apart from me no matter what the occasion, and my skin crawls with the prayer of wanting her love.

She completely believes the elders. I see it in her eyes, I see it in the glimmer of hope that is always present around her. She likes cooking. She likes weaving. She likes being a damsel in distress, sitting around, helpless and oblivious. Worst of all, she thinks we are deserving of the beatings they give us.

We are told to sit and not flinch. *The male is superior to the inferior female*, they tell us. They lash belts and hooks on our skin. Out of the corner of my eye I can always see the silent tears streaming down my mother's face. They whisper in my ear and they call me a fatherless child. A bastard.

Today is my fourteenth. I have everything I will ever need packed. The elders took away all my valuables; said I didn't need them and that the only thing of value would be a good enough man available to marry me. When I asked they laughed and they spat curses at me. "How could anyone like you ever find a worthy enough husband?" Everyday they make an example of me to the other girls, the ones descended from the elders, the ones worthy of marriage. They all turn their noses up at me now. Everyone except for Anh.

While it is my fourteenth today, it is Anh's fifteenth. We have agreed that when the clock strikes midnight, we will run away together. Anh will have a good life here if she stays. As the elder's daughter, she is worthy of respect. But she is bored too, Anh tells me. And she is sick of it. Sick of their beatings on me and sick of their unjust rules.

"Together we will run," Anh tells me. "We will stay together and live together as long as we live. There will be no need for men."

"Society will shun us," I reply.

She holds my hand, a juxtaposition of smooth, churned butter against rough calluses. "Why should we care about them? Who cares what they think?"

It is easy for Anh to say. It would be easy for her to stay. She has everyone's respect and she is the embodiment of what they need. A pawn in their cruel game. She can be a pawn, if needed. I have seen her sit there and nod to their

useless lessons and swear to be worthy of a husband one day. But I cannot be a pawn. I am too outspoken, too rash and too bold. "If you were born in a man's body, it would be better for you," they tell me with every whip of the belt. "But you are a woman. And a woman should obey."

Anh is the only thing holding me on, right now, as they lash a string of curses on me again. They tie me to a chair, bind me up with string, and start their torment. To them, it is a game. To me, it is something I must survive. My skin is rough and it is getting harder and harder for them to beat through every time. They like to watch me. Bleed. They take satisfaction in watching me suffer. But as I grow stronger, it gets harder.

Doesn't mean it doesn't hurt as much. With every whip, I attempt to muffle a strangled cry. I stare straight ahead, unblinking and unmoving. *I will not be a pawn in their game. I refuse to give them the satisfaction of seeing me cry.* But out of the corner of my eye I see Anh, looking at me with the most desolate, devastated look in her eyes. I know she is desperate to get me out of here. To get us out of here.

"Born out of wedlock," They scream at me.

Silent, I take the suffering.

I stay mute. I know if I speak up, it will only get worse. They will only bring me more pain, and less of the pain is what I need right now. The pain stings like fire to my skin. Metaphorical bees nip at me every second. I can feel crimson blood drip.

And that is when they stop.

They leave me alone, ripping off the strings and untying me from the chair.

Anh rushes over to me as I slump down, defeated. "We need to leave right now, Shing." She tells me while tending to my wounds. I wince as she presses a white cloth, now stained red, onto my wounds. "We need to leave."

"I thought we were leaving tonight."

"They plan to finish you off and kill you. They're coming back with more."

I blink. Somehow, this strikes no emotion in me. It's like I expected it. I didn't, of course. But my reaction is hinged and controlled.

"They can't kill me."

"Yes, they can and they will! If they don't kill you they'll kill your mother. We need to leave, *now*." Anh urges, bandaging up the rest of my wounds. "Can you walk?"

"Just barely." I gather up the resulting firewood from today. "Anh, will you—"

She grabs the firewood without complaint and takes my hand, ignoring the blood that seeps out.

"Anh, what are you doing? Do not touch that bastard child!" Her father shouts at her, running up to us. There is a glimmering, reflecting silver in his hand.

"Now!" Anh whispers to me. She quickens her footsteps, motioning for me to do the same. "Shing, now!"

"GET AWAY FROM MY DAUGHTER!" Anh's father roars, diving at us. I see the glimmer of a sharp object near me. Ducking, I roll into a ball and crouch. "SHING!" I can hear Anh beg. I can see her father inch near me.

"Father please!" Anh pleads, running up to her father and pulling on his clothes. "Father, please spare her—",

"I have ignored this little friendship of yours for too long. The girl will perish. Anh, you will be punished for your disobedience."

He brings up the knife, a look of utter malice in his eyes.

My brain freezes.

Somehow, my legs find the energy to start kicking. I thrash around, hoping to kick him. As I throw a punch onto his leg, Anh bites her father's shoulder.

He howls in pain, elbowing Anh and sending her flying.

I don't think twice before I throw myself onto him, pummeling at him with my tiny fists. I am small, but my punches weigh twice my size. I can sense the silver object clatter next to him.

I don't need to tell Anh to take it before she crawls across the room, her father's violence reflected in the growing bruise in the corner of her eye.

For good measure, I punch him one last time.

And then we run.

The First Grotto

Shanghai American School – Pudong, Lai, Charlotte – 13

The blazing sun shines bright like a medallion in the sky. Le Zun wipes a line of sweat off his face as he shifts his focus to the journey ahead. Numerous days have passed since his arrival at the Gobi Desert and the trip has only gotten harder with his increasing fatigue. So, in order to distract himself from his sweat-drenched robes and aching body, Le Zun begins to think about the destination that he longs to reach – the Western Paradise.

Like the countless monks before him, Le Zun embarked on his journey to set foot on this blissful land and get reborn into peace and plenty. Just like that, thinking about his wondrous destination, Le Zun quickly loses himself in his imagination.

Angelic music sounding from the sky, trees glowing with precious fruit, ravishing images of the Western Paradise flashes in Le Zun's head. He's deep in his thoughts when a cold breeze suddenly brushes against his face, pulling him back into reality. With the cooling temperature and the sun's changed location in the sky, it occurs to Le Zun that a lot of time must have passed while he immersed himself in his fantasies.

"Well, it looks like I should find somewhere to settle for the night. It indeed is getting colder with every minute" Le Zun tells himself. If he doesn't want to get stuck in middle of the desert, he knows that he should pick up the pace and make it to the mountains before dusk. And as the sun slowly begins to set, the temperature drops. Without the intense heat of the sun, this journey that was deemed exhausting to him doesn't seem so bad after all. In not much time, Le Zun reaches the mountains.

As he makes his way up, a spring in the distance catches his eye. With his mind preoccupied with the tireless imaginations, Le Zun had almost forgotten how thirsty he is. And now, with the serendipitous appearance of this spring, he simply couldn't have been more delighted to quench his thirst in its flowing waters. Under the exhaustion of his journey and the approaching night, Le Zun decides to make camp near the spring and lay down to rest.

Soon, it becomes dusk. Le Zun lies drowsily in his camp, admiring the sunset. Suddenly, just when he's getting ready to rest for the night, the mountains begin to glow. In his disbelief, he raises his head and an image of the glorious golden Maitreya Buddha appears floating out from the mountains and into the sky. Le Zun is quickly astonished by this heavenly sight. And before he knows it, a thousand glowing Buddhas emerge, lighting up the sky. Sparkling fairies follow by flying out and surrounding them, performing delightful music that's simply a joy to hear.

Le Zun remains dazed in this breathtaking sight when the buddhas and fairies are suddenly retreating back into the mountains. Just a blink of an eye later, they are all gone, as if none of it ever happened. Le Zun rubs his eyes and regains himself a little.

"Oh, I must have dozed off without even knowing it!" Le Zun mutters somnolently to himself. "That's probably just all a dream, but at least it was a beautiful one."

But suddenly, something occurs to him. What if he wasn't dreaming? What if all the buddhas and fairies and music hadn't just been an illusion? Perhaps the scene he saw was a vision!

"I was just completely transfixed by that radiant scene! But if it really was a vision, I should stay and celebrate it; maybe I can even recreate it for more people to see!" Le Zun excitedly exclaims. With this new idea, all his drowsiness seems to fade away in an instant.

Lifting his head, he takes a glance at the sky. With everything happening, Le Zun didn't even realize how much time has passed. The sun has descended into the mountains and the moon appears in the sky, gently peeking out from the clouds. The night sky is like a dark, velvet cloak covered in shimmering sequins. The moon shines brightly in the middle, casting down its light that glimmers on the fields around him. Now, being in such a pleasant and serene setting and feeling content with his plans with the vision, Le Zun finally tries to calm himself and settle for the night.

It's early the next day when he wakes up; the rose-pink light of dawn has just started to appear. He rubs his eyes, regaining enthusiasm for his ideas from yesterday. Oh, how wonderful that scene had been! And how blessed have he been to be the one to witness it! However, though wishing to enjoy himself and take his time, Le Zun knows that he must hurry in order to recreate the scene and not waste too much time on the journey. Just like that, he quickly sinks into his thoughts.

Le Zun's had plenty of experiences with art in his life, so recreating the scene wouldn't be too challenging. But of course, he knows that he can't just paint or sculpt out in the open like this. What he needs is a place to create and store his art – a shelter. Suddenly, an idea pops into his mind.

“With the tools that I have, I can create a grotto. This way, the art I make will have somewhere to go!” Le Zun declares while looking around at the various mountains surrounding him. “It shall be right on the sandy cliff walls in between these mountains, right below where the glorious scene appeared.”

Inspired by this new idea, Le Zun immediately set off to work at the cliff wall. It was arduous work. But in the great mood that he's in, he didn't really complain. Just like that, a small cave was dug out on the cliff walls in no time. Then, with the inspiration and motivation the vision gave him, Le Zun begins to work inside the grotto – creating murals and sculptures to represent the breathtaking scene from last night. Finally, he wraps up the hard work and stands from afar, admiring the beautiful cave.

“It looks like that little idea of mine has certainly gone a long way,” Le Zun exclaims with a big smile plastered on his face. “Well, I guess it's time for me to move on. I still have a lengthy journey to complete.”

After packing up his belongings, Le Zun takes one last longing look at his work. He would love to stay at this site longer. However, time is passing by and he knows that he needs to get going. Le Zun pushes himself away from the spring where he so cheerfully quenched his thirst, down the mountains where he's peacefully spent the night, and ultimately away from the sight of his grotto. As he stepped out into the opening away from the shade of the mountains, the heat of the desert embraces him. Though unlike yesterday, Le Zun isn't tired or annoyed anymore. This vision has filled him up with energy. And as he continues his long journey to the Western Paradise, he cannot help but think of the grotto that he's left behind.

In several years from now, maybe another monk will arrive at this spot. Maybe they will have the exact same visions like he had. And maybe the little grotto filled with his art, words, and story will be discovered and they will appreciate it just as much as he did. Le Zun can't help but smile at the thought of this.

This concludes the story of the entrancing legend behind the first grotto of a tremendous treasure house full of stories and possibilities. Although Le Zun's story is only a local legend with no proof of accuracy, we don't really have another explanation either. When thinking about it, everything started with just a simple vision of one monk. Yet it was with this vision of his that continued to change and impact the world even today. Little did Le Zun know that through the course of one thousand or so years, his simple vision would have turned into a pilgrimage site for travelers all over the country, a flourish of creativity, art, and innovation, and an exceptional representation of medieval art, culture, and religion. Just like that, Le Zun's one single grotto, with the contributions of the thousands of monks that came, expanded to a considerable number of 492. And for us today, these 492 grottoes also became a popular and enchanting tourist attraction. People all around the world came to Dunhuang, Gansu to journey through this dazzling tunnel and discover the fascinating world from the past. And just like that, an ordinary spot on the route of the Silk Road, through the course of a thousand or so years, became the extraordinary Mogao Grottoes – the great treasury of Buddhist art that we have come to know and love today.

The Perfect Stone

Shanghai American School – Pudong, Mei, Michelle – 13

The bare branches adorned with snow shiver as the bitter wind calls, whipping the newly fallen snow over onto the unevenly paved road. Dark clouds loom over the temple as the warmth of the sunlight gets blown away by the whistling brisk wind. Villagers brave the cold as faint chatter fades away.

Tiny droplets of tears crawl down the man's dark circled eyes, streaking his pale cheeks. The tears were not from the frigid winds, nor the pungent smoke from his beloved father's burial ceremony where the villagers Shencun burnt joss money to ensure a better after-life. The tears, dripping in a steady stream was from somewhere else, something ancient that rooted in his soul. Despite the frigid weather, families gathered to burn joss money to ensure Ming's father will have a comfortable after-life. Ming was so exhausted. Tired of feeling guilty. Tired of not being like his dead father. Tired of letting everyone down.

As the icy wind blasts through the village as towers of snow sweep past, Ming fights the constant crippling headache. Ming tries to peer through the currents of his blurry mind, his headache throbbing, pulsing, drilling away all emotions.

His father was gone. Ming's father Qiao did not leave much behind for Ming aside from a small stash of money and a box full of Qiao's most prized possessions. Inside the beaten wooden box were several texts on Buddha.

Slumping inside, the warmth of the temple hits Ming's wet cheeks. Ming's tears were for thoughts of his own after-life. What had he ever done to ensure his karma? He wasn't even there for his father as he lay sick and shivering in his hut. He was out gambling, getting drunk, and only talking to his family to ask for money to cover his debts.

Ming sees his family adding paper money to the roaring fire. They don't acknowledge his presence, and when they return home, he is still standing in the cold, shivering to the burring paper.

He stares at the flames eating the money, and thinks how his actions were almost the same, burning through whatever money he could beg from his father.

Ming wraps his worn clothes tightly around himself as he enters the temple. Ming wears trousers that were patched at the bottom, too short for him, and a faded jacket his father once gave him.

Inside the temple, a large statue of Buddha sits in tranquillity, its gentle, almost closed eyes casting no judgement, a warmth spreading out from its stone visage. Lighting an incense stick, he holds it to his forehead and bows to the Lord Buddha. He makes a promise to remember his father and his mother, to honour them, and to offer his service to Lord Buddha.

Exiting the temple, Ming climbs towards home. Guilt and shame course through his mind, as his past burns like acid; his headache was racing as constant sharp needles piece through his mind. As heavy snow continues to fall, snow crunches beneath Ming's straw shoes as he hurries home before nightfall.

Arriving home, he goes directly to his bedroom. Ming drags his father's old box to his desk. Settling into his chair, he studies the Buddhist texts. He holds the scrolls up to the flickering candles until the sun burns away the darkness. Ming begins to seek enlightenment like Buddha taught the people in the tales. Not studying math or Chinese, Ming studied religion. Up all night, his eyes and ears slowly adjusted. For the first time in many years, he finally begins to feel accepted with the people in the tales: stories of Buddha's power. While the stories were full of life, Ming's still felt empty, he now felt a new hunger for change.

At dawn, while everyone in the village is still bundled up under the warmth of a blanket Ming is wide awake. The snow had ended when Ming rose from his desk. Quickly getting dressed, Ming forces the door open, fighting against the powerful winds.

He walks for hours, until the radiant sun reclaims the sky. From the distance, Ming spots a dilapidated tea house, when he arrives, he enters, stamping the snow off his father's worn boots. Ming was not the only customer, despite it being so early in the day. Ming nodded to the older man with a long white beard. The old man spoke.

“What brings you so far from your home on this cold morning?”

Ming pauses and speaks softly “I need to clear my head. My father died. I never even came to say goodbye – I couldn’t leave my wine and dice. And now he is gone forever. I recall my father telling me to come here for your advice.”

Tears fill Ming’s eyes as he gazes through the window.

“I see,” said the man. “Not everyone is perfect. You are like a stone. In its original state, blunt and imperfect. But a weapon maker can take that stone and turn it into a knife. Look at this blade. It was not always so perfect and sharp – it took hours of constant dedication to sharpen it. Life sometimes gives us the hard times. We can either crumble under the pressure, breaking into tiny bits of gravel, or we can use hard times as a whetstone to hone our blade.”

Ming nodded, as he continues to fiddle with his thickly callused hands.

The old man spoke again. “Sometimes we stop believing that we can change. We accept who we are, even if we find our actions hard to accept. Remember Buddha. From a rich man to a penniless wanderer, Buddha never stopped changing, and his story reminds us that we can always change too.”

“My father tried to tell me about Buddha and the Mogao Caves, but I never listened. Last night I read the Buddhist scripture my father left me, and I, want to change. But I don’t know how.” Sighed Ming.

“Young man, perhaps you can go to the Mogao Caves. People like you and followers of Buddha could devote themselves to painting or carving, to writing sutras, to show their worth in this life so that they could have a better life after they died.”

Hope sparked for Ming as he nodded not making a single sound.

The old man handed Ming a scrambled piece of paper with the detailed instructions to reach the caves. “But it won’t be an easy journey especially in this weather. If you hurry and start walking soon you will arrive there just after dusk”.

Ming clutches the piece of paper as he nodded and wiped his teary eyes. “Is it far?” Ming blurted although he knew it was too childish for him to ask.

“Many thousand li, but there are many travelers on the road. Merchants and traders, wandering monks, Buddhists, Christians, Confucians. Most seek money, but many are on a spiritual journey. Perhaps your father thought you were ready to leave your old life behind.”

“Father did not leave me a lot of money. Do you think I will have enough money for the journey?”

“Once you stop worrying about money, you will find you have all you need, the trip will not be easy.

There will be dangers along the way, from wild animals to deadly storms. If you decide to visit the caves, you will need some way to protect yourself. Please, take this knife. It will protect you, but also remind you that you can change from useless stone to sharp knife. Please, take it.”

“Thank you. But what will I do once I get there?”

“That is up to you. Many monks paint pictures on the cave walls to tell the story of Buddha for those who cannot read. Some carve huge statues of Buddha.”

“I can neither paint nor carve rock.”

“Perhaps not, but you can read and write. When you get to the caves, write your father’s story. Honor him. Add his story to the thousands already there. Honoring your father is one way to change your karma.

Ming’s eyes were no longer filled with tears. Instead, they shone with a new light. He took the knife the old man offered, and paid for the tea. Wrapping his father’s worn coat around him he headed back to the cold, starting his journey. As ice claims the road, Ming trudge through the snow listening to his father’s whispers in his head; for

the first time, he listened, really listened. Despite snowflakes pricking his face like tiny insects, Ming could not resist but smiled.

Ming had a goal now, a purpose, a path out of the darkness he had always chosen. He did not know what would happen at the caves, what challenges life would put in his way, but he was determined now to face those challenges and to honor his father and Buddha. Ming might not yet be a perfectly honed blade, but he also knew he was also no longer a mere useless stone.

Mogao Survivor

Shangahi American School – Pudong, Tang, Luke – 11

Part 1: The Beginning of the End

1

Memory

The Mogao tribe flourished in the depths of ancient China. With success comes power, and with power, comes bad guys at your door bell. I can't really remember much of my past with the rest of the Mo's, short for Mogao tribe. But that's because I was a baby, and there's also the small factor that I was preserved and hidden for almost 5 centuries in a giant solid, gold buddha. Scientists and anthropologists think "we got abandoned because they switched the silk road trail". Around the 1400 common era, it was another day of bustling trade on the outside along the great silk road. And within the caves, there was a magical one as the chosen children practiced magical combat, yes including me. I remember this clearly as though it was yesterday, but my memory has become foggier and foggier every time a minute passes. I've forgotten what field I specialized in as each of the 7 chosen children were assigned to a singular fighting style—Samurai, Knight, Valkyrie, Ninja, Wizard, Wrestler, and Archer taught by the previous generation of fighters. I was with my mentor, Sai and we were warming up with jumping and sprinting, when we both sensed a disturbance outside. Then, the sound of bustling and trade was instantly extinguished and from the silence came the crackling of flames and a rumbling sound. At the time I didn't know what was happening and everyone else seemed dazed, everyone but Sai. While we were all stunned, he whipped out a pouch, enlarged it with an incantation, and shoved me into it with his armour and weapons, then cast protective enchantments around me. He continued forth and dived towards the stone wall, put his hand on a circular symbol I couldn't make out, and threw me into the passageway revealed as the rocks moved apart. While all that was happening, the cave door was broken and masked figures with multi-colored ribbons trailing from their long black shawls were at the door. They wore masks, each symbolizing animals, and pulled out knives with their animals on them. There were seven of them, lion, tiger, bear, tortoise, spider, shark, and falcon. They attacked both mentors and students with shocking speed and force. I was thrown directly towards a golden figure, and as I was thrown, I looked backwards and a horrific scene greeted me. The scene of Sai falling to the floor in slow motion, all life devoid of his eyes, and from behind him I saw the dead bodies of all 12 other mentors and students on the floor and splattered with blood. The cold, black eyes of the falcon met mine as the door concealing the buddha slowly closed, and even though he lunged forward, the final protection of Sai rebounded him and the doors closed with a deep finality. I was the only one left of my kind.

2

A Slice of My Life

I was supposed to be hidden until destiny bid someone to let me out, and I expected some cool super powerful celestial warrior. But I guess destiny doesn't always want to help you because all I got were some drunken, overweight monks. I've been living in their home ever since. And now it's the present and I'm 6 years old, turning seven in two hours, the time when magic truly shows it's true potential. The monks are amazed by our paintings and everything for some reason, but that's our history of magic. I was astounded when I saw "photos" that were magically printed on paper and of course you could do that easily with a copying charm, but this was without magic. There are countless more inventions like planes that are both impressive and can't be replicated by magic. Now, I've gotten used to the couches, cars, and refrigerators the monks have and I've got to say, 1900 common era ain't bad. "Breakfast lil chumpy chuck, breakfast!!!" said Daniel loudly. Daniel was the leader of all the monks that had discovered the Mogao Grottoes and he was the one who went forth to create one of our caves into a 1900 style roomy apartment complete with a stove, beds, a fridge, and everything else you'd need to live a peaceful life. I loved Daniel and he was the one I showed most affection to, more than even Sai. He's been raising me for so long and he isn't like the other drunk monks. He's fit and has a great personality, nobody can help liking the guy. I shoot out of bed and dart downstairs, somersault onto the couch, roll on the carpet, and push myself onto Daniel's stuffy armchairs. "I see you've still got that knack for acrobatics Levi," chuckled Daniel in his kind and warm voice. I look up into Daniel's face with a bushy beard and hair combined with his chocolate brown skin, creating the perfect image. "Yeah, I'll be seven in...one and a half hours!" I responded cheerfully. "Well hurry up and eat your scrambled

eggs and bacon, and Mogao—Mark’s bacon ain’t cheap! And look at this, I made you your favorite! Cheese Cake!” I jump to my feet, eyes wide and mouth drooling. “Where is it!” I exclaimed. He pulled it from the bottom of the table and although it was small, there were just the two of us, so we dug in. I felt elated beyond recognition, but how little I knew of how much my life would change so soon..

3

A Legend is Born

After the cheesecake, Daniel and I went walking outside and we were both staring at his watch. We’d just finished our cheese cake and we were preparing for my birthday when I sensed a disturbance in the air, something like what I felt the day Sai died, but I just brushed it away. There can’t be anything, it’s my birthday I told myself. “1 minute!” exclaimed Daniel. I could suddenly hear animals that weren’t native to our land and the voices seemed surprisingly close and my head was throbbing from the effort of trying to decipher what this meant, I couldn’t shake off that feeling. “50!” Wait, these sounds are like Lions, Bears, and Tigers. I could hear the scurrying of a spider and the swishing of a tortoise and shark. “40!” Then I heard a falcon and something clicked. “30!” Those were the signs of the masked figures! But how are they here, they can’t be. This seems awfully suspicious though. “20!” What was that memory again, I think it had something to do with Sai. I squeezed my face, trying to pull out all the concentration I had to locate that memory. “15!” That’s it, I hear Sai’s Voice! “Levi, I want to tell you something, it’s about when you turn 7.” “10!” boomed Daniel’s voice from a long distance away. “When you turn 7, your magical powers will be completely revealed but the protective—” “3!” said Daniel’s cheery voice. “Enchantments around you—” “2!” “Will be—” “1!” “LIFTED!” I whirled around and saw Daniel about to say zero when a masked figure appeared behind him, grabbed him by the shoulders, turned into a falcon, and flew away at light speed along with Daniel. I started to scream, a horrible scream of anguish and grief, the worst type of scream possible. Then, my vision was blocked by a figure. It was Lion. I had no weapons and he was raising his knife, no several knives were clamped to his nails so they resembled the claws of a lion, their metal surface gleaming in the sunlight. I saw the hand slowly bearing down on me, but I didn’t accept death. I thought of Sai who was murdered by him, his group, and Daniel who had been taken away by the falcon. Suddenly, my eyes sharpened and I could feel Sai’s bow in my arms, a quiver slung over my shoulder, the celestial arrow already notched. I saw Lion’s eyes widen behind his mask as I let go of the string. The arrow soared straight at him and he tried to block it, but it was no use. It made a clean hole through his hand and neck, sending a stream of blood spurting into the air. I didn’t know if it was instinct or not, but the hole through the neck destroyed his tattoo. But I didn’t stop to think, I wheeled around expecting others, but no one was there. The air was at peace and quiet and I knew what my goal for life was and who I was after years of being trapped in a solid golden buddha. I was an archer, no THE archer, who would save Daniel and as a tear trickled down my face and my heart pounded against my chest, I could feel a blazing inferno well up inside me and I stared into the sunset and started running, running toward my destiny.

What the Goddess Taught Me

Shanghai American School – Pudong, Wu, Yurika – 11

What is the meaning of life? It was the millionth time I had asked this question. Each day was just another repeat of the day before. It seemed like all my friends had exciting adventures. Some even had a near-death experience, so I assumed that they must have grasped the meaning of life. But for me? I just stay at home all day, being envious of others.

The days went by slowly. I felt dragged down and bored. One day, while milling around the house, I saw something that caught my eyes: A brochure about the Mogao Caves in Dunhuang. Flipping through the brochure, I quickly decided that I would go there and see for myself what made it so special. I booked the next flight to Dunhuang, and the next day, in a blink of an eye, I was on the plane! Everything felt so different from the day before: The sunlight shone through the window panes and I couldn't help thinking that the light gleamed like hope, warm and bright. For the first time in ages, I realized that I was happy and sensed a flicker of expectation.

After getting off the airplane, I hailed a taxi to the hotel. I quickly left the baggage in the room, grabbed the backpack from where it was hanging, which caused the suitcase to fall, hit me in the leg, and spill everything I had on the floor. Normally, this would make me frustrated, but today was different. I was going to have the time of my life and nothing would dampen my mood!

An hour later, I ended up at the caves. As the driver wasn't allowed to drive close to the caves, I had to walk at least 2 kilometers to get to the entrance. By the time I arrived, I was out of breath. Sweat streaming down from my cheek and neck drenched my shirt! For a brief moment, I felt so stupid about myself, "What have I got myself into?"

Then, all of a sudden, I thought of the ancient people who built the Mogao Caves. I couldn't help wondering, "What had driven them to construct such a massive project, in the middle of...of...nowhere?"

All my weariness and exhaustion melted away as I dragged my last step upward and finally reached the top, where I had the first view of the caves with my own eyes. My jaw dropped! The temple, which appeared to blend into the cliff when seen from a distance, was perching on the edge of a vast and almost vertical cliff surrounded by the boundless desert. Imagine the work needed to build into a hill of rock a temple that would survive for thousands of years. Even in modern times, this would be arduous. I walked into the caves in awe.

Within mere minutes, I was lost. I wandered left and right until I walked into a room and gasped at what I saw. The walls were covered in patterns with colors still bright as they were before. In one drawing, a group of people was praying to the buddhas. Rubbing my eyes, I could have sworn they had moved. In another drawing, I saw buddhas and thought they were all rather monotonous until I looked closer. They were all different! Some had golden flakes on their clothes and others were meditating with a look of calm. Each drawing of the buddhas was as small as a bottle cap, yet the sheer amount of details stunned me.

Then in another room filled with vivid statues, I almost bumped into someone. I apologized before realizing that it was actually a statue. Gazing at the folds in the statues' clothing, I drifted into a thought that if a breeze came, and if I could fondle the folds, I would probably be able to feel the rhythm as the folds swayed gently in the breeze. The adjacent cave was covered with a high ceiling of delicate decorations that reminded me of mandalas. The swirls and patterns were painted so meticulously that one could even see each brushstroke. I pondered, "How had they drawn the patterns on such a high ceiling? I had to strain my neck to look upward. Given the technology they had then, it was nearly impossible!"

I continued meandering. I saw the Buddha, which, according to the brochure, was the largest in the entire caves. He lay on his side, with his eyes closed and mouth slack, his face calm. It was as if he was in his ideal world. However, his students were tearful. I could almost hear them wailing and sobbing at the departure of their mentor.

After what felt like 5 hours of exploring, I was worn out.

"I should go home," I mumbled to myself. "I've been here for many hours already."

When I finally found the exit, however, I couldn't get out. I checked my phone and found that it was already 7 o'clock. And I knew for sure that the caves were scheduled to close at 6:30 pm!

“Oh, my!! I’d have to stay overnight!” I yelled out. I refused to believe it! I was going to be locked in here by myself! I tried banging on the door, but no one came. I tried banging on the door one more time, but no one came.

“Oh well,” I sighed and resigned myself to find a dry and warm spot in the cave. The optimistic part of me told myself, “Well, at least you get to have your first exciting adventure!”

I sat down, taking out some snacks from my bag. “At least you have got something for dinner!” I tried to cheer myself up a little. Slowly, my eyelids felt heavy, and slowly, they closed.

It seemed that I was in a deep, deep dream. And in my dream, I saw a magical forest. As I walked deeper inside, it got darker and more sinister. When I reached the middle of the forest, I found a goddess that looked like me.

“Who are you? And why are you pretending to be me?” I questioned.

“I am not you! I’m just copying you.” The voice boomed indignantly.

“I know! I want to know things that you probably don’t even think about.”

“I do.” Huffed the voice angrily. But I could feel that her tone, somehow, had slightly softened.

“Well, what do you think about it? Hmm?” The goddess continued. “I’ll answer one question you have and on—”

“Thank you, your majesty! I cannot thank you enough!” Before the goddess could finish her sentence, I interrupted. “Well then, what is the meaning of life?” I eagerly asked, and watched her. I watched and I waited. For a few seconds, I felt that I did not even dare to breathe!

The goddess turned and thought. Finally, after what felt like a million years, she answered, “I don’t know exactly, but what I do know is that the meaning of life is different for everybody. Take these caves as an example, people labored over the statues and kingdom. Even in the hardest circumstances, they persevered by overcoming obstacles, pushing boundaries, and breaking through their limits. They concentrated on what they were doing so that they could constantly improve. They are one of the prime examples of what life means to some people: find something that you are passionate about and stick to it, no matter what. Stick to it even though it is hard. And I think this means something to you, too. Don’t you think so?” The goddess looked back at me. I could sense that the softness in her voice had increased, even though it was just a bit more.

I paused there, trying to take in every single word. But suddenly, the goddess disappeared without giving me a chance to thank her.

I woke up with a start and checked my watch. It was 6:30 am. I breathed in deeply and told myself that I would get out of here soon.

Finally, tourists came pouring in and I dashed through the crowd, causing murmurs and titters all around me. But I didn’t want all this to slow me down. I ran towards the exit, through the maze of caves. I finally got to the entrance. Panting and puffing, I hailed a cab and jumped on board.

“Whew, that sure was intense.” I let out a loud sigh.

When I finally got to the hotel, I threw myself into the bed, hoping to catch some sleep. “*Ring-ring!*” I jumped and realized that it was my reminder to pack up and go. On the long ride to the airport, I thought about what the goddess had told me. By the time I came out of my trance, I was on the plane and going home. I looked out the window and was shocked to see how beautiful the world was. Then smiling peacefully, I closed my eyes and let my mind wander.

The Harmonies of the Sun

Shanghai American School – Pudong, Zhou, Madison – 13

“The history of the past interests us only in so far as it illuminates the history of the present.”

—Ernest Dinnert

366 AD

The setting sun descends with a harmony of red and yellow, leaving a symphony of shades that reflect over the endless eminence of the desert, humming a mellow tune that echoes across the land. It retreats, absconding into the dark shelters of the mountains.

He takes another step forward, eyes squinting at the distant horizon, his feet sinking into the roasted sand. His shaven head fails to shield itself from the heat, and his wide, orange sleeves flutter at the whistles of the wind.

The sun leaves passages of resplendent radiances across the jagged surfaces of the mountains.

And suddenly, on the rocky surface of the hill, a blurred scenery gradually awakens. Beams of gold scan the mountains, contouring the thousands of silhouettes that incandesce under glints of light. The distinct manner of their majestic positions glow with vestiges of rose firelight; their muted features are traced by radiating halos of lambency—

A sudden blinding of the sun—and the silhouettes are gone, leaving behind no traces save the rays of light, revolving ever so silently.

He blinks, arising from the realm of reveries, his mind blank yet tainted with one thought: *that vision—it’s a message, an appeal—one that demands a response.*

★ ★ ★ ★

866 AD

The sharp, crisp sound of porcelain on stone and paint pots on uneven ground betoken the morning of another sunrise, bedecked by indistinct chatters. The golden specie—a bloom of brilliance—peeks from the horizon, sending messages of copper onto the ground and into the hollows of the hill.

Those hollows each chronicle a stage in the process of creativity. Shadows are printed on the rocky ground, rotating in correlating directions with the sun. The diverse hues of pigments in pots scintillate under beams of sunshine.

The *Jiangs*’¹ robes are stained with the slightest traces of those vivid tinctures. They dip the brushes in paint and sweep off the excess, creating thin streaks of pigment that idly slide down the sides of the pot, like raindrops gliding down leaves on a spring morning. Then, the paintbrush tips are on stone, the elixirs of beauty creating copious landscapes where floral patterns bloom and apsaras flit across walls—where the scenery breathes along with the euphonious melody of the sun. Every mural is a memento—of not just the stories...

Voices in the grottoes:

“Yue Zun, wasn’t it, the monk who saw a thousand buddhas?” a *boshi*² turns to a nearby *duliao*.³

“I believe so.” the *duliao* replies, turning his head and averting his gaze from the accumulation of caves.

“Have you ever considered the authenticity of the vision, its accuracy? How can we ensure that all this work will not be for nothing?”

The *duliao* blinks at his straightforwardness and sighs, “We cannot ensure that, young *boshi*. Yet the flaw of the belief—the acceptance of it—gives us the vitality to act. And in doing so, we’ll all eventually be able to find a meaning to this.” he stops, as if lost in thought. The *boshi* stares at him, all perplexity and anticipation.

“And the meaning itself can have sundry meanings; its significance will range greatly—or remain unfound.” the *duliao* concludes.

Then there it is, a slim slab to the right: it pops open with a slight push, as if it had been waiting forever for that minute force.

The 'wall' creaks. And withdraws in—a hidden chamber.

He gasps, coming to register the surroundings. Dropping his battered broomstick, he gingerly steps in. His eyes survey the landscape: thousands of scrolls, piled in mountains, parallel to the wall. The narrow beams of sunlight embroider the dust-covered papyrus with amber dashes.

He reaches abruptly and his fingers grasp the end of a sheet; tugging it out and rolling open the delicate parchment, his eyes reflect his wonder, dust and sand dancing around him. He finds countless peculiar characters staring back at him, the faded ink almost breathing across the paper—
—the paper that felt like dry leaves, yet also like silk.

Voices in China:

"Discovery is crucial. And the study of history is, too. What Wang Yuanlu did—it's remarkable."

"Nonsense. He sold China's ancient artifacts, unlatched the passage for countless harms that are being inflicted on them."

"Yet, what he did shed light on those once-neglected treasures, bestowed them with new value..."

"His actions..."

And the debate perpetuates...

★ ★ ★

Today

The setting sun descends—a golden coin slipping through the fingers of wind, absconding into the mists of the clouds.

The natural light sends rays of amber into the golden landscape below, bringing harmless flames to the dimples on the hill—tracing its smile. The portrayals are encapsulated in the legion of grottoes, dimmed by the obstruction of light, dimmed to preserve their beauty—what could have been done years earlier.

These objects of virtue are exceptional. They alter and reorient, a novel style and technique in every grotto; they are a testament to the sophistication and advancement of civilization, its culture, religion, and intellectual awareness. They capture their history through countless aspects—almost all aspects of humanity.

The footsteps of tourists are drowned by their voices, clustered just like the countless caves on that golden hill, but unable to amalgamate into a scene of beauty.

Voices in the grottoes:

"They built these grottoes—only because a monk encountered a vision?" he asks.

"Partially. They used the vision as a vitality to understand the significance," she replies.

"Yet still, after time, they were forgotten. Some view it as merely art."

"That's because many could not comprehend a meaning that was in—depth enough; it was found, then lost. And now found again. They are much more than art. These grottoes themselves are a branch of learning. There are copious reasons that fabricate its meaning."

Her next words roll off her tongue naturally, with a spontaneous feeling of déjà vu, "*And the meaning itself can have sundry meanings.*"

★ ★ ★

"History is not a burden on the memory but an illumination of the soul."

—John Dalberg-Acton

The Nine Coloured Deer

Shanghai Community International School, Ng, Ella – 13

"Welcome to the Mogao Grottoes." Announced a musically, smooth voice. "I am Hua Lei, your tour guide today, I hope I can help open your eyes and bring life to our wonderfully wondrous tourist attraction." Despite the enthusiasm of the tour guide, Diana was drowning in dullness on her school trip to the Mogao Grottoes.

"Before we go, here is a brochure to help you understand some of the most important pieces of art in here. Now please follow me."

"Auuuuuggghhh..." Diana reacted as the paper contacted her hands. As she stuffed it into her pocket, a wind brushed Diana in her face. Diana turned to look but saw nothing. As she turned around, she saw a rainbow flash.

Hmmm... she thought

Diana stayed at the back of the group as they walked through tunnels and holes, admiring the walls and stones. As she moved further, it started to seem like the eyes of the statues and paintings were watching her and whispering about her. They seemed...real.

Suddenly there was that rainbow flash again. Dashing past her.

That was it.

She darted in the direction of the flash. Boredom was replaced with a sudden inquisitiveness that was raging within her. She quickened her pace. She was torn away from her group like a sticker getting peeled swiftly and silently off the sticker sheet. No one noticed that she was gone. Dashing left and right through the tunnels and the paintings, she kept her gaze on the rainbow flash.

Then, the colourful spectrum turned a corner and into a tunnel. She increased her speed and soon found herself going head over heels and landing face first into the dust. Diana stood up, brushed off the dust, and found herself in yet another tunnel. This one was bigger and more elegant than any she had ever seen. She went in.

The rainbow raced past her again! She dashed right after it. As she did, she slammed her face on something as hard as the floor, again. Diana plopped herself up to face a humongous human lying luxuriously on a bed of ruby clay. Her body quivered. Then, the brochure she received fell out of her pockets and floated to the floor. She picked it up and found it opened to a certain page.

The lying buddha—a major theme in Buddhist art. It represents buddha during his last illness about to enter parinirvana—the last moments of Gautam Buddha's mortal life before he achieved nirvana, or freedom from the cycle of birth. Diana didn't know why but she instantly fell to the floor, her head hitting hard, bowing to the greatness.

"Ow!" She yelped in a soft whispered.

I'm going to regret that tomorrow. She thought. *I don't know why I am bowing, but if I didn't, I would feel disrespectful...it's like there is this invisible force coming from the buddha that is making me bow. Still, it is soft, kind...*

"Why shivering so, child?" The statue asked in a voice that seemed to be made of silk.

"I beg your pardon, I...I just am trying to find that colourful thing..." she stuttered. The statue smiled.

"Ah, that elusive, yes I see, take a left turn, go down three halls and you should find it." As the statue just finished, Diana saw another flash of rainbow.

"Thank you...um... "

"Buddha. Please call me buddha." laughed the buddha.

As she continued to chase down that rainbow, she stumbled into...a workroom? Diana saw a big cave and in it were many supersized statues of people. Some were seated with their legs on top of the other. Some were just standing. They all look like they were...praying? She pulled out the brochure.

The praying Buddhas. Buddhists used to dig out caves and use them as temples and praying areas. These statues are built in them. As she turned to leave the room, she saw a sign:

"Do Not Disturb the Praying Buddhas." Diana quickly tiptoed from the room relieved she kept her loudmouth shut.

Suddenly Diana passed through a thick mist and into a garden of trees holding smooth, big, bright, juicy peaches. Fumbling for her brochure, Diana found the page she was expecting.

The Peach garden—high in the heavens, there is told to be a peach garden. The peaches grown in that garden are magical and believed to contain wisdom and a long life. The peach garden fairies pick, garden, and tend the peaches

A majestic, tall fairy came floating along the path. She smiled and gestured toward one of the very high trees.

"Nà xiē táo zi zhǎng dé hěn gāo. Kě yǐ bāng wǒ zāi xià lái mā?" The fairy asked. Diana puzzled over the words. Then, as if a lightning bolt struck her, she clapped her hands.

"Oh! You want me to help you get the peaches! Sure!" Luckily, Diana was a skilled tree climber. She scampered up to the tree like a monkey and shook the branches until it was as if it were raining peaches. When she climbed down, she found that all the peaches magically all landed in the fairy's basket. The fairy warmly grinned in thanks and handed Diana a peach.

"Oh! Thankyou!" beamed Diana with peach juice drizzling from the corner of her mouth. When she finished her delight, wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, and was zapped to attention.

"Oh! Do you know where that wild running of colours went? I am trying to track it down," she questioned with curiosity. The fairy paused, chuckled, and pointed to the left.

"Lù jiù zhè yàng zǒu le," she answered. Diana thanked her and raced off to the direction and wondering where the wild spectrum might be.

Once more, the wild colour appeared, once more Diana stumbled into another piece of art. This time, it was a very dark, red door. Standing between the door and Diana were two giant guards. She dug in her pocket for the brochure again.

The guards of heaven's gates—by myth, guards that protect the gates that held the jade emperor's temple. The guards open the doors to all who enter and exit the palace.

"She is not from here, is she?" whispered a voice from the right.

"Never mind if she is here or not. But the matter of fact, why?" chirruped the one on the left. Diana realised that the two door men statues were talking about her.

"Did the buddha let her in?"

"Maybe, maybe not. Suppose she didn't but look at that big bruise!"

"That must be the sign she bowed to buddha. A sign of respect."

"And a sign of clumsiness."

"Umm...hello! I. Am. Standing. In. Front. Of. You! RUDE!" Objected Diana.

"I heard mortals have pure stupidity." Claimed the right.

"Ah. Let's test this one." Theorised the left and walked up to Diana.

"Tell me what is one plus one." He boomed as he pointed his index finger just an inch from Diana's nose.

"Tell you what is one plus one?" Diana repeated his question back. The left one groaned.

"You see what I mean? Kick her out of here!" yelled the right

Before Diana could react, one of the guards grabbed her by the arms, the other opened the door, and then...

SPLAT!

“Oi! You idiot guards could have opened the door for me so I can walk out instead of flying out!” roared Diana as she shook her fist at the direction, she was thrown out, but that direction was now a solid wall. She turned around to see a breath-taking, colourful painting before her of a deer. Before she got to the brochure, the tour guide and the field trip group got her first.

“Ah, there you are. Just in time for our last exhibit. Here is a painting of heaven’s most beautiful beast,” Hua Lei pointed to the painting of the deer. “This colourful, rare, one and only deer is a guardian of the forest and helps animals and humans in need. One day, when a human was about to drown in the waters, the deer rescued the human and gave it safety. The human promised to never tell anyone about the colourful beast. One day the king had a dream of a colourful beast, and his men used its fur to make a fur coat for him! The next morning, he set his men out to get the deer. The human who was saved by the colourful beast went to the palace and bargained a price if he showed the king where the beast was. Soon, the hunt began. But the deer was too fast. It was so fast that it only left traces of colours. Soon, when the men were tired, the deer told the king how that human betrayed their promise. The king stopped the hunt and punished the traitor. The deer became protected. Soon, the deer, due to its colourful fur, was called...the nine coloured deer.”

An Elightened Soldier

Shanghai Community International School, Singh, Kiaan – 11

He drifted back into consciousness. The grainy sand in the air rushed into his lungs, and the effort of coughing seemed too much for him. Collapsing on the floor in agony, the severely injured Roman soldier who was left behind to die looked for refuge from the torrents of sand raining down upon him. He spied a small alcove providing partial shelter. He attempted to stand up; pain shot up his leg, crippling him once again. The lack of air proving too much for him, he faded back into his drowsy slumber. The sound of hooves awoke the soldier. At first, he thought he was safe back in Rome, but that thought faded away as he saw that approaching him was not a horse, but a camel. Seated upon that camel, was a traveller. By his upright posture and his dyed clothing, the soldier could tell he was possibly a wealthy merchant. "Hello there," the soldier heard him say. In a raspy voice the soldier asked for help and, on seeing that he was gravely injured, the merchant took the soldier along with him.

The soldier awoke in a small cave, dimly lit by a single lantern in the corner. "You're finally awake!" exclaimed the merchant.

"I thank you for your help," the soldier, who later introduced himself as Lucius, said, sitting up.

"No problem," the merchant continued.

"Where are we?" Lucius asked.

"We've reached the grottoes."

"The grottoes?" asked Lucius.

As his eyes adjusted to the dark, he noticed a short, man standing in the shadows of the entrance. He was clad in an orange tunic and his head was shaved. In the bleak light of the lantern, Lucius could see that this oddly dressed man had kind eyes. He smiled at Lucius and stepped forward. The merchant now began speaking.

"Your injuries were grave, brave soldier. You lay unconscious on the back of my camel for two whole days as we travelled to the Mogao grottoes. I knew that the healing powers of the monks here would be the only thing that could save you. Now, our ways must part. I am leaving the caves tomorrow and continuing with my journey. My ship is scheduled to sail for Rome soon and I cannot stay here with you any longer. But you are in the capable hands of the monks of these caves. When you are well enough to travel, find your way to the city of Xi'An and buy your passage home with these coins."

Saying this, the merchant gave Lucius a bag of coins and got up. He then called the monk towards them and introduced him as Shenzu. "You are in good hands, brave soldier. When you are healed – from outside and within, find me in Rome. Ask the people on the docks to take you to meet me – Magnus." And then the merchant left.

A few hours passed before Lucius woke up again and found Shenzu still standing by the alleyway. It was evening now. He could see the orange fire on the horizon. He sat up and Shenzu helped him get to his feet. He asked Lucius to follow him, as he led him to another cave. Here, Shenzu explained that he had been learning about the art of the medicine Buddhas and it was his years of study that had healed Lucius' injuries. Saying this, Shenzu sat cross legged in a lotus pose and began chanting softly. Lucius lay down on the cold floor of the cave and listened to Shenzu until he drifted into sleep once more.

Shenzu continued to care for Lucius. His diet comprised of the local fruits and vegetables found around the caves. The monks cooked him rice flavoured with local herbs and when it got cold, they made soup for him that was enriched with medicinal herbs. Within a few short weeks, the monk had Lucius walking properly again. During this time, Lucius read scroll upon scroll from library cave numbered 440. These scrolls introduced him to the teachings of the Buddhas and although he did not understand much, he would often approach Shenzu and other senior monks with questions that they would patiently answer for him. Lucius strolled the landscape exploring the various caves and spent time learning about the various artworks that were being drawn on the cave walls. He was most drawn to the work being carried out on cave 220 and Shenzu spent a lot of time explaining the relevance of these stories that the monks were painting for generations to learn from. Another monk invited Lucius to paint along with them and he readily agreed. Lucius spent many days painting the dancing figures on the bottom of the cave No 220. Other more talented monks were assigned to paint pictures of medicinal Buddhas and a giant mural of the first Buddha himself.

Lucius loved meditating in front of this mural. He spent many hours seeking his own truth in cave No. 220. Shenzu and the other monks included Lucius in their daily meditations and discussions about spirituality. Lucius felt drawn to these happenings. When he was lying injured in a foreign land, all he prayed for was to find a way to go home. Now, he wanted to spend time with the monks. He wanted to meditate and chant and paint images of the Buddhas. He finally understood why Magnus had, now over a year ago, said that Lucius would heal from within as well. He felt healed. He did not feel the urge to be a soldier again. He sought inner peace and his next goal was now clear.

It was a sunny and bright day when Lucius reached Alexandria, in Egypt. In the dry dunes, the sun beat down upon him as he walked towards the library. Sweat pouring down his back and looked around for the librarian in this magical world of words one of the senior monks had told him about. A man wearing a long, flowing gown of earthy tones, and a white turban, looked up from the thick record book he was peering through.

“Yes?” he said in a voice that obviously was attempting to hide annoyance from creeping into it.

“Good morning... I... am looking... for a job... as...a... scribe,” panted Lucius, dressed in a plain white tunic with short hair.

The librarian replied, “We are only looking for scribes who write about certain topics. What would you write about?”

Lucius explained where he was coming from, the time he had spent in meditation and learning about spirituality and that he would like to record his experiences and write about Buddhism. The librarian then put the record book away, and formally accepted Lucius into the library as a scribe. He led him to his own quarters at the library.

It has been many years since that day. Lucius is now a frail, old man with a flowing white beard and kind eyes. He continues to record the teachings of Mogao Grottoes. I, his faithful assistant, run errands for him and carry his scrolls to place them on the shelves in the Library of Alexandria. Under him, I have learned to be at peace with myself, have practiced the art of meditation and enjoyed his many stories from the time he spent at the caves. I now await an opportunity to travel East and find my true self someday.

The Living Statues of Mogao Grottoes

Shanghai Singapore International School, Katyayan, Aadya – 12

This incident dates back to around 1892. Johnny Jessins, an archaeologist and a wanderer, was touring along the glorious silk road in the sizzling Gobi desert. His two friends, Maria and Jeanne, his usual companions, were on their usual strides with him far in the desert. “Behold this,” the three pointed at once – there seem to be remains of some old town ahead. They were pointing at the magnificent structures that resembled caves.

They were on their usual ‘quest’ to discover something unusual and ancient. These caves certainly were. They knew they cannot resist those inviting caves. After some minutes of walking, excitement and anticipation in their minds, soon they set foot inside and moved on into the darkness of the cave.

They moved further from one chamber to another to a place that resembled a courtyard. It was a jaw-dropping moment. With her eyes wide open, Maria exclaimed “This is like a dream. I have never seen anything like this before!” Several beautiful art pieces, statues of monks, antique furniture, ornated walls, and a mysterious calm – it was one of the greatest sights they had ever experienced. The paintings and statues were covered in heaps of dust. It was obvious that no one had been here for ages. The statues signalled that these caves were once a lively centre of Buddhist practices.

They looked around for a while, exploring the breath-taking objects that these caves held. Soon a wall emitting bright rays of light caught their attention. They moved ahead in anticipation. The light was so bright that it was hard to see anything. As they adjusted to the light a little bit, they tried to get closer to the wall. Johnny tried to touch the area of the light to find out what was emitting it. Unexpectedly, he screamed and wailed very, loudly. He instantly pulled his arm back and looked at his friends in horror.

“I—I felt something grab my arms very tightly!” Johnny said, “It was cold and hard and—” He suddenly paused. He stood there, paralyzed. His face suddenly became pale.

“Johnny,” Maria and Jeanne asked, “are you okay? What happened?” Then, with all his might, he raised his shivering hand, pointing behind Maria and Jeanne where the light was shining. Jeanne and Maria froze at what they saw—a humongous statue was slowly coming out of the bright light. It pounded towards them with heavy steps, making the caves tremble.

“Who dared wake me from my slumber!” the statue roared in a loud gruff voice. Johnny and his friends were petrified. They looked at each other and then at the statue. The statue looked at each of them with wide, angry eyes. Then, it smirked, slyly.

“Well, what a surprise! I see we have guests,” the statue changed its tone as it greeted Johnny and his friends wholeheartedly in a welcoming way.

“Weren’t you mad at us for waking you up from your sleep?” Johnny asked, looking confused.

“Absolutely not! It isn’t often that someone comes and visits here. You are our first visitors in about a thousand years! Would you like a tour of these caves?” the statue offered. Johnny, Maria, and Jeanne discussed for a few moments, as the statue patiently waited. They were perplexed.

“We can’t possibly trust him. Didn’t you see he was fuming the first few seconds he saw us,” whispered Maria.

“Yes, and he suddenly changed his tone, not to mention the evil look he gave us,” whispered Jeanne.

“Well, we don’t have a choice. This is a huge place. We want to explore the vastness of the cave and its many chambers. Besides, if we get lost, it might be very hard to find our way back. Moreover, the statue doesn’t look like it means any harm. Let’s accept the tour,” Johnny insisted.

Maria and Jeanne sighed, looking exasperated. They knew that Johnny certainly wanted to explore the caves and wouldn't listen to them. Maria and Jeanne agreed, albeit reluctantly. The statue was overjoyed. Right away, they found themselves in the middle of a newly discovered place, getting a tour from a statue. They knew no one was going to believe what they were up to.

"These are the caves of the thousand Buddhas. They are all manmade and were places of worship and pilgrimage. These caves housed several monks," the statue informed them. "There are about 492 caves in total, and more than two thousand painted sculptures."

"That is incredible," Johnny exclaimed, "however, we can't possibly tour all of that in just one day!"

"You don't have to," the Buddhist statue muttered and continued to show them around. After a while, he took them to the statue of Maitreya. Maitreya was sitting cross-ankled, on a throne. After a short silence, the ground started to tremble. A crack from the bottom of the statue extended all the way up to Maitreya's head and the statue broke open.

Maitreya opened his eyes and walked out from the inside of the statue. He moved forward and greeted each of them. He smiled as he led them to the seats on the bare ground near the throne.

"We don't usually expect visitors, but it is a pleasure to meet you," said Maitreya, "Why don't we have a chat so I can tell you more about this place."

Maitreya shared all unknown facts about the cave. Johnny and his friends carefully made notes. They thanked Maitreya and requested to help them with the way out. On their way out, Johnny, Maria, and Jeanne were discussing how they were going to share the discovery of the Mogao caves and the living statues in it. Unfortunately, Maitreya overheard them talking about this and stopped them at once.

"I am sorry, but you cannot let anyone know that there are living statues in the Mogao caves," Maitreya said, in an angry tone. "We have been living in peace for many years, but if the world knew about us and our abode, there will be chaos." Maitreya continued in a loud and firm voice. "You cannot leave."

The three of them knew they needed to act fast. They ran as fast as they could, but Maitreya quickly got hold of them with the help of the other statues. Johnny, Maria, and Jeanne were dragged to where they had first seen the bright portal shining in the wall. They were pushed into that portal in the same wall.

"We don't mean any harm," said Maitreya "Your basic needs like food and comfort will be taken care of, have a good rest," as he walked away.

Maria, Johnny, and Jeanne were nervous. The idea of spending the rest of their lives trapped in a wall of light was horrifying. They had to find a way to escape. However, their human power was not of any use here.

The next morning, they saw the portal open again. A statue's hands stretched into the light and served them three plates full of food. Jeanne observed how when the food was served, they were able to get out of the portal in the wall. This sparked an idea in her mind.

"That's it! I've got it!" Jeanne exclaimed. She explained what she had observed. After hearing what she said, they were delighted! Now, they knew exactly how to escape.

The next morning, as expected, a Buddhist statue came and stood outside the bright light, to let the portal open. The statue stretched its hand inside the portal to serve them their breakfast. While taking it, Maria deliberately dropped her bracelet to the other side of the portal. She pleaded the statue to pick it up and distracted him. Jeanne and Johnny quickly got out and hid behind another pillar, and Maria retrieved her bracelet and the three meals. The statue didn't suspect a thing as he couldn't look through the portal. After the statue left, Johnny and Jeanne stood in front of the wall and waited for the portal to open. As soon as it did, Maria swiftly crept out of the portal. Dodging the Buddhist statue, they ran as fast as they could. However, the statue suddenly saw them running and started chasing them. They dashed, and kept running until they outran the statue that was chasing them. Drenched in sweat, they were panting vigorously. They knew that the other statues by the side wouldn't stop them as they didn't have power to do it without an order from Maitreya. Johnny and his friends had to exit the cave before Maitreya knew and could order

the statues to stop them. There was no room for error. Luck was with them and they were out of the caves before Maitreya could activate the statues to stop them.

They knew that Maitreya wanted to keep the existence of statues a secret for right reasons. Johnny and his friends respected Maitreya's desire. The world never knew that Mogao caves were home to living statues and unfathomable treasures.

Manhunt Accident

Shanghai Singapore International School, Lee, Chi Yee – 12

Dream's POV:

I can't remember but this story happened between my friends...

Flashback:

I opened my eyes and found myself in a strange place. It was a room with blue light and white wall. I was on a red bed with a smell of honey and beside me on a table was a diamond axe, the one that looks like the Minecraft (a game) axe but this is real life. I tried to carry it and surprisingly, it was quite light.

A speaker announced loudly, "Please gather your items and come to the Center Room immediately."

What? Center Room? I went around the room and carried a diamond axe and a shield. There was a walkie-talkie in my pocket and my clothes had changed from my casual green clothes to a green sweater with a brown stripe across it and a green and brown mixture color pants.

My hands flew to my face, thank goodness that my mask was still on. I got out of my room and started wandering around the strange place.

I saw a familiar face.

"George?" I asked. (George is Dream's friend)

"Dream? Is that you?" that guy asked back.

"George!" I answered. Holding back my tears, I ran straight into him and wrapped my arms around him.

"Dream! You also came to this place too?" asked George who tilt his head up to look at me.

"Yes..." I replied.

"HURRY UP AND GATHER AT THE CENTER ROOM, YOU MUFFIN HEADS!" the speaker again once shouted.

"The way it uses the word 'muffin head' makes me think of Badboyhalo." George whispered to me.

When we arrive at the Center Room, what was waiting for us was a chair's back, surrounded by different shades of red vines being protect between two guards. Sapnap, who was waiting there and is my friend, quickly ran towards George.. George aimed his bow at them because he was scared that they might harm us. I put my hands on his chest to stop him.

"Speak now, mortals." I sternly said with a glare at the guards.

"Greetings, I have been waiting for your guys so long. Finally, you guys are right in my base." The man spoke front the chair.

"Why do you want us to come to you base?" Sapnap asked.

"It is because... YOU GUYS ARE GOING TO BE DOING A MANHUNT!" The man laughed sarcastically.

"A manhunt?!" We yelled in unison.

Before we spoke anymore words, we were teleported and dropped into a place called Mogao Grottoes, located in China. It was also known as the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas. Since I live in America so for me China has been a strange place who speaks different language and eat different kinds of food.

A blue translucent board appeared in front of me and it said;

“RULE:

You are allowed to use your weapons to kill the person who hunts you down

To win this manhunt, you and your friends need to find a buddhas that was the β sign on its hand and stand on the pressure plate in front of it.

There are chests in each temple so you can open them to get weapons or armor.

Without any mention, the hunter appeared few kilometers away from us and started running towards us.

“Guys, split up! We have walkie-talkie to communicate with each other later!” I shouted while running.

“Okay, if you guys find anything tell us on the walkie-talkie!” Sapnap shouted.

“Okay, see you guys later!” George replied.

As I was running towards a group of different height and size of little brown-colored temples, I took a quick look behind me and found out that no one was hunting on me.

As the manhunt continues, the brown, cracked-wall temples have been a usual sight for me to find brown chests for weapons or armor. Sometimes, we all get to gather or find each other in temples with different kind of expression and colors of Buddhas sitting peaceful. I would always have water for George who gets thirsty all the time because of the heat that surrounded us.

When I was alone and checking my weapon, the hunter jumped out of nowhere and started to attack me with his axe. Thanks to my fast reaction, I quickly held up my shield and blocked his attack.

“Wait, Badboyhalo?! What is wrong with you?!” I yelled in confusion.

He didn’t reply but pushed me with his axe on my shield, causing me to move backward. When I found out his eyes weren’t green but red, I already knocked on the ground. Again, thanks to my reaction, I manage to block the slice of his diamond axe that landed few centimeters away from my fingers.

Since he is my friend, I could not bear hurting him. However, to defend myself, I had to pushed Badboyhalo on the floor when he didn’t notice and ran away. I turned to my left and ran towards a random temple to rest. To my surprise, it was also where I find George drinking a bottle of water labeling ‘Pure Life’ and I grabbed his hands.

“Dream? What happened?” George asked in confusion as we run out of the temple and pass a couple of brown, cracked temples that look like gigantic sandcastles.

“I can’t explain but I can tell you that we can’t hurt the hunter because it is Badboyhalo.” I explained as we reached to a temple

“BadBoyHalo?! Why is he in the manhunt?” George yelled in surprised.

“I don’t know— oh hey Sapnap!” I looked up, seeing Sapnap waving his hands.

I explained everything to Sapnap about the hunter and Sapnap was surprised.

“Why Badboyhalo?” Sapnap asked.

“I don’t know, but his eyes were unusual,” Sapnap moved closer to me as I spoke about Badboyhalo’s eyes, “His eyes are red not green.”

“Oh, my goodness. Dream, this is not going to be good manhunt experience.” Sapnap replied in a serious tone. I nodded my head.

As our journey continues, more temples arose in our sight. Some temples were short and some were high. We were having some fun going through temples after temples and admiring the artworks of the history. George even knelt down on his knees and started to pray for our success. The Chinese characters on thin white and brown colored—paper caught my eyes and I was trying to read it but fail because I don’t understand Chinese.

“Dream, is that—” George asked suddenly, gesturing his hand to a Buddha with one of its hands holding an object.

“No, I don’t think so George. It just probably another sticker. Come on, let’s move on.” I cut him off.

“No, look. This time the β sign did not come off and there is a pressure plate underneath the sand.” he commented as he dusted off the warm sand.

“Wait, holy muffins George! Let me check.” Sapnap yelled, quicken his pace towards the buddhas and pushed George to the sides. This time the β sign did not come off! We found the sign!

“Just wait, you muffin heads!” someone shouted.

“Badboyhalo?!” Sapnap yelled, “What are you doing here?!”

Badboyhalo didn’t say anything but quickly gave Sapnap an attack of his axe on the stomach. Sapnap screamed with pain and collapsed on the floor with tears flowing out of his eyes and blood leaking out of the side of the stomach. I quickly ripped out part of my clothes to stop the blood from flowing out while George battles with Badboyhalo.

The sound of the sword and the axe hitting on each other was very annoying. It distracted me from healing Sapnap and made me flinch whenever the high clinging sound ring through the empty filled with unknown Chinese characters.

“Ow! Badboyhalo!” George yelled. His arm showed a deep and bloody cut.

I couldn’t bear anymore and gave Badboyhalo a hard push and he hit his head on the wall of temple. When he opened his eyes again, it wasn’t red, it was green. I was about to hug him but he suddenly screamed really loud which made me to stop my pace.

“Bad?” I asked.

“Please—please! Kill me now! Please! It hurts!” Badboyhalo screamed as he threw me his axe on the ground.

Turns out that Badboyhalo had recovered from the mysterious man’s control. However, the man was furious and activated something to hurt him.

“Bad—” I started.

“Please!” He begged me with his eyes in pain.

“I’m sure we’ll find another wa—” I spoke but was cut off by Badboyhalo.

“DO IT NOW!” He yelled.

Slowly and painfully, I kneed down and grasped the bloody axe brown wooden handle and began walking towards Badboyhalo who was still screaming from the pain. With tears forming in my eyes and sliding down my cheeks, I took one swipe and the silence was presented.

The next second, I was in a hospital bed. With George, Badboyhalo and Sapnap bursting in my room, I released a sigh of relieved.

The Monk's Descendants

Shanghai Singapore International School, Mohanty, Arav – 12

“GAAAHHHHHHHHHH!!!! Le Zun!!!” Chang gasped for breath. His eyes were wild, and startled. He looked around, confused. He was in a bed, an empty hearth in front of him. Wasn’t he in a cave earlier? The last thing he remembered was a statue coming to life. In a few moments, he came around.

“Pheeeewwwww, just a bad dream.” Chang was a fifteen-year-old orphan whose parents had been killed by the Mongols when he was eleven during their invasion of his fishing village miles away from Gansu. He remembered the cold eyes as dark as ebony of the strong, the mighty, the one, the only Genghis Khan indeed, along with his plundering army. The village was destroyed and he escaped to the city of Dunhuang. Since then, Chang has had to fend for himself.

Exhausted, he pulled himself up and got dressed. It felt as if he hadn’t got even a wink of sleep. Despite his immense fatigue, he had to carry out his day work. He quickly ate his dumplings and drank his tea before carrying his water buckets on his shoulder and exiting the hut.

He walked hunchbacked with the heavy load towards the oasis to collect water, the only known source of water in a hundred miles.

By the oasis, he spotted unfamiliar strangers with foreign faces and brown beards. “Blasted Spaniards, never resting for silk or paper,” Chang uttered. Despite being started centuries ago, the Silk Road was still going strong.

As Chang tipped over his bucket to fill with water, he spotted two Spaniards whispering and pointing at the cliffs in the distance. They were more elegantly dressed and stern-faced than the rest of the Spaniards. It seemed as if they were the lead merchants. They were muttering something and he had no clue what they were going on about. Could they be after something in the wilderness, and were going on a wild goose chase?

One of the lead merchants shouted something, and immediately, all the merchants gathered and strode behind the lead merchants with their heavy packs and camels. Where on earth could they be headed to?

Chang let his curiosity get the better of him, and without thinking, without even worrying about packing supplies or anything of the sort, he dropped his buckets and ran towards the merchants.

Chang was well away from the city by now, crouching stealthily behind the horde of merchants. The city was the size of a pebble in the distance. Soon, he was beginning to regret coming here. Why hadn’t he packed supplies and worn proper clothing? Why didn’t he think twice? Dazed and confused by the heat, blinded by the sun, and driven crazy by his thirst, he persisted.

Suddenly, to his left, he spotted a shiny blue-grey area, and a palm tree next to it. “Water!!! An oasis!” Soon, he was about to enter paradise, and splash around the oasis. He took a leap towards the ‘water’ and closed his eyes. THUD!!! “Owwww,” he groaned. He landed smack on nothing but a patch of gritty sand. He sighed. It was just a mirage. “Oh no,” Chang wailed. The merchants were just a speck in the distance now. He had to catch up.

Soon, Chang found himself running frantically towards the merchants. He was gaining on them. But suddenly, he felt a jab on his toe, and the next thing he knew, he was sliding across the sand. He had tripped on a tiny stone. He saw a nasty gash on his knee. Blood oozed out, and trickled down his lower leg, dropping on the ground, staining the shifting sands of the Gobi Desert.

Chang couldn’t stop the bleeding, he tried to put pressure on it, but nothing was working. Meanwhile, the pack of merchants were getting farther and farther away. He got an idea. He took off his robes, and tried ripping off a piece of it. Nothing. He tried once more with as much strength he could muster. Nothing. One more time, gathering all his might and determination, he tugged. Success! A long, slender piece of cloth tore apart from the robe, and Chang quickly tied it around his wounded leg like a tourniquet. It wasn’t a professional bandage, but it wasn’t all bad.

Chang continued to run as fast as he could. He was soon closing in. Chang wondered. He soon caught up, not long before, he came across a vast sandy and rocky elevated area. It was the Mingsha Mountain, better known as the Echoing-Sand Mountain. They were below the cliff side.

One of the lead merchants said something, this time in English. “Aha, we have arrived, the legends were true. Travel where the peak meets the noonday sun and the cliff aligns with the lotus-shaped cloud. This is the very spot. My great-great-great-great grandfather was right.”

All the merchants cheered and gave a thundering applause. “Now all we have to do is break the curse, and hoard the riches.” one of the lead merchants explained. “*The curse, what curse?*” Chang thought. “The legend has it, stand by the stone on the last hour of noonday when the ground jay pecks. It indeed is the last hour of noonday and now, we just have to wait for the bird. Suddenly, from the corner of his eye, Chang spotted a queer bird, it was golden brown with black strips on its wings, head and neck. It landed and knocked on the stone with its beak. The lead merchants had noticed it too, one of them approached and stood beside it. Instantly, Chang felt tremors in the earth, the ground rumbled and boulders came crashing down from the cliff. The gargantuan mound or rock cracked open exposing its secrets. It opened like a gateway, then came crashing down.

Out of the dust and debris, Chang distinguished a huge structure with red platforms the shape of boats. “We have found the Mogao Grottoes!!!” the lead merchants exclaimed. Then, at the lead merchant’s command, all the merchants gathered and charged towards the front doors with some wooden poles. With the force, the doors eventually broke down with a tremendous crash. At once, all of them hurried inside and disappeared through the darkness.

Soon enough, after crouching stealthily, Chang found himself in a tunnel leading somewhere into the catacombs of the mountain. After a while, he found himself in an enormous cave with multiple paintings, murals, statues, works of clay, and pictographs. In the front of the cave was a statue of Buddha. His peaceful expression, hair, and elongated ears seemed oddly familiar to Chang, as did this cave. Where had he seen it before? Suddenly it struck him. This was what he had dreamed about.

“Take what you can, loot all the riches!” the lead merchant urged. Suddenly, his eyes turned towards the statue of Buddha. “Destroy it!” he demanded. Two burly men with sledgehammers charged towards it. Without thinking, Chang bellowed, “NOOOOO!!!!” All eyes instantly turned to him. “Who are you?” the lead merchants said in unison. Chang built all his valor and replied. “My name is Chang, and I will not let you destroy the grounds of my country!” “I see,” he said, with a tone of danger. “Never mind, you won’t be alive to tell the tale, kill him!” “Halt!” came a calm but strong voice out of nowhere.

Chang looked back. The statue wasn’t there anymore. In its place, was the Buddha. However, this Buddha was no longer a statue. He was alive wearing an orange robe. The same peaceful expression was revealed after a blinding light that came from him died down. Fear in their eyes, the lead merchants commanded, “K...k...kill it!” The burly men extended their arms then swung the sledgehammer at Buddha. BLAM! The two men were lying on the ground, startled, the shards of the broken sledgehammer scattered around them.

“Go back to your homeland, and learn from this. It is a man’s own mind, not his enemy or foe that lures him to evil ways,” said Buddha with great wisdom. Immediately, a strange black substance was expelled from all of the merchant’s chests. After it stopped, all of their hearts seemed to change. Their eyes were filled with happiness and content. It seemed that Buddha had extracted all the evil from their hearts and replaced it with goodness. Simultaneously, all the merchants chanted, “Thank you.” Before leaving the cave.

“Chang, is it?” Buddha asked. “You have shown true bravery today, I would like to reward you, what would you like?” “From the bottom of my heart, I want nothing, I only did what I knew was right, however, I want to know the truth. What does my dream mean?” Buddha chuckled. “You are the descendant of Le Zun, the monk who built the first grotto here.” Chang was flabbergasted for words, his jaw hung open in surprise. His mind rushed with confusion. He was not just a worthless orphan. He was the monk’s descendant.

The Paintbucket and the Club

Shanghai Singapore International School, Wen, Kuan Hao – 13

It was a long and weary journey, he thought, as he slid off the saddle of a dust covered camel. He had been riding on camelback for three months, with nothing to guide him but the starry stars above. The lack of water and food was constantly threatening to weigh him down in the vast desert, to bury him forever under the gritty sand. It was good to see a tiny slice of civilization and signs of life, something to rescue him from the harsh and burning glare of the sun, to take him from the cliff of death where only the camel and the stars knew what he had endured.

“Excuse me, do you know the quickest way to Dunhuang city?” he said with a rasping voice to a passing herder leading his cows to sell in the market.

“Aye, just round the bend of the road there, eh?” He pointed at a clump of trees close to the skyline, “See that oasis? Ride to there and you’ll see it. You must be the new magistrate, judging by the clothes you’re wearing.”

The magistrate gave a curt nod, serving to confirm his enquiry and give his thanks.

He climbed back on his saddle and rode on, occasionally waving at passersby, hearing whispers as the townsfolk murmured words about their new magistrate. He accepted the whispers philosophically. Ordinary folk have disappointingly small amounts of gossip to talk about in their day to day lives and he sensed this would be the subject of most of their chatter for the next week or so. Shrugging mentally, he arrived at the majestic and towering walls of Dunhuang city.

“Ah, you’re finally here, Mr. Liu. I trust you have your credentials with you?” the prefecture seneschal said.

He was happy that someone would share the almighty load of paperwork. This close to the Mogao grottoes, business and population would be booming but crimes and problems would be festooning as well.

He briefly checked the credentials and said, “Well, you’ll be starting your work as a magistrate tomorrow! You had better write a report to the emperor tonight to tell him that you’re here.” Then he bowed in respect and left the courtroom. He is going to have a busy night, the magistrate thought.

The magistrate was completing his weekly patrol through the Mogao grottoes. It was a bright, vibrant day, the sun grinning hugely and radiating its heat over the perfectly blue sky, ideal for an outing, he thought. The constant sound of the scraping of paintbrushes on the clay walls of the grotto, with the occasional clank of the paint bucket as it fell on the scaffolding, dripping down and thoroughly covering the scaffolding with bright colors, was the sign of another uneventful day at the grottoes. It was over a month since he arrived at Dunhuang and he had been enjoying the excellent weather in the place. He was now a fully accepted figure in the city, respected and considered trustworthy, and his career was going as well as a dream. This was to change.

“Mr. Liu! Mr. Liu! You’ve got to go to the Grottoes!” The seneschal was pounding at the door of the magistrate’s quarters.

“What?” The magistrate slurred as he opened the door. He was been roused from sleep at 4 o’clock in the morning and he was seeing three blurry seneschals in his bleary eyes. He rubbed at them and the seneschals were reduced to one.

“It’s catastrophe!” The seneschal exclaimed. “Vandalism in the grottoes! One of the workers was knocked out cold while he was guarding the grottoes and when he woke up, the artworks were scratched off and the buddha sculptures had missing limbs and are in pieces! Who could have done this?!”

This startling news immediately roused Mr. Liu out of his deep slumber and he began to dress. He galloped his best horse to the Mogao grottoes in a few minutes, leaving clouds of dust behind him. Soon, a group of workers and artists surrounding them, crying to him to catch the charlatan and condemn the man to the coldest corner of the lowest level of the 18 levels of the Buddhism hell for this major offense to the Buddhas. He pushed through the crowd and ran to the damaged grotto, with the mob hurrying after him.

“This is definitely a crime to be punished, I can be sure of that.” The magistrate said, after examining the sorry remnants of the demolished grotto. “What can we do, Mr. Liu? Our bosses will be enraged after they hear this, and they will not pay us our wages, after all the hard work we have done!” One of the workers sobbed. The magistrate sighed. Of course, he thought. Most of the grottoes were created with rich Buddhism believers that paid workers and artists to paint and sculpt beautiful grottoes as a gift to the buddhas, believing that the buddhas will reward them and they’ll ascend to the Buddhism heaven in the afterlife. He is going to take a further investigation on this case.

“Mr. Liu, my chickens are dead.” A worker holding two limp lifeless forms of chickens approached the magistrate when he was patrolling the Mogao grottoes, checking to see the work of the grottoes, whether any suspicious activities can be found as evidence. The magistrate’s eyebrows went up.

“Why are your chickens here at the Mogao grottoes? Shouldn’t they be at your house?” he asked. Livestock have no place at a workplace, he thought.

“Ah well... Sir, I’m very worried about the safety of my animals, and due to the crimes committed lately, I am tad worried about my valuables are stolen, they are my only source of money, you see,” the worker explained further, “so I thought they ought to be safe under my eyes, and I put them near my paint buckets and set on sculpting a buddha statue. But when I looked back, my chickens are dead!”

He was on the verge of tears, the magistrate thought. The chickens are obviously his most prized possession, but there is nothing that he can do now. “I’m sorry for your loss, but the only course now is to send them to the dinner table.” He said sympathetically, and rode off, having nothing to help the man.

Mr. Liu was patrolling through the Mogao grottoes again. Due to the recent incident, he had increased a great deal of patrolling throughout, from weekly patrols to once every two days. He had received two more cases of ruined grottoes, but the criminal has neither left any trace of clue after the scene. He was growing impatient every day, and the vandalizing became more outrageous, even causing the entire grotto to collapse on the last case. The workers were coming to work less and less too, as they were afraid to contribute their efforts of working as it may be wasted. The vandalizer seems to have eyes for the best grotto to destroy too, he mused. Suddenly, he had the most brilliant plan to catch the criminal once and for all.

“Have everyone got their weapons ready?” the magistrate whispered to the three men crouching near the entrance of the best grotto. The three workers exchanged wolfish grins among themselves, brandishing their clubs and spears above their heads, eager to catch the charlatan. “Wait until you hear a sound near the entrance,” he breathed, “then you attack.” He got answering nods from the workers and he sighed, leaning his back on the walls. It is going to be a long wait, he thought.

A sound! He gestured the workers to remain silent and stuck his ear against the walls to hear more closely. He heard the muffled sound of footsteps on the scaffolding gradually coming close to them and he mouthed the word *coming* to the workers. The workers nodded acknowledgement and waited. *Stomp. Stomp. Stomp.* The footsteps were coming closer... closer... closer... and past them? By gods! The magistrate thought. We have waited at the wrong grotto! Forgetting the need of secrecy and leaving his dagger behind, he sprinted towards the next grotto and stopped, facing the wrecker. The wrecker turned his head, wondering who was pursuing him.

The vandalizing culprit was his seneschal.

“Seneschal?! What are you doing?” The magistrate yelled, confused that the culprit was his trusted officer.

“I hate these blasted grottoes, that’s why!” He recognized him and yelled. “Every day attracting more and more population and attracting more and more thieves and beggars! I need to register each person entering the city and catch every criminal! I hate filling out that everyday heaping mountains of paperwork! That’s why I vowed to destroy the roots of this crisis, by destroying the Mogao grottoes!” The bloody-eyed seneschal therefore raised his club at him.

See that there was nothing to stop his madcap seneschal, but realizing that he left his dagger at the grotto before, he grabbed and flung the nearest object next to him at the yelling seneschal.

Which happened to be a bucket filled with red paint.

Do you know that in Ancient China, the painters used a poisonous mineral with the toxicant cinnabar for red paint? That is what killed the chickens and is exactly what the seneschal swallowed after the magistrate threw the paint at him. The seneschal began to choke and screech the most inhuman sounds while clutching his throat. The seneschal died of poisoning after some shrieking, and laid still.

After some moments, the magistrate said, "Well, I have heard that a pen can be mightier than the sword, but I've never heard of the saying of a paint bucket can be mightier than a club." He glanced at the lifeless body of the seneschal. "And good riddance."

Ascensions of Wang Jie

Singapore International School, Cheah, Wan En Christabel – 12

Twenty years ago. British Library, London.

Wang Jie, a ten-year-old boy, stares intensely at the vast Mogao collections, dozens of scrolls spread out in front of him on display.

“Your ancestors have passed down secrets and stories about these old manuscripts from the Mogao Caves. They even said there might be an undiscovered timeless cave that grants its discoverer the power of ascension,” his parents whisper in his ear.

“You think I can find that cave?” he asks excitedly, dreaming that he could one day appear on the front cover of the National Geographic magazine.

“You’re capable of anything if you free yourself. Learn from the past, and you will find your way,” they reply. Wang Jie’s eyes sparkle, a wide grin spreading across his face as he runs to hug his parents tightly.

Present day – May, 2022. Library Cave, the Mogao Grottoes.

Now a thirty-year-old professor of Archaeology and Ancient Languages, Wang Jie makes his way into the Library Cave of the Mogao Grottoes, yet again. He opens a worn out notebook. It is his father’s journal, containing Mogao maps and clues collected from visits to museums in Beijing, Paris and Berlin. A crinkled photo of young Wang Jie and his parents slips out of the notebook, and tears begin to roll down his face.

For the past seven years, Wang Jie has been away from his parents, pursuing his dream of finding the secret cave. But no matter how hard he has tried, he has not been able to find it. He starts to wonder if all his hard work has been worth it, if the cave even exists.

Wang Jie feels lost.

As he wipes away his tears, he refocuses his eyes on the wall painting in front of him. It is a large azure-coloured picture of Prince Siddhartha before his ascension to Nirvana. Wang Jie has seen this picture many times before, but this time, he feels a warm flow of calming assurance and hope, perhaps a divine connection guiding him. He then looks closer at the fold of the Siddhartha’s robe on the painting. Carefully brushing away layers of dust, Wang Jie spots a small engraved Chinese symbol that he never noticed before.

Flipping through the yellowed pages of his father’s notebook, he finds the same symbol referencing a secret verse to access the timeless cave. Adrenaline beginning to rush through his veins, Wang Jie presses the symbol on the wall and begins to whisper that verse from the notebook:

“This fleeting world is like a star at dawn, a bubble in a stream, a flash of lightning in a summer cloud, a flickering lamp, a phantom, and a dream.”

He closes his eyes in anticipation, heart beating rapidly. The ding of a chime enters his ears, followed by the sound of sand falling. Wang Jie opens an eyelid. The wall has started to crumble away, its structure turning into sand as it cascades down. Mouth nearly dropping open, Wang Jie turns around only to see the floor and walls of the entire Library Cave collapsing. Having no other choice, he jumps onto the bridge that has somehow formed in front of him.

The scene evolves around him, a timeless world twisting and morphing. Wang Jie lets out a small gasp as the colours around him begin to swirl. The different hues are exuberant and lively, thousands of Buddhas dancing around

him. They seem to smile at him, their robes glittering with the grand colour of gold. Apsaras and celestial musicians float around in the air, their cerulean gowns flowing behind them gracefully.

Wang Jie begins to ascend into the air, feather-soft clouds cradling his body, as he sees a panorama of palaces and pavilions form in front of him. Then, rays of golden sunlight appear, illuminating the new world below him.

Unknown Time. Unknown Area.

Wang Jie is gently let down from the cloud, as if a cupped hand from the sky has come to support him. Looking around, he realises that he is in an oasis. The sun is glowing brightly, water glittering in its brilliant light. Landscaped Bodhi trees around him seem to calm his soul and soothe his mind as their heart-shaped leaves flutter smoothly in the faint breeze. Outside the cool of the oasis, a desert lays there, the golden dunes snaking up and down over the horizon, almost like the scales of a great dragon that has fallen asleep for centuries.

In front of him, there is a five-storey cliff honeycombed with small caves on each level. These must be the Mogao Caves. But there is no tourist or guard in sight. Only a tranquil silence.

Slowly regaining his bearings, Wang Jie makes his way to the closest cave. His eyes widen at the smiling sculpture as he walks in. It is a two-storey structure of a calm, serene Buddha, cross legged, its pristine figure shining beautifully in the honeyed tones that the rays of ethereal golden sunlight bring. Its eyes are intricately detailed and seemingly full of understanding, as if it is trying to comfort Wang Jie.

Hearing faint sounds of mixed languages outside, Wang Jie walks out of the cave, spotting a large route ahead with people walking by. Perhaps he can ask them for help, and perhaps they know where he is. As Wang Jie gets closer, he recognises a line of Bactrian camels with two humps on their backs, usually found on the Silk Road.

He sees Asian long-nosed traders milling around with their floppy hats, wise Indian monks walking purposefully with their white robes, Persian travellers waving around their spices, and Chinese merchants heaving their goods on their backs.

Wang Jie hurries to the closest merchant and asks in Chinese,

“Ex- excuse me, where are we right now?”

“We’re at the Mogao Temples in the Dunhuang district,” replies the merchant in an obscure dialect.

Uncertain, Wang Jie asks again.

“Dunhuang district?”

“Yes, under the rule of Emperor Yizong of the Tang Empire.”

The Tang Dynasty.

May, 868. Mogao Temples.

One day, a decade after his arrival, a shabby Wang Jie passes by the Yueya Spring village near the Mogao Caves. His body has aged from years of futile endeavours trying to return to his own world. His face shows lines of despair – no one here would believe he came from another world, and no one back in his own world would know about his amazing discovery. His dream of being on the front cover of the National Geographic, and his hopes of ever seeing his parents again, are both long gone.

Wang Jie has never felt more lost than ever.

In the village, he comes across an ancient manuscript. As he curiously reads through it, his eyes widen as he sees the same secret verse he once used. This verse appeared ten years ago when he felt lost, and now appears again. As he reads on, Wang Jie discovers more teachings of wisdom, and spends hours reading them. He feels lighter. Free. He imagines his parents encouraging him with the words *"free yourself"* as he reads it.

Over time, that manuscript is like a diamond that cuts away all of Wang Jie's despair and delusion. Deciding to freely share this manuscript with the world, Wang Jie uses his modern printing techniques, and one day prints and dates it with this personal note:

"Reverently made for universal free distribution by Wang Jie on behalf of his two parents on the 15th of the 4th moon of the 9th year of Xiantong."

During the remaining years of the Xiantong era, Wang Jie lives a simple life as a teacher of philosophy and languages in the village. With his students, he writes hundreds of manuscripts on various subjects, some with hidden clues to help people navigate the future.

In the remaining years of Wang Jie's life, he is filled with contentment and freedom, and no longer desires ascension to fame or wealth. Yet, there is one unfulfilled longing. One night, as he stares at the sky for the last time, he dreams of reuniting with his parents.

May, 2002. British Library, London.

A child and his parents are visiting the British Library for their vacation. In front of them is the Diamond Sutra, displayed as the earliest dated printed book in the world. The child is staring at the manuscript, large eyes glittering with excitement.

"Mom, Dad! Look, the author of this book has the same name as me – Wang Jie!"

"I'm sure you'll be able to do great things just like him, son. *You're capable of anything if you free yourself. Learn from the past, and you will find your way,*" they reply, smiling.

The boy has a strange sense of déjà-vu, and runs to hug his parents tightly, reunited.

The Secrets of the Mo Gao Ku.

Singapore International School, Cheng, Yi Hui Ashley – 12

Sand is my enemy.

Like a madman trying to dance, I'm running away from the dust devil that swirls across the canyon like a rattlesnake on the hunt.

The wind cuts into my eyes, making me lose my balance and fall into the endless hole, causing me to cough through the sore feeling in my mouth, tasting the bitter and coarse texture of sand that had been stuck in my throat. The longing of water calls for me, but the insatiable thirst is something I have to ignore. And yet again, I forget that I'm still lying on sand.

It backfires.

Dammit.

I hesitate for a while, for just one quarter of a millisecond, and then rush to take out my precious: the only water I have left. The unbearable pain is still aching and throbbing in my throat— not to mention all the sand still lingering in my eyes.

In spite of how I imagined that my very last drops of water to be satisfyingly cold and sweet, all I could distinguish out was the metallic taste as I poured it down my face.

I feel like giving up.

The metallic copper taste in my mouth, the agonizing pain of my cracked, split lips, the numbness between my legs, the musty, strong smell of my sweat, and the eerie silence of the cold-hearted desert... I begin to wonder whether this is actually worth it or not.

Lying on the sand, I look up to the sky, as if questioning the gods what sin had I committed: but all I see is the endless, brittle blue sky, as if it too was broken and defeated. I close my eyes.

What do you see when it's over? When you're free from this world's burden?

Blinding, flashing lights are getting closer.

Fluttering my eyes open, I arise to see what was that. Was it the sign of death coming to take me, or... Hope?

But no. All I see is the gloomy sky clouding over me, and I sigh. Just my illusions. Suddenly, I'm laughing through my tears, and crying through my fear.

The vultures in the sky swoop over, as if signaling that I shall be their next meal ...

How foolish I was to think that there would be someone to save me, to pull me out of desperation.

I fall to my knees, melting to a coward. A weakling. I am weak, I am a coward. A freak. A useless, worthless person that will never prove myself worthy of anything.

My eyes harden.

No. I will not let anyone be able to break me down.

Not again.

I don't need to prove myself to anyone.

I'm a coward.

But I am also a villain, a thug, a bandit. I am that selfish, avaricious person.

I will *not* give up until I find that treasure. I *will and shall* do whatever it takes to live.

No. Matter. What.

Looking at my reflection through the metal bottle on the floor, I barely recognized myself.

His features look rough. His eyes are bloodshot yet empty, his has a high nose bridge, his lips are cracked and dehydrated, his face pale.

Is this how I look?

I know to live in this world, I have to be strong, be brave, be *cruel*.

If nobody is going to help me, I might as well help myself.

My heart turns to stone, gaze transforming to a harsh glare, this is for me to survive.

Walking through the swirling sands, over dune and through drifts, neither the sun glaring at me nor the blinding sand and dust whipped up by the storm could deter me from finding the treasure.

The wind blows, dusting off the sand from the caves.

When I glance up, a glorious, breathtaking cave stares back at me. The cave doesn't feel like a cave, it feels...alive. I gape, can't believing I just found the caves.

Looking through the walls of knowledge, I'm starting to question myself if my decision of planning to rob the cave would be right. As a Chinese, ruining, damaging, destroying my own race's artifacts? But yet again, what choice do I have?

I scoff at my own thinking. If the Qing dynasty (光绪二十六年) would have been more secure, more reliable , would I end up homeless? Would my family die of hunger? Those type of people don't deserve pity.

Walking in the caves, I'm attracted by the beautiful drawings and sculptures in the cave ' Cang Jing dong'(藏经洞). The complexity of the drawings has led me to fascinate and marvel of such beauty, but before I can get a better look, a foreign looking man barge in the cave and take away all the artifacts in the room. I tense up.

"Hold on. Who gave you permission for you to take these away?"

"The Qing government. Now move along." He replies in a husky voice, sneering at me.

My hands are rolled up into fists— how corrupt could they be? Those are artifacts from all the generations, now, simply sold off to foreigners, foreigners that don't respect our culture, foreigners that stole from us, foreigners that didn't feel any remorse of their actions.

They're just thieves in disguise.

"Wait. You can't go." I growl at them, simmering with fury, rage flowing through like lava.

"Oh? What did you say? Who are you?" the man looked me up and down with disbelief, then started cackling.

"I said. You. Can't. Go."

His face suddenly turned grave, as he looked at me in the eye, then seeing I was solemn, we started to ...

"You... Why do you have to invade our country and take what is not rightfully yours?" I demanded the answer.

“So what if it’s not rightfully not mine? If I say it’s mine, it’s mine. What can you do about that?”

“I—” my brain is so engrossed in looking for an answer, I forget that I’m in a fight. The man seizes the opportunity, raising his sword high, I turn around, but it’s too late—

It’s dark.

When I wake up, I see nothing at first.

It’s blur, but I eventually make out a shadow’s figure, yet I can’t see the person.

What’s happening?

“Quick, before anyone finds out!” I hear someone whisper.

I can hear the footsteps, yet there’s nothing I can see.

Suddenly, I see it.

His features look rough. His eyes are bloodshot yet empty, his has a high nose bridge, his lips are cracked and dehydrated, his face tanned.

He... resembles me. He’s a thief, so am I. The only difference is he’s free, but I’m not.

I’m looking at myself, my shadow. No, strictly speaking I’m looking at a mirror.

But I am the mirror.

“Damn it! There’s nothing left. We came late.”

“There’s some paintings on the wall.”

“But—Wouldn’t that be too—”

“You came so far... Now are you seriously trying to back out?”

Silence.

Then, the unbearable pain hits me. The knife pierces through me, slicing away my skin, leaving me open to the wild.

“Done. Wasn’t that easy? Why were you hesitating?”

“... Let’s go.”

I was wrong. He isn’t like me.

I am the person that he might have had become, and I could have become someone like him.

But I didn’t, and neither did he.

Humans, they are always greedy.

This is probably what I deserve, after so many things I have done, I guess karma has come chasing after me.

Every day, I witness people coming and going, some a thug, a demon, but kind in the heart, others are a saint, a lord, a disciple, and yet, their hearts are the ugliest I’ve ever seen.

I’ve seen dynasties fall, seen the ugly hearts of humans, and yet I’m still confined in this space, never having someone to listen to my fears.

But if you press an ear to the wall (that is, if you don’t get caught), you may, just may hear my voice echoing inside the hollow walls of the cave...

Anattā

Singapore International School, Fang, Emma Xun – 13

“Once upon a time...”

“There was a monk named Yuezun. He left home to seek enlightenment. When he wandered through the desert of Dunhuang, he saw a vision of blinding golden lights emitting from the mountains, as if a thousand Buddhas glowed before him. He thought it was a message from the Buddhas, and so he built a shrine on the cliff there. That was the first cave out of the thousands.”

“I want to go there, too, Papa!” cried a six-year-old Jack.

“You’ll go there, one day.”

“Will you take me there?”

He only sighed.

He breathed, the scent of spice and burnt oil mingled in the heavy air. Jack glanced at the food shops lined on the sides of the street, smoked lamb and jerky hanging high near the eaves.

“Sir?”

Jack turned around sharply. “Yes?”

“Would you like a camel, sir? Ten yuan and you can go around the city,” the mechanical words came out muffled on the bustling street.

“Can you take me to the Mogao Grottoes?” Jack asked.

“Yes, sir.”

The boy stuffed the cash in his pockets deftly before leading Jack to the corner of the street, where camels lined up, held still by reins. There was a sour odor that came either from the beasts or the sweat of men.

They came upon an old man. Wearing a light brown saffron robe, a cool breeze ruffled his white beard gently. The boy and him exchanged words in a foreign tongue.

“Can you take me there or not?” Jack said, irritated.

“Get on.”

~

The barren-brown desert looked ever the same as Jack strode by, sweat drenched, on the humped back of the camel. A lizard skittered across the sand, dust rolling up behind its slim body. Dunes rose and fell, like breathing waves on the beach, sculpted by the wind, leaving scratches on the soft sands, flawing the golden masterpiece. A lone, brittle bush stood, seared by the sun. The bloodied clouds tinted the vast desert with their fire, in a hue of rosy glow that faded to the west and deepened to the east. There was no siren call of the sea, no vicious storms roaming on the land, but only the vast, mournful plain of emptiness roaring, where everything that remained still resented everything that shone with life.

The relentless sun enveloped him as he closed his eyes and remembered.

“Bedtime, Jack.”

Jack cuddled up under the blankets. He stole a quick glance at his grandfather’s pale face.

The handwritten word “terminal” appeared on the new IV bag that hung from the roller stand which followed the old man around relentlessly, together with the rattling sounds of the wheels.

“Tell me about your trip to Dun-Huang,” Jack said suddenly.

“Again?”

“You know it’s my favourite story, Papa.”

Jack saw a wisp of a smile. The moonlight shone on his pale face, sprinkled with the frosts of light.

“It was the autumn of 1964 when I arrived,” he said, eyes closed. “But I felt, instead, the stillness of the summer air on my face as I rode through the golden dunes on the humped back of my camel.” Jack imagined his old grandfather, then young, striding through the desert nightly, his tall figure silhouetted against the red sun that surfaced over the sand. “The beauty of it was never the surprise. I knew the desert by heart.”

“No, it was the caves that bewitched me. The Mogao Grottoes. The paintings. The statues. The agelessness of it all. They were bits of culture from different places, from different times, the east and the west, merged in one perfectly. I heard ancient songs there, sung by the people before us, and my only wish, then, was to decipher this haunting melody. It was dusk when I left the cave. Then I saw it. The golden lights. The Thousand Buddhas glowing, blinding the sun and the moon. Like Yuezhen once did.”

“But who sang the music, Papa?” Jack asked, mesmerized.

“The Enlightened Ones. The Buddhas.” He whispered. Jack thought he saw something sparkle on his old face. A sky full of stars in his grandfather’s eyes, far away, where he could not see. He longed to see it, too, he realized.

He bent down and kissed his forehead. “Someday, you will hear the music, too, Jack.” He said.

~

Jack watched as a nightingale flew over the hundreds of caves that honeycombed into rock coarsely, windswept and aged after thousands of years of rain and sandstorms. A *pagoda* temple was embedded into the stone wall of an uneven face of a cliff, nine-story high, towering over the willow trees. He could see the faint glisten of the Dachuan river reflected on one side of the cliff. He imagined a lake of tranquil waters, upon which the sky flowed in ripples, the sun distorted on the moving mirror, ancient trees surrounding the small green oasis in the gold.

He stepped into the darkness of the cave.

A Buddha sat, cross legged, at the end of the chamber. He wore a loose robe with ridged folds, barefooted, his hair curly coiled and wrapped around the scalp as spiral-shaped dots. He looked over Jack, over the mountains and valleys, though in his eyes there was only oblivion. The *bodhisattvas* wore luxurious robes, the flares of colour lay in contrast of the faded grey of the two *disciples* that stood at the Buddha’s sides, their heads bowed. The silhouettes of the raw-boned figures wavered in the threads of sunlight that shot into the black. Their worn faces were streaked with harsh lines, carving through the face like scars. The Heavenly King of the South and the North stood by the entrance, their armours shone brightly in the dark, strange patterns distorting on the stone walls. Bronze gleamed in the shadows like gold. Paintings covered the stone walls, faded and dim after millennia, featuring thousands, the rich and the poor, surrounding the temple, dancing, as the Buddhas glowed. *Apsaras*, the nymphs, flew and twirled gracefully amidst the clouds above, their billowing scarfs fluttering as they scattered flower petals to the people that bowed. Celestial musicians played the konghou and the pipa. One lone dancer leaped into the air and whirled joyfully, his shawl swaying as he danced. The distinct music rang and echoed in the dark cavern like a ghost, a phantom of the ancient times that Jack cannot reach. A fragment of his grandfather’s memory that he cannot grasp.

“The Enlightened Ones,” Jack whispered.

It was silent. Yet Jack felt the booming of their silence, the thunder, the haunting melody synchronizing the sweet vibrations, and he felt his veins throbbing in rhythm, pounding against his entire body.

Jack jumped when he saw the old man had followed him into the cave. He stood still beside him. The leaves ceased to rustle, the wind died, the strokes of moonbeams stopped its trembles. He clapped his hands together, mumbling verses under his breath.

"We teach of suffering." A voice rang.

Jack spun around. "Who's there?"

The music drummed louder.

"Self is an illusion."

He could hear the music clearly now. It was no longer a strange, mysterious tune to him. He could feel his own heart beat intertwining with the rhythm of the song.

"Who are you, if there is no self?"

"What is music, without silence? What is peace, without war? What is life, without death? What is hope, without despair? What is light, without darkness? What is love, without hatred?"

"Illusions, everything is illusory, for you see everything, yet you see nothing; you hear every sound, but you hear nothing," the voices hissed.

"Anattā. Anattā. Anattā..." The lyrics of the song boomed and ricocheted off the stone walls of the cavern.

"Anattā. What does it mean?"

The voices and the music had stopped. Or are they one?

There was an air of anticipation as he spoke.

"Anattā. Non-self." He said softly.

There was silence. Then Jack heard a lone harp playing somewhere outside the chamber. Gentle music flowed through the cavern, smoothing the rough walls, filling the hot air with a cool breeze of the autumn from 1964, in Dunhuang.

"Someday, you will hear the music, too, Jack." He heard his grandfather whisper. The chamber was drenched in moonlight.

Jack stepped out of the cave, dazed. He swayed in the biting cold of the dusk air, his lips letting out puffs of mist. He gazed up, the deepest shades of blue engraved in the black canvas of the sky, the ghosts of silver flitting about around the churning stars where midnight dipped lightly like moon in water. Perfect. He remembered his grandfather's face, the stars that flowed in his eyes.

A streak of light passed over, in a blaze of brilliant gold, illuminating the darkening sky. Golden lightning came raining down.

Blinding the sun and the moon.

"The sky of Dun-Huang," he whispered in the cold, "I have seen it at last."

Yan

Singapore International School, Leung, Serene Sze Wai – 12

I trudged through the sands, wincing as I took each step, the gritty dunes digging at the soles of my feet. How many days was it since I last saw her? I had no idea, but it wouldn't really matter in a few hours – I would be dead by then. There was no turning back.

With every exhale I took, I smelled the ketones in the air, the scent of starvation. My breath hung limp in my chest. Still... even on the verge of death, I couldn't shake *her* out of my head.

For about two years, me and Yan had been partners in crime. Ever since my parents' deaths, she'd found me alone, crying in an isolated street corner. We'd vowed to stick together, because all we had were each other and our wits to survive.

It was foolish to want more than that. We tried wandering through the deserts of Dunhuang, all for a stupid, surrogate adventure. And that had cost me losing her.

My knees buckled. I felt tempted to just drop to the sand and lie in the dunes until I fell asleep.

I stared ahead – there was a pagoda in the distance. Monks?

My heart rate tripled. My vision tunnelled. There was a chance that these monks would help me, not only stay alive, but maybe, just maybe, they'd also seen Yan.

I wandered to the entrance, robed monks milling about, carrying out their daily affairs, not one paying me any attention. Shaking, I knocked on their front door.

The door fell open to a tall man donning the same attire as the monks in the courtyard. He had a sort of austere aura to him that instantly made me straighten my posture.

This guy was probably the chief monk. I knew it at once from the disapproving glare he gave me.

"Excuse me, sir," I said. "Have you seen a girl about my age around here?"

I described Yan to him, her black hair and affluent yet tattered apparel. To my surprise, he seemed to *know*.

The monk hummed quizzically. "That girl." His eyes were dark and melancholy, as empty as I imagined my stomach was back then. "Short in stature and as emancipated as you. She asked to stay transiently. I told her to retrieve a scroll from the Mogao Grottoes."

I stepped forward. "What scroll?" I pressed. "Why would she—"

"Hush, child. Let us discuss this matter over proper food. You are in great need of some."

—

Soon, I found myself at a mahogany table, the monk at the other side.

"Why'd you ask Yan to retrieve the scroll?" I took a sip of tea – the flavour was bitter and reminded me of the herbal concoctions Mother used to brew for me when I was sick. When she was still alive.

Chief Monk took a lengthy sip. "Some things remain private. I trust your friend will tell you once you find her."

"If I find her," I quipped. "How long has she been down there, anyways?"

He pondered before relaying the answer. "About a few hours. She took her time to recover. Battling the serpent... not an easy ordeal, especially for her age."

“Okay. Can I go down there now?”

The presumed chief gave me a look like, *Impulsive children these days*. I’d gotten a lot of those at orphanages me and Yan had stayed at. There was a reason why we ran away, you know.

“You may. But finish your food. Don’t the youth harbour *any* manners these days?”

—

A dismal cup of tea later, I ventured into the darkness. A solitary lantern dangled from my grasp.

“Yan?” I called, my voice a bit higher and wavering than I’d liked. “It’s me, Mei. Where are you?”

Before I could figure out how to find Yan — it caught my eye.

Thousands upon thousands of manuscripts, rolled up in neat scrolls, aligned the perimeter of the room. Curiously, I unravelled one, but it was scrawled in a language I couldn’t decipher — Tibetan, maybe? Next to me, murals of deities and monsters and emperors were etched onto the slate. A daedalian drawing depicted soldiers on horses charging out, carrying flags, bearing the pride and loyalty of a whole empire.

“This is awesome,” I marvelled, awe-struck by the condition and the detail of the murals, speechless at the sea of scrolls. How many years had the monks been keeping this cave hidden from society?

I had been standing there for god-knows-how-long when a faint scream snapped me out of my stupor.

“What the—?” I turned abruptly, drawing the dagger the chief monk gave me. I could see my tethered reflection in its steel blade. I bolted out of the cavern, trying to find the source of the noise.

A hissing noise emitted from the same source of the scream. To the left.

I raced past stalagmites and stones, murals and architecture alike. I had a premonition that Yan’s quest and the scream were somehow intertwined.

I stumbled into a new opening and the colour drained from my face.

On the ground lay a shattered bronze figurine of a serpent, shards of the metal scattered around. About ten meters in front of me — Yan, armed with only a steel dagger identical to mine, standing before the serpent portrayed in the statue, only fifteen times bigger than me.

Yan looked exactly like I remembered her — long midnight black hair she tied up in an elegant braid despite being homeless. She still wore the silk clothes that she owned almost two years later. Despite being tattered and stained, its delicate patchwork showcased her family’s abundance of wealth.

“What are you—” Emotions flickered in her amber eyes like fireflies. I couldn’t read her expression. “Mei, I—”

“I’m going to help you fight!” I charged forward, aiming to stab the serpent in its side.

“Wait!” But before Yan could finish her sentence, I stepped past her and gutted the serpent. It roared, divulging its hideous fangs and abhorrent breath. For a second, crimson blood burst out from its green scales, but seconds later, they stitched together to form sutures, giving the impression that I hadn’t stabbed them at all.

“Feng told me about this before I faced it. You can only kill it via decapitation or the scroll I’m looking for,” Yan said, sprinting to my aid.

“WHO’S FENG?” The serpent locked me in its tail, my vision blinded with green. “AHHHHH!!!”

“If you went to the pagoda—” I couldn’t hear her. My lungs felt like they were being filled with helium.

“NO TIME!” I cried. “FIND IT!”

“I’M TRYING!” Her voice was quavering more than usual. Was she *crying*?

Before I could consider that, I heard Yan rifling through stacks of papers. “Not this – too lengthy. Should be a ribbon symbol! Where *is it*—”

I drew my dagger, stabbing at random. I just needed to incite enough pain for the serpent to struggle.

“Found it!” Just as I escaped from the serpent’s grasp, Yan sent a battered yellowed scroll flying. As it closed in on the serpent’s ugly face, it lengthened into paper ribbons, tying knots around the neck and slicing it clean off.

The serpent was fixed into a guttural roar as it fell to the ground, sending static down my front. “What was that?”

Yan finally allowed herself to stop for air after fighting for what seemed like hours. “The scroll was formed by a sacred art by a monk.” She turned and fixed her critical eyes on mine. “Any more questions?”

“I—” I didn’t know where to begin. For starters, I hadn’t seen her in almost a month, and she’d vanished off the face of the earth only to reappear in a cryptic cave after being given directions from isolationist monks. What *had* she been up to?

I spat it out. “Why did you leave that night?”

Yan lowered her head. “I... I’m sorry about that. That night, I felt like I was in a trance, being drawn to the grotto. I only regained full conscience when I arrived at the pagoda.” She shook her head. “Feng told me about the serpent. Apparently a demon serpent spirit was bound to that figurine a few centuries ago. It had sensed my presence, and the closer I got to it, I would sense it more, too. I guess the desert was pretty near, so... that’s probably why we came in the first place.” She crossed her arms. “Not for an adventure. But it sure spiralled out into one.”

I was still confused. “Why was your presence so vital, though? I mean, couldn’t the monks kill it themselves?”

“That’s the thing. I don’t know. Maybe it’s related to my heritage. That explains a lot...”

As she’d said that, a drop of blood trickled from a wound on her wrist and onto the serpent’s corpse, shattering the corpse into dissipated light. It floated up towards the sky, transfiguring into flimsy ribbons.

Swirling Sands

Singapore International School, Leung, Sze Long Cyrus – 12

It was clear, So clear.

I remembered the first sighting of blood.

The sound of the first shot, rippling from the string of his arrow and drowning the arid, humid cavern with blood and sound. I remembered his eyes, his iris, which I once compared to the rising sun, now glowing a hue of Imperial red so mortifying, it seemed like it saddled the cumbersome weight of a thousand souls, as if forthright to death itself. I remembered his tattered face exfoliating as he stiffly fell to the ground, the mixture of twisted terror and oscillating melancholy hearing his last hurried words.

This night is a harsh one. The cantankerous cold bites at every point of my physique, the scathing shards of the relentless winter winds cutting and disorienting my breath patterns, leading me to gasp for air further and further. The swirling sands seem to drift aimlessly in the relapsing cold, as perspiration and dust scatter in the air, enveloping the desert of Dunhuang in a thick cloud of persistent fog. The piles of tumbleweed that once roamed the unadulterated desert now retrocede sheepishly, into the faint traces of tethered light.

I had watched as my brother's health had deteriorated, his green eyes filled with the rush of creative fervour slowly growing sickly as he was bedridden. I had watched as the glow of happiness slowly expunged from him, his spirit slowly draining out of him with every passing day.

It was only until father told me about a secret scroll, nestled deep underground, in the Mogao grottoes, protected from the rapacious temptation of humanity, sheltered by the faint traces of wisdom and courage. It was said that it would have the answers to heal any sickness, overturn every stone, and overthrow any power. Passed from word of mouth over a millennium, as the years passed, most everybody dismissed this as a mere folktale.

But now I had the scroll in my hand, shattered, torn, devoid of knowledge,

What was all of this for?

I feel my lungs ache uncontrollably, punctured from the arrowhead I had taken. Dunes and drifts line every field of my vision, the carved pathways from traders and barterers during the silk road lining the tracks of the desert. I try pacing my breaths systematically, desperately trying to savour every morsel of fresh air. I heaved the magical scroll in my trembling hands.

It wouldn't be long now. I thought. I was definitely sure of that.

I'd choke on asphyxiation.

I feel my trachea attenuate, causing me to choke incessantly. I try gasping for air, but am unable to.

I can barely breathe now.

With trembling hands and a blurry vision, I pull a picture of my brother from my satchel. My gaze flits over the image, brushing off the specks of dust which has built up. Even in black and white, I still see the drops of creative fervour rush and fill in his eyes, his disoriented posture sticking out like a sore thumb, and his hair brushed aside briskly, our mother's words echoing within the chambers of my mind.

"Comb your hair, silly! Ants and larvae are going to start sprouting out of it if you keep it this way!" We'd all used to joke, laugh, frolic.

That feels so distant in the past now. Beads of tears start glassing down my cheeks, and I try containing composure as I set away from the muddled picture.

I'm sorry I failed you, brother.

I felt my body pulse. It wouldn't be long until my entire body system would collapse. I could feel my life slowly wane, like the smoldered flames on an incandescent candle, struggling and grasping on to the faint flickers of life. I could barely grasp any sign of reality. My vision was narrowing, darkening, and I loosened my grip on reality. No.

No.

No.

At least not now.

I still had to help my brother.

I still had so much to live for.

I still had to return to the village.

My memories start to flash by like a cassette tape...

The first thing I noticed was the indubitable blur of my memories. Like speckled dots of undulating colour on an old canvas.

"This scroll isn't yours to take." Anwir's words echoed through the hollow chambers of my mind, the resonant sounds ricocheting off the labyrinth of Buddhist statues and oriental murals, unrecognizable from the benevolent voice I remembered from when we ambled through the expansive caves. He heaved the ancient scroll into the palms of his hands, removing the scroll from the hands of Buddha himself.

The next thing I remember is my voice. "Please don't do this." I muster a small croak of sound. My voice is so brittle, it was like a house of cards.

I watched myself as I stood stiffly on coarse hardwood panels bolted into the ground, my arm tenuously grasping my dagger, my battered hands could barely support the weight of my wrist, with the serrated rocks searing through the soles of feet as I took every step, causing me to wince in disorientation.

No. No.

Why am I here again?

I could feel my stomach churn. The man whom's eyes I compared to my mother's, a color so wispy it was as if it contained the rising sun now feels like burning ash, his eyes equally as terrifying as the first time they glowed.

"Jeez, you're greedy." He remarked. "You'd rather save the life of your bedridden brother than allow me to bring prosperity and life to the impoverished. How hateable can you be? It's not like you'll get back to Siwan village in time anyways."

I could feel my blood boil.

"Don't you dare," I said through cracked lips.

"Why won't you just die already?" *His words were like serrated pieces of ice.*

I dashed towards him and all of a sudden time froze. He was always faster than me, gone in a flash. I see his arrows ripple through his string before connecting with my neck and I taste blood as it splatters, I feel my lungs ache as more

arrows flow in succession, my grazed sword so flimsy I can barely overturn the flurries of shafts, one lodging within my lungs, causing my breathing to halt in a sudden, uncompromising manner.

Idiot. I think. Idiot. How could you not see that coming?

I could hear my own thoughts repeat in my mind once more. **Is this how I was going to die? Stricken, falling down, spiraling into the abyss over and over again?**

“How pathetic.” He denoted. “I can’t even materialize the strength to laugh. Your life truly is worthless, an insignificant parasite, grasping on for dear life. Now, expunge yourself from my sight.”

I fell into desolation, plunging down in a barren lake of remembrance, falling, floundering in desperation, the shackles of memories chaining me, breaking the leftover specks of parity that remained intact within this journey making me resurface for air, only to be pushed down continuously, never to resurface or to recover.

My thoughts echo through my memories again. This is how I was going to die.

No. I thought. **No.**

I remembered my father’s story, the legends he would tell, I saw my mother’s eyes, the sun rising within them, containing the passion yet tranquillity of the sun itself. I saw my brother bedridden his condition getting worse with every passing day.

I battled with acrimonious fervour, ricocheting off the decorative art and drawing my sword from my scabbard.

Why did I even try...

But Anwir watched in bewilderment.

“I’m surprised you can still stand.” He says as he unsheathes his sword, revealing a finely reinforced Dao.

At once, he bolted forward in a surge of power, his attacks so fast it seems they are powered by electricity. I tenaciously grip my sword, though I feel my arm deteriorating every moment I grip my sword. The hilt of his sword clashes with mine, but I overturn his sword, causing Anwir to leap back.

There. The moment of vulnerability. I rush towards him in a frenzy, penetrating his right arm and pinning him to the wall.

I was so naive. It was funny to believe that I thought I could help my brother live.

I can see Anwir wince in pain.

“You won’t kill me..” He gushes. “You’re far too weak, far too feeble, far too emotional to kill someone, are you not? You’re weak just like your brother, no matter how physically capable you may be.”

I can’t bear to watch.

Rage overfills in every crevice of my mind “...How dare you.” I arm my sword, ready to stab him in the heart. My role was that of a spectator now, unable to control my actions as rage overfills me.

“Do it.”

Blood splatters as he falls to the floor stiffly, his face a mix of twisted terror and befuddlement.

The last thing I see is flashing lights in the distance...

The Treasures of the Mogao Grottoes

Singapore International School, Sun, Zhaoxi Joyce – 13

It's not a curse, it's a blessing.

That was what Grandma said to Jing when she first asked about her eyes.

“The eyes were blessed by the deer of nine colours itself. It is said to be allowing the person to see the borders between Yin and Yang, a Daoist belief from Wang that started the great history of the Mogao Grottoes.”

Once upon a time, Wang, our ancestor, travelled on the Silk Road. He came across a cave in an oasis. He decided to make the cave a place of worship, respecting the Buddhism culture. He painted murals of ancient myths, and constructed statues of Buddhas. That was the start of the Mogao Grottoes. But that was only what they saw outside. Hidden amidst the Grottoes, there were treasures left by Wang himself that were said to be able to grant someone a wish.

Jing engrossed herself in the reading. It was a page she picked up on the floor, and she recognised it as an excerpt from one of the treasured manuscripts handwritten by Wang himself. Pondering the words on the manuscripts, her eyes travelled around the village. Living in Dunhuang for a long time, she still could not get enough of the ineffable beauty. As the orange-gold palette stretched far across the sky, its rays danced across the villages, the rivers, onto the scorching sands. Far in the sky, a silhouette exploded in prismatic lights. *A mirage*, she thought. Common sight living near the deserts. But this time, it seemed different. The silhouette resembled the shape of a deer. It was radiating faint light as it leaped across the rolling clouds, bringing its hues across the sky. *The deer of nine colours.*

Jing blinked. When she reopened her eyes, the deer disappeared.

“Look, Jing is staring at the sky again.” It was a murmurous voice, from another child.

“Well, she can see the yin, the dead spirits. I wonder if she had seen her mother’s spirit before.”

The mention of her mother made her cowered, sending a wave of agony through her head. It is true, she could see spirits. It is also true, her mother had never intended to visit her. The muffled voices of the other children dissolved with a small, subtle burn in Jing’s heart. Then, the flames grew, devouring everything in its path.

The sky has darkened from blue to gray in preparation for twilight, and clouds hung low over the river. As night fell, Jing could not sleep. Gazing at the night sky, her mind drifted away. She thought of the words on the manuscripts. Stars draped over the night sky like a blanket. In the midst of the stars, the pale moon shone like white flames, devouring while lighting up the night. The moonlight poured onto the water in the well, casting the shadow of the crescent moon. It reflected a pale picture of her eyes. She thought about the children’s words. Her iris was a shade of light blue and her pupil was astonishingly white, as if white flames were to arise from the sea. The thought of it brought Grandma’s words back. *The borders between Yin and Yang.*

The first spirit Jing saw was when she was three. It was an old man’s ghost. She ran to her grandma in tears, seeking help. Then, everyone knew, and rumours never stopped. Despite the hundreds of spirits that had appeared before, she thought of her mother, who never visited her. Grandma told her that she died giving birth to her. *She died giving birth to a monster.*

As the water gurgled, it seemed to be washing away Jing’s sorrow. Dazed by the darkness, Jing always wanted to remove the curse. Before, it seemed like a hope as far away as the stars, but now...

If only... I can find the treasures. I can ask for the removal of my curse, perhaps, my mother will love me, and the other children will befriend me then.

Not knowing where her feet were leading her, Jing wandered into the dark.

Jing was standing in front of the Mogao Grottoes. *The treasures.* She thought. Maybe it’s her destiny.

The interior of the cave stretched into tunnels and there was a resounding echo as she stepped in. Cobwebs hung freely above her, like gossamers fluttering in the air. Dust settled on the floor that when Jing entered, it filled the atmosphere, making it cloudy. It was as if she was roaming through a hollow bone, lifeless and endless.

A tinkling sound, as a small light source lit up the end of the tunnel. A solitary man sat peacefully still on the solid ground, holding a single flickering candle. The cave was overwhelmed with loneliness, as if the atmosphere was a reflection of the man, staring into the vast space beyond. From the unique style of clothes, Jing recognised him as one of the monks living in the Mogao Grottoes.

“Hello,” he said in a hushed voice.

“Sorry to bother you,” Jing took a step closer, “I want to ask if... if you know where the treasures are, the treasures left by Wang?”

“The treasures?” His voice became pitched, demanding, piercing her ears. “Why?”

“I need the treasures, the wish to cure my eye. It’s cursed, people think I am cursed. I can see dead spirits, no one likes me.”

The monk fell into deep thoughts. “You should see things from the other perspective, every curse also comes with a blessing.”

Jing blinked profusely.

“Take my candles, young woman, it will guide you on your path.”

As if he had pulled a curtain across her vision, the walls dissipated, revealing a dark tunnel.

With the candle flickering in her hand, Jing walked through the caves, past the tunnels, over rocks and stone pavements. She came to an abrupt stop with a swishing sound. Then, as if someone had switched off the stars, leaving Jing alone, staring at a disorienting square of darkness. Jing held her breath and her steps faltered.

A silvery silhouette emerged from the darkness. As the silhouette materialised, It has golden antlers, shooting out iridescent lights in all directions. Its small eyes twinkled as it descended onto the ground, carrying a sweet fragrance, an aroma of flowers and grass. Jing gasped. Grandma’s words, the excerpt she read, the mirage she saw shaped the clear appearance of the deer of nine colours.

“Can you bring me to the treasures?” Jing breathed.

The deer paused, her eyes twinkling like black pearls. She nodded and Jing followed him as they walked along an archway that led deep into the caves. The night air was cool, and he sent a chill down her spine. Jing shivered and clutched the candle tighter. The deer crouched down. Jing’s eyes twinkled with surprise as she carefully crawled on her back. She felt the deer’s warmth, it was the kind of warmth she craved. From herself. From her playmates. From her mother. The faint light of the deer illuminated the whole surrounding.

Then she saw it. It was a small door, hidden on the side of the boundless wall. It was padded with dust. Jing felt the door calling for her as gently, she pushed the door slowly—

Scrolls.

She let out a yelp of surprise. These were the first things Jing saw upon opening the door. The space was lofty, and the ceiling soared above high, so high that Jing could not see the other end. Her eyes searched for tints of gold, hues of silver or, perhaps, kaleidoscopic shades of jewels. Her efforts were in vain. Apart from the ancient scrolls, there was a variety of literature, books, excerpts, manuscripts, but no treasures. Jing turned to the deer, its small, black eyes seemed to be winking at her mockingly.

Realisation struck her, like waves, washing through her mind, offering a moment of epiphany, a sensation of absolute clarity. There was no luxury; for the cave was full of knowledge, the greatest treasure Wang could have achieved. Jing stared at the manuscript, there was a small line of words. The faint inscriptions were glittering against the scrolls in dull gilt. Each word flashing like a single story by itself.

Although the Mogao Grottoes are a work of Buddhism, I am a Daoist, I believe in the existence of Yin and Yang. Only the blessing from the deer of nine colours allows a child, her own child, to forever cross the borders, for the existence of the deer settles on the blessing itself.

Her eyes widened as it lingered on the word, *child*. Words wavered on her lips.

“Mother,” she whispered.

The deer soared into the air, trailing fire behind. For a fleeting second, Jing felt an embrace.

It's not a curse, it's a blessing.

The Thief and the Monk

Singapore International School, Teoh, Tian Yu Tom – 12

He walked through the swirling sands, over dunes and through drifts. He knew his purpose, and neither the sun glaring down at him nor the blinding dust and sand whipped up by the storm could deter him. A single goal lay in his mind, just as it lay ahead of him, stowed within tiered pagodas built into the burnt cliff face. He kept his pace steady, thick cloth wrappings covering his face. The treasure was within one of them. He just had to find it.

He slept soundly, then was roused suddenly by the morning bell. He got to his feet, his saffron robes drifting aimlessly around him. He headed out to join the remainder of the monks in their daily affairs. He glanced out his window, little more than a hole crudely carved into the wall. A sandstorm was forming. Didn't matter. The places he would go and idle were indoors, sheltered from the worst of the storm. He took a final glance around his room, sparsely decorated out of modesty, and stepped out.

He remembered. He remembered the spring from which this journey had been seeded. He was a child then, a small, pitiful thing. Yet the world gave him none, and passed him by. He was a slave—boy to a rich merchant then. A rather rich one. He'd gone to these caves with him. He could not remember their faces, but he remembered what happened. The monks were first reluctant. Then he'd seen the glimmer of gold pass hands, and they'd built the merchant a cave. Oh, they adorned it like every other, but there was a secret within. He'd hidden and watched as the monks hid the little artifact the merchant had entrusted to them, and he'd remembered, he knew he'd come back one day.

He took a glance at the modest fore—temple built into the cliff face. It was one of many, many others. Yet he felt drawn here. There were other caves, sponsored by richer, and there were caves far larger, with far more colourful murals and far larger statues, but he liked this place. Just an *intangible* magic he felt. It began months back, and then he came again, and again. After a while he just went here to meditate. It was all he needed, calming, reassuring, and private. Most others just flocked to the largest, the most lavished and grandiose caves. What did so many see in gold and beauty? He heard a whooshing noise and turned around. The sandstorm was building up. He sighed and ducked into the cave.

In this weather, none would see him, so he walked without much caution, but for what he lacked in it, he made up with his speed. He dashed through the dunes and waded through the warm, shallow river. He leapt out, pausing only for a moment to wring his cloth wrappings dry of most of the wetness and hurried on. Suddenly, a brutal wind lodged sand into his eyes, and he tripped and stumbled, blinded. He fell, and hit a rock. As his vision blurred and darkened, he noticed monks in dim saffron robes hurrying towards him, lifting him up, carrying him inside. He wanted to run, but alas, his body needed rest.

The man had arrived in a... dramatic fashion, to say the least. The monks were now milling around the man's body, unconscious, bleeding. None of the monks knew what had to be done, yet they did their best. By now, the bleeding had stopped and the wound began to clot and dry. So they let the man be, and headed out to go on with their affairs, but they left him there, to watch, and to wait for when the man would awake, ask him his story, and help him to the best they could.

He dreamed an empty, unfulfilling sleep, void of dreams, void of passion, void of all feelings that made man what it is. He stayed like that for hours, but he did not know that. His body tossed and turned, but he did not know that. He mouthed silent words from his dreams, but he did not know that.

Then he awoke, and saw a kind face watching him from the corner. He took quick fleeting glances around the room, taking everything in. The room was sparsely decorated, empty except for him, some scriptures and murals on the walls, and of course, that strange man in the corner. Then it hit him. "Of course. They're monks. I'm in one of their little grottoes."

With a kind smile, he asked: "How did you end up in the storm? For what reason did you come here?" The other man just stared back silently. The monk sighed, and said, in an austere voice, carefully controlled, yet tired: "Well, I'll show you around. If your wish is to stay with us, then I shall show and teach you more." Something flickered in the

other man's eyes. This strange man could well be just one of many travellers who came to seek enlightenment here. If so, he was obliged to help, and teach this man their ways.

"What a trusting man. What a foolish man." Those were the first words he thought, upon hearing the monk speak. If he'd had the monk's years, he'd be far less trusting, far less naïve. Yet he needed every advantage he could get, so he was thankful. He uttered a silent thanks to his gods. Then he decided on a story to tell the monks. Yes, he would be a soldier, one who lost his family to brutal, bloody war. Then the monk turned around, to the door, and he smiled, readying himself, making plans. Oh, they'd have no idea what hit them once he was done.

The morning came, little rays of golden-amber light streaming through his little window. The worst of the storm was gone, but a few drifts of sand that had swept through the crack beneath his door had accumulated into a pile, resting at the foot of his bed. He slowly roused himself and pulled his aching body out of bed. He'd spent the last day walking around, teaching the new guy around the *vihara*. No matter. The past was past.

He got up and turned right, into a tunnel, which led into the main room, tunnels branching off, leading to other rooms. He took a glance at the large, centered Buddha statue lavished with gold and paint, then headed off into one of the many tunnel entrances which encircled the main room. "Breakfast." The monk said to the new man, waiting for him to leave before walking out the door and closing it behind him.

Days passed.

He got up early, earlier than the others, gazing out his window, the sky, hardly lit, with just the slightest tinge of red hinting at the path the sun would follow. He got out his door and headed to the kitchens. "Normally, we'd go out there for an alms round, but it is too distant. Instead, we send monks out every week to collect raw foods for me to cook. "We." I have changed a lot. Before I felt as if it was "Me" against "Them." Things have changed. No matter. I must act soon, before I change farther, and refuse to leave. I know where to look." He thought to himself.

He woke early that day. In the dead of night, he awoke, awash with sweat. He got up and headed to his cave, to find calm, to meditate, but he found something else, instead. As he sat and thought, my thoughts, alone, he heard soft footsteps, then a clatter.

He thought the monk might have heard him. He'd been in the genizah, earlier, taking all that he could. Then he dropped a bowl. He rushed and hid. Wasn't too rare for a monk to get up early.

He took a glance around the corner, and saw nothing. Then, he spotted a little movement and hurried towards it. A mouse scurried around a discarded metal bowl. He sighed and turned back to whence he came.

"What luck." He thought. Then he continued on his way, finding the room. It was little matter to take the artifact and stow it within his robes. He remembered. Then he headed out the door, and he saw the monk.

"A Thief!" He cried.

"A Monk!" He thought.

He grabbed the scrolls from his arms and struck the thief, hard. He called for the others to come. The thief was not welcome.

He stumbled back, stunned. Then he ran.

They came, confused. They ran after the thief, and he sat, heaving a sigh of relief. At least they'd recovered what was stolen. He sighed, again, and went back to his cave, knowing pursuit was pointless.

He smiled a little smile, behind a boulder. "All was well." He thought, unwrapping the artifact, which shone brightly in the rising sun.

The Flame Only Burns Once

St. Clare's Girls' School, Chan, Lok Ching Charmaine – 13

(Aideen Cahira's pov)

"Red really doesn't suit you."

I can't believe that was the first thing Caelum told me at the company ball. The company ball was where we, Lyn, Caelum, Hellion and I, were chosen to go to the Mogao Grottoes.

Lyn and I were friends and Caelum was her half-brother. Hellion, on the other hand, was just another work partner to me. Although Lyn and Caelum were siblings, I more or less hated him but that's a story for another time.

Lyn took a seat next to me.

"So why are we going to the Mogao Grottoes anyway, weren't there other researchers who've already looked through the caves?" Lyn questioned.

"Well, that's true but they've only looked at the historical side of the caves, we're there to look at the caves from an aesthetic perspective and record it down... That's what I believe from what I've read in the reports."

"I see!"

The night sky was like a dark canvas freckled with white paint to create a river of stars and I slowly fell asleep admiring it.

(Aideen Cahira's pov)

We finally arrived at the infamous Mogao Grottoes with a feverish sky.

"I'm so excited!"

Lyn shouted aloud with the sides of her mouth reaching her eyes, creating a lovely smile.

"Let's begin with the first cave we were tasked to see, cave number forty-five," Hellion said. Instead of a suggestion, it sounded more like an order.

We had no choice but to follow him.

We went up a flight of stairs next to the nine-storey temple called the Facade of Cave, cave number 96. The stairs were made of the products of Mother Nature, and carried our steps with stability. The fences embracing the stairs were smooth to the touch, making me forget their old age.

As soon as we stepped into the cave, we turned on our flashlights. The art displayed on the walls and ceilings were painted stroke by stroke, revealing a heart of gold.

The group of statues with well-captured forms and expressions embodied the varied images of different people of the high Tang dynasty. The solemnity of the Buddha, the modesty of his disciples, the feminine charm of the bodhisattvas and the formidableness of the heavenly kings could all be seen.

I became completely mesmerised by the form of art created, the work of art was so captivating.

(Hellion Duman's pov)

We were now off to cave number ninety six, the nine-storey temple that we saw at the entrance.

We stepped into the cave temple and placed our bags on the ground to make it easier to walk around. Suddenly, sand collapsed and the entrance was blocked with sand. We were all shocked and fell silent. Aideen then broke the silence.

"From the looks of it, I guess we're not going to leave any time soon."

"You know you shouldn't be that pessimistic. Learn from the happy-go-lucky girl," I said, stepping up.

"My name is Lyn and let me just rephrase it more optimistically. Ahem... Yay, we're going to die!"

Aideen turned around walking away from the entrance.

"I'll go check out the surroundings."

"I'll come with you."

Caelum's voice trembled. Aideen shot him a glare. Although I didn't like it much. I decided not to say anything and went along with it.

(Aideen Cahira's pov)

As we walked past the giant statue of the Buddha, I thought back to when I was a child, when I actually liked Caelum.

From a young age, I would always talk with my neighbor, Caelum. We got along quite well at first but as the days passed, I hated him. He was always following me, doing the things I loved, and better in fact. It was like he was rubbing it in my face, especially when my mother compared me to him.

"Disappointment," she would always say.

(Caelum Kavan's pov)

Aideen suddenly stopped and whipped her body around to face me.

"Why are you always like this...? Taking everything I wanted right in front of me."

Her voice gradually grew louder. She looked at me with hatred fueling the fire in her eyes.

"What...?"

"Don't act innocent! You always did the things I liked and rubbed it in my face!"

I was done being misunderstood and with a slip of the tongue, I shouted.

"Because I like you!"

Aideen froze, and it was like time stopped.

"I wanted to be able to proudly and confidently confess to you so I followed you throughout every step and tried my best. And I'm sorry if I hurt you. I just... just wanted to be able to say it."

My voice died down.

(Caelum Kavan's pov)

Everyone was sleeping in front of the fire we had made. However, I just couldn't sleep. Aideen might've noticed it and whispered.

"Caelum,"

She used her hand to motion me to come over. I cautiously walked over and sat beside her. We both stared at the crackling fire.

"With the help of your sister I realised that I truly do like you but my jealousy might've clouded those thoughts," she said.

Another wave of silence came.

"Your eyes are beautiful," I whispered, trying to kill the silence.

"Oh please, they're just brown"

"Out of all the places I've been, your eyes are the most beautiful," I admitted, "I find myself getting lost in them constantly. Most of the world has brown eyes, but yours are unique because they're yours. I never thought something as simple as eyes could have so much meaning before I met you."

As if knowing what I might ask, Aideen said, "I'm sorry but this might not work out."

"Maybe... it won't work out but... maybe seeing if it does will be the best adventure ever"

(Lyn Hanish's pov)

It had been days since Aideen and Caelum talked to each other privately since their last conversation with Caelum confessing. I should be worried but things seemed to returned back to the way it was.

Throughout the last few days, we learnt much more about each other. I never thought that the Hellion, who claimed to be not scared of anything, would scream like a little girl as soon as he saw a cockroach. I guess it's true when people say everyone claims to be brave until they see a flying cockroach.

I also got to hear what our first impressions of each other were like. What Aideen said about Hellion made me burst into laughter, she said and I quote, "Have you heard of annoyance at first sight?"

Even through the darkest moments, there was light.

(Aideen Cahira's pov)

Lyn and I agreed to venture around. When we got to the top, we were both panting. As soon as I saw her smile, I couldn't help but smile too.

Suddenly, a loud scream could be heard. Without thinking, my body moved on its own, running down the flight of stairs.

When I reached the bottom, the scene of Hellion and Caelum laying on the ground in a pool of blood pierced my eyes. I ran straight to Caelum. I tried to stop the bleeding.

I wiped a tear threatening to fall and Caelum grabbed my arm.

"Caelum!"

Caelum took heavy breaths as he tried to talk.

"Aideen, I thought of you in colours that... that didn't exist. I loved... you long before I had the guts... to let you know. Thank you... so much for these beautiful days. I'm glad... I didn't... didn't die before I met you."

Tears were falling down my face. Caelum slowly opened his eyes. He said one last sentence whilst slightly chuckling before he went cold.

"No..."

My voice cracked as I hugged his cold body.

Suddenly, light shone through the entrance, but that didn't matter to me anymore. I couldn't help but stare at his lifeless body.

(Aideen Cahira's pov)

Years passed, I sat on a cold metal chair facing a piece of glass with a familiar face on the other side.

"Why did you do it"

"I think you know the answer to that..."

"You're sick"

"That's what they all say," he smirked.

"Goodbye, Hellion Duman."

I placed the phone back and left.

I got home or should I say the apartment I live in. The sink was crowded with days' worth of dirty dishes. If Caelum were here, he would have washed them without me even asking. I sat on the fluffy gray carpet. The stain on the carpet reminded of the time when Lyn spilled her coffee leaving that brown stain.

I miss you guys.

I slowly slid the door open and stood on the fence of the balcony. With one shift of balance, I found myself holding onto nothing. Memories flooded my brain. It was not the butterflies in my stomach that told me it was love, it was the pain and I was too late. The last thing that Caelum said popped into my mind.

Red really doesn't suit you.

Truth of Mogao

St. Clare's Girls' School, Kung, Irene – 14

I am Ash Hart, a famous archaeologist from The United States. Recently, I was invited to China to investigate one of the largest secrets of the world, the Mogao Grottoes.

The Mogao Grottoes are caves where pilgrims and monks prayed and meditated. It is located in the Dunhuang district of Gansu, a province in west central China. They have long been abandoned, at least until other fellow archaeologists rediscovered it.

I was pretty excited for the trip but there was one thing that unsettled me. I was going to the faraway lands of China! I had to leave my family behind back in America. It would take me a month or more just to get there by the fastest ships. I stood in front of the ship as I was going to board, curiosity and determination filling me. There were so many mysteries in these caves. I knew I must discover the secrets they held.

I had never travelled to such a faraway place before and it's hard to not puke when you're seasick. But after one month and twenty days of constant wobbling and swaying, we finally arrived at the Mediterranean Sea. There, we got off our ship and finally set off our journey along the silk road to the Mogao Grottoes. It was a hard trip, riding camels all the way and always running out of water. Somehow, without any major difficulties or setbacks, we made it. We had travelled for so many days and nights, but once I saw it, everything I've been through was worth it. There was a temple in the middle of hundreds of caves. Everything looked so majestic. I had a Kodak no.1 camera with me and I tried to take pictures of everything to leave down a record.

After taking a brief look on the exterior of the place, I went to the nearby camps to report for duty. The sun had already set by then, so my colleagues just told me to settle for the night. However, I simply couldn't resist my curiosity for this place. Therefore, I took my lantern and wandered in the temple.

Inside the temple, the vividness of the place shocked me. There were works of art and sculpture everywhere, from the walls to the ceilings. The art styles were also very different to what I'm used to back in the U.S. I was walking around the temple, examining everything I could find. However, there was one sculpture that attracted me. I slowly reached my hand and touched the Buddha's hand. I felt a ring on the hand. There was also a bump on it representing a jewel. I raised my lantern for it to illuminate the ring and I saw there was space between the "jewel" and the ring. My instinct told me to press it so I did and pressed as hard as I could. Surprisingly, the "jewel" went in! Suddenly, the ground began to shake.

"Was it an earthquake?" I thought. Then, I saw a trapdoor open up by itself. Instead of feeling what a normal person would feel, which is fear, I felt more fascinated by the mysterious mechanism. How could the ancient people of China have set this up? It all felt so complicated and I've never seen anything like it! Despite all the dangers there could be up ahead, my curiosity got hold of me and I mustered up my courage to go inside the trapdoor.

I climbed down the ladder until my feet reached the ground. I felt around and brought my lantern in front of me. What I saw left me awestruck. There were scrolls and scriptures everywhere. I assume these texts should contain all sorts of medical knowledge, as they were hidden this deep. However, I would have to bring it back for my colleagues to decipher them first. I quickly grabbed as much as I could and got out of there. I woke everyone up to inform them of what I had found. They all gathered around and tried to work it out. They then told me to catch some z's first so I went to my tent and dozed off.

The next day, I woke up to the sounds of birds chirping. My fellow archaeologists were still gathered together, examining and deciphering the scrolls. They looked like they were on the verge of breaking down. When they saw me get out of my tent. They told me that the scriptures weren't medical formulae or anything like that, they were the records of civilization! It turns out that they were all documentations of real past events!

Long ago, there were three brothers ruling China. Zhao, Wen and Jin. One day, they had a terrible quarrel on who was to have the absolute power of the throne. A civil war then broke out for them to acquire power. Jin, the youngest brother, cared the least about ruling China. He then fled to Gansu to evade the attacks by his brothers. After Zhao successfully captured Wen, Jin never left the place he'd fled to. Instead, he taught other people about how to respect and love others. Eventually, a lot of people decided to follow in his footsteps and did the same things as him. With so many followers, they started building places they could use to meditate. They dug caves and this is how the

Mogao Grottoes came to be. As dynasties changed and rulers switched, the Mogao Grottoes and the monks still remained, continuing to preach about love and peace.

After hearing this from my colleagues, I realized that treating people with love and peace is the best way to solve anything. From solving a family conflict to ruling a country. That's why Jin lived the longest, and that's why the Mogao Grottoes live on. It has always been about treating other people with love and respect.

I slowly walked to do my assigned duties, which were collecting scripts from the other caves, while thinking about the history of this place.

However, I still think there's more to the story. Why did so many people just willingly gave up their families to meditate here all their lives? While collecting the scrolls, one caught my eye. The language it used looked different than the main language used here. After finishing my duties for the day, I quickly sprinted back to my group of colleagues, excited for what they were going to decipher in the scroll that was different from the rest.

This time, I joined in the deciphering. I quickly made out a few sentences like "Stop this!", "Help me!". This made me so confused. Weren't they all willing to come here? One colleague of mine suddenly shouted "I got it!". The truth then emerged. Jin had not been as friendly as we thought. Some of the scrolls were actually diaries of his followers' lives here. Jin was actually a tyrant. He locked up all of his brothers' men in the caves, eventually driving the men inside the cells insane and killing any person that disobeyed him.

All of this information clashed with the information I had received this morning. I didn't know which to believe anymore. This expedition made me realize all things aren't what they seem to be. We have to dive in deeper in order to make the right judgements. Otherwise, we might wrongly accuse something or someone. From this trip, I have grown. I am getting more knowledgeable and wiser. I will make sure to tell others the real story of the Mogao Grottoes and not anything that the tyrant had made up.

The History of the Future

St. Clare's Girls' School, Luk, Jun Hei Janice – 13

The Mogao Caves, one of the oldest and most ancient caves in China, were found by a monk more than one and a half millennia ago. It was located at an oasis in the desert along the Silk Road in China. Over the centuries, thousands of pilgrims arrived and decided to stay, digging more caves and spending their lifetime creating sacred art and literature. But as time passed by, more than a thousand years later, travellers started taking alternative routes. The Mogao Caves in the Dunhuang district of Gansu Province in west central China were forgotten with a lot of ancient art left unattended in the Caves. Then, in the 1900s, local and international scholar-explorers rediscovered the caves. They gradually unlocked its history and lessons. It was discovered that there were hundreds of caverns containing some of the world's sculptures and literature—including the oldest printed book in the world. Because of the amazing archaeological exploration, they received a prize for rediscovering the Caves. "It was like a tunnel to a lost world in the past", scholars said.

How did the caves look like when the scholars found them? You may ask. The Caves were shaped like an igloo, with a small entrance and a narrow hallway leading to a large opening. Next to the entrance stands two tall, strong trees, which were grown in a curvy shape, almost like an arc — the scholars called them "tree arcs". The "tree arcs" at the entrance were one of the few things that attracted the scholars. Though the trees didn't grow nice and tall, they grew curved enough to support each other effectively. "The monk that found the caves must've planted the trees," said one of the scholars. On the walls of the caves were the long Buddhist prayers written with a few paper documentaries of what the past pilgrims did and will do. But inside one of the caves were carved sculptures of past events. That cave was larger than other ones, so even larger 'tree arc' was planted at the entrance. Under the sculptures were the titles of the carved events written in Latin. In the middle of the cave shows a chest filled with drawings, sketches and writings about the discoveries and theories made in the past. The papers in the treasure box had all turned yellowish, alongside the lock and metallic parts of the chest rusted and the wall sculptures all dusted in cobwebs.

The oldest event carved was named "Rollers", consisting of two sculptures. One of them shows a man struggling to pull a large squared cube alone. The other one shows the man helped by a group of people. Both of them were placed with rollers at the bottom of the cube and kept re-placing the logs while the rest helped the man pull the stone cube. Like "Rollers", the second oldest event named "War" is also consisted of two sculptures. There is a man at war with a shot leg, crying for help. Another sculpture shows another man help the injured man up and they end up winning the war together. In one of the documents from the chest, it is written "'Rollers' shows teamwork and team spirit." And "War' shows that helping someone could make a difference and that humanity is beautiful." These words touched the scholars when they read and translated them and so they showed their professors what they have discovered and ended up getting the award.

The caves taught us a very valuable lesson but not everyone is aware of. Some of these lessons could be the answer to our future. Just like what's happening now in 2022, a critical time that the disease keeps spreading. Without an effective cure found yet, we could start by doing all it takes to prevent it from spreading. So, scientists could find the cure with more time instead of worrying much. That is why teamwork is important and that we should all collaborate to prevent the spread of the highly contagious disease.

The Supernatural Secrets of Mogao Grottoes

St. Clare's Girls' School, Luk, Mei Tung Katie – 13

“Ah, what was that...?”

I gazed upon an enormous structure from afar. It wasn't like anything I had ever seen in my life. I suppose it was because I had never really seen or experienced something great in my life ever since I was born.

I was born in a timeline where the situation in my village was not, you can say, in the best state. There was a hazardous virus spreading in there. I think most of the people there caught it, including my family and me. Everyone was hoping that they could be cured. Therefore, the business for medical services back then were boosting. People tried their best to find cures for this disease.

Almost every single day, the queue was incredibly long. Even if we had the money, it would take ages for us to get checked up unless you go to some clinics where the medical fee was a bit more costly. However, that seemed to be impossible for most of us villagers since a lot of people caught the disease and not many people could work to support themselves nor their family, including mine.

Every single one of my family members caught the disease unfortunately. Therefore, the financial situation wasn't very stable. Out of all of them, it seemed like my situation was the mildest. Therefore, for the sake of my family, I went out and worked, such as cleaning the streets or doing jobs that no one really wanted to do.

I came home quite late every day. Therefore, I could barely see them. I was glad that my family members were able to take care of themselves while I was gone and I wouldn't have to worry too much about it.

Since most of the people were reluctant to do the jobs, I did, and the wage was luckily quite high. Each day, I would cheerfully hop back home with the packet of money I received. I would smile brightly and hug it tightly. It was the same every day, and though it seems quite tough and tiring sometimes. I didn't really mind, really. I only hoped to see that lively family I used to know in the past. Yet, after I discovered it. You can say, my life has changed...?

One day, while I was on my way home. I saw a somewhat broad, enormous and long structure. It was as if it's endless... It kept on stretching towards the two sides, until it was out of sight. It caught my eye, therefore, I approached it to take a closer look. It was on the hilltop. As a result, it took me a while to reach the top. I was surprised and perhaps overjoyed. It was a gigantic cave, with some bridges and huge holes in the sandy-textured wall. I thought it was like some secret hidden place with some treasures in it. I thought, I suppose, if there really were some valuable things in there, I could sell them and earn money. Then, we would have the money to go to the clinics with fewer people to get checked up. I was quite worried that they wouldn't be able to get through it. I was afraid that it would take too long. And before I knew, it was too late... I couldn't afford that to happen. That was why I decided to start my journey.

The next early morning, I packed my things into a big and thick cloth bag. I left some food and money on the table with a tiny note, saying, "I'll be home soon." Then, I set off towards my destination, what I would call—treasure cave (the Mogao Cave).

I took the same route as I did before, and right before my eyes, were that same structure I saw before. I grabbed my bag straps tightly, then climbed up the bridge leading to the entrance.

It seemed way more ancient looking than I expected. It was as if it had been years since someone went in. Since it was the first time for me to be in there, I was kind of lost. However, I supposed that was what they called an adventure. This should be how adventurers figured out routes, before a map of the architecture was made. I walked around, and on the way, I came across a few spots.

There were some smaller caves near it. One of the few I came across was a cave with a gigantic Buddha lying on a platform with murals all around. I raised my head and gazed at that scenery. There were probably over a million tiny Buddhists on the ceiling. On the other two sides were murals too. They mostly turned out to be paintings of bodhisattvas and arhats. On the left side of the entrance was the Nirvāṇa Buddha. The Buddha was resting his head on his right hand while lying on his right side.

The Buddha looked so calm and peaceful. He was probably in a very deep and nice sleep. I didn't want to disturb his sleep. Therefore, I left. However, right when I took a step out of the cave, there was a light shower. I was sure that it

wasn't the sand or rain. It was a somewhat feeling of calmness and assurance, as if it was telling me that everything would be fine. I thought, could it be the Buddha? I wasn't sure, but I still believed so. Could it be a hint of some sort...? I wondered.

I started off again, but halfway, I was starting to feel unwell. I had a nauseous feeling. I also had a bit of a headache. I thought I probably was tired, so that was when I decided to take a break and sit on the sandy path. I knew that I needed to take good care of myself if I was going to explore. I ate and drank a bit to regain my energy.

Things were turning blurry; I was losing consciousness. I could feel my body shaking a bit despite the hot weather. "Should I not have come there in the first place?" I thought. "Could this be a mistake? No, it couldn't, and I wouldn't allow it to be."

"Hm...? A door? Door cave?" I started to talk gibberish. I tried focusing my gaze, and it seemed I wasn't wrong after all. I started to try walking towards it with the energy I gained from my curiosity.

Unexpectedly, it was a room full of scrolls and scripts. It was quite small for a room. I thought it could only fit two people inside. It seemed like a storage room. There were stacks of scrolls and scripts as tall as a door. They were all covered in dust and spider webs. There were also some Buddha statues and murals with stories and deep meanings behind every scene drawn. The color was getting fainter, but everything still seemed so well-kept.

After being mesmerized by my surroundings, I started to look closely through the mere sunlight peeking into the room. I didn't understand much of what it was about, but I could tell it was about Buddhism and ancient China histories. I thought that they might be valuable. I might also receive some money if I sold them. Before I left, I put some pieces of bread wrapped in paper on the platform and gave a few nods as appreciation and thanks.

As I stepped out of the room, I felt a strange aura... I wasn't sure what it was, but I was worried. Therefore, I hurried my footsteps as the aura got stronger. I started running towards the exit as I held the scrolls and scripts tightly within my chest. It was as if the aura was telling me to give up, but I mustn't. I just couldn't. I must keep on running. I panted as my body started to get weaker.

"I know I'm nearby! I must succeed, to save them! I don't mind what happened to me! I'm willing to sacrifice my life for them!" I cried while pouring my heart out.

A faint wind suddenly blew towards my face, as if it heard my calls and screams. I was then feeling all better and the aura was gone. I looked around, feeling different and queer. But it didn't matter anymore, I ran down the hill towards my home and told my family about my explorations and discoveries. We managed to make quite a fortune out of them. We managed to use the money and heal ourselves and other villagers too. We lived a happy life, but that wasn't the end for me.

I ended up being in the Mogao Caves, yes, the one I explored before, in my afterlife. However, it was unexpectedly nice for me. In fact, I discovered a lot more secrets there.

I just wonder, who will find them out next?

New Tales of the Mogao Grottoes

St. Joseph's College, Chung, Man Nok Terrance – 13

“The Mogao Grottoes, also known as the Thousand Buddhas Grottoes, or more famously, the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas, has several legends surrounding it, each crazier than the last. The most accepted one, is of a monk named Yuezun saw a vision of a thousand Buddhas at the site, leading him to draw what he saw on the walls of the cave. He was later joined by a second monk Faliang, and the site gradually grew, by the time of the Northern Liang a small community of monks had formed...”

“Hah! Trust the government to cover up the treasures inside! This passage’s just a whole lot of balderdash!” said the infamous thief, Oliver Jones. He was just tipped off by one of his “trustworthy” sources, and was now heading to the Mogao Grottoes, disguised as a normal tourist, participating in the 1–Day Dunhuang Mogao Grottoes Mingshashan Tour. Of course, his goal was just like the one in all the famous places he had raided before: get the treasure. In this case, the treasure consisted of what seemed to be an enormous amount of gold and a giant gold Buddha statue. Oliver grinned a devilish grin as he thought of how rich he would be 24 hours. The mere thought made him laugh out loud, leading to everyone on the tour bus to look at him quizzically. He was going to have to be more inconspicuous.

“I can’t lie, this place is really cool” he thought as he arrived at the famous site. The tall looming pine trees around cast a dark, almost eerie shadow against the walls of the buildings planted on top of the caves. The dark interior of the castle–like structure added another layer of spookiness, and it wasn’t helping that the sound that the wind made as it blew through the tunnels sounded as if the Buddhas on the wall were alive. The Buddhas on the walls were bathed in golden light as the sun shone on the walls, and the expressions of the Buddhas looked terrifying and imposing. Oliver shuddered, then returned to his plan, ducking behind a doorway with a sign saying: no entry allowed. All the doorways were open except for this one, so this had to be the one with the treasure. He waited for sundown, which was when the tour would move on to dinner. Now, he made his move.

Oliver got his flashlight out and started to move down the hallway. His small breaths echoed around the whole tomb–like structure. Every now and then, he would hear the wind whistling through the castle, making him come out in goosebumps. He finally reached the end of the hallway, then proceeded down the stairs, which led to three separate doorways. Oliver took the right doorway (he had memorized the whole layout of the Grottoes on the 2–hour bus trip) and hurried along the hallways, turning left, then right, then right again, until he had reached a dead end.

This was to be expected; he definitely expected some kind of mechanism protecting the gold. Oliver quickly translated the Chinese inscriptions on the cold and dusty stone wall, which meant that he had to choose which brick he needed to touch in order to open a secret passageway to the gold. Oliver moved to the left side of the wall, then looked at the wall again from a different angle. This time, instead of old moss on the slabs of stone, he saw a green arrow made from the moss pointing the brick he had to touch. Raising an eyebrow, Oliver thought: too easy! As he proceeded to walk through the newly opened door. The door led to yet another cavern, this one filled with paintings of Buddha eyes on the wall.

Oliver couldn’t help but feel frightened as he approached the pedestal in the middle of the room. There was a golden crown on the top of the pedestal, as if waiting to be collected. It started to draw Oliver into its trance, practically begging him to put the crown on. Oliver knew he couldn’t do that, not if he wanted the treasure. He quickly averted his gaze from the nearly irresistible crown, then threw it to the doorway from which he came in. As if on command, the cavern rumbled, then the whole platform around the pedestal started to descend. Finally, when the platform came to a halt, Oliver turned around and saw what he was looking for. And boy, was it magnificent.

It was every man’s dream. The floor was just covered with mounds and mound of gold bars, by the looks of it 100 tons of 24–carat gold was just lying on the floor. At the back of the entire room, there was a giant gold Buddha lying down on the golden plated bed. Its expression was relaxed and calm, with a kindly smile, while all the Buddhas on the walls looked absolutely enraged. Oliver chuckled, then started to pick up the gold on the ground, dumping the golden bars into his sack.

Suddenly, he heard a rumbling noise, and the sound of gold clanking against gold. He wheeled around, and before he could see anything, a golden hand shout out and held him tightly in its grasp. The owner of the hand was the giant gold Buddha, smiling serenely as it rose to its full height of 10 feet. Oliver was scared to pieces, not daring to speak, but his greed got the better of him, and he started counting how many gold bars he had taken. It let out a short booming grunt, then spoke "Tiny human, not even a devil, nor a monster, why have you come to steal our gold? You passed the test of perspective, which should let you see the Buddhas on the wall's perspective, as they see a foolish man steal the gold which they have spent their whole lives protecting. You passed the test of greed, which should teach you not to take the gold of the Mogao Grottoes – what are you doing?" he questioned Oliver, who was rapping his knuckles against the golden Buddha. "This is solid gold? He asked the gigantic golden Buddha. "Yes – oh never mind." The Buddha grumbled. "Every 50 years we get raided and I have to do this. I can't even keep track of how many times we've been interrupted from our sleep. Human, are you even scared?"

Oliver looked up, grinning with a greedy look on his face. "I am scared, but more than that, I'm thrilled! How else was I going to move you up back to the surface? You must be 500 tons or even more!" The Buddha sighed, then threw Oliver across the room, making him crash against the floor. The Buddha proceeded to lie down in his original position, then muttered a spell. Oliver got up, dusting himself – then immediately fell back down. The paintings of the Buddhas on the walls had come to life, and they were angry. Quick as a flash, they encircled Oliver, furiously kicking him, and punching him, until one of them blasted a golden light, blinding Oliver...

When Oliver woke up, he was surprised to see that he was back on the tour bus, leaving with the other tourists. He was so shaken about the whole ordeal; he slumped against the bus seat, trembling. He looked at his watch, when he noticed the golden writing on the back of his hand, and it read "Human, I'm giving you a second chance at life, but if you ever steal again, you will be transported back here and become one of the Buddha paintings on the wall, destined to protect the Mogao Grottoes gold. Have a good life now!" with that, the words morphed into a tattoo of a Buddha on the back of his palm.

And that is the new story of the Mogao Grottoes.

Kite, Thread and Wind

St. Joseph's College, Lee, Cyrus Chi Hin – 14

As far as the eye can see, the sound of horses' hooves is heard, the yellow dust is rolling, and the wind and dust mixed with sand blew the window canopy of the carriage. The face of the man inside is clearly visible. He looks young, lying lazily, but his sharp eyes show youthfulness. His frivolity and arrogance seemed to imply that no wind and rain in the world could block his way.

The sound of the hooves of the horses stopped, and the man in the carriage walked out slowly, dressed in bright clothes and expressionless.

The man went forward to the cave in front of him.

The entrance of the grotto is a size that only one person can enter. The road was dark, the man groped along, and there was little light along the way. When he reached the end of the road, he suddenly saw a small stone room. An old carpet and a lamp were placed on the ground, and the monk was breathing cross-legged, facing the wall. The stone room was neatly and concisely arranged.

The monk felt something. He opened his eyes and asked in a low voice, "What do you want from me?" The man replied respectfully, "Master, my name is Ran, passing this place, may I stay for a few nights?" No voice responded. Ran walked away, disappointed. The monk smiled and turned around, showing a handsome face and said, "I am Lang. If you are in trouble, I am willing to help. After you exit the cave, turn right at the second fork. You can stay in that room tonight."

After saying goodbye to Lang, he followed his instructions and found the "guest room". The entrance of the cave was relatively spacious. Standing at the entrance of the cave, you can see everything inside. However, Ran could not take his eyes off the frescoes on the wall—the painter was in ragged clothes, with a bony right hand holding a paintbrush. Ran could not see his face but the movements of drawing and painting were lifelike. The light on the painter pierced through the surrounding darkness, and the walls flickered faintly, making Ran feel that although the figure in the painting was poor, he exuded an unattainable temperament...

Ran spent the whole night thinking about the artistic conception of the murals, and couldn't understand it, so Ran went to find Lang early the next day, but on the way to Lang's cave, Ran found Lang who was painting on a wall at the entrance of the temple. However, looking at Lang, a set of simple and tight monk clothes highlights Lang's thin figure; the pen flying on the wall, white, yellow, orange, a Bodhisattva with deep eyes, a compassionate expression, and a cassock that slowly takes shape... It exuded an extraordinary and refined temperament. The exquisiteness of Lang's painting skills astonished Ran. It was also Ran's pursuit of artistic attainments that changed his idea of learning painting in the West.

Lang looked at the Bodhisattva with pious eyes: "The Bodhisattva purifies all living beings, and is compassionate. She is one of the Buddhas we believe in. We all pray to her to bless the people with peace throughout the year, and to resist the invasion of disasters for us who are small. I pray that the Bodhisattva will bless us on our journey of cultivation, so that we will one day become immortals." Ran looked at Lang earnestly: "Master, I yearn for the way of cultivation, can I stay and learn from you?" Lang smiled slightly: "If you are sincere, Mogao Grottoes and I will always welcome you to study with us, and I will be your teacher from now on."

Ran entered the stone room and sat on a pile of dead leaves. He asked Lang to tell him the story of the Mogao Grottoes and the origin of the Buddha statue, like a humble student asking a teacher for advice. Lang eventually decided to teach Ran Confucianism and everything learned throughout his life.

Just when Lang introduced the Mogao Grottoes, he suddenly stopped halfway through. Ran asked him, "Teacher, do you need some water?" Lang shook his head. Ran heard Lang's slightly hoarse voice saying, "Be calm in the process of cultivation. It cannot be interrupted; this is a test of a cultivator's perseverance, and if you want to become a Taoist, you have to pass such a difficult test." Ran was thoughtful about Lang's words and remained silent. He was reflecting on himself and Lang said to him, "You have a pure heart, and you are a seed that can blossom and bear fruit under careful care and become a tree for a hundred years. A month later will be the Lawax Festival, which is an important festival in Buddhism. We see it as an important festival. You have to remember to get up early."

The master and the apprentice began a month of cultivation life. As the days passed, Lang also taught Ran about meditation, Buddhist language, calligraphy and painting and other Buddhist culture with heart. The teacher and apprentice practiced together for a longer time every day.

In the early morning of the Lawax Festival, Ran remembered Lang's request to meet early. When Ran went to the temple, Ran felt restless all the time. He took Lang's hand halfway and asked, "Master, what should I do if other Buddhist masters think I am not ready?" Lang clenched his clear hand and said, "You don't have to worry, Master knows your willingness to follow the teachings, and can see your pure and kind nature clearly. I will introduce you to the Buddhist masters well."

Ran saw the Buddhist teachers kneeling in an orderly manner to worship the Buddha statue in front of the altar. The solemn atmosphere was broken as they entered through the door. The Buddhist masters stared at Ran with puzzled eyes, Ran felt overwhelmed for a while, held Lang's hand and began sweating slightly. Lang clasped his fists and introduced Ran to the Buddhist masters: "Everyone, this is the person I mentioned to you, my new disciple, Ran." Lang then pulled Ran to find two straw mats, meditated quietly, and waited for the auspicious time.

When the auspicious time arrived, Ran and Lang followed the masters to the front yard of the temple. A few monks stood upright with kites and kite strings. They seemed to notice the newcomer and gave him a slight smile, indicating that he should not panic. Lang explained: "Every Lawax Festival, we will fly kites, lift them into the air, and then make a wish, placing our wishes on the kite – the kite string is the distraction in our hearts, and the wind is our sincerity. Cut the string of the kite, let your kite fly with the wind, and the God of Lawax will see and realize your wish." Lang cut off the string of the kite he was tying, and said, "I wish to use my life to benefit the people of the world." Hearing Lang's wish, there was a hint of loneliness in his eyes – for the first time he realized his selfish possessiveness towards Lang – he just wanted to be Lang's only disciple.

The next day, Ran saw a group of Buddhist masters in the main courtyard. There was a coffin in the middle. A monk said to him, "Master Lang passed away."

Ran could not remember what happened after that. He only remembered that he was unusually calm. When the body was cremated, he looked at Lang's serene face, and the kite that symbolized Lang's life which left with the wind. He suddenly felt that Lang was an ethereal kite, and he was the kite string that bound the kite, allowing him to enjoy the beauty of the mankind, but it was also an obstacle preventing him reaching the land of bliss; the rules of etiquette is the knife of the thread, faith is the medium for the kite to fly high, but what awaits the kite in the end, is it the paradise or the abyss?

As the Sun Rises

St. Joseph's College, Li, Haolong – 13

Another gust of grainy wind, the sands whirled into their faces, singing cacophonous rhythms. As Bo grasped the reins tighter, his camel jerked its head in protest. The merciless fireball raged above them despite all the muttering and praying for it to stop. Blazing rays scorched bare skin, while the stifling heat knocked men off their camels. *What could we do anyway, us mere mortals?* Bo thought, cursing the gods.

For five years, he'd endured the extreme: trekking dunes, sailing torrents, fighting bandits. And all their bounty left? Spare pieces of silk and porcelain, and some dilapidated brushes and teapots. *Wish I never came*, Bo thought, as if he'd a choice. His parents? Dead. Siblings? Dead. Snatched by inner demons overnight. Bo's eyes welled up. *No, mustn't cry*. He bit his cracked lips. *Where were those gods, when I prayed, bedside, for the suffering to stop? Where were they, for a twelve-year-old orphan?*

“FINALLY! Thank God!”

Bo snapped back to his senses. In the distance, a city gate—at last, Dunhuang.

Most of the band careened straight for the wells, slurping water from gigantic jars, too parched to bother with petite terracotta cups. Bo excluded; his mind elsewhere, gawking with incredulity at clay patches and withered shrubs. *Where'd they go? Into an endless nirvana, as the scriptures say, or...just gone? Answer me, divine gods, if you exist.*

Gazing toward the skies, Bo found himself face-to-face with a burly merchant. “Been looking for you, boy!” the towering goliath growled. “Welcome rituals. Now.”

Under a canopy, sitting cross-legged, Bo ignored the spiritual blabber for torturous hours and regarded the locals' dress. Familiar native elements, but in earthy tints—altered by bound turbans, billowing pants, head scarves with peepholes.

“...*May Gautama Buddha bless you all!*”

When the merchants clapped and hurraed, Bo did too—the highlight to come: the Mogao Grottoes. He'd heard the legends since he was crawling on fours.

“Goin' to fill a cave with goods for gods,” someone in the crowd declared.

“The *gods?*,” Bo exclaimed. “We can't afford that, especially not for—”

“H—How dare you disrespect the gods! May you be cast down all eighteen levels of hell!” A portly man glared into Bo’s eyes—a “lesser”, awfully religious, tradesman in the troop. His chubby index finger shook wrathfully as he fired accusations.

Bo, in defense, could only splutter. *Heaven, hell, what’s the difference, without my family?*

Thankfully, someone “friendlier” yanked him away; then they dashed towards an ochre hill as curses—“*miscreant!*” “*reprobate!*”—faded behind them.

Bo noticed, from a distance, not the natural splendor but the deep, dark spots on a hill that resembled cavities or rat holes. *The grottoes?*

When he got closer, though, Bo was awestruck. Inside, everything seemed to leap out of the walls: *Fei Tians*—flying apsaras, with ribbons of silk and hue soaring across the skies; Buddhas, solemn and tranquil, meditating on thrones of clay; arhats, bodhisattvas, and mythical beasts nodding to the grace of paradise.

Bo staggered, mesmerized, along the gallery of grottoes till he came upon a cave teeming with crewmen.

As he entered, the friendlier merchant tugged on Bo’s long hair. “Don’t offend anyone—they take their gods and afterlives seriously. C’mon, pile that stack *there.*”

Bo regarded the crinkly, yellowed papers beside him, dated *Kai Yuan* 13th of the Great Tang, 726—when they’d started out. Heaps in his arms, Bo headed towards the designated corner, and laid them down.

After barely an hour, he’d had enough of this hypocritical holy work. “Um, urgent business—may I?”

The crewmember scoffed. “Can’t it wait? You’ll have to run to the residences or...the meditation sanctuary.”

“Meditation *what?*”

“Where monks worship, but—!”

Bo scurried away, full of himself.

Back outside in the suffocating heat, Bo roamed lazily around before arriving at what looked like a temple, seven stories carved into mountain rock, outlined in cerise and black. He hesitated at the threshold, obscurely unassured, then turned to leave, whistling with the desert wind.

On his seventh step, however, he changed his mind.

A peculiar sensation lured him back. Bo felt a surge of desire to venture past the looming doors, as if beckoned by a higher power. Even the bronze *Kirin*—alas, only its head—called for his name.

At the entranceway, Bo tried the metal ring clutched in the Kirin's jaws and, to his surprise, the door opened with ease; but after wiping his brow and crossing the threshold, it banged shut behind him.

Struck with dread, Bo tried again—the door refused to budge. A queer, sinister world within: dark and conspicuously bare, except for a flickering flame in the dusky air. Unlike the old tales, there were no monks uttering sacred scriptures or striking rusted gongs; in fact, there wasn't a monk to be seen—or heard. He trailed the flame and ducked into a cave, where a leathery monk sat on the floor, hands resting on his knees, muttering softly to himself.

Bo inched backward, careful not to disturb—having heard that their kind were cantankerous. Eventually, he elbowed a wall, fumbling around for an exit, any trace of an opening. After a while, he felt a small, round opening in one of the walls. *A tunnel! Chances are I'll be able to squeeze through, but... But, there's no other option.*

Bo scurried into the damp hole of darkness like a rodent returning home. Unlike the rodent, he crept in terror through the cramped, muddy tunnel. Whetted stones, poking spitefully out, punctured his sides and tore fragments off his robe. The tunnel was far longer than he'd expected. For ages, he wriggled along the zigzagging path, one way to the next. *Perhaps this is all wrong*, he thought. *Perhaps there's no end.*

Bo writhed faster through the drafty darkness. A draft? Yes, a hint of escape. Bo reached forward, blindly, then felt something. Something stone—cold that burnt his sweaty hands. *Metal*, Bo suspected, *oddly spherical*. He groped it impetuously, twisting it left and right, till a trapdoor flung open.

A sliver of light pierced his eyes, leaving them with flurries of amorphous shapes. Gaining his bearings, Bo realized he'd crawled his way back to the same room with the same monk—except now, on the opposite side.

Bo collapsed. Yet the monk, old and weary, took no notice, reciting the same passage over and over, from the *Diamond Sutra*, in desperation. *Old fool*, Bo thought. *What a waste of life.*

After a while, the monk stood up and straightened his robes. *“The one clinging to perception and views wanders the world offending others.”* He strode out of the cave with such swiftness that could only be by memory, not sight.

Across the room sat a Buddha of stone, on an altar. Four *Fei Tians* spread across the walls, alongside hunters on horseback and miniature depictions of deities. Bo marveled at the sight, which would’ve been more vivid and radiant if not for the dimness. The murals looked more “realistic” than the ones in the grottoes, as if alive.

Ouch. Bo rubbed his swollen back, scowling at the serene Buddha.

Out of nowhere, its eyes flared, gleaming with a virescent glow. Panic-stricken, Bo glimpsed down at his twitching hands. They seemed to hover ominously, float and...*fade*? Without warning, his body—now a mist-wafted forward, entranced and engulfed by the Buddha’s eyes. The last thing Bo could make out was a faint cry—that sounded like his own.

I’m going to die. Sucked into a Buddha’s eyes. Strangely, there was no pain, or anything of that sort. A sense of relief enveloped him. Bo imagined tender zephyrs kissing his cheeks, light chants echoing faraway, the air nectar-sweet. He opened his eyes.

He wasn’t inside the Buddha but an idyll of dreams, a place hardly believable though strangely familiar. A lone island surrounded by an endless sea and blooming lotuses in the obsidian night. Just like the murals in the Mogao Grottoes.

Graceful deities swooped around him, though ignoring his presence; a few mean-looking arhats sped through the foggy skies.

I’ve been waiting for you... A distant voice crooned.

An apsara flitted down to the melancholy island of his.

“Me?”

Yes.

“B—but *why*?”

To tell you something.

“Then tell me.”

You humans are connected by an intense sensation; with that, one cannot perish. Your family isn’t gone.

“Of course they’re gone!”

No. Do not dwell in sorrows—mortals are caged in them. The root of suffering, in a way. True freedom is found in the mind. Do you understand?

Bo paused for a while, holding his breath. He whispered. “I do.”

Then you are on the path to enlightenment.

As the apsara fluttered away, Bo pondered its words. He clamped his eyes tight to the sound of harmonious notes trembling through time; there were his Papa and Mama, his brothers and sisters, reaching towards him across the expanse.

“So you’ve been there all along,” Bo murmured, “everyday, as long as the sun rises.” *Ingrained in my heart*, he thought, returning to the Mogao Grottoes.

The Treasure That Eclipses All

St. Joseph's College, Li, Lok Wang Gerald – 12

Ilham finished reading aloud the sacred text. This transcript that the Sand Serpents had stolen from the Huihuang Monastery ended abruptly, but the Serpents had already gathered enough information from interrogating the abbots. Legend had it that priceless treasures were hidden in the oasis. With a bit of calculation on Ismail's part, they were able to track down the mysterious location.

However, when they arrived at the spot where the oasis should be, nothing was there. The Sand Serpents, as bandits often did, resorted to arguing.

Ilham, sick of this business, traipsed around the camp. Kicking around the sand, he reminisced about the past brotherhood among the Serpents. He poured some water into his mouth from his bottle, but the scorching sun burned it away, just like how their greed and wrath caused their friendship to evaporate.

Feeling especially emotional, he hit a rock with his club, which then landed on something different with a clang. He called the other Serpents to the peculiar object and the Captain, digging with his bare hands, found tablet, made out of gold. Immediately Ilham saw greed engulfing his fellow Serpents, their eyes blind with manic desire. To deter them, he tried to kick the tablet away, but when he saw its beautiful adornments, he too felt an urgent desire to possess it, and he grabbed it.

It slipped, striking another stone tablet hidden beneath, and everything that followed unfolded in a flash: the sandy grounds around everyone started shifting away as light shot out of the ground, shining three colours: a lustrous green, a furious red and a blinding white light.

And into the illuminated opening Ilham fell, tumbling and rolling.

Rubbing his head, Ilham looked around, squinting until he identified green lights emanating from the luminous diamonds on the walls of this cave that he had landed in. Mesmerised, Ilham wandered down the cave, gawking at the twinkling walls. The cave led to an underground oasis with a mural etched on its end.

It depicted a rich man drowning in gold, glaring enviously at another with even more gold. Next to the first etching, the man sat on a caravan approaching an oasis. Ilham tried to continue reading, but the mural seemingly ended there.

Looking around for more clues, he found a glimmering, perfectly cut emerald. Looking inside, the silhouette of his neighbour from the distant past, Mr. Chan, appeared.

Mr. Chan was from a land further east, a place named Shanghai. He had come to Huihuang to seek his fortune. He'd sometimes let Ilham and Alimjan, his brother, play at his house. Inside, Ilham had seen his opulent houseware. Magnificent chandeliers, priceless china, expensive jewellery, and the most precious of all, a tiara imported from another continent, Europe. Surrounded by such unparalleled wealth, he'd thought about his own desperate lifestyle, and envy had struck. It was then or never. Taking a chance when Mr. Chan had gone to get tea, he took the tiara and fled. However, some distance from Mr. Chan's home, the clown slipped from his hand and the incoming sandstorm carried it away.

Unable to divert his attention from the seeming apparitions, a picture then manifested into form beside the emerald, catching Ilham's eye. He instantly recognized it as the one he had drawn of the Sand Serpents when they were young. Each one of them, upon seeing it, had exclaimed in wonder and contributed something personal to it. Ismail added his calligraphy writing, Yazgul added his camel's fur, his brother Alimjan added a piece of priceless jade he had found while scouring around some ruins, and the Captain added a peacock feather his departed father had brought back from India.

But in reality, the picture was long gone, lost to the sands of time. During a heist from years past, the Captain had abandoned it, calling it useless baggage.

Tearing up, Ilham thought about what they had lost because of their greed. Their envy and desire for others' belongings caused them to lose what they truly treasured.

With that realization, he finally tore his eyes away from the picture. He walked away, finally noticing the diverse fauna and flora everywhere around the oasis. Ilham approached the water, wanting to fill up his bottle with water. Just as he touched the water, the oasis turned green, and briefly shined gold as a panel on the end wall slid open. Gold pieces then floated from beneath the oasis.

Yet, the jewels no longer tempted him. Ilham walked towards the opening on the wall, which revealed the rest of the mural: the man walked away from gold and became engulfed in golden lines that seemed to represent light.

But before he could decipher its meaning, fire rained down as red light beamed from above.

To avoid the fire, Ilham jumped to the side, only to be faced with another wall of fire. The serene landscape was set alight and the picture that he was clutching fell to the ground. Within seconds, the last vestige of the Sand Serpents' former camaraderie was turned to ash.

As flames erupted further, Ilham found his own likeness staring back from the distance. A copy of himself, composed of fire. The copy fled and Ilham gave chase. Despite his best efforts to attack the copy with his club, it simply just passed through its fiery silhouette.

Eventually the entity was cornered in a cavern with lots of stalagmites, dangling precariously off the ceiling. Seeing them, Ilham thought of a plan. He threw his club towards them and knocked down a stalagmite, which descended towards his duplicate. Still, the stalagmite passed through its fiery form, and it was unharmed.

Just then, fire flooded in from the entrance of the cavern. The fire morphed into the shapes of his former comrades.

The doppelgangers were gaining ground, and Ilham was about to be burned to charred pieces. The situation was evocative of how the Sand Serpents had terrorized villages along the old Silk Road. But then, a voice spoke in a whisper, 'The child in front will have to die, if you can again see the sky.'

Indeed, a child emerged in front of Ilham, and he knew that the Grotto made no empty promises. He was about to kick the child into the inferno when he had a vision of his brother, young and innocent. Snapping back to reality, Ilham looked at the child, and he couldn't bear to do it. He pulled the child back and took the full force of the flames. All the suffering he had caused was at once levied on himself. Screaming in pain, he begged for mercy, but remembered how he had given none to his victims. Resigning to his fate, he decided to suffer the consequences.

Yet, the Grotto seemed to sense his immeasurable guilt, for down came healing water, covering the room in steam.

Within the clouding smoke came a flowery scent, making Ilham's eyelids instantly feel like drooping curtains. Listening to the dripping water, he was lulled to sleep.

In his dream, Ilham saw himself as a young child, draped in a luminescent white glow. When he tried to approach his younger self, he seethed at him. Next to his younger counterpart was his brother Alimjan, also glaring at him. The silhouettes of his friends also faded in and out in the mist, and along with the spectres of himself and his brother, they judged him.

"You are at fault!"

"You brought our family down!"

"You have forsaken your innocence!"

"How could you leave me in my time of need?"

The words stung like hornets, especially the ones by his brother. Guilt coursed through Ilham's veins as he knew that those words were true. After their parents' demise, Ilham had left Alimjan at the mosques while he let out his grief through work and violence. Through the turmoil, his brother eventually followed his footsteps, viewing him as his role model. But meanwhile, Ilham had dismissed Alimjan.

During his grief, Ilham had not only turned himself into a criminal, but corrupted his own brother, who he had vowed to shield when they were small. Ilham grew to not care for Alimjan. He had pushed him away and over the edge.

But now, he didn't wallow, he couldn't, he wouldn't. This time, he will be there for Alimjan.

With that thought, he moved with conviction towards the cave's exit where his brother stood. He threw himself onto his brother's arms. They embraced, tenderly hugging. The steam erupted into an assortment of colours in an explosion.

Far away, an abbot notices the eruption, coming from beneath the sands, where a trove of cosmic and human secrets, a tale of being lost and found, was etched into the archives of a treasure that will eclipse all.

The Confession of a Monk (A Hoax)

St. Joseph's College, Tse, Lap Wo Liam – 13

DUNHUANG, China (AP) — Workers unearthed a letter that shed light on the controversies surrounding the loss of the 'Mogao Scrolls'. The letter was purportedly signed by Wang Yuanlu, Taoist monk and caretaker of the Mogao Grottoes near Dunhuang in Gansu Province, China, in early twentieth century. It was discovered during restoration work after the pagoda, which commemorated the monk, was found tilted due to subsidence. Below is a full translation of the letter:—

I am Wang Yuanlu. This is a statement about my life and the events leading to and following the discovery of the library cave in the Mogao Grottoes.

I was born in a rural area in Hubei province. My family was in extreme poverty. The land was barren, and I had many siblings. I left home to join a military regiment for food and accommodation, but soon felt I wanted something more, and different. I followed a Taoist master to learn about The Way. The master died, and I started wandering about in the northern provinces, seeking a place to belong to.

I was almost forty when, in 1897, I stumbled upon the Mogao Caves. I could still recall the first, breathtaking sight of Mount Sanwei. It was a vast canvas, golden by the rays of the setting sun and decorated only by the shades of its folds; atop its range were silhouettes of gods overlooking the serene valley with permanent grace. The golden light reflected on the thousand caves, built by generations of pilgrims along an escarpment on this side of the valley. Inside the caves, stunning murals told the stories of Buddha and the deities of many other religions, alongside those of secular subjects. It was dazzling.

There were temples at three levels of the escarpment. The highest and the middle levels were inhabited by Buddhist monks. The lowest level was vacant and seemed neglected for a long time. The entrance was submerged in sand, making it impossible to see the interior of the temple. Staring at the pile of sand, a surge of determination flowed through my mind in an instant — that I had to clear it up to uncover the beauty of its interior.

I gathered up a group of believers to salvage the wreck. We discovered more wall paintings, sculptures and figurines made of wood, metal, ceramic and clay, and all sort of paraphernalia. After mending the first few sculptures, we felt a sheer sense of accomplishment. However, the caves were over a mile across and there were loads to be fixed. Our task was enormous, so was the resources needed. We developed this routine of travelling fifteen miles to Dunhuang, the nearest town, once every two months to raise funds.

On June 22, 1900, when my pupils and I were clearing the sand in the sixteenth grotto, I noticed a crack on one of the walls. I tapped on it gently and it gave a hollow, crisp sound. I immediately asked one of the pupils to dig through the crack. A section of the wall crumbled. My eyes flickered in astonishment as an immense heap of manuscripts, scrolls and silk paintings appeared in sight. They were packed so intact and stacked up so high, that they should amount to tens of thousands.

“This must be valuable,” I muttered to myself. I consulted the village elders at once, and they advised me to keep them in place for the time being. Next, I reported the discovery to the town magistrate and sought his instructions, but he was so preoccupied with the problem of collecting taxes in his domain that he could not spare a single second for me. Two years later, still not able to resolve the tax problem, the magistrate was replaced. I raised the matter again with his successor, Wang Zonghan. Wang was a caring person, and he seemed genuinely concerned. Although he was very busy, he promised to discuss the matter with a province professor. I had not heard back since. I did not want to give up, so I travelled 800 miles with two caskets of manuscripts to see Yan Dong, the chief of my former regiment, who had since been made Daotai of Gansu Reserve Army. Yan, a calligrapher himself, was not impressed by the artistic quality of the manuscripts, but he was moved by my effort and wrote to the provincial government to propose transferring the treasure to Lanzhou, the provincial capital, for safekeeping. When the official reply finally came in 1904, it was disheartening. Due to the long distance between Dunhuang and Lanzhou, the cost of transportation would be very high, and since funding was not available, an order was granted that the scrolls be kept at the same place, and I was to guard them.

The new responsibility, being an addition to my ordinary duties to raise alms, maintain the tenements and conserve the artworks, was too much for me to bear. I prayed for the mercy of Buddha to have the burden lifted from my frail shoulders.

On May 15, 1907, I had my fateful meeting with Aurel Stein. I had been notified of the impending visit of a very senior official from the United Kingdom, some minister of education. Even with that knowledge, I was surprised by the grand formality of his approach. He was accompanied by a dozen soldiers, sent by the commander of the Shazhou Battalion, as well as a translator named Jiang and a few assistants.

I had returned from an alms round, in time for the annual temple festival. Stein had been waiting for me. Apparently, he had learnt about the location of the cavern and was even shown a sample of the scrolls.

The meeting was set up by Jiang. Its purpose was clear: the scrolls. The day that I had dreaded about had finally arrived. My emergency letters to the authorities were unanswered. With the help of my most trusted pupil, Zhao Mingyu, I hurriedly bricked up the entrance to the cavern. Obviously, it was noticed by Stein. At the meeting, he beat about the bush and pretended not to focus on the cavern and its contents. Jiang asked for a few specimens of the manuscripts. When they were handed to Stein, he could hardly withhold his beam of delight.

Having seen the real articles, they had their mind set. It was an ordeal trying to fend off their persistent requests, which went on for weeks. In the end, I gave in. Yes, they offered me money, and Stein in his most desperate moment even resorted to fabrications about him being the envoy of Tang Sanzang! As I dealt more with Stein, I came to feel that he was a rather 'pure' person having a genuine interest in his research. Plus, he promised to keep the scrolls with care. Forty horseshoes of silver were not something that I could easily turn down, considering the dire conditions of the caves and the sculptures waiting to be repaired and the daily needs of my crew. What if I refused? Those people were quite capable of taking things they want by force.

It was a big gamble, but did I have any better choices? And I knew Stein was not to be the last to come.

Ten months after Stein left, Paul Pelliot from France came, with the same objective. He was an Orientalist and spoke fluent Chinese. I had done it once; I was not inhibited anymore. Rather, having an appreciative buyer for the artefacts gave me a sinful kind of relief. What I did not expect was his incomprehensible decision to showcase his new purchases in Peking, which prompted the Ministry of Culture to order removal of all the remaining scrolls to the Capital Library. That was what I had advocated for, in vain, to the Qing Government earlier that year. Ironically, when the transfer finally happened, it did not turn out in a way it was meant to be.

So, there were further transactions with a Japanese, and then a Russian. When Langdon Warner, an American, came in 1924, there was nothing left for him to buy. We were all busy with the renovation works. If we had known his evil plan, Warner would not have been left alone. By the time it was found out, Warner had peeled off some 26 fragments of ancient murals with glue, causing irreparable damage not just to the relics, but also my reputation.

No more foreigners would come to ask me for anything. I could finally focus on the service to the temples. I had tried my best in light of the circumstances. I feel obliged, given my involvements, to state my version of the story. I entrust this letter to my beloved Mingyu who will preserve it till time deems it appropriate to be revealed.

Yuanlu Wang

Winter, 1930

The Forbidden Secret of the Mogao Grottoes

St. Joseph's College, Wong, Hiu Nam Zachary – 12

“The museum closes in ten minutes. Please leave the venue,” echoed the museum’s speakers. I was visiting Dunhuang Museum, and that month’s special exhibit featured the Mogao Grottoes.

Around 1,500 years ago, the Mogao Caves were just your run-of-the-mill caves. In fact, they weren’t even caves at first. According to *An Account of Buddhist Shrines*, a monk, in 336 AD, had a vision of a thousand Buddhas bathed in golden light. To some it might have seemed like utter nonsense. However, the monk chose this site for his grand work. And thus began the long history of the Mogao Grottoes where the caves now exist.

But did the monk really have a vision? And what if the vision was just how the tale had been changed over hundreds of years to hide the ‘truth’?

Born to be a skeptic, loads of questions kept popping out. As I carried on looking around the exhibit before I had to leave, I noticed that the museum had somehow obtained an ancient figurine reputedly from one of the caves. I slowly approached it and the label on the cabinet read, “Believed to be a figure of Devadatta.” The name didn’t mean anything to me at the time, but I could feel the relic was special. Maybe it was because the air seemed to vibrate as I neared it. Maybe something inside made me think I would get a truth about the caves if I got closer to it.

Then the relic started radiating a golden glow. And that glow grew brighter. Brighter. Even brighter. The world seemed to turn upside-down. I felt like someone was twisting me, spinning me and flipping me inside up....

...I was deposited with a thump right outside a massive hole, which I immediately recognised as the grottoes. It was the site where the caves were going to be made, and right in front of me was a monk holding a pickaxe. Somehow, I could tell it was THE monk. How I knew his identity, I still do not know. Somehow the relic had pulled me back in time. The idea was so fantastic that I struggled to believe it. But I also reckoned this was a good opportunity to find out the truth about the caves.

The monk was humming to himself and didn’t notice the crumpled ball of a human on the ground: I was a bit too winded to stand up. Then he turned around and smashed into me.

“Awww...” I moaned in pain.

“Sorry, sorry, Buddha, didn’t mean to... Wait, you don’t look like the Buddha.” He looked me up and down. “Never mind that, I’m happy with anyone willing to help. Here, take this and let’s start. I’ve got to get inside the grottoes. There’s something special inside.”

So maybe I was right after all. Maybe there were real golden statues or other fabulous treasures inside somewhere. I picked up the pickaxe and followed him. “But...but...” I stammered at the thought of all the work ahead. However, the monk just clambered into the hole he’d already dug out. Reluctantly, I followed. But then I thought again about treasure, about the riches.

When my eyes had adjusted to the gloom in the hole, I could see the monk hacking away. Without even glancing backwards, he told me to start another branch to his right. Driven by curiosity, I began energetically hacking away at the wall. Hour after hour passed as both of us made inroads into the hard surface, both desperately searching for something. However, as time passed, I inevitably grew tired until I was on the brink of collapsing...until the monk opened up a hole in the wall revealing a chamber.

I dropped my pickaxe and rushed over to where he was. The chamber was dimly lit by a small oil lamp which the monk had pulled out from one of his pockets. The walls of the chamber were painted with images of Buddha which seemed to come alive as the shadows from the oil lamp made them appear to dance. There were hundreds and hundreds of them. Then it struck me: the layout and painting were similar to cave #904 which was actually not the 904th cave to be dug out but was one of the first. However, since people forgot about it later on and only remembered it after all the other caves were named, it was called cave 904. I had read several books mentioning it but

none of them could pinpoint the source and creator of the art. Moreover, now nobody could pinpoint the location after the discoverer disappeared. It was as if the cave was a myth.

The monk enlarged the hole and we stepped inside to find a single large wooden chest...filled with scrolls of paper! Manuscripts! But where were the golden statues of Buddha I had hoped to find? The monk reached in, took out a scroll, unfurled it and began to read. I took a quick glance over his shoulder but the paper had some kind of weird symbols on it which I couldn't read.

"Greetings, you have discovered the Lost Documents," he read out loud. "These pieces of paper house the knowledge of Buddha obtained from the ancient ones. This knowledge will protect mankind and its future from the one who would destroy everything. Treasure these papers. Do not lose them." I recalled one of the books mentioning something about 'ancient lost documents' in cave #904, and also that most of the documents went missing: only 4 pieces were found by a pilgrim when he was visiting the caves. Could this really then be the long lost cave? And could these scrolls be the long sought-after ancient documents? But who had placed the scrolls there? And who was the "one who would destroy everything?"

Then the monk turned around and looked at me. He said, "What might they protect mankind from? Why were they hidden in this chest in this sealed cave?" Then he noticed a small black bag tied with a blood-red cord, lying beneath where the scroll had been. It contained two items: A figurine that looked all too familiar and a scroll. He took the scroll out and started to read. While he was reading, he picked up the figurine. He glanced at it. He looked back at the scroll. He turned his head to the figure again.

Suddenly, his face turned white. "It's Devadatta!" he said. As he was speaking, the figure started glowing. The same golden glow that I'd seen in the museum. And the light lit up the hundreds and hundreds of Buddhas around the room in a golden glow.

"We must stop it! It's Devadatta, the evil one! I was wrong to move the scroll. We must fix this fast!" He pulled me out of the cave and began smashing the pickaxe at the ceiling above its entrance with repeated, hard blows and soon the ceiling came crumbling down. "Now, let's get out of here, quick!" He immediately ran off, running as fast as his legs would take him.

I paused, surveying the now permanently blocked cave entrance. Then, through a small crack between the rocks, I saw a faint glow. Wasn't the figurine crushed beneath the rubble? Had it somehow escaped destruction? The glow grew brighter. Brighter. So bright that it enveloped me just as I saw the cave we had dug crumbling into itself, hiding our discovery. Into the strange tunnel I went once more, my body yet again bending and twisting just like the last time...

I was back where I had started, in the exact same spot, but I had never time travelled. I had just had a vision, just like the monk. I realized why the cave had remained hidden for centuries. I had been warned too. Yes the monk's vision was real. The figurine had been buried under the tons of rubble brought down by the monk, but it had been found somehow and was now here right in front of me. And it was just beginning to act. Beginning to glow. The familiar blinding colour of gold morphed into a piercing blood red. My surroundings turned and twisted, folded into themselves, walls now blurry, shapes unclear. The relic was pulsating, emitting strong dark energy pulling, tugging me towards the unknown. I clung onto a pillar for dear life. The force became irresistible; the dark magic, ever-so-strong, was hauling me. I lost my grip and was absorbed into the swirling void.

Title: Anti-Nazi Martyrs and the Mogao Grottoes

St. Joseph's College, Wong, Ho Lok Alvin – 13

Between late 1939 and early 1941, the Nazis fiercely invaded and conquered much of continental Europe. People suffered unspeakable pain. A group of underground anti-Nazi martyrs discovered an ancient book of secrets that mentioned a scripture kept in the Mogao Grottoes. The scripture contained a spell that has the magic to eliminate evils. The anti-Nazi martyrs had no choice but to try any possibilities to end the Nazis. They were able to retrieve the book of secrets from a remote castle in Austria where a scholar lived. It was hidden under the grave of the scholar's ancestor right by the castle and escaped from the book-burning campaign in the 1930s.

This group of martyrs was led by Dr Paul Dahlke, an archaeologist who specialized in Buddhist artefacts. In 1924, Dr Paul established the first German Buddhist monastery, the "Das Buddhistische Haus" in Berlin. They believed that finding the scripture and using the spell on it would terminate the ruling of the Nazis. The secret team therefore camouflaged as a group of western explorers and followed the clues provided by the book. They finally arrived in the Mogao Grottoes in China. The Mogao Grottoes is situated in the middle of the desert, one of the main passages along with the legend Silk Road but disappeared in the sand and therefore abandoned for the past 1000 years. This place is sacred and contains the largest number of books about Buddhism. When they were so much anticipating the mission, they never thought that their plan was leaked and a team of pro-Nazi which was headed by Frederick the Great, a strong follower of Hitlerism was following them in the dark.

The weather in this area was terribly sand-stormy! The martyrs had to pause their search quite often because of the frequent and vigorous sand storms. Now they ended up searching the scripture in the most suspicious caves in the Mogao Grottoes. They searched over and over and after many countless days and nights, they found something in the 737th cave. They discovered the entrance to the scripture just before they were about to give up. The cave had a narrow entrance which was very different from the rest. This opening looked like a seal between the real and the unknown world. An old man came nearby and warned, "Please don't go in. I have seen so many people, young and old had gone into the spiral hole, but no one came out alive." The martyrs believed him but they had no choice. Dr Paul said, "Guys! Anyone of you hesitates is permitted to quit now!" Not a single person stepped back. They all had their mind prepared to sacrifice for their country. They broke the seal and went into the cave fearlessly. All of a sudden, they heard cracking sounds from the ground which came from numerous skeletons they stepped on. The skeletons didn't scare them because there is nothing scarier than a life with no future. It felt like a dark and endless journey.

Along their way down this spiral passage, there were treasure and traps with deep holes filled with deadly acid and poison. Their eyes turned so sharp that they could see all the traps and avoid them all even in the dark. Hours of exploring in the dark, there came in front of their eyes the illusions of fierce vampire dragons, zombie phoenixes, and many other unseen kinds of mythical creatures. The team seemed to carry some special power to tell they were illusions and therefore escaped from their attack. Their solid belief in finding the scripture and to free their people's sufferings from the Nazis saved their lives. They eventually reached almost the end of the spiral and paused to experience a very strange level of peace in their heart right in front of a colourful Buddha painting on the wall. The Buddha was calmly sitting on a golden lotus throne delivering some sort of calmness to all. Dr Paul confirmed, "We found it! These Sanskrit words on the wall painting were the scripture we want!"

Meanwhile, the pro-Nazi team saw everything from the dark far away. Frederick whispered, "We've got to destroy the paint and kill them all!" Meanwhile, the martyrs suddenly turned around without taking a piece of dust and moving their way back to the ground. "What's going on? Why are they just leaving like that? What did they take?" Frederick exclaimed. Dr Paul said, "Now I got it. Trusting the force of nature! Kindness always wins. Let's go home!" Dr Paul said. They just disappeared gradually in the dark. The pro-Nazi team had no clues but the treasure on the ground of this spiral cave made their eyes open wide. They moved towards the way the martyrs stopped. As their greed grew deeper in their heart, they ran faster and deeper down the spiral. Their greed prevented them from noticing the acid and poison holes in the ground and many of them fell into them and melted in a second. The vampire dragons and the zombie phoenixes turned real and everyone screamed at the top of their lungs. They took out their automatic guns and tried to kill these monsters but these mythical creatures replicated continuously. There were not too many of them left alive at that point. They started to feel so exhausted and depressed that they wanted to give up. All of a sudden, a door from nowhere opened automatically. To their pleasant surprise, they found what

the martyrs found, the Buddha painting with the scripture plus much more precious treasure in the room. There were thousands of shiny golden coins, flashy diamonds and colourful precious stones all over the place. The pro-Nazi spirits were all back and they screamed in excitement. The pro-Nazi destroyed the Buddha painting and the scripture. They also took so much of the treasure due to their greediness.

All of a sudden, a rock covered with spikes dropped from nowhere. They ran as fast as they could to escape. It was a disaster because a few of their remaining team members were ground and killed by the rock. The last two were left alive and Frederick is one of them with a short one who was carrying a treasure bag he grabbed. As they moved along, without a warning, a huge gap in the ground appeared in front of them. Frederick was quick enough to jump to the other side but the short man missed the jump. Frederick commanded, "Throw me your precious treasure bag!" But the short man ordered, "Throw me the rope to escape from the cracking ground!" The two argued but both noticed there was not much time left and finally the short man decided to throw Frederick his treasure bag in exchange for the rope. As soon as Frederick got the treasure bag, he ran away without keeping his promise. The short man took his last saved breath and jumped past the gap and was able to grab a long trunk of a plant to climb up to the other side. He ran like crazy to escape. Unfortunately, the narrow front entrance of the cave collapsed before both of them reached it. No one came out alive!

The day of this incident happened in the Mogao Grottos was on the 8th of May 1945, the same day the Nazis signed the instrument of surrender! Whether there was the spell destroyed the eternal ruling of the Nazi or the Nazi would vanish anyway because of its bad karma remains an unanswered question.

In the Void

St. Joseph's College, Yau, Tsz Wai – 13

Between late 1939 and early 1941, the Nazis fiercely invaded and conquered much of continental Europe. People suffered unspeakable pain. A group of underground anti-Nazi martyrs discovered an ancient book of secrets that mentioned a scripture kept in the Mogao Grottoes. The scripture contained a spell that has the magic to eliminate evils. The anti-Nazi martyrs had no choice but to try any possibilities to end the Nazis. They were able to retrieve the book of secrets from a remote castle in Austria where a scholar lived. It was hidden under the grave of the scholar's ancestor right by the castle and escaped from the book-burning campaign in the 1930s.

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An Oasis in the Desert

St. Margarets Coeducational English Secondary & Primary School, Del Mundo, Giuliana – 14

Surrounding the oasis city of Dunhuang is the desert. There are no plants in the Dunhuang deserts, there is no sound of the wind through leaves and branches, only the low hum of wind playing with the sand dunes. The sand is warm, for it there is no shade. On one side of each sandy bank, occasional harsh winds mess up the smooth formations of sand and lift the tiny particles to blow in the air. A bird caws, disrupting the peace of the dunes, expertly gliding through the sandy air. That was the signal.

The boy whistled and the bird swooped down, landing on his shoulder.

From the slowly dying sandstorm, a temple began to emerge like a snake, cautious and wary, ready to strike.

“I’ve finally found you.”

Finding the caves had not been not an easy task. However, in Kashgar, Dunhuang, nobody turned a blind eye to an opportunity and nobody left a task undone. “Find the oasis in the middle of the desert.” That was the way of the people of Kashgar.

He hadn’t given up, and after years of endless wandering, he’d found his oasis.

*Below the cliffs, auspicious colours often rise,
Good fortune and happiness in the land of Tang.
Lasting ten thousand years and thousands of autumns.*

He furrowed his brows at the temple in front of him before taking a paper parchment from the bag strapped to the belt beneath his maroon cloak. The oil painting of Dunhuang was still fresh and unfaded. Hastily, he took his brush and marked the newest discovery in the land of Tang. The caves would no longer only be a mythical tale told by villagers. Soon, he would help conquer them by tapping into the secrets kept by the monks of Dunhuang for hundreds of years.

The rough sketch of the pathway that led to the temple from Kashgar was complete. His life-long dream was within his grasp.

“We are almost done, Ying.” He tied the parchment to the bird’s leg before stroking its feathered head. “You only have one job left, do you understand? Bring them here safely.”

The bird cawed in return, flying back into the sky, until he was as small as the sand particles that danced in the sky.

He stared at the temple with renewed resolution, ready to begin the next part of his mission.

*I ascend the Northern Terrace,
Climbing the dangerous roads.
The stone paths are steep,
I walk slowly, on how many trails?*

The cave was eerily quiet. Just for a second, he wondered if this was truly what he had been searching for. There was no trace of light. It seemed like the lair of a slumbering beast. All he could do was navigate through the changing sensations of the stones below his shoes and the dusty inner cave walls that he felt for guidance.

The sound of footsteps approaching bounced off the cave walls. Instinctively, he removed his *dao* from his back, the sound of steel ruthlessly echoing in the cave.

“You must be lost, young Min.” The voice in the darkness was soothing, and the footsteps became clearer. So did the temple as he noticed a torch lighting the way. Worn out murals were barely visible. Not repainted or touched in years, their colours were beginning to fade. “Tell me, did you come here for answers?”

His hands clenched tightly around the hilt of his sword, ready to strike. “How do you know my name?”

The man came near enough for him to see the soft smile on his face. A monk. An aged, bald man with a golden robe, the sunshine-like fabric dazzling softly in the cave.

*With a face of compassion
And a heart of joy.
The true monks of the Western lands
Come from afar to pay reverence.*

“Only those who walk the path to enlightenment and seek for good can behold the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas. Follow me.”

He paused briefly, surprised by the monk’s easy compliance, then he followed.

*I ascend the Central Terrace,
The road winding far away.
Eighty thousand feet I wander remote,
As if circling half of heaven.
Cliffs of precious stones glitter in the light.
The strange plants and famous flowers
Resembling a brocade, are worth a visit.
The Jade Flower Pool, The Golden Sand Bank.*

His heart fluttered at the intricacy of it all. From the elegant statues to the story the paintings on the cave walls tell. He listened to his own footsteps tapping on the smooth stone floor, the soft echo of the monk’s footsteps responding.

Slowly, the lighting of the cave dimmed as they went deeper. Then the monk suddenly stopped in front of him, causing Min to almost bump into him. Only fast reflexes saved him from his own embarrassment.

“This room encases valuable scriptures written dynasties ago.”

“Why wasn’t the content of the scriptures ever shown anywhere?”

“The knowledge contained here, in the hands of the wrong people, would topple civilisations.”

Clearly, this room, after the loops and tunnels of the caves, was the pool in the oasis.

They entered, Min in silent awe as he surveyed the shelves of cramped manuscripts. Some in obvious bad condition, many with corners shriveled from slowly ageing in the darkness, others twisted and deformed as the paper remembered years of being curled up in loose string.

He spotted a lone bundle of paper on the floor and silently moved towards it, all the while keeping sight on the monk.

The monk had his back to him as he bent to pick up the papers. With the ancient manuscripts' information in the hands of his own people, they would finally rise to the heights of the power they deserved. Great warriors and scholars would put the knowledge in the papers to the best use. Historians would record this event as the time when the people of Kashgar began their inexorable rise.

Then he remembered the monk’s words and froze in place as the monk turned and looked him straight in the eye; “*The knowledge contained here, in the hands of the wrong people, would topple civilisations.*”

Min pointed the *dao* threateningly. “Get away.”

Words of remorse wanted to slip from his tongue to convey his heart’s true gentle nature, but his rationality did not allow it.

*I cannot stop for long
Because the dragon spirits are angry.*

The monk lowered his head slightly, “it is the Decline of the Dharma, young one.” He clasped an amulet and closed his eyes. The cave trembled, dust and debris trickled down from the ceiling.

“There is a reason that you found the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas. You have come here for knowledge to use for the good of your people.”

The monk chanted softly, yet the sounds erupted with such ferocity that he trembled to the floor.

*The listener is uneasy,
And fears going to Narayana.
He chants Mansjusri's name a few times.
The Great Sage is compassionate,
By expedient means he conceals himself to save us.*

A suffocating feeling of dust built up in Min's lungs as the debris reverberated around him and filled the cave.

“It is a noble desire – but it is not for the good of the universe.”

Min knew he had to escape. His fear escalated – he knew that, in a few moments, the caves would crumble and would trap him forever in the stone walls of the temple.

“It is time to seal the caves until the world is ready.”

There was no time to think. Not knowing how, just running and running, he bolted, leaving the monk behind.

A bright light shone from the end of the cave. Rushed footsteps continuously got louder as time was running out. A thunder of rocks filled the empty space of the desert, the entrance collapsing a hair's distance away from the hem of Min's cloak.

The temple was gone, as swiftly disappearing as a snake slithering away.

Ying cawed from afar, like the cry of a free bird caught by an arrow; an opportunity lost.

~

1907 A.D.

Surrounding the barren city of Dunhuang is where deserts lie. With the absence of life, the silence is deafening. The sand is warm as usual, for it has no shade against the glowing sun. But now, the air is calm, as of long sleep after a great calamity.

Somewhere in the Dunhuang desert, an entrance is opened, the oasis ready to be found.

Inside, under dust that covers like a blanket, untouched for millennia, statues, manuscripts and murals amaze new explorers.

The Mogao Grottoes

St. Mary's Canossian College, Chan, Annabelle – 12

The music was playing, from somewhere, I knew that for sure. I could see there were dancers moving around the chamber as if they were floating on water. They swished past me in the blink of an eye. I couldn't see their hidden feet under sweeping dresses; or their covered faces under masks of ivory. It seemed like a perfect dream as I danced alongside them.

I saw the flash of a shadow behind me and turned to look, but nothing was there. All of a sudden, the melody stopped and everyone froze.

"Help!" was all I heard before the ceiling collapsed, burying us.

I woke up with a gasp before my eyes scanned the surroundings. I was still in the hotel room and I was safe. I let out a sigh of relief. These dreams had been bothering me as I got closer to the Grottoes. I knew they were connected somehow, or maybe it was just my brain dreaming up stories, but I was still unsettled. In the dreams, I was always in the center, dancing, seven others alongside me, and we would always be in a rock chamber. This time, though, was different; the rocks tumbled onto me, and that had never happened before.

Shrugging it off as just my imagination, I got up and started my journey towards the Mogao Grottoes.

"And I also ran out of water, great." I stared at the empty water bottle as if it would be intimidated into refilling itself.

"I brought three bottles of water and I finished then in less than a day. Typical." I sighed.

"No choice but to carry on," I told myself.

I could see the Grottoes from miles away. They seemed to touch the sky without even trying. My breath was taken away by the architecture; simple yet majestic.

Inside the main building of the Buddha statue, there were paintings decorating the walls, creating a mysterious atmosphere that made me shiver. The faces of the cave paintings were mostly blackened, which made it hard to see the details. I stood closer, squinting to see and almost losing my balance as someone talked to me.

"Lovely, aren't they? Too bad they're in such a devastating condition now." An old man, suddenly appearing next to me and shaking his head, said to me. His face was worn down with wrinkles and his eyebrows were white as snow, showing his age, but his back still stood up straight. The clothes he wore were traditional, with intricate embroidery on them. I scrambled to catch my balance and answered him.

"Yes, of course." I coughed, trying to seem professional.

"Such a shame." He raised an eyebrow at me. I could see judgment in his eyes but he spared me from continued embarrassment. With a swish of his robes, he disappeared into the crowd. The only thing left was a gleaming emerald necklace sitting on the ground.

"Um, sir, you left this." I called out, only to see him walking away from the building. Deciding to return it to him later if I saw him, I stored it in my pouch and continued on.

"Alright, everyone. This is Grotto number 362, please be careful." The guide told us sternly. I huffed at the thought of needing a guide, but since only the guides had keys to the Grottoes, I couldn't exactly break in.

Again, like the others, this Grotto had paintings and drawings on the wall. Upon close inspection of the paintings, I noticed they were brighter and more colourful than the others. There weren't as many blackened spots. As I was pondering over this, I heard a familiar voice.

I turned and saw the old man. Realizing it was the same person who had dropped the necklace, my hand immediately went into my pouch and pulled it out. The old man's face shifted into a shocked expression as he laid eyes on it.

“That would be mine.” His voice suddenly turned stiff and I shivered at it. A cold wave washed over me and my tongue tangled into a knot.

“Yes. Here you go.” I timidly held out the necklace but didn’t let go of it. Something about this old man suddenly seemed strange. His eyes were greedy for the necklace, but they also hinted at another message; a calculating sparkle.

I glanced behind him and saw a familiar scene from the paintings. My heart dropped.

“No, no it can’t be.”

My feet felt weak and I almost fell backwards. I was dreaming, I thought. I must be dreaming. The scene could not be the same scene from my dreams.

The old man only nodded, but it confirmed my worst fears. The dreams were related to the Grottoes after all. Although I was right, I didn’t feel triumphant at all. I wanted to disappear and forget about all of this.

“Quite interesting, yes? It is like a locked door, and the key is the necklace in your hands. If you give it to me, I can tell you what you need to know.” He stretched his hand out, demanding I give it to him. My grip on the necklace only got tighter, I wasn’t sure why, but the aura of the old man was unsettling.

My brain was frantically trying to put the pieces together. What did he mean by the necklace was the key? I couldn’t see a lock anywhere. Or maybe it was a metaphorical key? But for what? I had no answer. I needed more information.

“Why is the necklace the key?” I ventured cautiously. The entire time as I was thinking, he stared longingly at painting, as if something inside was causing him pain. I scrunched my eyebrows together. Could there be something dear to him painted in it?

“Is there a lock inside the painting? Or is it metaphorical?” I felt like a detective interrogating the old man. He turned to look at me. His eyes were fixed on the necklace. I was about to ask him once more, but he raised a hand and stopped me.

“I shall tell you a story and you will understand why.” His voice was somber, as deep as the depths of the ocean.

A young man and woman met each other. They fell in love. They settled into a home near the countryside. The first few years, they were deliriously happy together. The wife suggested that they go travel around to experience different things. And so they went, sightseeing, playing chess and being a loving couple. And then, they went to Mogao. The wife decided to explore one of the grottoes alone, while her husband was talking to an acquaintance. She was amazed at the art but made a tragic mistake. She had touched the cave paintings. As soon as she touched them, the paintings claimed her as their own. And since then, she has been trapped in there. Unmoving. Quiet. For all eternity.

I stood frozen after hearing the tale. It was clear then; his wife was trapped in the paintings. He needed the necklace to get her out. One thing was still not adding up though, if he already owned the necklace, then why did he need me? He saw my expression and put on a smile. It was more horrifying than his previous one.

“Just hand me the necklace,” He said, this time his tone laced with sorrow, “You wouldn’t reject an old man’s wish to get his wife back. Yes?” His calloused hand reached out towards me again.

My head was swimming. I was scared I would make the wrong decision. If I gave him the necklace, I didn’t know what powers it had. If I didn’t give it to the old man, his wife would be trapped forever and I wouldn’t be able to live with that.

Slowly, with shaky hands, I placed the necklace in his hands. His face lit up with a delighted grin. I wanted to smile also but something still didn’t feel right. My face started forming an involuntary smile, my cheekbones rose, my eyes stretched into those like a Cheshire cat’s eyes. Everything felt bizarre.

“Oh,” the old man gasped, as if he had forgotten to say something, “I didn’t tell you? A life for a life. You save my wife, you get trapped. Did you not know that?” I tried to shake my head but it felt like my body was a piece of carved out stone. I tried to open my mouth but words just wouldn’t form. I couldn’t feel my hands. With all this panicking, my heartbeat should be fast, but I couldn’t feel anything.

A misty image of a woman began to form by the old man’s side. He beamed with joy at the figure and turned to look at me.

“Thank you. Your sacrifice was well worth it.”

That was the last sentence I heard before tumbling into the Grotto; into a world of dancing, parties, leisure, pain and suffering.

Tales from the Mogao Grottoes

St. Mary's Canossian College, Chan, Cheryl – 13

Question:

Tales from the Mogao Grottoes

More than one and half millennia (1,500 years) 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 朝聖者 arrived and decided to stay, digging more caves, and spending their time creating sacred art 神聖的藝術 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 洞穴 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?

Answer:

It was truly like a tunnel to a lost world in the past. The scholar-explorers proceeded to go further inside the cave of the Ma Mogao Caves in the Dunhuang district of Gansu province in west central China. They held torches and the light made it feel like everything was normal. At the very far corner, they noticed some signs of accidents or struggles inside the cave. They found a prized possession of the staff members of an emperor's family – a framed photo of a father, mother and two boys, standing behind a babysitter in a chamber with a signboard-like plate engraved the number “1” at the top of the stone door of the entrance. The scholars stood in silence for a brief moment, unsure of what to do next. Then, Dr. Watson, the Head Professor of the scholars nudged and pointed again. “Writing,” he whispered. The scholars felt a sudden rush of excitement. They continued to solve mystery. They walked deeper and deeper and opened a rushed wooden gate. Suddenly, a pile of books and notebooks falling out of the stonewall, some with pages turned over, some stacked at the side. Mr. Watson took out his glasses, and started to examine the papers. “a mix of bullet points and scribbles?” Then, Chris, one of the scholars, discovered a square-shaped jewellery box with scribbles and patterns on each side.

Breaking the silence, other scholars approached and had a closer look. The marks on the box are similar to those of the books and notebooks. “What are the meanings of those scribbles and marks?” asked Chris Williams, the eldest scholars among the exploring team. The investigators did not answer, but leaned slightly forward. When the scholars opened the box, Dr. Watson moved around and glanced there was a heart-shaped emerald in the jewellery box, decorated with yellowish gold and some lively churchmen symbolized an ancient religion at that time. Underneath are uncountable colorful doodles seeming to be historical curses or routines to new continents. Some scholars took out magnifying glasses to search for any clues on the treasure. They found there was a line of curves, twisting around like turbulent waves, ebbing and flowing in some sort of pattern or unknown language. Of course, more than one and half a millennia ago, no one understood the doodles and characters, but the scholars believed that the lines of curves told the stories of people living in the cave and probably how people survived in an oasis in the desert on the Silk Road in China or even some hidden stories behind the cave. “Were they discovering a new continent?” exclaimed Chris.

The scholars proceeded to the next chamber, with a secret path leading to a living room. They found many remarkable wall paintings which were well preserved, thanks to the dry desert climate and their remote location. The team could see clearly the contents though it was covered by dusty sand. The paintings depicted the settlement of ancient people in places where Buddhism reached China, via a stream of monks and merchants who moved north and east from India along the Silk Road. One unknown scholar touched the hands of a monk of the wall painting.

All of a sudden, the monk wearing white saffron-dyed robes came out of the wall and greeted the scholars, “Emm.... Rrr.....oooo...”. Dr. Watson turned his head and responded, “We are people from the 21st century. We’re doing a project and exploring the Mogao Caves in the Dunhuang district of Gansu province in west central China. How do you do?”. The monk felt shocked but stayed calm. He showed the scholars and Professor Dr.

Watson a photo of a square-shaped jewellery box. “That one is found outside this cave – the same as the one with scribbles on each side,” streamed Chris. The monk looked pale and started to speak, “My name is Adam, I was an emperor in Adam Empire and ruled the people in the kingdom. One day, I had been tied by some monks with strong physical and military power and was sentenced by them to death penalty because they wanted to seize my treasure and killed my wife and two sons. My family disguised as ordinary people and escaped. We ran, ran and ran, day and night, morning to dawn, to this desert place. Suddenly, we heard a big shock, perhaps thunderstorms or an earthquake..... I didn’t know. I lost my way and separated with my wife and sons and arrived to a mystery sandy place. I lost my only photo frame. I remembered I was struck somewhere and then became unconscious until now!” Dr Watson sighed with surprise. Chris swiftly handed and led the “Monk” to the way and pointed the framed photo at the chamber number one where they just had come across moments ago.

When Adam saw the photo frame, he cried, “My wife and sons....”, with tears pouring like rains. “In those days, many monks and merchants moved north and east from India along the Silk Road to China, and transmitted Buddhism. Monks were dressed in robes with the colour and style of robes varies considerably from place to place.” Dr Watson pointed, “We just found the uncountable colorful doodles seeming to be historical curses or routines to new continents in a jewellery box.” Adam took a closer look, “Right, I heard Chinese emperors were famous and their princesses were sent to marry “foreigners” in Tang and Song dynasties. Travelers, religious monks and missionaries came along the way, but some were evil and immoral. There had been rumors of a mystery place where gold, diamonds, ornaments and jewellery were hidden. People from different hierarchies strived and struggled for power. By that time, I found it tired to rule my kingdom. I fled my place with my family.”

The room was filled with silence. Adam continued his story, “ I found some maps.....” pointing to the ceiling of the Chamber, “The scribbles were secret codes, meaning the treasure discovery and the routes to the new mystery place. Follow me.” The whole team followed the Adam, the “disguised” monk and the emperor. Adam made a spell, “Mali Mali Home....Ouch Ouch...” A secret passage appeared under a “sand tile”. Dr Watson adjusted his googles and stared at downstairs. Adam signaled the team to follow. All moved forward and walked down slowly and quietly one after one. Underneath, the basement was amazingly magnificent treasure trove, filled with ancient manuscripts on topics ranging from religion and philosophy, history and mathematics, folk songs and dance. As the caves had high ceilings, inspection needed to be carried out non-invasively. The team held a high-tech magnifying adjuster to zoom in the objects. After a full-day search, they found a long list of prescription of so-called “elixir of life” in the middle of the ceiling. Adam quietly spoke, “People in my times are searching for elixir of life, our live-span is 50–60 years old and people wanted to live longer, so all were walking long distance to search for medicine.” After telling us about this, Adam vanished in the air. The riddle seemed to had been revealed.

Those days, millions of people were dreaming for a new continent with no war and free from starvation. Greedy people appeared everywhere to seize the properties of the rich and even risked their lives. Those who were unfortunate were suffering from hunger and sick. And, simultaneously, they were also dreamed of “elixir of life” and wanted to free from strict rules. Life is priceless. Other than treasures, social status, elixir of life The Silk Roads stretched across Eurasia, connecting East and West for centuries. At the same time, people had been looking for ways to live longer. The network of trade routes enabled merchants and the rich people to travel around in China and the Mediterranean Sea, carrying with them high-value commercial goods, the exchange of medicines, perfumes, etc. which encouraged urban growth and prosperity. Life is beautiful. We should live a better life, stay healthy and contribute ourselves to the society.

Jivajivaka

St. Mary's Canossian College, Yu, Jennifer – 12

There is a vibrant mural in Grotto 172 of the Mogao Grottoes, Mingsha Mountain, Dunhuang. It portrays the blissful immortal world, surrounded by auspicious clouds and beautiful music. In the middle, a two-headed snow-mountain divine bird Jivajivaka is standing on the lotus flower platform with its colorful wings spread.

Jivajivaka is the most charming singer and best player in the immortal world. It has two heads, the stunning one is named Sheng Sheng, and the heroic one is called Ming Ming. They are born together on an elegant crane-like body. It is a gorgeous body with colorful feathers, slim legs, and a necklace with a crystal pendant. Though Sheng Sheng and Ming Ming each have an individual mind, they are in the same body forever and cannot leave each other. In the mural, Ming Ming is playing the lute dashingly, Sheng Sheng is singing euphemistically. Jivajivaka is flapping rhythmically, dancing gracefully, and looking proudly, but we can feel the atmosphere of mournful melody, which seems that Sheng Sheng is telling a legend.

When a pure white and fragrant iceberg lotus appeared in front of Sheng Sheng's eyes, she put it in her mouth without hesitation. She believed that when Ming Ming, her other half, woke up, he would be delighted that they shared this divine flower, which made their voice more amazing. In the consciousness of Sheng Sheng, Ming Ming is her forever half. Her caring for Ming Ming is caring for herself. Sheng Sheng couldn't help but start singing and dancing again with the marvelous feeling that she could share the energy of the iceberg lotus with Ming Ming. Ming Ming woke up to the voice of Sheng Sheng's singing and flapped the wings. He was refreshed and invigorated by the iceberg lotus.

'Wow! Sheng Sheng, what did you eat? It made me feel so vigorous.' Ming Ming asked.
'Oh, I just savored a piece of flourishing iceberg lotus. It's indeed the most fantastic immortal flower in the world. Did you hear us singing more melodious? Are you excited?' Sheng Sheng answered frankly. After such a fantastic performance, she felt tired, then yawned and fell into a deep sleep.

After taking a calming breath, Ming Ming felt the magic of the iceberg lotus from the heart. He couldn't stop singing with joy. The song was melodious like a heavenly voice, and the tune lingered in the sky.

Suddenly a strong wind blew by, a large bird with a human face and a pair of black wings flew to the big tree where Ming Ming was perching on. Ming Ming was startled after he found it was Aeolus Grand-Peacock, a notorious ancient Chinese mythical bird. The character of Aeolus Grand-Peacock was as dark as its appearance, extraordinarily fierce and insidious. It created countless hurricanes, and people suffered a lot. Though they both were mythical birds, Ming Ming was thoroughly ashamed to associate with it. Ming Ming raised his head proudly, and he didn't want to pay attention to it at all.

In an odd voice, Aeolus Grand-Peacock mocked Ming Ming, 'Well, I wondered who sang like trash in the holy mountain, so it's you! We all knew Sheng Sheng sang much euphonious than you. Compared with her, you could only be a substitute forever. It's too ridiculous!' No more words, only sneering tones left, Aeolus Grand-Peacock spread its wings and flew up. A black whirlwind moved over the ground, and the tree trembled violently. Jivajivaka almost fell down the tree.

'What a bore!' Ming Ming rolled his eyes at flying away Aeolus Grand-Peacock. The interlude didn't influence his amiable mood. He continued singing with joy.

A strange feeling was floating in his mind gradually after Ming Ming had sung for a while. By this time, no matter how he showed off his skills, he still felt that the voice of Sheng Sheng was more elegant. Ming Ming felt depressed suddenly. He looked back and stared at sleeping calmly Sheng Sheng. The more he looked at Sheng Sheng, the more he felt offended. Those words of Aeolus Grand-Peacock appeared in mind unconsciously, and the unpleasant sound of laughter echoed in the ears. Ming Ming started to feel very sad, and he thought: Though he shared the same body with Sheng Sheng, why was Sheng Sheng always the one who shone more brightly? And he could only always be in the shadow of Sheng Sheng. Why was Sheng Sheng always the luckier one? Sheng Sheng could have had such a stroke of good luck to taste that precious iceberg lotus, but he didn't even have the opportunity to smell the iceberg lotus. The more he thought about it, the more he felt the unfairness of fate. Jealousy had blinded Ming Ming instantly. Even worse, the mind demon rose. He couldn't tolerate the situation of sharing his respected body with

another head and couldn't bear another charge which was even more fabulous than him. He must become the exclusive divine bird Jivajivaka. Eventually, Ming Ming was full of that wicked idea.

Ming Ming flew to the peak of the mountain. That tree full of poisonous fruits was not far away. He was warned explicitly by Sheng Sheng that they mustn't taste those juicy poisonous fruits at any time. These fruits were fatal to Jivajivaka, and there was no antidote in the world. Sheng Sheng cherished the body life she shared with Ming Ming, and she dreamed of living happily together with Ming Ming forever. But the only dream of dizzy Ming Ming was to finish the life of Sheng Sheng by now. He flew up to that tree, pecked the largest poisonous fruit, and swallowed it without hesitation.

Awakened by the severe pain, Sheng Sheng wondered what had just happened. She looked at Ming Ming with confusion and asked, 'What's going on? I felt nausea and vomiting.'

Ming Ming answered with evil laughs and mimicked the accent of Sheng Sheng, 'Oh, I just savored a piece of fruit. It's also the most fantastic immortal fruit in the world. It's said to make our sound more harmonious, and I thought you would be excited again.'

Sheng Sheng opened her mouth and spat out black blood. A feeling of despair descended on her as Sheng Sheng suddenly realized what was wrong. The voice of poor Sheng Sheng had been hoarse, and she stared at Ming Ming incredibly. 'Clever fool, you must have eaten that poison fruit. I trusted that your behavior was unintentional! But you knew this reality since our birth, and we are Sheng Sheng and Ming Ming – Sharing one body and lives.'

Sheng Sheng was in a daze, and her life was passing away gradually. Kind-hearted Sheng Sheng still believed that Jivajivaka, Sheng Sheng, and Ming Ming were the most musical singers and the noblest holy birds in the universe.

'Unbelievable! I defeated you finally. I am the exclusive top solo singer in the world from now on! I am The One!'

Looking at bloody and eyes-closing Sheng Sheng, Ming Ming was in a state of exaltation. Ming Ming was so excited that he didn't hear Sheng Sheng's last sentence at all. He opened his mouth to start his solo but only spat out black blood and made no sounds. Clutching his sharp painful stomach, Ming Ming was horrified at this moment. He collapsed slowly. Colorful plumes and feathers shaded continuously and went with the wind. In the last moment of life fading, Ming Ming seemed to be a bit enlightened. He burst into tears but couldn't distinguish which were for regret or enlightenment.

A large black bird of human-face and dog-body was perching on a vast branch not far away. It witnessed the whole event quietly.

Finally, it sang viciously and repeatedly, 'Wise fool! Hypocritical goodness!'

Ming Ming finished the life of Sheng Sheng and killed himself at the same time. Goodness and evil are symbioses, and selecting are crucial to our fate.

From then on, no one in the world has ever seen the divine 'human-face and bird-body' Jivajivaka. Buddha was furious with Ming Ming's selfishness and viciousness. He punished the Jivajivaka by sealing it in the mural of the Mogao Grottoes forever. The evil Ming Ming and kind-hearted Sheng Sheng must accept the punishment together because of their one-body situation. Sheng Sheng is still singing pleasantly, and Ming Ming is also playing elegantly in front of Buddha, but they could only perform in the mural since then. Watching this colorful mural in Grotto 172, we can feel the touch of a legend whispering in the pleasant and gentle songs. Accompanied by the sorrowful sound of the Qiang flute and the lonely camel bells, the legend dissipates in the deserts of the Gobi with the whistling wind.

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Defending Heaven: Stratagems of a Dragon's Head and a Serpent's Tail

St. Pauls Co-educational Colledge, Kwan, Hei Yi Leanne – 13

It is well-known that the nefarious Mongolians invaded China. A bloody massacre had taken place.

It was another new day. The blazing sun shone its rays over majestic mountains and onto rough sandy land. After a lengthy and exhausting expedition, Patricia came across... She couldn't believe their eyes; what stood in front of them was what they had dedicated their lives to searching for --- The cave. Stalactites were hanging like chandeliers and vibrant gems on the rocky walls were glinting under the sunlight.

Upon discovering this enchanted cavern, Patricia took her expedition to a whole new level. She entered the winding passageway and took slow, circumspect steps, making sure that nothing went wrong. Barely able to fit in, she crouched low and continued their journey. She went deeper and deeper, further and further. Oxygen was gradually drifting away, making it harder to breathe in the muffled tunnel. There was only a shaft of light that angled through the twisting and turning tunnel, and what it led to was something that generations on generations had sought.

Finally, after long hours of ducking down and trudging, she found herself emerging from the bowels of the earth. Accidentally, Patricia slipped as there was watery mud on the ground. Her leg hit the boulder and something rose from underground like a seed sprouting.

What was revealed was an ancient scroll, yellowed with age, slightly crumbled, wrapped in the most delicate and thinnest hemp cordage --- The ancient scroll that every archaeologist desired for. Destiny lay right in reach. Inside was written...

*“ This reveals the ferocious truth
The Mongolians’ menacing rages hit
fierce attacks from the sabre tooth
And with time, our forces split.*

*Youngsters obligated to brutal war
For what? Do they deserve this?
Journey to death, it is no more
Snatched away from their bliss*

*Charging through boundless hilltops
On horses, they rush through battlefield
Endless carnage never stops
In mind, they wish for us to yield*

*Corpse and skeletons filled the streets
Who is the culprit? We don't know
We as a whole refuse defeat
To the bitter end, we are ready to go*

*Is there a cure to this situation?
Can someone please send a saviour?
Preventing us in this hard position
To make those Mongolians disappear...*

Instantaneously, the sand walls surrounding them rose up to touch the sky. They transformed into sandy funnels, changing and churning. The rugged ground split into pieces, like minute fragments of broken glass shattering. Patricia gasped as she saw her team and herself floating in the mid-air. Her breathing stopped. Her heart stopped. Everything stopped. There was an ear-piercing noise sounding from an unknown place; it felt as if someone had injected some bizarre hypnotising medicine into their bodies, except they had not.

It felt as if it was another morning in the mysterious anonymous place. What greeted Patricia's eyes were the colossal defensive walls which looked like a dragon tail snaking around Beijing, taking her breath away. Ding... Ding... Dong... Dong... Sounds of cymbals reverberated from the inside of the city. Endless numbers of shops scattered throughout the city centre, some selling exotic perfume, some selling spicy tea, some selling polished porcelain ; people chattering swarmed around the narrow streets, colourful street performers danced to the sounds of Suona, horses pulling carriages neighed.

"Hey! You!" shouted a guard, "where are you from? And what are you wearing?"

At that instant, Patricia realised that her modern t-shirt and shorts betrayed her. Showing her flesh at IN ancient times was seen as immodest.

Not being able to explain herself thoroughly, she was bound in heavy chains and brought to the King. Was she an imposter? Or a Mongolian spy?

"Move! Move!" demanded the guard, kicking her feet.

"Hey! Let go of me! Let me explain myself! I'm..."

"Shut up! We're going to see our holy highness. Explain yourself then," they dragged her through the dungeon which had an odour of rotten-eggs. Patricia was disgusted by this smell. But, it seemed familiar... But she could not put her finger on it.

Before she could react, she was locked inside four bare walls, and the only thing inside was a set of traditional woman's clothing. "Ew..." Patricia thought, "how bulky". However, she didn't have a choice. In order to not have her head decapitated, she had to change.

A few moments later, Patricia was walking up the long steep flights of white stone stairs, and she stepped into the resplendent throne room covered in burnish gold.

"What happened?" commanded the emperor, gradually rising from his delicately engraved gold dragon throne.

Determined to clear the misunderstanding, Patricia explained about her expedition and how she came across this ancient scroll, bringing her back in time. However, the emperor didn't believe her and treated it as nonsense, ordering her back behind bars where she would rot like an egg for decades.

Upon the majesty's order, the guards rushed inside and dragged Patricia out. To prevent being captured once again, she uses full strength to force herself out of their grasp and fell onto the ground with a thud. Without hesitation, she immediately continued, "My emperor, I have a tactic to win the brutal war between you and the Mongolians! But please, just let me stay alive!"

The emperor instructed the guards to let go of her and permitted her to propose her strategy. Patricia then reminded him of the revolting smell from the dungeon, suggesting that it was sulphur, a key component for explosives. Despite her efforts, the emperor didn't understand a single word that she said, as explosives were still many centuries ahead. Determined to show the emperor what she was talking about, she begged the emperor to give her some charcoal from the fire and the sulphur in between rocks in the dungeon.

In no time, the above ingredients were granted to her and she invited the Emperor to the palace garden to perform this experiment. She politely asked the emperor to bring the fastest, strongest, bravest horse – Longma – to test it out.

Pacing up and down, his face was furrowed in thought. Yet, he knew that this was the only chance to save his country and his very own life. There were already 500,000 Mongolians on their fierce horses surrounding the city walls, ready to charge at any time.

Without time to spare, Patricia quickly mixed some foetid sulphur and midnight-dark charcoal together. P.2

BOOM! The horse let out a blood-curdling scream and could not stand firmly on its four legs, panicking and running around in circles uncontrollably. Even the King himself was astonished by this bizarre phenomenon.

With no time to spare, the King knew exactly what to do. As Mongolians were experts on horses, this gunpowder has a high chance of distracting the horses and creating chaotic circumstances. Promptly, the King ordered all servants to mine the sulphur and forget about practising martial arts.

An eerie sound and an uneasy feeling started to creep up onto Patricia's back. Was that a signal that Patricia almost needed to leave?

Indeed, it was. Patricia briskly knelt down in front of the emperor and said, "Thank you very much for this chance to help you. I truly feel honoured. Now, remember to fight with all your courage and heart. I very much wish you all the best." Taking out the scroll from her backpack, she lifted it up with two hands showing the emperor. There was a luminous shaft of light shining through her body, uncovering her and slowly bringing her forward in time.

The King turned pale and clutched onto a smoothly made rock table, trying to not stumble. But because of the urgent and imminent battle, he didn't have time to rigorously think about all that had happened. He continuously and sincerely said his thanks to Patricia and the Gods. He swore that he would be victorious, unwilling to let Patricia down.

After endless years of destructive demoralising wars, Patricia's sagacious tactic put them to an end. The hard-working and loyal commoners of China finally had a calm and productive life. The King used luminous gold ink to record for all eternity — the crucial message for the future. He instructed his trustworthy warrior — Hongyi, to place it in the Mogao Grottoes, ensuring that one day Patricia would receive this plea for help.

Tales of the Mogao Grottoes

St. Paul's Co-Educational College, Woo, Yat Chin Renee – 12

My name is Eliza Nightwalker, and I live in a cave.

Let me make that clear: I live in a magical dimension in the Mogao Grottoes, also known as the Mogao Caves, and I come from a tribe of people who can turn into different dragons. We have two alphas, Fiona Foxglove and Leo Lorenzo.

And then my powers appeared, and disaster struck.

Before it all happened, my friend Asher Thrushweather and I were at our Revelation ceremony, which is when we find out what kind of dragon we can turn into on our 14th birthday. Asher and I have the same birthday.

We stood in front of Executor Thornscar. The Executor holds the highest rank, and everybody hates him. He has a history of giving people harsh punishments.

And then the catastrophe started.

When we are at the Revelation ceremony, we are branded by a piece of iron on our wrists. Asher and I held out our hands, and the Executor brought out the pieces of iron and stamped us with it.

The moment it touched my skin, it burned. I felt like I had put my wrist in the fire. I doubled over. Next to me, Asher did the same.

The next thing I knew, I was growing, fingers stretching into talons, wings growing out of my back, teeth sharpening. My scales were ice turquoise in colour.

And out of nowhere, two pieces of ice shot out.

I felt myself shrink and I collapsed onto the floor, the pain leaving. I lifted my head and saw Executor Thornscar in front of us, his face white.

Then the world went dark.

I woke up in a bed. I saw Asher on the bed beside me, still asleep. I heard a beeping sound below. I looked down and saw a metal band on my wrist.

I turned my head. Asher was sitting up. He turned to me. "What happened?"

I was about to reply when Fiona walked in.

"You guys okay?" Her face was a mask of worry. "You've been out for two days."

I spoke first. "Why are there metal bands on us?"

Fiona grimaced at my question. "Believe me, it wasn't my idea. It was Executor Thornscar's. Those bands are to warn us when you're awake."

I turned to Fiona. "But why? We didn't do anything wrong!"

Fiona frowned. "There's a prophecy of the tribe that one day, two tribe members will turn into dragons that are turquoise. They are to arrive when war is coming, but it is not known which side they are on."

Asher spoke. "So you're saying that WE are those dragons? And because Thornscar is an idiot, he wants to kill us so

that we don't endanger this tribe?"

"Yes, that's what I'm saying," Fiona replied. "But Thornscar wants you two to bring back the lost Crystal Dragon to prove your loyalty."

We gasped. The lost Crystal Dragon was a crystal statue of a dragon on a golden pole, and it was meant to keep the tribe safe with a magical barrier. It was lost a thousand years ago in the actual Mogao Grottoes, where it has a secret passageway that opens into a forest, and at the end of it was the place where we would find the lost Crystal Dragon. Few have tried to retrieve it, but they never returned.

"But that's unfair!" I cried. "We don't know how to use our powers, and how can you be sure that we'll choose the opposing side?"

Fiona grimaced. "Trust me, I didn't want this to happen. He has one more condition. You must not use their powers or turn into dragons the whole way, and you must return within a week. I can't change his decision. Sorry."

Fiona spoke again. "These backpacks are for you guys. I prepared a portal." Asher and I nodded and followed her out, carrying the backpacks, getting to the edge of our village, where the portal stood.

Fiona turned to us. "Never turn into a dragon. Those metal bands around your wrists will pull you right back to us if you do, and Thornscar will definitely kill you."

We nodded and went through the portal.

We found the passageway in no time, but it wasn't in its nicest condition.

When we emerged, we saw the forest. It was dark and gloomy, with dead trees and bushes of thorns. And at the end, about 300000 miles into the distance, was a mountain.

We stepped into the forest.

We walked.

Before we realised it, it had already been three days, and the Crystal Dragon was becoming nearer and nearer.

But then, on the fourth day, we were walking towards the mountain, and suddenly, we fell down a hole, and hit solid dirt.

Asher and I sat up. Then someone threw down a rope, and we climbed up.

"I am SO sorry. I haven't seen tribe members in YEARS!" A voice said.

Asher stared. "Excuse me, who are you?"

"Oh, I'm Antony Hallowkey."

Then I processed what I heard. "Wait, what do you mean, you haven't seen tribe members in years?"

Antony grimaced. "Follow me."

He walked away, and Asher and I looked at each other. "Should we trust him?" I asked.

"He helped us out of that hole. And he might know something about the Crystal Dragon."

We followed him.

Turns out, Antony had also once come from the tribe. He had done something to displease Thornscar, who had ordered him to search for the Crystal Dragon, but he didn't make it, and didn't want to go back empty handed. So, he remained in the forest.

I looked up at the sky. It was still bright. "Thanks, Anthony, but we'd better get going and find the Crystal Dragon before it's too late."

"Hey, do you think I can join? I can help." Antony looked unsure.

A little help couldn't hurt, right? "Sure. Let's go."

With Antony's help, we managed to avoid a number of death traps. At night, he made soup from what he gathered in the forest.

In return, we told him all about the village, and how Fiona had given us a device to transport us home.

Before long, it was the last day, and we had reached the mountain. We went around it until we found an opening and went in. We walked to the end of the cave, where two slabs of crystals were blocking the way. On it were the words "ONLY TRUE INTENTIONS MAY PASS".

We walked straight into it.

But we never made it that far. Halfway there, Asher and I stumbled.

"Oops," said a familiar voice. "You shouldn't have drunk that soup last night."

My vision began to blur. "What?"

"Come on," Antony said. "You didn't really think you would just stumble across a person who was willing to help, right? I put poison in our soup. There isn't enough to kill you, though. Now, I'm going to attack your village, and then, I will come back and you two are going to get me the Crystal Dragon."

And I gave in to darkness.

I was not surprised to wake up with the cave entrance blocked. I looked over. Asher was also sitting up. "We've got to get the Crystal Dragon before he attacks."

We walked straight into the crystals.

And passed into the other side.

There was the Crystal Dragon, shimmering translucent blue. Asher took it, but a problem hit me. "How do we get back? Antony took our device! That was the way back!"

Just then, I remembered what Fiona had told me way before we left. "Wait. The metal bands would transport us back if we transformed! So, all we must do is transform into dragons!"

I turned into the same turquoise dragon as I was before. I had just a moment to look at Asher, who was holding the Crystal Dragon, before we were sucked back to home.

When everything stilled, we were in the meeting room with Fiona standing over us. Everyone was still.

“We have to install the Crystal Dragon!” I yelled. “War is coming RIGHT NOW!”

Fiona looked at the Crystal Dragon and went serious. “Come,” she said.

Just then, we heard the horn of an opposing army.

“Go!” We teared across the streets of our village to the very centre of it.

The horn sounded again, and we saw the army, with someone riding at the front.

Antony.

No time to lose. Asher and I jammed the Crystal Dragon into its stand.

Antony’s army raced forward.

And hit an invisible wall.

The Crystal Dragon had worked. Antony saw us, and looked at us with pure hatred. Then he turned away, along with his army, back to where they came from.

The village erupted into cheers.

Asher and I looked at each other, and we smiled. Sure, Antony would come back, Thornscar would keep on trying to kill us, but for now, we were safe.

And that was enough for me.

Tales from the Magao Grottoes

St. Paul's Convent School, Au, Hoi Serina – 13

(Past) 9th January, 1852 in Shangxi

“Long ago, before the Mayan civilization ended, the Mogao Grottoes were said to be first found. Over the centuries, thousands of pilgrims arrive and decided to stay there, digging more caves, spending their time creating sacred art and literature. They were filled with hundreds and thousands of caverns—“

“So where are the Mogao Caves now?” a little boy interrupted.

“Be patient, Yuanlu; I was getting to that part. No one really knows where the so-called Library Caves are now, but it's very important that we pass on the legend. One day, when you marry a nice, pretty lady and have kids, you can tell this story to your children too. Now off to bed, it's getting late and you still have school tomorrow,” the mother replied.

“Someday, maybe in the future, I want to be the one to rediscover these caves!”

“I'm not repeating myself, young man. After all, that's just a silly legend, nothing else.”

(Present) Rory's journal, 12th August, 2019

I had found a journal. I didn't hand it to anyone, I kept it for myself to read.

It looked peculiar.

It would technically count as robbery, but no one knew, and there was no need to let them know.

Hidden inside its ancient purple cover, a secret was unravelled.

When I first opened it, wonder filled my mind. It was like nothing I had seen before. It gave me a new perspective of the world.

Now at this point, I feel the need to explain that I'm working at the Mogao Grottoes. I'm in-charge of finding new artifacts, and I'm writing my own journal, so that when I die, people can find this, and know this secret too, while I can avoid going to jail for stealing an ancient artifact. Now I've decided to share it to you. If you're reading this, you have to close off the library caves, now.

Back to the book.

It's a tale from the mogao grottoes.

Back then, people in the mogao grottoes would worship the Buddha. It was a very holy place. However, there was a killer. No one knew who they were. They were said to have killed tens of thousands of people, and disappearing without a trace. That fateful day, everyone in the mogao grottoes vanished, and the library caves, the very same ones that Yuanlu discovered, were sealed off.

It was called the killing. Very little books are on this topic, and I was lucky enough to find one. Why, you may ask, do such books have to be sealed off again?

The books are alive. They live, breathe, and plot your demise. This might sound fake right now, but listen to me. Such things are not to be tampered with. They possessed an innocent girl and made her kill thousands. Should they do the same again, the numbers will increase and more damage will, with no doubt, grow too. Books are literally all-knowing of everything you write in them. The longest book on earth became so by devouring other books, absorbing the information from them, and writing them on itself. Over time, books have evolved too. They have become capable of thinking independently.

A long time ago, a little girl wandered into the mogao grottoes. Seeing the innocence of the child, the books decided to reveal themselves to her, deciding that they could use her to finally gain some power over the caves they lived in. The girl, curious, picked the book up, and read its contents. Her innocence slowly disappeared as she was exposed to the evils of the book, and she lost control of her mind and her sanity.

The books controlled her, leading her to trap people in the caves, burying them alive, sealing the exits of the caves and burning the people inside. At the last second, the girl had found her conscious, but it was too late. The girl tried to stop the books instead, sealing them in the library caves and running away from the place.

The book that I found was the diary of the little girl.

The Magao Grottoes

St. Paul's Convent School, Chong, Ching Hebe – 12

'You know that cave, in China? I think its name is Mogao Grottoes,' ask Bryson. We were just doing Geography homework, when the topic of 'caves' came up in our conversation. 'No,' replied Tinsley. 'Well,' said Bryson. Oh no! Bryson put on his 'story voice'! His stories were the worst. Most of them were made up— definitely not factual. As if reading my mind, he said, 'Chill, dude. This story is real—and really intriguing. Now try to imagine this in your brains as u listen to me...'

Hi. I'm Zach. I'm a seventh-grader, studying in a school called Jackson High, in New York City. Ever since I went up to the seventh grade, a lot more subjects were added to my plate. There were Geography, History, Sport, Art and this weird subject called Mandarin. Mandarin was actually optional. It was either that or German. Me, being the stupid person I always am, picked Mandarin because I thought it meant eating orange-related fruits during class. Well, obviously, I was wrong. Mandarin was about learning this language used on the other side of Earth. What the heck happened to just having English, Math and Science as our subjects? Thankfully, it was soon to be the summer holidays! I couldn't wait to relax and get this burden off my shoulders.

Back to the caves. Bryson happily told us the story of Mogao Grottoes. 'More than one and half a millennia ago...' 'Wait, how long is that?' Tinsley interrupted. 'I think five hundred years, or is it a thousand?' I said, confusing myself. 'Guys! Let me get back to my story! No interruptions!' Bryson was being fed up with us. We apologized and allowed Bryson to continue his story.

Bryson was right. His story was interesting. Long story short, there was this cave in China, with some treasure. And this cave wasn't rediscovered until the 1900s. The treasures in that cave conclude of the world's finest paintings, sculptures and literacy—the oldest printed book in the world. Scholars said it was like a tunnel to a lost world in the past. Tinsley and I stared at him in astonishment, since when was Bryson so smart? At the same time, what Bryson said fascinated me. It made me want to go and explore the caves myself, experiencing the 'lost world in the past'. 'We should go,' Tinsley said. We all agreed to ask our parents tomorrow, when we have lunch together. We continued our depressing Geography homework, thrilled about the Mogao Grottoes.

'Hooray!' said Bryson, Tinsley and I. We were very excited. Our trip to the Mogao Grottoes in Gansu, China was approved! We promised to be on our best behavior during the trip. Our parents talked through it during lunch. The fees, weather, luggage... blah, blah, blah... all that boring adult stuff. We couldn't wait to board the plane to China!

After three films, using the tiny television in front of me, I got tired and fell asleep. Bryson woke me up all of a sudden and gestured my airplane table. There was a warm meal. There were hamburger patties, carrots with rice and mashed potatoes. The flight attendant probably thought I was a kid and gave me a carton of apple juice. I won't complain though, it tasted a lot better than it looked.

Just when I was about to reach the 'maximum boredom state', a voice came up onto the loudspeaker. 'Everyone please stay in your seats, and buckle up! We are about to land in Gansu, China! Thank you for choosing Goodwill Flights!' Our tiny tellies didn't work anymore, but I didn't care. For the first time in my life, I was in China!

Jet lag sucks. Due to time zones, your brain will get woozy to adapt to the time. Bryson, Tinsley and I were very tired. We went to collect our luggage with our parents. There were many shops at the airport, there was this cool joke shop that I really wanted to check out, but my tiredness stopped me. It may have been my imagination, but I saw three obese but well-dressed men pickpocketing a poor old lady. I told myself it was the effects of jet lag and went off to the hotel.

Three pre-booked, luxurious rooms were waiting for us. You wouldn't believe how great the room was. As I entered the restroom to wash my hands, a fresh fragrance welcomed me with open arms to wash my hands like a royal. I glanced at the bathtub and my jaw almost dislocated. There was a 65-inch television hung on the wall, positioned for you to watch while enjoying a nice and relaxing bath. There was also a showerhead, if you wanted to take a shower, instead of a bath. The beds were as soft and comfortable as you could possibly imagine. It was like falling onto a pile of feathers, transporting you to the world of dreams. There was a second television in front of the two beds. It had a ton of channels, sports, movies, cartoons, (ugh!) news, even yoga! There were a lot more channels, but Tinsley was banging on the door.

'WE KNOW!' said Bryson and Tinsley for the thousandth time. I was bragging about my room. Tinsley cut me off as I rambled on about the beds. 'We are on a mission to visit and explore the Mogao Grottoes, remember?

Get some rest. We'll set off tomorrow. Plus, Zach, we have the same room as you.' We went back into our rooms to get rest for the long day waiting for us tomorrow.

On the way to the Mogao Grottoes, which wasn't that far away from the hotel, we met a gang of orphans. They told us they could guide us through the caves. We thanked them and they led the way.

As we entered, the orphans alerted us that there were going to be a lot of booby traps, since the treasure of the caves were there. We were really careful not to set off anything to get killed.

The orphans were like ninjas, making it hard to keep up. There were cool historical paintings on the cave walls. Ancient words were pointing to a ruby-like stone. A sun symbol was carved onto it. 'That, is the Jewel of the Sun. No one knows how or when, but it has been the greatest treasure of all time.' said the lead orphan, Max.

Displayed in a glass box, sitting there was the Jewel of the Sun. It had a magnificent Sun symbol carved onto it.

As we were admiring the treasure, an evil voice spoke up behind us. 'Well, well, well... Hand it over, boy.' I slowly turned my head and saw the three fat men from the airport, pointing guns at us. Arrows were sticking out of their butts, obviously they didn't put much effort into avoiding the traps. I looked at the guns. Something was familiar about the gun. A seal was imprinted onto it. It was from the joke shop at the airport! Max must've realised the guns were a phony. After a bit of chaos, the three fat men were pinned on the floor. Bryson, Tinsley and I started, impressed with their fighting skills. My mum gave her phone to Max and he called the local police. As I turned out, those men were wanted in three states! The reward money was a check worth of 10,000 dollars. I handed it to Max and told him to buy a nice house for him and his gang of orphans. They thanked us and brought us to eat the best Chinese meal I've ever eaten.

That night, I was really satisfied. Not because I ate a terrific meal, but because I saw the Jewel of the Sun. On my soft bed, I kept thinking about it. The red glimmer of it kept sparkling in my mind. The neatly carved Sun symbol was engraved in my head.

On the last day of the trip, we thanked the orphans again and boarded the plane. I waved goodbye to them, sure that we will soon meet again.

Tales from the Magao Grottoes

St. Paul's Convent School, Ip, Ching Chione – 12

The mojao cave is known for its thousand statues of Buddhists, especially with its long history, it has a lot of stories of its own. The stories of the history itself, and also stories that are related to the cave.

Ophelia was her name, what was her Chinese name? Nobody remembered. All we know is her legendary, mysterious and breathtaking story.

One day when she was sixteen, she met a friend that was obsessed with Tarot and other kinds of supernatural beings, it turned out that she even knew how to use Tarot. If we had to take it positively, she was superstitious, but if we had to take it negatively, she is blind faithed. However what is undeniable is that every time she predicted something bad would happen, it most likely would, it was so incredible that Ophelia, who never really believed in unscientific explanations, had to believe for once. When Ophelia asked her friend what her fate was, what her friend said had shocked her, and it was that she was forever going to be lonely as soon as she turned eighteen, and the only solution was to visit and pray in a temple thousands miles away. Ophelia didn't really mind nor pay attention to it, since it was just some Tarot and nothing worth caring about, so she did not take it seriously, like how everyone else would have taken it.

It was a warm Saturday, the morning breeze brushed through her face, the fresh air hit her breath and the feeling of it was nice. She sat in her backyard and was reading a book. She turned eighteen for seven months now, and nothing happened so far, and Ophelia herself didn't really remember what her friend had said two years ago. Like a Princess she was always treated as the only child of the family, her mother came to sit with her, bringing along some freshly made British red tea. The morning was yet so nice, both of them had no idea of what was coming.

When Ophelia and her mother were having some waffles for tea as they discussed the newly released physiology book of their favorite writer, they received a knock on their door. Their immediate reaction was to call their maid to check the door. Melissa, the maid, came back shivering, frightened, speechless, all that she could afford to mutter out of her shaking voice was "Madam, master sir, he crashed—" Ophelia immediately dashed to the door prepared, or maybe not, for the worst. She faced the two police officers who had the most pitiful face, "I'm sorry but that Mr. Yuen Lee Zun, who I believe is your relative, had died in a car crash at about three. I'm sorry." Then she heard a bang behind her, she then turned to face her fainted mother, she had collapsed onto Melissa's arm, failing to take the news properly. The two police officers immediately called for the ambulance.

Two hours later, Ophelia was crying in Melissa's arm at the nearest hospital from their house. Her parents, the only people who she ever felt love from and for, were taken away from her, both at the same moment. She felt as if it really was the end of the world, more like the end of her world. As she was deeply in her thoughts and was complaining about everything, a doctor came out. He pulled off his mask as Ophelia and Melissa immediately rushed to him, "We performed an urgent surgery on your mother just then, it was caused by a heart attack due to serious shock. Your mother is now not in the state of life-threatening," saying that Ophelia's heart rose to delightful heaven, "but she is in a coma and nobody knows when she will wake up, we tried our best, sorry." Saying that, the doctor left with Ophelia's broken heart that once again dropped back to the deep end.

"Mistress, I know this is the most inappropriate time to mention this to you," Melissa said as she handed Ophelia her handkerchief, "but remember that friend who said you are going to be lonely after you turn eighteen?" Ophelia looked up, trying to remember her so-called friend's name, "maybe she can help you out?" "Melissa, you know that I don't believe in these," Ophelia said even though she was thinking of a way to contact that friend meanwhile. "But mistress, we had no other choice," Melissa felt just as hopeless as Ophelia was, as Ophelia's parents were the only people who offered her a job at that time, and she was forever grateful for them. Ophelia finally agreed to her, unwillingly, and she also told Melissa that she can no longer pay her as her dad who originally made money had died and that she had to be thrifty, however Melissa said that she would stay by her side as long as she was fed and could survive. Their relationship was very well maintained.

Ophelia searched her neighborhood and found out that the friend had moved out three months ago, but fortunately, of all the terrible things she had been through, she got her number. Having no time to waste, she immediately dialed

the number and asked her if there was any solution to this horrible situation. She ended up with the worst thing she would've expected to hear, there was no solution. She felt absolutely hopeless, not like it was already enough, she felt that all those time and effort, everything was wasted, completely. Melissa told her to not be so down and done, but all know it wouldn't help, time cures everything, but not at that moment when all just crashed into Ophelia's little, poor heart. She wondered if her life was a joke.

She couldn't stand it anymore and ran away from home, as if it would solve everything, she ran and ran. With no food, with no water, with no shelter, with no basic thing necessary to survive, even a three years old toddler would know not to run away, especially when it solves nothing and just causes more problems, but Ophelia at that moment chose to do so. She didn't run far away from the neighborhood, just from her neighborhood into the woods, and the night already fell. Normally, Ophelia would be smelling the aroma of the tempting dishes soon as she left the scent of the flowers in her yard, then she would be laughing with her parents as they share literally everything during dinner, from school work to point of views of social matters, now, she was left alone with the feeling of nature woods. Tears rolled down the cheeks of Ophelia, she was almost lost in her memories when reality took over. It was getting darker and darker as the sun was hidden completely by the hills. She had to find somewhere to spend the night, quickly. It was all very meaningless, a day had passed, the sun was going to hide, and she watched as the sun hid and night started to rise, she had to find some shelter. As she looked around and walked while she still could with the dim light left, she found an abundant cave. And with nothing left to fear, she entered and decided that she was going to spend her night there. There were tones of statues, you are right, it is the mojao cave. She was so tired and exhausted, she fell asleep instantly and dreamt of all the lovely memories.

The next day, she was woken up by her mother, and she was on her bed! "Honey, breakfast's ready!" She heard her mother's lovely, musical voice as she walked down the wooden stairs down to the dining room, "we made your favorite bacon with cheese." Ophelia hugged her mother as she held back her tears. She sat down in the original spot as she usually did and started to eat. At the corner of her eye, she saw Melissa grinning with what seemed unfamiliar, this wasn't how she originally smiles, Melissa then told her mistresses and master that she had found herself another job and that since Ophelia had grown up, she wasn't necessary anymore. Ophelia prayed that Melissa should stay, but Melissa just winked and said that Saturday was the best day to leave without sadness.

Later Ophelia searched her phone and found out that it was the day that all shock had happened, who was Melissa actually? Thinking back, Ophelia realized that she didn't really tell Melissa about the tarot, how'd she know? Then her brain went numb and it felt as if she wasn't supposed to know. Even though all could only happen logically as a dream, it didn't feel like one, what is really the reality? It forever stays a mystery.

Spirituality

St. Paul's Convent School, Lee, Ching Yee Charlotte – 13

Inside, it was cool and humid. My only source of illumination was an oil lamp which cast a soft glow on the path dimly. As I quickly but cautiously made my way through the cave, I turned my head in all directions in search of my brother.

“Huang Wenshun?” I called out. My only reply was an interminable echo, its hollowness somewhat mirroring my despondency.

Void filled me from within. Biting my lip, I trod further into the cave, bending under the low roof while holding onto the side of the cave for support, which was cracked due to its age.

Wenshun had autism. This meant he would do anything to fulfil the wish of his present mind – including running off in the middle of the night to the Mogao Caves, which he had longed to explore. As the elder sister, I always kept an eye on him, but somehow he had managed to slip out before anyone could stop him. Naturally, when I realised this, the first thing I did was head straight after him. I hesitated for a second at the mouth of the cave, before stepping in with a determined air.

At first, the countless, tall statues on the sides gave me a claustrophobic sense, especially since the giant eyes all seemed to be directed towards me. I started to wonder if I should just wait for him to return, after all, he would... wouldn't he?

I didn't dare take any risks.

My legs felt weak and wobbly, even though I kept telling myself to stay calm. I hadn't expected there to be so many forks like a labyrinth. Which route had he taken? Searching the entire cave thoroughly would take me ages, not to mention the extra time and effort required for groping in the darkness when my oil lamp went out, which seemed like any moment now.

As I dashed past the many religious wall paintings, artworks and relics, into tunnel after tunnel, I called for him with a voice packed with perturbation. A sense of hope was created before every shout, yet rapidly vanished into the humid air as it was met with empty silence. The light was growing dimmer and dimmer every minute. Soon I would be enclosed by darkness.

My throat felt dry; I must have called about twenty times, all to no avail. Defeat punched me right in the abdomen and forced me onto a rock. I grasped the hem of my dress, rubbing and twisting it with my fingers as if it could serve as an efficient outlet for my mental tension. Drops of sweat beaded my forehead, providing additional moisture to the already damp place, and one or two trickled down my face. I stretched my small, worn-out body on the rock and, with a hand under my head, slowly fell asleep.

My eyes opened to see two monks staring at me. Bolting up, I hastily got to my feet. “Sorry, am I intruding?”

“No,” smiled a monk, before introducing himself as Le Zun and his partner as Faliang. “We are just recreating a scene we saw.” He waved his hand at the mountain of artworks behind him proudly. Sensing my curiosity, he began his story:

“I was traversing the desert to the Western Paradise and stopped here for a rest. As I sat admiring the serene sunset, the mountains glowed softly and there Maitreya Buddha was, floating with a thousand Buddhas and fairies that were playing heavenly music.

“The scene enthralled me profoundly, so I decided to portray it using painting and sculpture. The caves seemed holy, as a result, I chose it as the abiditory. While I was moving my artworks into one of the caves, I met another monk who was coincidentally having the same vision – Faliang.” Le Zun motioned to his partner. “Like me, he wants to make sculptures for record-keeping.”

Faliang pointed at a group of religious sculptures by the opening of the cave. “We are planning to store those inside a second cave and will add more later.”

I stared at everything wide-eyed. Hadn’t I been inside the cave just now? Hadn’t it been the same case for my brother? I had seen the tidy rows of artworks and relics with my own eyes, so why were these two monks saying they had only recently begun filling it? Did they mean other caves? These two certainly looked newer. Or was this an illusion?

The men looked at me expectantly. “So, what do you think of our project?”

Project? I hurriedly pulled myself together. “Oh,” I laughed nervously, “it sounds interesting. Good luck!”

They thanked me and went back to their handling work, leaving me in a baffled daze. Just then, a small head peeked out from behind a statue and stared at me intently.

“Wenshun?” A lump formed in my throat.

“Don’t touch me,” he said, and I stopped dead in my tracks. “There’s an evil spirit around me, which Le Zun and Faliang are getting rid of. They say this will make me more... normal.”

They probably meant his autism. Nevertheless, it was a novel occurrence that he allowed strangers to touch him. “You know them?”

A solemn look crossed his face. “I’m their monk apprentice. Being a monk has been my dream for a long time. Finally, my wish is granted.”

My mouth fell open. “Aren’t you happy with your life? We have warm food every day.”

He looked away and didn’t reply.

After a moment of silence I said, “Aren’t you coming back home?”

He shook his head. “I’m sure Father and Mother will understand.” All of a sudden, his outline started blending in with the surroundings.

“What’s going on?” I exclaimed. He just gazed at me with his wide, dark, emotionless eyes as he grew fainter and fainter. I reached out my hand, trying to hold on to what was left of him, but my fingers penetrated his body and a shudder ran down my spine. In a matter of seconds he had vanished, vaporised. As if he hadn’t been there at all.

“No! Is this a dream?” Darkness blanketed my eyes, and my head felt heavy as lead...

My hand slipped out and my head hit the cold surface of the rock. I made an utterance of pain, before sitting up and seeing it all. It had been a dream.

But what about the Buddhas? Blinking back my tears, I lifted my head.

Standing before me was a majestic statue of Buddha. His palm, facing outwards, provided me with a reassuring force. I fell to my knees and murmured fervently between intakes of desperate breaths.

Knowing that all matters were in the hands of Buddha refreshed and encouraged me. Now, I was ready to continue my search.

With firm steps, I made my way out of the tunnel and into what looked like a hideout. There was a small pile of hay and a blanket with a lump the shape of a human body. It stayed still. There was no sign of movement. I shrunk back in terror, then took a deep breath, tiptoed towards it and extended my hand to lift off the blanket...

The covers were thrown off and a person scrambled up. "Hi, Jie."

I gasped. "Wenshun, what are you doing here?"

"Having a nap," he replied matter-of-factly, not looking like he wanted to be a monk. I sighed with relief under my breath.

"Let's get back before Father and Mother find out we're missing." I grabbed hold of his arm.

He shrugged me off. "Jie, I want to stay. I like it here."

I felt heat creeping up my face. "Listen to your sister."

"But Jie, I enjoy being in the presence of the Buddhist relics. There's some kind of spiritual bond between us that makes me feel at peace. I want to be a monk."

His words paralysed my thoughts. "What?"

"I want to become a monk" – he caught my look – "when I grow up."

"Well, let's see what Father and Mother have to say about this. Now come home with me." Fortunately he followed me, albeit reluctantly.

As we hastened home, I brooded over Wenshun's aspiration. I couldn't understand why he wanted to become a monk when he could sit for the *keju*, the imperial examination, and attain a governmental position like other people.

That spiritual bond he mentioned, though... it was what I had felt earlier in front of the statue of Buddha. Perhaps this was a sign for both of us, like the vision Le Zun and Faliang had thousands of years ago.

That was how the spirit of Buddhism was spread among people, and how the Mogao Caves have been preserved till today. These days, we gradually forget about the story of two siblings who grew up to be devout monks. The Mogao Caves are not merely a tourist attraction, but an oasis of spirituality, depicting the evolution of Buddhist art as well as many sacred wonders.

Legends

St. Paul's Convent School, Lok, Audrie – 12

Grace slowly opened her eyes, squinting against the sun. What she saw was definitely not New York. It was better.

She and Enzo were in a large, sacred, stunning grotto. The Cave teemed with life, and had a special, warm atmosphere. They were under a spotlight, a lone ray shining through a hole in the roof of the Cave. Grace squinted her eyes and looked up. She could feel the Sun's heat smouldering in her face. Through the opening, she saw a crystal blue sky. Confusion entered Grace's mind.

"Where are we?" whispered Grace, bewildered.

"The Mogao Caves! My Mom told me tales about them when I was little," Enzo murmured excitedly.

Grace turned to him and saw that he was looking spellbound around himself. She focused her eyes and gasped. The rough cave walls were painted with vibrant, meticulous drawings that told the story of a lost world. A land shrouded in legends. The wall murals popped with vivid colours that emphasised mythical creatures, magical gods and goddesses, and ancient tales. Every nook and cranny of the Caves was covered with these dazzling drawings. Even after thousands of years, their magnificence hadn't faded.

The Caves were part of her, she realised. Her heritage. For a moment, all shock of arriving in this enchanting land was forgotten.

"Did your Dad tell you tales too? My Mom said that they often exchanged tales in their village," Enzo said. Enzo's mom and Grace's dad came from China and lived in the same village when they were young.

Grace gazed down at her white platforms, now caked with red and brown dust. She didn't reply.

Her mind was overwhelmed with thoughts. She realised that she knew almost nothing about her dad's culture. He never talked about it. She only recognised that these Caves were part of her way of life from the soaring dragons on the walls. Her mother had told her stories before, but not her father. Now, she didn't even get to see him anymore, as he was always off on work trips.

"Let's explore," she said rashly, not thinking properly.

"Lead the way, milady," answered Enzo in playful banter, smiling goofily.

A strange smile tickled Grace's lips. Just like old times.

Grace and Enzo walked slowly around the majestic cavern, embracing their heritage together. The moment she took a step in the Cave, Grace felt magic swirl around. What was once dormant, set-in stone, had come alive again. She felt an adrenaline rush, and a genuine smile settled on her face. A small cloud of dust rose and fell from her step, as if to emphasise that magic was really in the air again. For the first time in a long time, the spirits of the Mogao Caves had been awakened again.

The spirits smiled, and the Mogao Caves swallowed them into their mountain of wonder.

Magic hid in the walls, watching the two children silently. Both children couldn't help but marvel at the astounding splendour of the Caves. They housed glimmering, priceless treasures of the past world, tucked away a millennia ago. Beautiful paintings, detailed sculptures, and many other irreplaceable gems. Perhaps the magic that had seeped into them also gave them a special touch. The Caves were truly a treasure trove, preserving the past perfectly.

Grace laughed as she saw Enzo look at the regal, elegant, valuable manuscripts, enchanted.

“Wow...” she heard him mutter. “These manuscripts must be at least a thousand years old,” he said, voice tinted with reverence and amazement.

Grace walked over to the pyramid of gilded scrolls piled precariously. She couldn’t understand anything though, unlike Enzo. Her dad had never taught her Chinese.

She continued admiring the large cavern, and often looked at the hole in the roof of the Cave that she and Enzo had seen when they first got here. It let in a brilliant, radiant beam of sunshine, which lit up the whole place with a warm, inspiring glow. She looked curiously at the light and saw dust particles floating serenely in the beam. Grace swore she could see something glittering in the beacon. Perhaps they weren’t dust particles, but particles of magic? She could feel the wizardry around her.

“Leave me alone,” someone said in a raspy, bitter voice suddenly, upsetting Grace’s peace. The children, who were solely focused on the trinkets, jumped in surprise, and turned to look at a hunched figure in a shadowy corner of the Cave. The figure had his back to them, and he looked like a mangled, torn bundle of raggedy cloth. He slowly stood up and turned around to face them. “What are you kids doing here?”

“We were just exploring,” said Enzo, snapping out of his shock. “These Caves are truly marvellous,” he commented, as Grace studied the man’s eyes. There was no life in them, just a bitter anger.

“Ah,” he replied shakily, “I wish everyone thought like you, my boy.”

“I am Wang Lezun, great-grandson of Wang Yuanlu, the guardian of these temples. Alas, the Caves are dying,” he continued distractedly. Puzzled looks replied him.

“These Caves are wonders,” he began to explain, “I have tried my best to make them known long ago, and I did succeed. But it seems as though humans no longer have time for great things, so they just toss these treasures aside, and leave them forgotten, cloaked in darkness. Like a shining diamond in coal.”

He turned to his dark corner of the Cave once more, shoulders heaving with sobs. Grace was about to go comfort him but stopped, awestruck, when he produced two of the most beautiful eggs Grace and Enzo had ever seen. One was a bright vermillion red, sprinkled with golden specs, and the other was golden, jewelled with metallic fuchsia sparkles. They both had a magical aura.

“There is something that nobody knows,” Wang said gravely. “Marvellous, powerful dragons and Chinese lions guard the Caves alongside my ancestors and me. This is their hallowed home, and they guard it with their life. They feel it is their duty to do so. But,” here he sighed forlornly, “now that the Caves are dying, so are they.”

He referenced to the eggs. “This is the last dragon, and this is the last lion. They are growing weaker each day, as people are forgetting the legends. The legends are the spirits of the Caves and them. Once the legends are forgotten, the Caves will die, and with them, their loyal guardians.”

“However, not all hope is lost,” smiled Wang. His eyes glinted and a little life entered them again. The children’s eyes lit up from their saddened state as well. “It is my belief that children shall be the ones to carry on these beloved legends. They are the purest of all ages. Children are living in the simplicity of life. Life is simple, it is us humans that complicate it.” Here, he stopped for a moment to admire Grace and Enzo. His eyes fell on Grace’s locket.

“This locket is magic,” he went on, in a quiet, feverish manner, “It was born of the same mystical spirit as these Caves. That it has found its way to you proves that you are the children who are meant to carry on the legends.”

Grace smiled down at her locket and rubbed its smooth surface. Strangely, it was hot. The amulet began to give off a faint golden glow. It was time to go back home.

Wang took Grace's hands and delicately pressed something into them. "Keep the legends alive," he breathed one last time.

Grace smiled at the wise man, "We'll always remember the Mogao Caves." She held Enzo's hands. They disappeared, and a flurry of golden sparks appeared before Wang's eyes.

Grace smiled unknowingly. New York again. She faced Enzo.

"I'm really happy that we had this adventure together," she said shyly. "It felt like old times when we explored New York together. Just you and me."

Enzo nodded in agreement. "I'm happy too," he grinned.

"I know now that it doesn't matter that my Dad isn't here anymore. I have the memories that we shared inside my heart," Grace understood.

Grace felt something tickling her palm. She unclenched her hand and revealed a crinkled piece of parchment that Wang had given her. It had an exquisite drawing of the sacred Mogao Caves on it. She put it carefully inside her locket next to the precious picture of her and Enzo and smiled.

Enzo took her hand, and they strolled calmly in bustling New York, inside their own peaceful bubble. Grace beamed at the memories of her dad, of Enzo, of the adventures she had today. The moments preserved forever in her mind soared freely in her head like majestic, wild birds. Miles away, she could feel the eggs growing stronger, more positive and more determined with each thought. She looked into the distance, with a small smile on her face.

Someone had to keep the legends alive.

Legacies of the Forgotten Caves

St. Paul's Convent School, Luk, Hoi Yan Rita – 13

In a small town in the desert, crowded with merchants and scholars from places far away, craftsmen and villagers bustled on the street under the dazzling sun. The children there usually crowded under the big birch tree in the middle of the square between the town hall and the temple, they tend to sit in a small circle around old wise Mr Ho, sometimes with the older kids too, and listen to his tales that has always amazed them.

“What shall we hear about today?” smiled Mr Ho and the younger kids burst into questions about legendary monsters, stolen treasures and great adventures. Among the chattering children was quiet Little Xiao, who stared at the merchant with a sack of gold at the end of the street, then looked back at Mr Ho with his bright curious eyes, “Mr...Ho...” Xiao at the age of 6, murmured, “Why do grown-ups like gold so much?... and Big Brother said...he’s going to make a lot of gold when he grows up!” Old Mr Ho smiled gently and the wrinkles on the side of his eyes appeared. “Gather round, youngsters, we have an interesting story to tell,” called Mr Ho as he looked at the older kids who just arrived at the small square after school. “Once upon a time...” he began, and the younger ones quietly leaned onto their brothers or sisters, and like a shepherd and his young lambs, they gathered round.

Long time ago, when the place was still filled with lush green grass and clear blue streams, the town was still a village of wooden huts. There were no merchants or scholars, no gold or gems, but only farmers and villagers, living their simple lives. Amid the commoners, there was a young man known as Liuwei. He was unique the moment he arrived this world as he giggled instead of cried. As a child, he drank tea instead of water; in adolescent years, he would still wander in the wild, spending most of his time with nature than with people. To the people in the village, he had an eccentric personality and they despised him. Despite all odds, Liuwei’s sixteenth summer came, and according to the village’s tradition, he was now a man, not a boy nor a guy, but a proper man, who was expected to have his own piece of land, and to have his own family by earning his first bucket of gold. However, Liuwei, tired of the communities’ opinions and judgements, packed his bags on a night when the silver moon was shining brightly. With millions of stars twinkling above him, he stepped out of the door, out of the village and never looked back. Every step was sure and steady, as Liuwei’s will was strong and immovable as a rock. It was as if a roaring fire of anger was lit in his heart, by each and every criticism he has ever received in his life. On the first morning since he left, he stopped by a small lake, with water so clear that the blinding blazes of sunlight lightened the dark pebbles lying beneath it. Liuwei reached out his hands, his fingertips gently caressing the cool surface, then gradually dipped them in the ice-cold water, he scooped out a handful and splashed it on his face, waking himself up. Liuwei blinked hard, gazing into the reflection in the pool of water, he sighed, “New day, new life...” He stood and peered at the sun, promising himself that he will find gold, jewels and treasures, by then glory and fame will be upon him, he will no longer be an abnormal outcast but a courageous adventurer, whose fame would be passed down by generations of children spreading the tales of his adventures.

Across the field of viridescent steppe, through the deep valley surrounded by sharp ridges, Liuwei wended his perilous journey towards the North-western direction, the future unknown to him, yet he never had a single thought of turning back. The sun came and went, the same way the moon appeared and slipped away, Liuwei lost track of time, his mind obsessed with glory, fame and wealth, unknowingly falling into an abyss of greed. After countless days and nights, Liuwei came across a huge temple, and a great stone wall dawned upon him. Liuwei’s eyes glowed, his jaw dropped. It was marvellous, as he had never seen such wonderous landscape before, it looked too flat and smooth to be made by nature, yet too rocky and rough to be human-made. Thousands of caves, big and small, rounded and squared, oriented on the steep cliff of a rock. Liuwei imagined the caves, each filled with riches and valuables from primitive rulers. The image in his mind urged him to go forward, to the first cave in his way. To his disappointment, there were no precious metals or items, but a sculpture of a—a man? No, it’s a sculpture of Buddha. Liuwei scanned the walls and the ceiling, and he was amazed at the paintings. Though he didn’t know what the paintings were about nor did he understand the meaning of them, he was still greatly astonished by the ancient art. All of a sudden, wealth and honour didn’t matter to him, a desire to investigate the past of this magnificent place sparked within him, like a thin string pulling him back to reality from the chasm of rapacity. Liuwei shook his head, lightly pat his cheeks and whispered to himself, “What am I seeking for? Wealth? Prominence?” Liuwei’s will had been shaken, he was struggling deep down, unsure of whether his decisions and actions were what he wanted. Liuwei had always hated people for doubting him, however, it now seemed to him that he was doubting himself too. Liuwei ran out of the cave, trying to convince himself that his commitment has never changed and what he was seeking for will one day be obtained by him.

Forever and a day, Liuwei rummaged through every single cave, each one increasing his curiosity to discover more of this ruin of yore. The artwork on the walls were never the same, each brush created a contrasting impression; same with the sculptures of Buddha, it can be seen clearly that each was made carefully by a pair of cautious hands and a devoted heart. At long last, Liuwei reached the last cave. The last cave which contrasted with the other thousands, was an unfinished piece of work, with a relatively small opening, and half-done illustrations. Liuwei steeled himself, then took a step deeper into the cave. All of Liuwei's hopes were gone. In the middle of the final cave, there were no sculptures or precious fortunes, but a small puddle of water, no more and no less. Liuwei stared into the pool of liquid, and couldn't believe what he saw. Liuwei rubbed the beard on his chin, then touched the small eye bag under his once young and bright eyes. Liuwei knelt and thought of all the things he saw and encountered over the long haul, needless to say, the whole journey deviated from the planned direction. Liuwei's chest tightened as he clenched his fist, all seemed too surreal to him, but reality was in front of his eyes. A tear fell down his rough cheeks, and he sobbed while holding himself tight.

"Kids, do you know what happened to Liuwei afterwards?" asked Mr Ho, rubbing his prickly chin. The air was silent and tense, "Mr Ho why don't you just tell us?" Mr Ho chortled, "Well then, Liuwei recalled the memories of the caves, and the stunning art and carvings he discovered there—those were all creations of old masters who spent their lives mastering an arduous set of skill. In an instant, Liuwei realized what he truly sought for, not gold or exquisite valuables, not popularity or recognition of society, but a life in which he could pursue an interest he enjoys and live the way he likes. The joy brought by doing something one enjoys cannot be replaced by wealth or fame, so, live your best life and cherish everything the world has given you, after all, you only live once."

The young children, all squinted their eyes and looked at Mr Ho with puzzled faces while the older ones, were in awe of the deep meaning of the story and the wisdom of Mr Ho. As the sun descended slowly into the horizon, the children got up one after one, and headed home. Eventually, only Little Xiao was still staying. "It's getting late boy, Mr Ho is going home to have dinner with his family, why don't you go home?" Little Xiao stood up and said, "Thanks...for the story...I'll cherish it." Mr Ho replied, "Someday, boy, you'll pass this tale down to your children, and on and on." He smiled gently then patted Little Xiao's head and together, they headed home.

Tales from the Mogao Grottoes

St. Paul's Convent School, Rai, Ayanna – 13

“Have you heard of the recent rumors? The locked doors of the Mogao Grottoes are re-opening! After so many years, the people have finally reopened it. We should visit it together one day!” said Naigon excitedly to her friend Hera. They were young police officers.

On the day the Mogao Grottoes re-opened, millions of people came to visit it. The Mogao Grottoes had been closed for about 120 years. Why? There were many cases of theft. At that time, technology was not as advanced as it is now. Thieves could steal any piece of luxurious art and treasure, which were very valuable and expensive. With greed, people started stealing the wonderful ancient masterpieces. Ever since then, the Mogao Grottoes was forced to close... until now.

“Aren’t you excited?” asked Naigon. She knew Hera was a big fan of the Mogao Grottoes, yet today, she didn’t seem to show any sign of delight or excitement. “The Mogao Grottoes have been closed for so long and throughout all these years, have people stopped stealing? They are going to make the Mogao Grottoes empty!” replied Hera. Hera was a serious police officer who hated crime. “I understand what you mean, Hera, but at least the Mogao are re-opening! We must visit it” suggested Naigon, “The Mogao Grottoes have so many priceless objects such as jewels, treasures, paintings, sculptures and literature – just to name a few!”. Of course, Hera could not refuse her friend’s idea of visiting the Mogao Grottoes.

Just a week before Naigon and Hera’s visit, there had been a crime in the Mogao Grottoes. The thief had stolen 3 rare paintings, but he was caught. Naigon and Hera found that out when they were watching the news. “See? I told you! Humans can’t be trusted these days!” complained Hera, “Can’t believe that disgusting thief!”. “Not all people are like that, not everyone commits crimes. There are good people in this world too.” said Naigon, “We are going there next week and we have already booked the tickets.”

Few days later, Naigon went to the library to read a book about the Mogao Grottoes. “The Mogao Grottoes contains many paintings, sculptures and many types of art. It has so many undiscovered secrets that most people don’t know exist too. In the old days, thousands of pilgrims arrived and decided to stay there. During that time, the pilgrims created many forms of sacred art...”. She read on and on. In the end, she borrowed the book home to show Hera.

Hera was impressed by the book and her curiosity of visiting the Mogao Grottoes grew. That book also contained some of the secrets of the Mogao Grottoes, including the secret books and potions. In fact, the pilgrims who stayed there also loved chemistry. They have created many potions and books related to chemistry.

On the day of visiting the Mogao Grottoes, Hera and Naigon were so excited and curious. They couldn’t wait to visit it. They read many books and did a lot of research about it. They got up, got ready and went to visit it immediately.

When they reached the Mogao Grottoes, there was a huge line there. There were many people visiting the Mogao Grottoes including famous celebrities. It was very crowded, but they managed to stay together. However, Hera saw her favorite idol and decided to meet her. She told Naigon to go ahead while she found her idol. Naigon didn’t mind and went ahead. When she finally entered the Mogao Grottoes, her eyes sparkled.

The Mogao Grottoes was filled with bright glowing crystals. Each one sparkled with beauty. “Welcome to the Mogao Grottoes!” said the tour guide, “This is one of the most sacred caves ever and we hope you enjoy your visit here!”. Naigon took many pictures. “Firstly, we have the magnificent paintings. Here, you can see all the beautiful artworks done by the pilgrims. Each one was not made by modern paint, but was made through nature. Pilgrims mixed natural resources and made them into paint to use. For example, they used leaves for green! They have a lot of creativity!” said the tour guide. Naigon was fascinated. However, she started to realize that Hera had been gone for about half an hour and she couldn’t see her anywhere.

“Next, we have the sculptures. Pilgrims made huge sculptures as gifts to their kings and rulers. As sculptures were extremely expensive to make and required a lot of work, only the high-class people were able to afford it. It was also a common tradition for pilgrims to make sculptures of the princes or princesses when they were born to welcome them to Earth. Sculptures were also used to pray to gods. Pilgrims would make sculptures of gods and put them in temples to pray and worship everyday.” said the tour guide. Naigon herself loved sculptures. She used to make

sculptures herself when she was a child. Even though she was enjoying the sculptures, she started wondering where Hera went. She decided to call her.

“Hello? Hera? Can you hear me?” asked Naigon. She was calling Hera by her phone and it was very noisy because of the crowd. “Hera?” she asked.

“Hello? Naigon? Why are you calling me?” replied Hera. “Where are you Hera? Are you still with your idol? I am already halfway through the tour! When will you come?” asked Naigon. “Go on with your tour” said Hera, “I will meet you up in the cafe later!” “Ok! Bye” replied Naigon.

“Here we have the amazing works of literature by the pilgrims. They were fabulous story writers and created many literacies. Some were happy, some were sad, some were romantic and some were heartbreaking. One of the most famous literature works was “The Happy Days of Childhood” by Idris Hester. It was a very inspiring biography. Other books written by Hester were “Lonely”, “30 Days of Freedom” and “Empress Catherine”. If you would like to purchase a copy of any of those literature works, you may buy them at the shop over there.” said the tour guide, pointing to a small shop.

The tour continued for about one more hour. After the tour, Naigon went to the cafe to meet Hera. To her surprise, Hera was already there. “Where were you this whole time?” asked Naigon. “I finished the tour half an hour ago with my idol, Esa Swanson, the famous explorer! I was waiting for you the whole time!”. Naigon sighed, “Well, since we finished the tour, we can go home now I guess,” she said.

As Naigon was enjoying her dinner while watching the news, a news report about the Mogao Grottoes popped up. There had been a theft again. She was worried and immediately checked her bag to see if anything got stolen. Luckily, she had everything with her.

The thief stole 5 ancient secret works of art including the potion called the Elixir of Health, the sculpture called the “Heaven’s Angel”, the painting called the “Day with a Pilgrim”, the literature called “Empress Catherine”, the music sheet called “Happiness forever” and the “Secret Book of Eternal Joy”.

Naigon wondered who the thief was. Nobody would be stupid enough to try to steal priceless objects especially when there was a CCTV camera. The Mogao Grottoes had to be shut down again because there had already been 2 cases of theft.

After a few days, the thief was caught and it was on the news reports. It was no other than Hera.

Naigon screamed when she saw Hera’s name as a thief. Hera was a police officer who hated crime. How could she do that? Hera was also very close to Naigon. Just a few days ago, she told Naigon how much she hated crime. Hera was sentenced to 50 years in prison.

Why did Hera commit such a crime? She loved the Mogao Grottoes, but she herself stole from it!

One day, Naigon decided to visit Hera. Even though she had trusted Hera, Hera had betrayed her. “Why did you commit such a disgusting crime! You are a police officer!” said Naigon.

“I didn’t want the money. I just wanted to keep those items because of my greed. I love the Mogao Grottoes and wanted to keep some of the secret items as a souvenir for myself. I wanted to keep the original version! Not the copy!” said Hera, crying.

Naigon was so ashamed of Hera that she said nothing and left. “I hope she learnt her lesson.” thought Naigon.

Tales from the Magao Caves

St. Paul's Convent School, Sum, Yui Hayley – 12

Pure adrenaline ran through Ming's blood while he was gazing at the view in front of him, realising that he was a part of the team that might have just discovered one of the places with the highest historical significance in centuries.

The scholars stood in the centre of what seemed to be a huge circular lobby with an uncountable number of caves and passages surrounding it. Colours from dim velvet to striking blue were present and gorgeous statues of traditional gods and goddesses overlooked the entire cave. Ming stood in silent admiration and almost lost his ability to speak for a second. As he snapped back into reality, providing the fact that this was not a dream, he gathered with his fellow researchers, some who were still in shock. "Why don't we split into teams," Ming suggested, since he was the leader of this expedition, "I'll go with Victoria and Tam and investigate the corridors." Ming pointed at a dark passage to where he was facing. "The rest of you can check for any written sources or art pieces and take some samples for the research later on." Four scholars let out a small murmur of agreement.

Dusty, foul-smelling air filled the corridors as he opened a door, not that anybody there wasn't already used to it after years or even decades of working in the field. This was originally a mission started by Ming a few years ago, but it took him a long time to gather his skilled team. Ming made sure that none of them were here for fame or glory, but for the sake of exploring and learning.

What was in front of them looked almost like a museum, given this was already a historical site, it was something worth the attention. There were paintings and small statues, each with a language beneath it which only a few ancient Chinese characters could be recognised by Ming. One display caught his attention. It looked like a distraught woman embracing a small child, he wondered if she was protecting the child from the dangers of the world. It was amazing how art, even those from ancient times, could make a person think about our current society. Ming left the model alone, despite it being a compelling source for historians. A feeling from the bottom of his heart told him that if he had bothered the woman and her child, it would create chaos at present times, as if it weren't already chaotic enough.

The team passed through a doorway and entered a room which looked like it was built for worship, there stood statues of gods and goddesses almost twice the height of a man in the four corners. They were all cut from large pieces of smooth stone. The details on the statues were extremely intricate. The goddess in the left corner had a shining golden layer of gold melted into the shape of a robe while precious gems decorated a crown elegantly placed on her head. Her eyes were closed and she was gently smiling, holding her hands together politely, as if she was greeting the visitors with manner and grace. The position she sat in almost perfectly matched her clothing, appearance and expression. Ming wondered the values of art to the people who once inhabited this place and how much time it must have taken to create something so exquisite yet fragile. The patience the creator had has already far surpassed the patience of so many nowadays.

Another door was opened to the team, revealing broken pieces of furniture which looked like nothing more than ruins and ashes. A peculiar-looking box stood at the corner of the room. It was made from well-polished stone with sharp edges. Ming went on to investigate and ran his fingers through the jewels and gems that decorated the surface. There wasn't a keyhole. He delicately opened the chest and his eyes instantly widened. "Tam, call everyone back and make sure they have the samples secure. We have to return at once."

The research team and a few officers were sitting alongside the scholars in a confined laboratory.

"There wasn't any evidence of anyone ever being there, I'm sure of it," Ming confirmed. "Yes, I believe you, but you have found something, haven't you? You wouldn't have gathered us here otherwise. Show me your findings." replied an officer. Ming took the chest and confidently presented it to the table. Inside the chest was an aged leather book with torn edges, shredded pieces of wool and fine pieces of string. However, what caught the most attention was a black, rectangular box that obviously does not belong there. An electronic device, more specifically, an old cell phone. "That is not possible," insisted another officer. "I am only here to give you what I know as the truth." The researchers discussed among themselves. Suddenly, Tam stood up and announced. "Things aren't always what they seem, sir. I'm very confused why you would believe that a place like the Mogao Caves could be constructed more

than a millennium ago. This is a joke! We have been researching and spending all our time on nothing but a fake underground palace that some fools have created!” His voice almost immediately changed from a collected manner to a furiously frustrated animal. Ming stood as well. “I recommend that you calm down, my colleague!” Despite his words, Ming himself did not seem calm at all. “There is more than enough proof that the Caves are as real as the air we are breathing, as true as the evolution of mankind!”

There was a series of varied conversations from whispering to shouting. The previously—silent woman, Victoria interrupted, “None of you are calm! Could it be that we simply weren’t the first ones to discover the cave?” The chattering resumed at an even faster pace. “It is a huge discovery, no sensible historian would keep the Mogao Caves a secret!” Tam debated. There was a short silence. Out of curiosity and frustration, Ming reached into the chest and took the leather book out. “Wait! Look at this, everybody,” On the first page was a date written in cursive English. “12th of December.” The lines below wrote, “To whoever reads this, I am a scholar from Japan. I discovered this place in 1994. You might wonder why I kept this place a secret, but I have my reasons. I was the one who placed the items in the chest. I am glad that you found this chest, which was meant to be a time capsule, to be opened at no specific date. This book is my journal. Please read it. It is my last wish to share my life story and have it published to the world.”

Years later...

A book named after a world—famous historian from the 20th century became one of the best—selling books ever. It is an autobiography in the form of a diary, telling the life story of the woman who discovered the renowned Mogao Caves in China, originally built by a monk. Up until the publishing of the book, the Caves were kept a secret to the public, according to the will of the historian. She was dedicated to making sure that the Mogao Caves were to be opened to the public eye at no cost, under the circumstances that it will be well—protected. Millions of tourists visited this breathtaking sight, the starting point of a great civilisation. The book influenced the globe by giving insight to present—day dilemmas and spreading the joy and satisfaction of studying world history. Yet more importantly, it transformed the world into a place where everybody had the opportunity to learn about the past, the present or the future.

The Lost Treasures of the Mogao Grottoes

St. Paul's Convent School, Tse, Tak Yin Torrance – 14

Under the blazing sun, lizards skittered across the golden sand which dazzled like millions of diamonds. As far as the eye could see, everything was roasted with the same intensity. Just then, the explorers thought they saw a hummingbird flitting into a cactus, but it was probably another hallucination. Just as the listless taste of the last biscuit they ate became their last memory, they took a deep breath and were abruptly greeted by the sound of fresh water and the fragrance of flowers. As they groggily opened their eyes, they stood in amazement: how could there be such a magnificent place in the middle of nowhere? As they journeyed the oasis further, they soon found not one, but a series of caves.

“These caves look cool! Let’s go in and explore!” said the taller of the two, whose name was Conner. As he beamed from ear to ear, he played with the worn hat in his hand, gifted by the other, Arthur, who nodded his head determinedly with his trademark grin, which wooed plenty of girls in their hometown. They strolled leisurely into the innocent-looking caves...

“What is this ?” Arthur gasped with a faint tone of awe. The walls were filled with vibrant dashes of colours, one illustrating several phoenixes spreading their wings broadly, with a glint of pride in their eyes; another displaying the celebration of the moon festival in full swing, the crowd in the painting cheering as they gazed at the silver moon. Another curious painting caught Conner’s eyes: it portrayed what seemed like most people’s fantasy, and it was raining gold as blurry people scrambled to catch some from the sky. Not only were the walls covered with art, the floor was placed with so many sculptures and scrolls that it became difficult for the explorers to walk. Conner grabbed the nearest sculpture to find out that it was made of white marble, and although the long years had taken its toll, the marble still seemed to shine like the moon inside the dark cave.

“I—I think I have heard about this place before. It was just an old folktale spread in our village. I think it goes like this: as merchants and traders passed between Europe and China, art and manuscripts filled the caves of the Oasis. But soon, it was forgotten and long lost in the voids of the desert. As legends have said, whoever finds the caves shall be the owner of the lost treasures of China. Could this be the lost caves of the Oasis?” said Arthur in disbelief. “Are we now the owners of the lost treasure?”

While Arthur rambled on about his knowledge of the caves and how they were going to be regarded as heroes after their rediscovery, Conner caught a whiff of what smelt like rotten meat. His heart froze as he realized what the putrid scent meant. He steadily stepped through the scrolls of artworks and the towers of sculptures. When he finally reached the back of the cave, he was shook by the piles of gold on the ground and was halfway towards reaching out his hand when he stopped abruptly. As he inspected the ground closer, he realised that gold wasn’t the only thing on the ground, he was also stepping on human bones: some were nothing but ash, some still remained whole, and some still had pieces of decaying flesh on them. But all were the same: the skeletal hands were all holding bits of the gold coins. A curse, Conner immediately thought. His mother always said, “One should always greed for the knowledge of the world, instead of craving for worldly possessions.” Could this be right ? Could the existence of these caves signify the deadly sin of greed? Just as he was thinking about it, Arthur walked to him, his eyes twinkling with light as he saw the gleam of the gold.

“Wait! Don’t touch it!” But it was too late, as Arthur laid hands on the gold, he collapsed on top of the heaps of bones and like an old story made new, another life was lost because of the greed in his heart. Conner was rooted to the ground in the matter of these few seconds, as he staggered in shock when he acknowledged the fact that Arthur, his best friend and companion, was dead, all because of a simple touch and a moment of greed. As he tried to prop Arthur’s lifeless body up, his hat fell to the ground, however it shimmered with the faintest glow. After he hastily picked it up, Conner grunted and dug his legs into the ground, only to find out that Arthur’s corpse was stuck to the ground, a constant reminder for his wandering soul that he was dead, because of that moment of cupidity.

Conner limped back to the entrance of the caves and looked back to the pitch black entry, at that moment, it looked like a tunnel to a lost world, a different dimension frozen in time. As much as he didn’t want to leave his friend behind, he decided to go back to the village to warn the others about the lost caves of the Oasis, that the lost caves of the Mogao Grottoes, that the caves, the treasure, the art were all cursed with a dreadful spell.

The people didn't believe him of course, and even suspected if Conner was the one who actually killed Arthur. However, when Conner tried to bring the people to the lost caves for evidence, large gusts of wind and terrifying rainstorms would fall upon their village, leaving Conner no choice but to abandon his journey to bring back Arthur's body.

Decades past, and although Conner was well and alive, he suffered from insomnia due to the shock of losing his only friend. Conner spent time researching about the mysterious caves and one day, he read aloud from an old scripture called the Diamond Sutra, which claimed that it was the oldest dated, printed book in the world by an old monk. According to the monk, he found the book when he came across the lost caves of the Oasis. Conner furiously flipped through the pages and read aloud:

"As stars, a fault of vision, as a lamp.
A mock show, dew drops or a bubble,
A dream, a lightening flash, or cloud,
So should one view what is conditioned."

"So...Everything is impermanent, things are not what they appear to be... Just like how Arthur was killed because of that second of self-indulgence...I remember now! One of the major beliefs of Buddhism is the law of cause and effect: whatever thoughts or energy we give out, we get back the same consequences. This must be the message of the caves!" As the crescent moon shone brightly in the pitch black sky where millions of stars twinkled gloriously, he tossed and turned on his bed, his mind still occupied by his disturbing discovery. Gradually, Conner drifted off into a deep slumber, in his hand, held the faintly glowing hat, which he wore to the journey many years ago.

"My friend, are you here?"said a familiar voice.

"Arthur?! Is that you? I never thought I would ever see you again!" Conner mumbled as he buried his head in his friend's shoulder, shedding pure, pristine tears. At that moment, time seemed to stop running as the two best friends embraced each other.

"Are you okay Arthur? I tried to warn you before you touched the gold, I didn't mean for it to end up like this. I'm so sorry."

"You are not to blame, I am. I shouldn't have let that moment of greed blind my eyes. For my sake, tell the world the tale of our adventure, let it be a lesson for all to prevent anyone from following my footsteps." pressed Arthur, his face turning desperate.

"Okay I will, but one last question. Is this real? Or is this all just happening in my head?"

"Of course this is all happening in your head, but why shouldn't it be real? The magic of the caves has no limits." said Arthur with a smirk, a shadow of his trademark grin, then bright flames engulfed the man whole and with a gasp, Conner fell back into ominous darkness...

Several centuries later, the whole incident became little more than a dusty legend, where parents would tell their children the Tale of the Two Explorers, to remind them the sin of greed, and to cherish their opportunity to spread the beauty of art and literature. As for Conner, he died at a surprisingly old age. He spent most of his time trying to convince people to believe in their unfortunately sorrowful adventure, to believe in the Legend of the lost caves of the Mogao Grottoes, but no one would truly believe a crackling old fool, and he soon departed his life with regret, grief and guilt.

Tales from the Magao Grottoes

St. Paul's Convent School, Vijayakumar, Tanisha – 12

“Fascinating.....”

Ethel, having her breath taken away, couldn't hear a word Frank said.

She stood there in awe and wondered if the tales were true....

“Do you think the tales are true, Frank?”

“Frank? Frank are you there?”

“ETHEL COME HERE AND LOOK!”

“Now what.”

She strutted her way through the dirt and dust.

She took a look at Frank and asked,

“Yes, what is it now....woah.”

“Look at this massive size, looks like a dragon egg to me.

“Wait Frank, let me examine it.”

And so, she started examining it.

“It can't be...they...they....how is this here?”

“Stop stammering already and tell me what you found!”

“It's a Chinese Celestial Dragon egg, how is it even here?

“Is it alive?”

“Appears to me, yes, it is, somehow surviving the harsh conditions.”

“Should we inform the higher authorities about this? I think we shouldn't be taking care of this.” said Frank, hesitating.

“NO! They will only display it in the museum, we need to find out how it got here, the only possible places it could be is in heaven or....Shanxi, near Taiyuan.”

“It is obvious that we must investigate further in other areas in order to come up with a conclusion.”

“For once you're right, Frank, shall we?”

Shocked and slightly amused, they carried on their way into the grotto, deeper than before. Who knows what lies ahead? They encountered various kinds of creatures along the way, let's say, bats were one of them, this time, however, they looked petrified.

They scrambled to get their weapons ready for what lied ahead. They stopped.

“Which way do we go now? I'm craving for some sunlight, we should hurry up and get out of here as soon as we can, it's not safe here considering the fact that there's a LITERAL DRAGON EGG IN HERE.”

“Calm down Frank.”

“Fine. Which way, left, right, or middle?”

“According to the legends, they say one of them lead to a trapdoor, we need to be careful.”

“There's a WHAT?”

“I'm afraid so.”

“AHHHHHHH WE'RE GOING TO DIE”

“SHUT IT FRANK!”

They hear noises and soon stopped screaming. None dared to move a muscle as they stared at each other in shock. Their lives just flashed before their eyes as they were at the brink of death. At least, that’s what they thought.

The grotto’s rumbling intensified. Soon, they were covered in what seemed like the droppings of an African elephant.

“Ew what is this.”

“I don’t know, but it does smell pretty awful, Ethel.”

A dark shadow was cast upon them, they soon saw a Chinese Celestial dragon. It was humongous.

“Don’t speak a word.” whispered Frank, looking at the sight of Ethel’s pale face, which seemed quite amusing to Frank.

“It’s a baby, not a big problem.”

“You sure, Ethel?”

“Yes.”

Ethel, with much bravery stepped forward and stared into its demonic looking eyes, trying to stay calm.

The dragon let out a little sneeze and covered Ethel with slobber. It bowed its head down to her.

Ethel bowed her head down too, followed by Frank.

“Hi, I’m Frank, don’t worry, I won’t hurt you.”

“WE won’t hurt you.”

It let out a little noise that seemed like a laugh. They weren’t too sure what to do next with it. They decided not to do anything that would provoke it and continued walking, this time with a baby dragon.

“It’s pointing to something.”

“It’s pointing...left?”

“Let’s go left in that case.”

Ambling along, they stopped for a snack.

“I’m so glad we have all this.”

“Should we, perhaps, give some to the dragon? It looks hungry.”

“Oh alright Ethel.”

“Should I go give it?”

“No, I’ll do it.”

“Also...make sure you don’t get hurt, ok?”

“I won’t, don’t worry Frankie.”

“Stop calling me that!”

“Haha calm down. I’m just joking”

Frank, fuming with anger, ate his food, mumbling to himself while Ethel gave some food to the dragon.

“Here you go, little one.”

It ate, in an absurd way, but that didn’t bother them.

They finished their meal and went on along the tunnel, with a treat waiting for them.

“How...long...more...to...go?” asked Frank, panting.

“I think we’re nearly there, don’t fret so much.”

“Ugh..”

“Wait, do you see...that?”

“See what?”

“That.”

The dragon was now two times bigger.

“Should we name it? I think we should.”

“Let’s just leave it as Tianlong shall we?”

“Alright Ethel.”

The cave shook.

“Look here, I think that’s a painting.”

“That looks like....”

“Like the monk.”

“Monk?”

“The monk who discovered this cave Frank.”

“Oh that monk.”

“There’s something beside him.”

“Ethel? Ethel? Here.”

“Yes, what is it?”

“There’s a piece of cloth, looks like....a monk’s clothing?”

“We need to contact the manager about this.”

—During the call—

“Mr. Manager, Frank and I have found a piece of clothing as evidence, looks like a monk’s clothing.”

“Alright, keep it safely with you, bring it back so we can study it.”

“Ok, thank you.”

—After the phone call—

“I think I know what that is, it looks like a....dragon egg?”

“That’s not possible.”

“Legends say the monk who discovered the grotto went inside and never came back.”

“No, no it can’t be.”

“Ethel, calm down.”

“What if...”

“Nonsense, Tianlong is harmless!”

They walked and walked, till they saw a room, filled with incense sticks, skeletons and chickens.

“Chickens? What has that got to do with this?”

The dragon takes a deep breath and speaks.

“You can speak?”

“Yes, I can, Ethel”

“It even knows my name!”

“The reason why I’ve brought you here is because I need you to help me.”

“How can we help?”

“Firstly, I’m not a child anymore. Secondly, I need that piece of monk clothing you got earlier to finish my ritual so that I can go back to heaven.”

“We promised our boss that we would give it to him!”

“Frank wait.”

“We need to discuss this.”

“Alright, take your time.”

“Ethel what are you doing?”

“If you value your life, do as it says.”

They turn to the dragon.

“We’ll give it to you.....on one condition.”

“And what is that?”

“You need to take us back to our laboratory first.”

“Is that all?”

“Yes, I suppose.”

“In that case, I will take you back to your lab first.”

“Thank you.”

Tianlong the dragon then began the ritual, lighting the incense sticks and setting the skulls of the skeletons in place. It waited patiently for the chicken.

“What is he doing? What is he waiting for?”

“I don’t know, maybe for the chicken to fly?”

“Seriously Frank, you think I would know?”

“Fine, let’s wait for it to fly in that case!”

The chicken laid an egg. The dragon took the egg and cracked it on his head.

Ethel let out a little laugh, trying to stop herself from bursting of laughter.

Frank blankly stared at her.

The dragon turned his head.

“You find this funny don’t you?”

“No, not at all. I’m sorry for her behaviour.”

“Yes, I’m sorry.”

He turned his head back and continued waving the incense sticks around the skulls.

He finally used the monk clothing, wiped his head with it, then wrapped the incense sticks, and some skulls alongside.

“Now that I’m done, I’ll take you to that laboratory of yours. After that, I shall return to heaven.”

“Finally!”

“I see an opening all the way up there, let’s go through that way!”

“Sure, if you say so humans, get on my back.”

“What if we fall?”

“Then you fall.”

“Hold on tight Frank, it’s gonna be a long ride.”

Tianlong, with a pouch in his mouth, and Ethel and Frank on his back, commenced the journey.

“I’ll lead the way to our lab, and try not to be seen.”

The dragon starts going upwards when the cave suddenly started trembling.

“We better hurry”

“Yes, there’s still quite a distance left. We should hurry.”

Tianlong heeded their advice and started increasing his speed.

After what felt like forever, they were almost at the top.

“Oh, my hands are getting sweaty, what about you Ethel?”

Frank proceeded to wipe one of his hand, so that he doesn’t fall back in.

He slipped, forgetting his other hand was sweaty, too.

“FRANK!” screamed Ethel.

Luckily, Tianlong caught him by the tail.

“You should use your brain sometimes you know.”

Frank stayed silent.

“Seems like he got a shock, let him rest for a while and tell me the directions.”

“Thank you so much, if it weren’t for you then.....”

“No problem, it’s my duty to protect people after all. Let me try to make him feel better, does he like the night sky?”

“He a big fan in fact.!”

“Good.”

Tianlong dove a up and down, making sure they had enough oxygen to breathe, at the same time showing Frank the night sky.

He soon came back to his senses. They landed at their laboratory and Tianlong went back to heaven.

Tales from the Mogao Grottoes

St. Paul's Convent School, Yau, Yi Isabelle – 12

In the west centre of China on the silk road lays the Mogao Grottoes where people used to dig caves and spend their time creating sacred art and literature, now it has become a cave filled with some of the world's finest paintings, sculptures, and oldest books. Secrets of the caves are either remained secret or revealed, but there must be more than that as it took thousands of years to make it, so could there be treasure the world has never seen? Scrolls that hold the answer to the universe? Only one way to find out is to go caving deep down in the caves, but before venturing in the deep dark caves, how about a little story of the history in the caves?

The Mogao Grottoes are located in the Silk Road where Zhang Qian was sent on a mission to seek an alliance with peoples in the west of China to fight against the northern tribes. It was then used to trade goods with Romans such as silk, teas, and spices. This trip created the Silk Road that marked the beginning of globalization between the countries in the east and west. After years of transporting goods, some monks began to have visions of thousands of Buddha statues which inspired them to build a cave there to worship the Buddha. Many pilgrims passed by the caves and decided to stay and create various kinds of art and statues. Then in the Sui dynasty, monk members of the ruling family of Northern Wei and Northern Zhou constructed many caves. By Tang Dynasty, there were more than a thousand caves and within them lied the true treasure — all sorts of knowledge and a lot of art based on how to meditate in Buddhism. That's when a monk named Xuanzang went to India to learn more about Buddhism. It was a 17-year journey and he had been through a lot of kingdoms while travelling to India. He got scrolls from India and when he got back and he translated the contents into Chinese using the knowledge he got while studying in India, he wrote them in scrolls which were found in the moral caves, then he spread the religion in China and a lot of Chinese people started to worship the Buddha in the Tang Dynasty. People began to go to the Mogao Caves and worshipped the gods and Buddhas, they also spend a lot of time painting lots of sacred paintings in the caves, some of the paintings were teaching people how to worship the Buddha and others and some stories of how the Buddha and other gods once helped the people.

The caves might wouldn't be built in the first place if Buddhism didn't exist, and Buddhism began with The Buddha, but the Buddha wasn't always a Buddha, there's one story that says the Buddha used to be a prince who was trapped in his castle for life until one day, one of his servants tried to sneak him out to let him see the outside world, where the prince met the first person — an old man. He wondered what the old man was, the servant told him that everyone will be old one day and they would be helpless and weak. Then they went on and saw an ill man, after that they saw a corpse. The prince was very sad to see that people suffer a lot and wanted to do something to help them, then he saw a holy man who didn't seem to be affected by any of these sufferings, so he decided to leave the palace and become a holy man himself to understand the suffering of humans so he could help them. He meditated for 6 years but it still didn't work so he sat under a tree and decided to meditate for as long as he needed to. He gradually found the path to enlightenment and at the age of 35, he was known as the Buddha, which meant 'the enlightened one'. Ever since then, the people have been worshipping the Buddha and spreading Buddhism.

They built a lot of statues of Buddhas to worship the Buddha, and by a lot, I mean more than a thousand! The outlook of it is already breath-taking and the inside of the cave has more caves like the Library Cave which is filled with old scrolls and books with all sorts of knowledge and most of them are about Buddhism as the caves were mostly built for that reason. The Library Cave was most likely constructed by a monk named Hongbian and his successor, it was sealed when a monk found it later on, so people think that the Library Cave was sealed to protect the sacred books and scrolls from intruders so the knowledge within would be passed down from generation to generation, preventing Buddhism and other knowledge to be forgotten. Besides the Library Cave, the monks built many other caves in the Mogao Grottoes too, so some caves there could still be hidden, waiting to come out to the light one day.

So far, there are about 492 caves discovered in the Morgan grottoes and there are still a lot of tunnels that may lead to more caves and more Buddhism knowledge will be revealed but even if it may take another 100 years to find all thousands of them, it'll be worth it as the world will know more about Buddhism and other past knowledge that the monks wanted to pass down to us.

Tales from the Magao Grottoes

St. Paul's Convent School, Yuen, Wai Jasmine – 12

In the city of Xining, Qinghai, there lived a girl named Daiyu and her family. When Daiyu was young, her mother used to tell her Chinese myths to lull her to sleep. “China is a land of magic,” her mother would say, “fueled by the five artifacts.”

According to the traditional tale, the five artifacts were located in famous relics in China. They were carved of bronze and believed to have magical properties.

“It’s said that when Qin Shi Huang, the First Emperor, was building the Great Wall, one of his advisors told him about the bronze artifacts, saying they would grant Qin Shi Huang immortality. The superstitious emperor had always wished for immortality, so he agreed to hide them within the Great Wall,” Daiyu’s mother recited.

“However, four of the five artifacts didn’t stay there for long. Some Buddhist monks discovered the artifacts later on and, after learning about their significance, moved them to more secure areas, where they wouldn’t be found as easily. The first artifact, a bronze tile with the words Changshou (‘Longevity’) remains hidden away at the furthest ends of the Great Wall. As the name suggests, it gives its owner a long, peaceful life.

“The second was a bronze flower with the words Aiqing (‘Love’) imprinted onto one petal. The flower had the ability to make someone fall in love with its owner if they sniffed its fragrance. They say that it’s tucked away neatly on the rooftops of a certain building in the Forbidden City, disguised as a rooftop decoration. Despite the place welcoming thousands of visitors every year, nobody knows for sure if the myth is true. The bronze flower would fit right in and be near impossible to spot, after all.

“The third was a bronze orb the size of a small marble with the words Zhihui (‘Wisdom’) on it. It was said to give its holder infinite knowledge of the universe as long as they were holding it. Apparently, the monks thought that this ought to be hidden in the urna of the statue of the Giant Buddha near the city of Leshan, Sichuan. This was because the urna, the dot on the Giant Buddha’s forehead, was supposed to be a third eye that symbolized his inner vision and his ability to guide the world with his wise teachings.

“Situated in the Summer Palace in northwestern Beijing, the fourth artifact, a bronze coin with the words Caifu (‘Wealth’), is reputed to have the ability to grant its owner great material wealth upon its possession. Although the fact that it even existed in the first place is little more than old speculation, no one knows if it would’ve survived the destruction of the Summer Palace in the nineteenth century.

“And the last artifact...” Daiyu’s mother trailed off when she noticed that her daughter was already sound asleep. She smiled gently and pressed a kiss to Daiyu’s forehead. “Goodnight, sweetheart.” With that, she left the room.

Maybe it was a strange fluke, but Daiyu never found out what the last artifact was. By the time her mother had gotten to that part of the story, she was always already snoring. For some reason, she never thought to ask in the morning, either.

On her twelfth birthday, Daiyu received a necklace as her present. A compass was tied to one end of the necklace. Daiyu wasn’t all that pleased with the rusty device, but when Lao Lao, her maternal grandmother, was presenting it to her, she had a certain sparkle in her eyes that convinced Daiyu to wear it. “It’s a family heirloom, passed on from grandmother to granddaughter,” Lao Lao said mysteriously. “May it lead you to joy.”

Daiyu was puzzled, but she didn’t spend much time trying to decipher Lao Lao’s words. Instead, she focused on schoolwork and her friends just like she had before, but this time with one minor difference – wherever she went, the necklace now followed. Daiyu was never seen without it, except when she was at home.

Time passed by in the blink of an eye, and before she knew it, Daiyu found herself on board a bus headed straight for the Mogao Grottoes in Dunhuang, Gansu. The place wasn’t that far from Daiyu’s hometown compared to other famous Chinese landmarks, and she, along with the rest of Class 4B, was currently speeding towards it at seventy miles per hour.

Daiyu tried to sit back and enjoy the view, but there was a nagging feeling in her chest that wouldn't let her rest. All of her classmates seemed to be having fun chatting with each other, and it must've been pretty obvious that she was in discomfort, because her classmate, Huizhong, suddenly asked, "Are you okay, Daiyu?" "Yeah, I'm fine," Daiyu said, brushing his concern off. "I'm just a bit lightheaded." Huizhong furrowed his eyebrows. "Maybe you're carsick. Should I get the teacher? I'm sure— Woah, look at your compass! The arrow's going crazy!"

Sure enough, when Daiyu looked down to examine her necklace, the compass seemed to be going haywire. The arrow kept spinning around, like it was trying to pinpoint the location of something it just couldn't quite reach. "Huh, that's strange..." Daiyu muttered. "I'm sure it's nothing."

After that, Daiyu barely managed to survive the rest of the journey to Dunhuang without throwing up. *Maybe Huizhong was right*, she thought, *maybe I do have motion sickness. Weird, I've never been carsick before...*

She followed her group through the Mogao Grottoes closely. Her movements were sluggish and slow from her earlier ordeal on the bus, but she still managed to find it in her to admire the paintings in the caves. She was admittedly impressed, and clearly so were her classmates, who were gasping and gaping at everything they set their eyes on. They seemed to be enthralled by the stories the tour guide was telling them as well, but Daiyu, who was lingering in the back, could barely hear the tour guide's voice.

Nothing in particular really caught her eye, however. That was until she walked past a small scrap of blue cloth that seemed to be wrapped around something small. The class had already moved on, but Daiyu stayed behind. She felt a sudden, strong connection with whatever was underneath the cloth. Remembering the erratic behavior from her compass earlier, Daiyu reached down and grabbed the compass so she could have a look at it again. The arrow was pointed at the veiled object, and Daiyu needed no more incentives. She pushed back her hesitation and gently tugged the cloth off. It was made of silk, she subtly noticed.

A round bronze plaque with the words Xiyue ('Joy') was revealed, and from somewhere deep down in the depths of her brain, Daiyu recognized it as the fifth artifact. "So the artifacts are... real?" she whispered in awe. Daiyu fiddled with her necklace and removed the compass from its frame, replacing it with the bronze plaque. It fit perfectly, and in that moment, she felt an instant surge of ethereal happiness as she slipped the compass into her pocket. Remembering why she was at the Mogao Grottoes, Daiyu broke out of her delighted trance and ran after her class to catch up with the others.

After another hour, the group was led back out of the Mogao Grottoes. "...So, that concludes our trip," the tour guide said, clapping his hands together excitedly. "All aboard!" The class filed into the bus, and soon enough, they were returning to Xining.

Once she arrived home, Daiyu opened the door with a hefty slam and ran to her mother immediately. "Mama! Mama! I have good news—" She was cut off by a stern look from her mother. "Why haven't you answered my calls? I have important news to tell you." "I have something to say, too—" Daiyu tried to resume her speech, but she was interrupted yet again. "Not now, Daiyu. Your Lao Lao passed away."

Daiyu froze in the doorway. She felt a thousand negative emotions rain down on her at once. Anguish, grief, misery — she could go on. But suddenly, it was all replaced by an inexplicably overwhelming wave of glee. She grinned widely, much to her mother's rightful disgust. "It's fine, Mama! Don't worry, be happy," Daiyu started rambling. "You disrespectful girl! Go to your room right now! I don't know what has gotten into you." *Me, neither*, Daiyu agreed internally.

She hurried back to her room and yanked the necklace off of her neck harshly, snapping the cord in the process. She felt her grief from earlier return tenfold and she crumpled to the floor, her heart filled with self-loathing. "You're disgusting," she said, quoting her Mama as she pointed at the pendant accusingly.

As the situation sank in, Daiyu realized whilst holding back regretful tears that she shouldn't have taken the pendant. *Really* shouldn't have, because now she was stuck with happiness she didn't need nor want.

The Journey to the Caves

St. Stephen's College, Chan, Chun Hei – 14

A map fashioned with high quality parchment paper is spread flat on the coarse sand of the desert located in the famed Silk Road of China. A man with a beige hat looks down upon his map, leaning the brim of the hat where it almost covers his eyes to block the fierce sun from striking his eye. He navigates his finger through the contours and names of rivers. His finger halts as he realizes he has only reached 20 miles into the Silk Road desert and still has a long way to get to the Magao Caves. The man sighs with the awareness of his reality, a mildly frustrated sigh. The man stands up after reclaiming his map, folding it into a handkerchief with composure and putting it into his bag. He had packed his necessities for the days to come, food to consume, water that lasts two weeks, tools such as compasses and goggles, as prepared as he is, his journey is far from over as he gazes upon the biggest mirage he has ever seen, and trudges through the sandy territory.

Memories start to arise as the man reminisces the time where he was a young adult. He remembers the day where he dropped out of college to pursue his own purpose, create his own drive and motivation. He has started a multitude of passions, ranging through arts, entrepreneurship, and music. But he is still here walking through the desert, hoping to find the inspiration he needs to live his life in fruition, no more boundaries to obstruct his success, at least that's what he hopes, from all he has experienced in this humid adventure he is reminded of the jarring time of lectures he endured in university. The mirage was like when he was out of focus while sitting in the columns of desks, the sound of heat waves resembled the monotone yet obnoxious voice of his former professor. The repetitive low gradient hills of sand appearing every minute called upon the man's remembrance of his old notes that he recited for his exams. He would wake up, compose himself, then walking through the gargantuan yet dull campus to the first class of the day, repeating and repeating the same cycle. Every step he took as his foot sunk into the sand, was akin to the marbled steps towards the ancient lecture halls.

The situation became even eerier as he climbed up to the apex of a taller sand hill and his two eyes widened as he sees the vast desert of the Silk Road. He ponders upon the isolation of this vast land, yet he knows the poor living conditions in these plains that allows no man to live. It was like a simile for human relationship, someone could offer a lot, yet he doesn't realize his follies of his personalities lead to his own lack of appeal. Through his 30 years of living, all his relationships were thrown to the wayside, as he had done to his former partner. He believed he was the cause of his own insecurity and suffering. After many failed relationships he decided to isolate himself, casting himself to isolation so that he would not hurt ones he loved ever again, maybe that's why he's here now, to leave the world in hopes not to destroy it, in contrary to so called finding "inspiration" in his work. He still wonders why he is going through all this trouble with finding a cave rumoured to contain precious writings and arts, it may all have been a lie, but he has already travelled long, not long enough to get to the caves, but not long enough to head back home.

As days elapsed, the monotonous desert concocted a cumbersome sandstorm for the traveler, the sandstorm did not penetrate his eyes but his mind that is regretting the journey, the sky is as filtered with ferocious tendencies as his mind. Every step helped the man come closer to his insanity and hopelessness.

"Why did I decide to come here in the first place?" said the man, "For what, inspiration! Why do I have to go through hell just to find inspiration, I rather go back to college and sit in lectures than walk on these blasted trenches!"

All the man had left was himself, no one can rescue him out of the storm other than himself. The man pained with frustration begins to weep from sorrow, sorrow from the times where the isolation in these past few years, his own ego won't let him get hurt through other's rejection and believes that he is disconnecting from them for the sake of their own good. The man stations himself on the uneven sand and looks up to the silhouette of the sun, blocked by the sandstorm, his already pre-existing emotional thoughts allow him to open up to himself and lets him see the world around him as analogy for his life. The sandstorm is his many struggles in life, mentally and socially, the obscurity of the sandstorm is like the man's confusion towards how to resolve his problems. Overwhelmed he fails to find his way out of the storm, the howling wind resembles voices whispering into his ear saying that he is not worth it, that he won't be able to fix his relationships. The man devastated by the words of the wind and the overwhelming onslaught of the sandstorm, but through looking closely into the sky you can see the sun still present above, and seeing through the storm and finding the sun, you will find the way to escape the storm. The man sees the sun as a

ray of hope, that as long the sun still exists, there is still hope for the man's future, and he should use that hope to venture on towards the Mogao Caves.

The motivation he obtained made him live through the sandstorms and arrive at the location of the Mogao Caves. He enters the cave through an entrance made from initial research back when the caves were first discovered, sculptures and symbolic carvings in the walls are plastered around the cave. The man was greatly enamored by the aesthetics within the cave. He drops his hefty bag on the ground after carrying it for ages and takes out a camera to capture this esteemed infrastructure. After browsing through the cave's intricacies his mind ponders about the turmoil to get to the caves. He felt that for the sake of preserving history people will go to great, but to him preserving history was not the focal point.

He leaves the cave feeling dejected, flabbergasted by the fact that this journey felt like it was all for nothing. Then he remembers the blazing heat of the desert and the sandstorm he had to go through, it took his will to go through these obstacles and to get to the caves. He is inspired by himself to have such courage to go through such arduous pain to achieve a specific goal. He passes through the caves in search of a different route, a new pursuit of adventure, ready for what comes ahead.

Lost and Found

St. Stephen's College, Cheung, Ashere – 14

“Friendly reminder, always stay on the left when you encounter a fork,” the tour guide, Max, reminded. I could hardly contain my excitement, my parents and I joined a tour to Mogao Grottes, also known as Caves of the Thousand Buddhas. Located in the desert, about 15 miles south-east of the town of Dunhuang in north western China, Mogao Grottes is a magnificent treasure trove of Buddhist art. The tour guide gave us some frequent reminders that we had to follow him as there is a prohibited chamber in the middle of the cave.

The 1-hour bumpy trip had come to an end, standing in front of us was a majestic historical temple-like entrance to the cave. “Before we enter, remember to follow me, stick with me!” Off we went into the cave, ancient paintings and two large statues of Buddha were seen. *Where is this mysterious chamber? Why are we prohibited to go inside? Is there a sculpture worth a billion dollars? Or is there something that the government wants to hide from us?* Questions about this mysterious chamber incessantly rang in my head. Burning with curiosity, I asked the tour guide a lot of questions, but he relentlessly refused to divulge the details of the chamber.

“Come back.”

“I’m coming!”

A disembodied soft voice was heard from the near end of the cave. There were sounds of footsteps, laughter. *Who was it? Where did it come from? Ghosts?* In the near middle of the cave, I could already fairly see, a fork, the first fork. *Should I leave the tour guide and go on my adventure? What is he hiding from us?* Inquisitively, I decided to embark on this adventure. I tiptoed towards the other fork, it was just like any other ordinary fork, unique drawings were hung up, visitors crowded there, but the sounds and muffled voices were gradually louder. In no time, the path led me back to my parents. *What? Shouldn’t there be something exclusive?*

“Welcome! There are about 492 extant cave-temples ranging in date from the fifth to the thirteenth centuries. During the thousand years of artistic activity at Dunhuang, the style of the wall paintings and sculptures changed...” I was not paying attention at all. I caught a glimpse of a sign that read ‘Forbidden area. Do not enter!’ There was another fork. “There it is!” I thought to myself. *Should I take the risk?* I was sixes and sevens whether to proceed to the other fork on the right. Boldly, I decided to explore this deserted path.

I felt the fear. I took a small step forward. Plucking up my courage, I took another step, a bigger step. There I was at the ‘entrance’. I pushed open the creamy, rusty gate and walked forward. One turn of the rusty door knob and the door clicked open. I could feel a rush of cold damp air. The light bulbs were rusty, the light sources, the path was dark and damp, not even a single soul was around. Petrified beyond my wits, I stumbled across the walkway, hoping that I’ll get out of this hellhole safe and sound. It was an endless path, my legs have officially claimed that they aren’t mine. My stomach was rumbling, my mouth was as dry as a desert. Dehydrated, I started to regret my decision. *Should I go back?*

“Be quiet guys, I think I hear footsteps!” The sound of the kids came back again. It was louder, a lot louder. The atmosphere was suddenly as quiet as the library. Terrified, I paused, and turned around, and turned on my torch. “Hello?” No one answered, there was no one, I was all alone, who is here? *Someone hiding?* No one is supposed to be here. Inquisitively and cautiously, I followed the sound.

Light! There was light! A beam of light! Oh how I needed water and food! I hurried my steps to discover this mysterious place. As I walked closer I could see more. It was a hidden world! It was a small village with cottages, filled with bright colours. Young carefree monks and nuns chasing around a small fountain. The fountain water was crystal clear.

“Hey, who are you and why are you here?” Tapping my shoulder, a monk asked me.

“Oh! Um... I came from the museum. From Mogao Grottes. Should I leave now? Sorry for disturbing you all!”

“Oh, you can stay. I can share our past with you. So this is our village. I bet you want to know where we come from. Well, we came from your world and discovered this place. We decided to stay here to stay away from the complicated world, full of lies, violence and crimes...” The voice of the monk started fading from my ear as the only question I had was about them.

“But why are there no adults?” I couldn’t hold it in any longer bursting with curiosity. Apparently, it was the fountain. It is called The Fountain of Youth. If you drink from the Fountain of Youth, you could stay young forever, never age and never die, you could have eternal life.

“It’s completely your choice if you choose to stay here and drink at the Fountain of Youth I’m sure it would be great to stay away from your world from homework, from school... You could escape from reality, stay here with us, you’re welcomed. You will feel comfortable here!” One of the monks said. “Jack here, recently joined us here, he was an old grandpa, but he drank a sip of the Fountain of Youth and is young again. Look! He is good as new!”

“Ya, life here is great, I don’t need to be scared of ageing anymore, and I can move freely now, no more back pain, how great is that! Come on, drink the liquid, you won’t regret it!”

Yes, the monk and Jack are correct. I would be able to escape from reality, no homework. I was having too much pressure, too much homework, too many quizzes and exams... and the list goes on. I won’t grow up and I wouldn’t need to bear all the responsibilities of adults when I ‘age’, I could just play all day, this must be every kid’s dream! Without further hesitation, I immediately sprinted to the Fountain of youth and scooped the liquid with a glass cup from the fountain.

But wait should I stay and drink the Fountain of Youth or should I go back right now? What would Mum and Dad do if they figured that I was missing? I wouldn’t be able to see them again, how about all those gaming nights and hugs before sleeps, I would dearly miss them! Most importantly there are no electronics here, how about my phone? Who’s posting on Instagram? How would I know the latest news?

Dropping the glass cup, I immediately yelled, “No, I’m going back I’m not taking the liquid!” Generously, one of the monks volunteered to bring me back to where I came from, the cave. Before I left, the monks yelled together, “Don’t tell anyone what you’ve experienced today! Remember!” I promised them and it was time to leave, the monk led me into a secret route, it took some time and my hands became more sweaty. *Will I be able to meet my parents?* But eventually, I could hear Max talk again, I was back in the cave! I hugged the monk and said goodbye, I speedily ran to my parents and we were reunited!

“What do you think about this mural,” I asked my mum, but my mum was confused. “What are you talking about? You just asked me the same question a second ago?” I came to realise that everyone was still in the same place, looking at the same mural and no one even noticed I had been gone! I didn’t dare to stray away from my parents for more than 1 meter ever since.

This was an adventurous experience. I am glad that I did not drink the liquid from the Fountain of Youth as I’ve realised that it is never the right choice to escape reality. You can’t run away or hide from reality, it will always be there, for better or for worse. I really have to treasure everything and look outside the caves and step out of the darkness into the light.

The Legend of the Time Guardian

St. Stephen's College, Lai, Chun Hang – 14

“Are they gone?”

“No! Shush.”

“Can they even hear?”

“I don’t know, but they might be able to……Say does anyone have any leftover dynamite?”

“Yes, but I’m not giving them to you. We don’t want them to fin…RUN!”

When Tom was hired by the Chinese government to explore and record their trip through the Mogao Grottoes, he was not expecting to be chased by murderous sculptures. Yet here he was, chased by normally inanimate sculptures alongside his team. They had been evading these sculptures for two hours now. As they were resting, he looked on at the sea of blue as he reflected on how they got in this mess.

It all began when they entered the grottoes. The moment they stepped through, a white glow enveloped them.

“What’s going on?”

The light slowly left them and bled onto the walls and the paintings. Then the white turned blue. The eyes of the Buddhas were particularly vibrant sucking in the light. After they caught a glimpse of the statue, as if someone switched the lights off, they stood in darkness. All was silent. Just when they were about take a small step forward, a wave of green light flooded the caves out of nowhere. The Buddha started glowing brighter and brighter until it glowed an unholy white. Something about it felt wrong to Tom. Soon after, every other sculpture turned vibrant from their original dull and awakened in zombie-like movements. As the chase went on, it was clear that they donned identical armour. Things took a turn for the worse when more joined, except these were wielding bows. Now not only did they have to dodge arrows, but they had to stay far enough that the swordsman would not stab them. Eventually, they lost the small army, but they were hopelessly lost in this labyrinth.

They finally found a room down a random corridor. Filled with gold, jewels and scrolls, it appeared to be a treasury or library of some kind. When they walked through the room, they heard a soft voice echoing through the rocky interior, “We are the librarians. By our decree these scrolls will stay here forever till someone worthy comes to retrieve them. Yet you are not.”

However, when they looked around, no one was there. Suddenly a ghostly apparition appeared before them, bloody and mauled, the spirit said desperately, “Beware of the guardian....” before fading back into nothingness.

Back in the room with the Buddha, the statue was still glowing. Slowly but surely, the green and blue lights started glowing brighter and brighter, until it seemed to be white. Suddenly the light turned into a harsh flash. As the light died down, the green slowly pooled out of the Buddha statue’s eyes until only the blue remained. The green light morphed into a green smoke. A figure was seen in the smoke. Green lights shone out of the smoke from the figure, and it slinked off through a doorway.

The group, curious as to what happened, took their time looking through scroll after scroll on multiple shelves in hopes of getting answers to the lights when a canister of pure jade fell in front of them and cracked open. Inside was a scroll depicting the Guardian of Time. It was a panther with glowing green eyes and was granted eternal life, only to awaken when someone unworthy enters. The Guardian was created to guard the gates of the passage of reincarnations and ensure that evil spirits did not skip their punishments. When people stopped believing in this afterlife, the borders fell, and the Guardian was left with nothing to guard. This drove the Guardian mad, so the Buddhas, in an attempt to satisfy its anger, sent it to guard the remains of the Mogao Grottoes. Now it guards the Grottoes for all eternity. That was when Tom realised they were in trouble.

“Wait, the glowing green on the walls...we are technically intruding upon this place. If we are seen as enemies by the Guardian, we must find a way out of this place, immediately!” They decided to split up into pairs to investigate the grottoes for an alternate exit.

Charles and Jonah found another room. This one was also filled with sculptures. Water dripped from the ceiling and echoes from their footsteps filled the air. The blue paint was dulled and the air was musty. They navigated through the room until the ground beneath them gave out, and they dropped into a room filled with green gas. When the gas dissipated, they realised they were in a similar room, except a soft sound like the pounding of drums started to come towards them. It was the statues moving towards them in weird clunky movements. They dashed, but hit a dead end. Jonah lifted his axe while Charles raised a machete. They attacked the statues. But the statues were sturdy, and did not falter under the impact. Finally, they reached Jonah. They hacked and slashed at the statues to no avail, and were soon crushed to death.

Painlessly, they reappeared in the library. "What jus...", asked Jonah, before promptly being squashed by a familiar figure.

"GERROFF ME YOU FAT OAF!" he screamed, pushing Fellon off him.

They looked around with their guard up when Tom half ran half stumbled back into the room, looking deathly pale, when he got stabbed through the chest by a statue of Genghis Khan. He looked down in shock while the others looked on in fear, and turned into a dark smoke which travelled up to the ceiling above the others. Quickly and magically, the smoke turned back into a screaming Tom, whose fall was cushioned by the bodies of Fellon and Jonah.

Tom looked around, confused, "I remember being stabbed, how am I alive?"

"My theory is that we are stuck in a time loop that restarts every time we die," stated Charles, "We need to get out of this cursed place, fast."

"Let's take out as many of those statues as we can. Don't we have dynamite?" asked Fellon as he cleaved off this statue's head.

They went back through the tunnels to look for an exit. This time, they decided to take some weapons with them. That was when they heard a rather familiar stomp pulsing through the air. The sculptures rushed in and surrounded them in a wide circle. The sculptures raised their shields, boxing in the team as a panther stalked in. Green smoke emerged from the nostrils of the panther as its eyes lost their mystical green glow. The smoke pooled together in front of the panther as it turned to obsidian. The smoke solidified into a man. The man looked at them once, and pointed at them. Fading away, the panther came to life. The sculptures advanced. Tom decided to charge out of there. Putting his naginata in front of him. He charged, with the others following closely behind. They fought their way out. However, things went south rather quickly. It began when the panther bit Charles in two, leaving him to bleed out. The sculptures all decided to step on him, just enough to cause more pain but not death, he slowly bled out. It did not get any better from here.

The next to fall was Fellon. He held his own against the Guardian. Eventually, he was outsmarted by the panther and died swiftly. Jonah charged the beast in rage, with the help of adrenaline, he managed to wound the beast. Due to his planning ahead, he always carried around items he may need. One such item would be concentrated acids. The moment he cut off the limb, he splashed hydrochloric acid onto the wound, then proceeded to burn it with a torch, injuring the Guardian. With the Guardian thrashing around, Jonah successfully bought them five minutes, but some of the flames caught onto his shirt. Wincing at the minor burn, he charged forwards with the will to survive. They ran and ran as fast as their legs could take them. Losing the Guardian, they hid in a nook to catch a breath.

"What now, Tom?" asked Jonah, "The Guardian is a panther, it will smell us."

"I don't know....we need to get out of here."

They slowly traced their way back to the library. They were hungry, beaten and a feeling of hopelessness was beginning to settle in. They decided to end things on their own terms and to take out the Guardian with them. They set up the room with the remaining dynamite. As the panther stalked through the doorway, Tom hit the ignition and that sector of the grottoes exploded and crumbled upon them. The two died swiftly and the panther was never found.

Five days later, two bodies and a pile of ash was found at the entrance of the grottoes, rotting away, as if to serve a reminder to those who dare enter the grottoes.

The Sacrificial Monk

St. Stephen's College, Mok, Kwan Samuel – 15

“Ouch!!!” Peter cried out in agony as Edmund had just returned to their secluded catacomb beneath the Mogao Grottoes.

“Here, Peter,” Edmund said, handing over a bottle of potion, “this is the last bottle of pain relief that I could find in the Buddhism community in the Mogao Grottoes, I’ve stolen it for you.”

“Edmund!” Peter scolded, “How many times have I told you not to steal from the monks again? It’s unethical!”

“Have you forgotten how the Buddhism community treated us?” sneered Edmund. “They innocently accused us of stealing page seventy from the Book of Wisdom, then banished us from the community to this unearthly cave! They even permanently injured you, otherwise you wouldn’t have needed this potion!”

Peter sighed, “It’s so saddening to see the corrupted Buddhism community now. It’s my fervent wish to return and rectify the community there. But my deteriorating health wouldn’t allow that, I won’t survive for long.”

“Well, hopes aren’t that ludicrous.....” whispered Edmund, “As you know, the current Buddhism leader’s power is weak due to the missing seventieth page. Today, when I was creeping around in the Grottoes, I overheard two monks say that when a greedy soul touches the Book of Wisdom, the Book would let out a blast of flames, and the missing seventieth page would be restored. This would yield total power over the Buddhism community! And they even unwittingly disclosed the location of the Book to me! If we steal it, the current leader’s power would decline, and we can become the new leaders of the community!”

“No! I will not steal from the community!” Peter exclaimed, “Furthermore, how can we get a greedy soul?”

Edmund pleaded sincerely, “Almost all monks in the community are greedy! Just drag one and get him to touch it! So, our only task is to get the Book. It’s simple! Don’t you want to restore the community? Please....”

Peter felt bothered by Edmund’s repetitive begging. His unendurable pain inevitably affected his consciousness, so he answered reluctantly, “Fine, tell me what you overheard.”

“We only have to steal the book from the deep cave, have a greedy soul touch it, and we will become the owner of the Book to rule over the community.....”

The two of them set off at night. For Peter, creeping around such familiar grounds as an unwelcomed visitor was extremely horrifying. In the pitch-black Mogao Grottoes, the walls resembled gleaming, intimidating eyes that stared at him and his companion. Soon, they reached the deepest cave— the one rumoured to contain the Book of Wisdom.

Peter stood still. His emotions were mixed. “Should I betray, or should I conform?” Peter’s thoughts ran frantically. He had always promoted the religion avidly, and wanted to uphold justice in the community, but to overthrow the current ruler was a different story. He had always fervently hoped that the community could attain the prestige that it used to have, but it did not seem right to attain this through theft, since this was against the rules of Buddhism.

Edmund didn’t give Peter time to think. He pushed Peter away and charged into the cave, proclaiming, “The Book is mine! I’ll get back what is rightfully mine!” He ran as fast as a leopard towards the Book of Wisdom. Peter shuddered as a gloomy thought descended on him – Edmund was going to get the Book and find a greedy soul by himself, then take revenge on the Buddhism community. Through living with this junior monk during their banishment, he grasped Edmund’s traits— a greedy person who only cared about his own interests. Peter had suspected that that Edmund was trying to take advantage of his intelligence to commit some sort of devilish ploy, and it seemed that Peter’s innate intuition was correct.

Seized with utmost fear, Peter chased after Edmund, shouting wildly, “Stop your mischief!” but it was utterly useless. Edmund ran towards a pyre of wood, and above it stood the long-rumoured Book of Wisdom. Peter could not do

anything to prevent the doomed future of the Buddhism community. He longed for a miracle to happen, a tiny miracle that could save the community from chaos. He shut his eyes and prayed silently, pleading to Buddha to save the monks in the Mogao Grottoes.

Suddenly, Peter heard a loud bang followed by crackling, popping noise. Peter looked up in astonishment. The pyre was burning fiercely, and the Book of Wisdom was hidden in the flames! Without hesitation, Peter immediately jumped into the flames to grab the important Book. To his utmost surprise, his body was left intact! He recalled what the chief monk had taught him ages ago— ‘Since the Book of Wisdom is a highly sacred object, it has an amazing ability to protect its owner from danger!’ Peter realised that he had become the next leader of the community! But wait! Peter thought. He flipped frantically to page seventy of the Book. It was back! But how did it get there?

Peter realised Edmund had disappeared! Holding the Book in hand, Peter walked into the flames to search for Edmund, since ‘lending a helping hand’ was always emphasized in Buddhism. But him, or his corpse, was nowhere to be seen! Peter suddenly realised that Edmund was *the* greedy soul who had touched the Book, which restored the missing page! Peter wondered whether Edmund had undergone transfiguration to the otherworld yet. If he had, he would surely be facing severe consequences for committing greed and theft, as described in the philosophy of Karma.

Peter heard lots of solemn, urgent footsteps behind him. It must have been the blast of the flames that attracted them. Clutching the Book in his hand, Peter turned around to face the whole group of armed monks with spears in their hands, led by their leader standing in front. Wow— Peter thought— they have spears now.

The leader spoke up. “Well see who’s here— thief Peter! After stealing the missing page, have you finally returned to admit your flaws? Where’s Edmund by the way?” he jeered.

“As I have said, I did not steal page seventy. Edmund has been sent to the otherworld as the greedy soul who touched the Book of Wisdom.”

Gasps of disbelief were heard from the monks. The chief monk spoke up, ‘Overhearing our conversations, eh? That’s very cunning of you, Peter. Very unlike your initial self. Do you know that you’ve done three acts of immorality— stealing page seventy, overhearing our conversations, and sacrificing Edmund to obtain the Book? Never knew you were so power—hungry, Peter!’

Peter wanted to shout out, it’s you who’s power—hungry! But he immediately refrained himself from doing so in spite of his treacherous comments. He didn’t even steal the page! He didn’t even overhear their conversations! And he did not pull Edmund into this adventure, he had touched the Book by himself!

He had only wanted to restore order, peace, justice, and prestige in the community!

‘I only obtained the Book in view of the betterment of the future. And please be reminded that I am now the rightful ruler of the community.’

The leader shouted, ‘You may be the ruler, but I have my loyal monks!’ He whispered a remark to Peter, ‘I’ve made a potion to ensure the complete loyalty of my monks!’ He directed, ‘Monks, kill!’

The monks charged at Peter. Peter had never felt such overwhelming fear before. As an armed monk’s spear was about to slice through his body, the monk suddenly let out a cry of anguish and collapsed on the floor. At the same moment, the Book of Wisdom clutched in his hands let out a white beam of light. Peter suddenly realised that the Book’s sacred powers had protected him from this danger! He had never known that the Book could prevent malice, since war was never present in the Mogao Grottoes.

The monks continued to charge at him, probably propelled by the terrible potion that the chief monk made. A few more died on the spot. Peter came with the terrible realisation that if they continued to charge, the whole Buddhism community would be left dead. The thought of these innocent monks dying under his feet was unbearable.

Peter closed his eyes and ran towards the burning pyre. Once he jumped into the flames, his hands let go of the Book of Wisdom. Peter felt pain all around him. Like loads of tiny knives with sharp blades slicing through his skin. Like a swarm of bees stinging his skin. Like a pack of lions scratching his skin with their monstrous paws.

Peter had been taught by the Buddhism community that on special circumstances, a monk's sacrifice would impress the Buddha and the community would be redeemed. He was sure that through his glorious sacrifice, he had successfully fulfilled his job as a monk to redeem the Buddhism community.

The Light in the Darkness

St. Stephen's College, Wong, Chin Shun – 14

The sky is completely dark. It is supposed to be noon, yet the air is frigid and bitter. Isla trudges along the edges of the Gobi Desert, using her prized compass and map to navigate her way through the seemingly endless sea of sand. She was nearly there. *This is our last hope.* Isla reminds herself. The sun had perished and humanity was surviving on the remnants of the previous era.

“Isla, this is our only chance at survival. You know this. The village does not have enough resources to last another year. You know this first-hand,” leader Alden said.

Isla woke up in a cold sweat. Her mouth was open in a silent scream.

Isla donned her traveling clothes, tied up her hair and headed out to the village square. A large crowd was gathering there. A horn sounded, Leader Alden stood up, and the crowd went silent. “Today,” he declared. “we bid farewell to our valiant warrior Isla, who will look for a way to bring the Sun back!”

Leader Alden continued, “The supernova explosion may have wrecked the Sun two years ago, but it has not, and will never crush our will to live—” His words died in his throat as a piercing scream was heard throughout the village. Isla’s heart stopped. An old man had collapsed due to the cold.

The temperature is getting progressively worse. Isla’s fingers are starting to feel like they are about to fall off. Isla recites the prophecy in her mind that Monk Chen-chio made a millennia ago to stay awake, and therefore, alive.

*When light is hidden, and the world almost vanishes
One must rise to the occasion to save them in darkness
Go to where the East is, through a world of bitterness and hatred
A spiral of sand will bring you to where you are needed
The treasure to be found, a symbol of tranquillity and benevolence
Light will be found where the sacrifice takes precedence*

At the base of a sand dune, Isla lies down on the fine sand to nap. The chill of the sand penetrates her fur coat and she shudders. *What are the villagers doing right now? How is everyone getting by?* Isla wonders. Suddenly, a gust of wind blows over her shivering body, and she pulls her fur coat even tighter around her.

God, when will this limbo end? Am I even the right person for the job? Her thoughts go round and round inside her head, and she imagines her thoughts condensing and increasing in size and speed until they become an unstoppable hurricane, just like the one that swept through the village a decade ago and claimed her parents’ lives. The memory jolts her further awake, and she stares at the night sky full of stars.

The exhaustion from her constant walking during the day gets the better of her. Isla’s eyes grow heavy; her eyelids droop. Despite the chill, the sea of sand fades into utter darkness.

Swish. Swish. Swish. The golden sand swirls around Isla’s sleeping figure, shaping into a tornado-like form. As though it was a human, the whirlwind sweeps Isla up, cradles her like a new-born infant, and heads straight for a system of caves carved into the desert. Once inside, it stops abruptly, gently sets Isla on the rocky earth, and floats in mid-air, waiting for its next instruction. A phoenix with glowing vermilion feathers materialises out of thin air.

“Sand of Gobi, I thank you from the bottom of my heart.” The whirlwind glides forward, snuggles the phoenix, and seems to nuzzle its beak.

“Ugh...,” Isla slowly sat up rubbing her eyes, as if it would soothe the weariness she was experiencing.

“Greetings, Isla! You are in the Mogao caves, a network of caves that have been here for one and a half millennia! Isn’t that just exciting? Standing in a place filled with history, simply divine... Ah! I forgot to introduce myself! I am Kai, and I am a – what do you humans call me again? – a phoenix?”

“Moving on! We have A LOT to complete in extremely little time. First and foremost, we need to bring the Sun back!”

“Uhm...Mister Kai? Why am I here? According to the prophecy, I am supposed to be searching for a treasure, yet I do not see anything here. Are we at the wrong place?” a confused Isla asked.

Kai chuckled. “Oh, Isla, not everything has to be material. A treasure can be anything! What a person deems precious to them, is a treasure to them!”

“Then, what could be considered a treasure valuable enough to bring the Sun back? Mister Kai, do you know?”

“I know what it is, but I cannot tell you. Isla, you must untangle the threads of the prophecy yourself. As the destined one, the fate of the world is in your hands.”

Isla began to think.

What does the prophecy say about me? I will rise to the occasion to save them in darkness? I did that. What about going to the East? Does the Gobi Desert count? I mean, it is one of the major deserts in East Asia. World of bitterness and hatred? The world’s always been spiteful. But whirl of sand?

“Mister Kai? Who brought me here?”

“Now that I can tell you. Sand of Gobi, come and say hello.” A wave of sand glided in, levitating in front of Isla. It stuck out its hand — a strand of floating sand which was gradually morphing into an outstretched palm.

Isla took the sand’s ‘hand’, and shook it “Nice to meet you, Sand of Gobi.” She was surprised by the soft, smooth texture of it. Weren’t sand supposed to be rough? *So, whirl of sand is explained. Symbol of tranquility and benevolence? And in this place – the Mogao Caves?*

“What could be a symbol of tranquillity and benevolence? I mean, the closest symbol I can picture is a dove; I read about that in the Bible, but it’s not like doves live in the desert. Plus, most living things have already gone extinct during these few years. Lack of sunlight really did it for us, huh?” A sad smile crept across Isla’s face.

“This symbol must be in this cave, and there is only you, me, and the Sand of Gobi.”

“I’m missing the sacrifice. Light comes back when a sacrifice is carried out. Sacrifice me? Or you, Mister Kai? Or both of us? What sacrifice will be deemed worthy of ‘reviving’ the Sun?” *Wait... Phoenix. Chinese mythology: Resurrection by flames. FLAMES! FIRE! The sacrifice is Mister Kai himself. HE must become the New Sun. HE is the Sun.*

“Mister Kai, it’s you, isn’t it? You are the literal solution.”

“Ah, Isla, you have finally decoded the prophecy. Yes, it is me. I am to surrender my immortality for eternal pain and suffering. The resurrection process will never end and my consciousness will remain intact. I will feel the agony of flames licking at my feathers, charring them and scalding my skin.”

“Why? You do not have an obligation to save humanity. You can stay immortal forever, why give it up?”

“But I do, Isla. I am duty-bound. Many millennia ago, when China was just an empire – the Qin Dynasty, I was but a golden eagle who resided in a tiny village on the edge of the border. Having not eaten for days, I was on the verge of death. Monk Chen-chio, the one who made the prophecy, rescued me, for he knew that one day I would be the saviour of this world. In return for food, I pledged my loyalty to him, essentially ‘selling my soul’.”

“You did it to survive! That’s not selling your soul!”

“Hurry, we don’t have time to go about these things. To fulfil the prophecy, I require an offering from you, Isla – preferably a gift in blood. As the fated one, you need to chip in too, such that the sacrifice will succeed, or else everything will fail.”

Decisively, Isla pulled out a pocketknife from her coat and sliced her left palm. Immediately, the wound started gushing blood, with no sign of stopping.

“Mister Kai, where do I put my hand?”

Kai took her hand and held it in the air. As increasing drops of blood dripped onto sand, crimson red lines appeared, forming an illustration of constellations that crisscrossed the floor. Isla started feeling woozy and closed her eyes. She heard an agonizing scream. In the pitch-blackness, a piercing cry sounded, and a bright flash of orange light burst through, then, nothing.

Eventually, Isla found herself lying on the sand floor, she walked out of the Mogao Grottoes, squinted at the sky, and promptly burst into tears. The sun shone down, casting a shadow on the sobbing girl.

A Soldier's Home

St. Stephen's Girls' College, Au, Cheuk Kiu Kathleen – 14

This is the story of a soldier called A-Li, a Defender of Home. I set my story here in the Mogao Grottoes because all I desire is for the world to know the story of a commoner. After all this time, I hope my home has flourished since then.

~

I didn't have a name because I was born an orphan and my memory got lost to a severe fever. I wandered the streets, eating anything I could find until The General found me – the great hero Yue Fei. I remember what happened like it was yesterday: His stallion trotted past after a victorious war with the Jurchens and when he saw me, he halted and asked, “Boy? What’s your name?”

“I don’t have one,” I said.

Then I became A-Li, a soldier. That was the start to my life.

~

At the time, we were fighting off the Jurchens who had seized our capital city Kaifeng. I hadn’t ever been there, but had heard of the marble palaces and the vast number of books. This dynasty was a time of intellectuals so scholars were common visitors to court. I did not understand their patriotic loyalty – why would they be prepared to die for this nation time and time again, even in vain? To me, our country held nothing but ignorance of the poor and homeless. I had nothing to fight for because my entire life was abandonment.

But one day, the General walked me along the streets, holding a basket.

I asked him, “General, why are we here?”

“For the reason I fight.”

He said it like it meant nothing at all, which seemed strange to me. But I was naive then. I understand more now.

The General and I reached a hut, it’s size barely fit for living in. When he pushed open the door and I saw a huddle of women and children. One child ran up to the General, hugged his leg (that’s how tall he was), and turned to me.

“Gege, is this your friend?” he asked.

I waved hello, but the child seemed frightened and ran back to his mother. The General then proceeded to hand out the rations from his basket. What surprised me most was that they were the Emperor’s army provisions. I was stunned. Here was the General giving away supplies to these people.

A bold child ran up to me and handed me a piece of bread. I tried to return it, but Yue Fei clapped a hand on my shoulder and told me to eat it. I did. It was dry and tough to chew yet it warmed my stomach. I smiled at the child and patted his head. He didn’t return the smile squeezed my hand.

As we left the hut. I asked the General, “Why give our food to them? Don’t we need energy to fight?”

He replied, with a hint of pride and pity: “These people are better than anyone of my same rank, even above. They deserve to live more than we do.”

I thought about that in silence. Perhaps he did have a point.

~

A few years later, we went to battle again. The same enemy, different battlefield. This time it was near Kaifeng and the enemy were strong. Perhaps they had sent their best warriors? I gripped my spear and charged alongside my brothers. I could see a wave of menacing figures and a well-built bulk. That intimidated me, but not my heart. It beat for something greater.

The memories are vivid, even now. Swords clashed next to me. Horses stumbled and crashed into us. Flames licked at the bodies of the fallen. It was chaos. It was heart-breaking. It pierced me to see my kin fall. It made me desire hot revenge. I remembered the times we drank wine together, laughed together, trained together. One of the Jurchens spat on the corpse of my comrade and laughed. I could barely restrain myself from tearing him apart, but apparently the General felt worse. He pounced on him and sliced off his head. I didn’t feel a shred of horror or remorse. And my comrades roared in approval and fought more ferociously. I can still feel their fire. It feels just like yesterday.

In the end, we won. Yet we had lost so much – A-Cheng, A-Xian, my closest friends and many more. We mourned their deaths with a toast and erected a pyre in their names. I cried too and this was my first time to cry.

These people weren’t ordinary strangers; they were family. General Yue stood silently watching the flames burn and the wood crackle. Then he left like a swift wind. I noticed he didn’t shed a tear.

After a night's rest, we donned our armour again and made to set off. We were near Kaifeng, our pride and honour. Every soldier's heart beat erratically knowing we would soon be home. But I was homeless. It didn't matter whether we won Kaifeng or not because all I cared about were my kin, the General's army. This was my home. What came unexpectedly was the Emperor's messenger. "The General commands you to return," he reported in a panicked rush, hundreds of miles from the new capital, informing us to surrender the fight. We were in shock, especially the General. His brows knit together but he had no authority to refuse. We unwillingly turned in the opposite direction but we would not rest easily without achieving our goal.

~

The next I heard of the General was of his impending execution. I was with A-wang who stumbled to his outraged feet, snarling "What's the meaning of this? He fought for this country's honour! He does not deserve such an end!" The servant who delivered the message cowered but stayed dumb. Maybe he felt indignant, too? A-Wang and I hurried to the prison where the General was being kept. We killed a prison guard and watched his blood trickle into the dirt. When we finally located Yue Fei he looked dishevelled. I was seething in rage and A-Wang slammed his fist against the bars.

"The key.....the key.....," he muttered, scanning the area.

The General unexpectedly started humming. "I did not expect my warriors to be this loyal," he said faintly. Then his lips twitched a fraction, "Maybe now is my fate".

I widened my eyes but it was too late. The Emperor's imperial guards had filled the cramped space. I managed to escape their clutches, but A-Wang couldn't – which I didn't realize until I reached refuge in the distant mountain plains where they could not find me. As the wind howled and blades of grass rustled, I sank to my knees and bellowed in anguish. But the wind merely swept my voice away.

~

I did not witness the General's execution. I heard people whispering that he wore a card with the word "unnecessary". It pains me to know he died with regret having fought for an unworthy empire, a king ignorant of his subjects and councillors craving treasure. In my time, only the lesser subjects had a pure heart.

I didn't love the empire because it was my birthplace – I loved it for its people. There are many I would fight for now, my brothers who stood beside me in a time of war, commoners who were generous in times of strife. But the royal court cowering behind her treasures and wealth? It disgusts me. I eventually found an abode with a family of three, their daughter only six years of age. Her parents could afford to give me a daily bowl of congee, and each one warmed my heart. It reminded me of Yue Fei's kindness all those years ago and the scrap of bread that child had given me. This empire didn't deserve such a noble child.

It was difficult for me to accept how the world is full of undeserving people who demanded my protection of them. I was once innocent. I place a scroll of my story here, in the Mogao Grottoes, a place of sacred art and literature. I ask whoever reads it to ponder a question: what is home? What would you do to defend it?

I know my answer now. I hope you will know yours too but have no regrets when you say it.

A Short Escape

St. Stephen's Girls' College, Cheung, Kuen Chi Alison – 14

November 1975

In all my 72 years, 1926 was the worst. My mother had passed away earlier that year, and I found myself parentless. Archie started cheating on me, even asking for a divorce to be with the other girl. Rosalind was seven years old, and my life was falling apart. I was suffocating, maintaining a perfect image on the outside but fighting battles every day internally. If I let anything slip, my career, the only thing I had left, would also be reduced to ashes.

After days and nights of arguing, doors slamming, and strings of curses thrown back and forth, I had had enough. The only way to be free was to flee. I planned to go to Yorkshire and so packed my bags in the middle of the night. Further arrangements could be made later; leaving was my only priority.

Hence, my mysterious disappearance for 11 days. Even I cannot explain what exactly happened.

I pulled my suitcase behind me with a change of clothes, money and my notebook, stumbling in the dark to the garage. Opening the car door, I threw my suitcase in with a heave, got in and turned on the ignition. The engine roared and off I went.

I have to admit, I didn't have the clearest mind that fateful night. I had had a glass of wine. Maybe two. I was having trouble driving in the pitch-black darkness, with only the faint light of headlights to illuminate my path, so when something foreign suddenly landed onto the car windshield with a great 'bam!', my hands left the steering wheel in surprise, and I crashed into the bushes. The world turned dark and I faded into the unknown.

I woke up in a deep haze, rubbing my eyes and peering around. I was not in my car anymore. Or in England, it seemed. There were weird sculptures around me, their piercing gazes staring straight into my soul.

'They're only sculptures, Agatha.', I said to comfort myself, my voice echoing against the walls. I stood up, holding my hand against the rock wall for support, craning my neck and finding more paintings and box-like containers adorned with crystals.

At that moment, most people usually one, freak out or two, cry. The first thought that popped into my head was 'This is fun.' There was nothing to go home to anyway with my parents dead and family broken up. Rosie mattered of course, but she was at camp with her friends for the holidays.

I walked deeper into the cave, my hand sweeping the wall. A sense of serenity filled me. For once, everything was at peace, like home had been before all the drama. Wandering further into the caves, I found paintings and sculptures covered in layers and layers of dust, each one more intricate than the next. The style of the paintings varied, with some depicting deep valleys of green while others were regal portraits of kings and queens from days gone by. The paintings were of the finest quality, rivalling Michelangelo, Da Vinci, and Van Gogh.

As I continued exploring the cave depths, my eyes kept looking back to the boxes I had found earlier as if they were summoning me. Carefully, I fumbled with the lock on one of the boxes, opening it with caution. Inside, I found the most precious treasure a writer could ask for: manuscript upon manuscript handwritten in neat cursive. I flipped through the top manuscript on the pile, reading stories of knights dueling and maidens dancing. As I reached the end of the manuscript, there was a signature and a date: Christopher Columbus, 1486.

I let out a gasp and it echoed on the walls around me. Columbus? Christopher Columbus. The legendary explorer who discovered America! Was he here some 1500 years ago? I read and read for days from sunrise until sunset when the caves became dark again. I devoured the manuscripts, my mind filled with the plots' endless twists and turns.

That last night, I was wandering around the caves again, trying to process all the stories I had read. Suddenly, I tripped and fell and fell and fell....landing with a thump and looked around in surprise. I was back in England.

I walked unsteadily to my car, removing the sheet of newspaper that had flown onto the windshield. I glimpsed the headline: 'Hidden Treasure Trove in Western China Discovered by Archaeologist Max Mallowan'. Was that were I'd been for the past few days? I read on:

... 'International scholar-explorer Max Mallowan, 22, rediscovered the Mogao Caves in the Dunhuang district of Gansu Province. Hundreds of caverns containing never-before-seen paintings, sculptures and literature from around AD 500.'

I could not believe my eyes.

I drove back to the home I had left behind, carefully this time, my mind still trying to process what I had just read. Parking my car in the driveway, I walked to the front door and rang the doorbell. 'Mommy! Where've you been? I've missed you so much!' Rosalind rushed into my open arms and welcomed me in a warm hug, drowning me with questions as she led me into the place I had once called home. Archibald was lying on the sofa, listening to the radio with his eyes shut 'Agatha? Hey, can you get me today's paper?', he muttered distractedly. At that moment, I decided that I would get a divorce. For real.

A few days later, I found Max Mallowan's telephone number at The Royal Archaeological Institute and rang him. I asked him about his discoveries in the Mogao Grottoes, confirming my suspicions, and I told him about my adventure to the Grottoes after I had crashed the car. Following Max's advice, I pretended to have lost my memory and denied all inquiries from the press.

The rest is, as they say, history.

Vesper's Choice

St. Stephen's Girls' College, Li, Ming Yan Emily – 14

It was dawn when I arrived -- my dizziness from the flight and last night's hangover hadn't dissipated. The three-storey house, located in an abandoned area of Venice, was constructed in the 16th century. Its grandeur was by then dusted with emptiness. My Italian grandmother, Vivianna, was the family's last descendant; since she had crossed the ocean, no one else had lived there.

Vivianna was a professor and archeologist who specialised in Dunhuang studies. My love for literature grew under her nurturing: the gleam in her eyes when she told me fantastical adventure stories lit up my otherwise dim childhood. The joy we shared before she passed away, I hadn't felt since.

I wandered in the forlorn house, rather a museum, but all I felt was void. Deep down I longed for the slightest sign that her spirit had visited here, that she had left clues to show me what to do with my life. But nothing had changed-- even the pungent medicinal smell remained.

The silence was abruptly interrupted as my phone started ringing. *Isn't it 9 pm in Seattle already?* I reached for my phone in my pocket. Predictably it was my mother calling.

"So have you made up your mind? Please don't tell me you're going to Moscow for that literature programme-- you're one year away from getting your M.D. ..."

"Go to bed, Mum."

"Vesper, face reality, yo--" I promptly hung up and switched off the phone.

Vivianna's bedroom was on the third floor. Everything there was so familiar and strange at the same time. I imagined what it would be like when my ancestors were still living here. My fingers lingered on her bed, her wardrobe, eventually pausing at the antique drawer. I realized I had never opened it. A feeling of excitement washed over me. With a trembling hand, I pulled it open.

A rectangular, yellowed manuscript lay before me as I felt my breath accelerating. I took it out from the drawer and held it in my hands carefully. The fading ink and ragged texture revealed its age.

I sat on the bed and began reading.

A monologue found in Cavern No.493, 1936

By Dr. Vivianna Rosso, department head of Dunhuang study

Unpublished

—

It was late summer when he came to the Grottoes. He had beautiful eyes, innocent and calm like the sea. He was from Italy, a country I had only read about in books. I had never been outside of the Grottoes as the Grandmaster said the Grottoes were blessed. Marsilio told the Grandmaster he was only in Dunhuang to record and learn for a few months-- according to his king's secret order. Master was reluctant to let him stay, but his understandable Chinese and manners guaranteed sincerity, and I insisted-- I imagine like in China, failing a royal mission could get you into fatal trouble. Master sighed and yielded, but forbade me from talking to him.

Yet my curiosity resisted obeying--you mustn't condemn me for that. At dusk, I found him in the middle of the desert-- his silhouette was almost devoured by the boundless desert. Naturally, we introduced ourselves; I think he noticed how I couldn't be a monk with my haired head, so I told him my story.

"Adopted... here?"

“Yes. The Grandmaster is like a father to me and everyone here.”

A chime halted our conversation, followed by two more shortly afterwards. When the grottoes’ bell rang I was to get my chores done.

“I have to go. Golden-haired boy, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He nodded and coyly grinned.

2.

A few days later, I showed Marsilio some of our grottoes’ collections. “And here we are, cave no. 259. Look at that...”

At the back of the cave stood an enormous, life-like Buddha.

“It rivals Michelangelo’s...Such a pity that I can’t show you what art is like in my hometown.” Marsilio noticed how my eyes dimmed and asked, “So, there’re 492 caves in total?” “Actually,” I tilted my eyebrow, “there’s one more.”

We sneaked into cave no.96 (the highest one) at night. I walked towards the buddha and gently pressed my hand against its face. A chilling breeze made all the paintings flutter as a narrow tunnel emerged. Marsilio gasped in astonishment.

“And that’s cave No. 493. ” I whispered, “Our top secret. Master says it’s magic— Isn’t it fascinating?”

Marsilio stood rooted to the ground. “Perhaps Galileo had been going the wrong way,” he exclaimed. I chuckled, “Not everything can be justified with logic— it’s about faith. ”

3.

Since then, we had been discreetly meeting in the Grottoes almost every night. He introduced me to western culture, science and philosophy while I told him secrets of the Grottoes that the monks refused to divulge. We discussed and debated everything. Gradually, I could picture the mysterious nation Marsilio built with words in my imagination.

One night, I almost got caught when I slipped out of my bed. The Grandmaster accepted my flimsy explanation but I could not ignore his scrutinizing eyes.

4.

However, It was that starry night, when my world turned upside down. We had already been to every cavern so we decided to stroll along the oasis.

“Wan Zhu... Your name means evening star, right? Vesper means the same.”

“ I guess I have an Italian name now.” We giggled.

“Some say stars guide you to where you belong.”

“Really?”

“Vesper, if I’m allowed to call you that...”

“Yes?”

“I’m going *home* next week.”

“What?”

I froze. I felt as if the world was spinning— At that moment, the desert was the sky and the sky was the ground I was walking on.

He’s going back.

No.

I’m going back. To reality. To our rituals and traditions.

But what exactly was I expecting? I knew this day would come.

He looked away and muttered, “I…”

“Are you willing to come with me?”

“I know it’s an impossible thing to ask… but wouldn’t you like to go see the world with me?”

I didn’t speak. I looked him in the eyes— his eyes, luminous like the stars. I knew instantly where they would guide me.

5.

Knock, knock, knock. I took a deep breath.

“Xiaowan. Come in, please.” *He knew it was me.*

“Grandmaster.” My voice was shaking.

“I know why you’re here.” The grandmaster smiled at me cryptically as the wrinkles on his face deepened— I never realised he had aged this much.

“I wish,” I inhaled, “to leave.”

He didn’t respond.

“I’m leaving with Marsilio.”

There were no signs of shock on his face: He saw it coming.

“You cannot find what you want in the far west. Only God could grant you the peace of mind.”

“But I long for something… different.”

“I provided you with food and the finest education one could receive, because I knew you were chosen to witness God. Do you know how many have tried but failed?”

“I’m sorry. ”

“You don’t even speak that westerner’s language.”

“But he’s my friend— my first and my only. Mogao— peerless. I’m not a monk! Is a free and normal life too much to ask?”

Silence took place again as the Grandmaster stopped talking. He sighed and stared at me— for so long, it felt like a century.

“Fine... If that’s what you want.”

The wooden doors of his chamber were then shut once and for all. I never saw him again.

6.

“If you’re sur—”

A sudden peal almost covered his voice but I understood him perfectly. Leaving with Marsilio meant I would never come back ever again.

I raised my head: in the endless amber sky, the crimson sun shone amidst white opaque clouds. Where else could you find this scene? Wouldn’t you believe Dunhuang was truly divine?

But leaving here also meant adventure and the unknown. *It’s the only way to freedom.*

So I took Marsilio’s hand and got on the horse. I was unchained, for the very first time.

My yearning for the grottoes wasted away as our children grew up.

—

As soon as I finished reading, I realised all the mysteries had unveiled themselves:

My rare Italian name—

This ancient manor in *Venice*—

My grandmother’s untraceable devotion for *Dunhuang*—

It all made sense now.

I looked out the window. The sky was still yellow and the rising sun was turning crimson. An oceanic feeling overwhelmed me: I had never believed in God, but I could feel someone was watching over me. I felt an ineffable need to kneel before the windows—I remembered Vivianna once told me *the altar is wherever you kneel*.

As I prayed, I heard a voice: my own voice, mumbling— *If your ancestor was brave enough to trudge through the continents, why won’t you follow your heart?*

A bell clanged upon my heart. I finally made a decision.

—

On the train to the east, I had a dream about my grandmother, in which I was still a child and she was reading me a lovely story about the desert.

The Magic of the Manuscripts

St. Stephen's Girls' College, Poon, Jade Yu Ling Harvey – 13

All Xiao Hei had were the few coins he had stolen from traders and the pillow he hid those coins under. He couldn't remember when he had gotten the coins, just that they were the only valuable things he owned. In reality, he didn't own anything, he stole them. Except the pillow, the only remnants of a family he had long forgotten. A family who had left him to the streets to fend for himself.

He had since been taken in by a trader who hired him to do simple chores. He lived in the trader's house but the food given to him was scarce and living conditions even worse.

Xiao Hei's determination was bull like. Once he had his goal set, he would chase it for as long as it took. His determination led him from doing chores in the trader's house to walking the streets in ripped clothes and ragged hair, looking for unsuspecting market shoppers to steal from. One day in the market, he overheard rumours between two traders of amazing, magical caves near the city of Dunhuang. They were called the "Mogao Caves" supposedly holding priceless artefacts that foreigners would pay gold for. A monk was selling ancient manuscripts to anyone who could offer funds to the protection of the caves. The word "gold" continuously echoed in his head. He could only imagine the riches that could fill his seemingly endless desire for money. What artefacts were there? What secrets? Was it real? His mind was set and his determination would not let it go.

He followed the traders to a site in the mountains he'd never known of before. By the time the sun set, his patience was low. However the second he saw the distinct Mogao Caves, his eyes shimmered with determination. He snuck past the traders, making it through the entrance without anyone noticing.

Once Inside, it was dark and eerie. The only light came from a single candle. His eyes followed the smoke from the flame as it drifted into a cramped dark space. When out of nowhere a candle lit up the room, Xiao Hei realised it wasn't small at all: it was just full of manuscripts that reached the ceiling. Wherever he looked there were manuscripts, to the point where there was almost nowhere to stand.

He bent to pick up one book, and as soon as he touched it, the world seemed to twirl around him as though he were floating in the midst of a storm. Then, the world stopped moving, and he stumbled backwards, dizzy. The library that surrounded him was the same.

"What happened?" he asked himself.

"Hey, are you alright?" A boy who barely looked older than Xiao Hei with dark brown hair and eyes asked with a smile.

"Yes, I'm fine. I'm Xiao Hei. Who are you?"

"Oh! I'm Xiao Ming. We're about to get attacked so you better get into your station," said Xiao Ming.

"Attacked?!" Xiao Hei exclaimed. He was very confused, but he just nodded and followed Xiao Ming.

The passageways were lit with many candles. Artwork on the walls had colours both bright and beautiful. A painting of a Buddha caught his eye, with everything that could make it be considered a masterpiece, except for a fragment of one eye. It looked to have been chipped off. Xiao Hei felt the other eye staring at him, watching his every move. He felt unnerved and so distracted himself by looking around. The passage was filled with people of all kinds, some looked kind, some looked scared, others looked brave. Xiao Ming stood in a doorway waving him over.

Xiao Ming pulled out a small cloth bag. "If you don't mind, would you help me fix the Buddha painting over there?" he asked him.

Annoyed, Xiao Hei asked, "What? Why should I? Why don't you do it?"

"Well, I just thought you wanted to help. I've had a lot of work this week preparing for the invasion but my work on the art here is really important to me. Sorry if I upset you," said Xiao Ming sincerely. There was an awkward silence. Xiao Hei started to regret being rude to him.

Xiao Ming then began to collect his bow and arrows.

"What do you need that for?" Xiao Hei asked.

Surprised, Xiao Ming asked, "Have you been living under a rock? The northern army is coming to invade us, we've been preparing for weeks!"

Xiao Hei looked down, embarrassed.

"What's the northern army like?" he asked.

Xiao Ming answered: "They destroyed a part of these caves once, and that was just a threat. So I'd say they're quite scary."

Suddenly, the sound of war drums echoed over the caves, and the sound of marching shook the earth. The army had arrived. Everyone prepared their weapons.

"What are you doing? We have to run or we'll be killed!" Xiao Hei said in a panicked voice. He was tempted to drag Xiao Ming by his sleeve to an exit but the only thing stopping him were Xiao Ming's desperate, determined, stubborn eyes. The same eyes Xiao Hei had had when he tore his only pillow away from his family and left home, never to return. He knew better than anyone that you can't stop someone with eyes like that. But what he didn't understand was why Xiao Ming had eyes like that.

"Why can't you just leave these caves, why do they matter so much to you?" asked Xiao Hei.

Xiao Ming looked at Xiao Hei. "Wouldn't you protect something precious that you and so many other people had cared for and protected for years and years?" he asked. "Wouldn't you protect it with your life?"

Xiao Hei stammered. "I-I... I don't know."

Suddenly, shouts and the clash of weapons filled the air. Xiao Ming shifted his eyes from Xiao Hei's face towards the sounds of fighting. He pulled out the cloth bag again and placed it in Xiao Hei's hands.

"Keep this safe. Go down to the end of the passageway and then turn right. You'll find the library, I think you know the rest," he said, pushing Xiao Hei towards the door.

"What is this thing? Are you going to be alright?" Xiao Hei cried.

"Well, you'll find out." Xiao Ming replied.

Halfway through the doorway Xiao Hei shouted back, "I hope I see you again, Xiao Ming." And then he was out of the room, running. The once bustling passageway was now in a tense silence.

As he ran, Xiao Ming's question made his head ache. "Wouldn't you protect it with your life?" The truth was, he wouldn't, but why wouldn't he? The simple answer was, he only ever had one goal in mind – to gain riches. Suddenly that wasn't his goal anymore, he knew what he had to do.

As he ran by the library, he was reminded of the book he'd stolen that got him here. He grabbed the book from his pocket, and returned it to its rightful spot. The moment the manuscript no longer touched his hand, the world seemed to start swirling. He fell towards the ground, but was caught by a revolving wind. All of a sudden, the spinning stopped, and he landed on the ground with a loud thud.

He felt hot tears running down his cheeks as he raised his head towards the lone candle flame. He was exactly where he had been, but it was hundreds of years later! He was in the library, with its manuscripts stacked to the ceiling. But now it was dusty with spider webs covering corners and small hints of paint delicately applied to walls many, many years ago. The clearest painting with small pops of colour scattered on the wall formed the shape of a Buddha, only missing a fragment of an eye.

He stood up. Something in his pocket weighed him down. He remembered the stranger he had met so briefly and he instantly remembered the cloth bag. Xiao Hei took it out and stuck his hand into the bag...

"What are you doing?" A monk stood in the gate, his arms crossed. He pulled Xiao Hei over, gripping his wrist.

"You're going to need to give that to me, kid."

"Give what? I didn't steal anything."

The monk looked unimpressed. "What's that in your hand then?" The monk opened the bag. His face showed shock and his mouth hung open.

"Where did you get this?" the monk asked, as he took out a stone chip painted with a buddha's eye.

Xiao Hei knew where it belonged. He took the stone out of the dumbfounded monk's hand, walked to the wall and placed the stone chip where the one-eyed buddha was painted. It didn't match the rest of the worn out, faded wall, but the eye finally completed the Buddha.

"For you Xiao Ming," he said softly.

What do the Mogao Caves Have to Hide?

St. Stephen's Girls' College, Rambo, Natalia – 13

The explorers went further into the caves and what they found was unexpected. Inside were bones wrapped in orange cloth and resting on a pillow of flowers. The travelers believed that they belonged monks from the olden days. Alongside these bones were the animal skeletons of dogs and cats, still in a standing position and their skin intact. The travelers decided to slit open these animals to see if they had been embalmed and found them stuffed with cotton. And hidden inside the cotton rags were papers with dates and drawings and writing. They specified a location and an event that was being held on a certain date.

According to the letters, these caves were used for gatherings and rituals. Some caves were used as a bank of sorts where they kept fine jewels and important paintings. Famous authors left literature there. They kept these objects in the caves for fear of theft. According to the letters, they believed there was a spiritual barrier in front of the caves and whoever entered them with bad intentions would one day be punished for their sins. So the caves were a sacred place. Given that they believed the caves were scared, it was where they kept the monks that had passed away – a channel for them to pass on to a new life after death. And the flowers symbolized a fresh start, a way to forget any regretful behaviour in their earthly lives so as to look forward to an everlasting one. The cloth was orange merely because of the most common dye at the time. The animals next to them were guardians protecting the monks' souls from any evil.

Nearby the bones, the travelers also found the oldest dated, printed book in the world which held details of their way of life, how they lived day to day, what they traded, government ruling. A record of their lives. There were also some drawings which revealed the 'fashion style' at the time.

But what was really interesting was what they discovered as they moved deeper into the caves. Painting after Painting of cities! Cities which seemed so modern! I dare say almost identical to the cities we have now. At the time of discovery, the travelers didn't really pay much attention to this – given that it was the 1990s so many items in the painting hadn't yet been invented! Things like drones and what appeared to be robots. Yet the paintings were from so so long long ago – how was it possible? Is our whole reality a lie? Did the Mongaos live in the future? Or do we live in the past? Were the paintings fake? The point is we really can't be sure of what is real. Our present life could simply be our imagination. We really can't be sure of anything.....

A Journey to the West

Tai Kwong Hilary College, Chow, Wing – 14

One day, I went to visit the Mogao Grottoes. In my opinion, it's the most fabulous, cosmopolitan and historical place of all because everything inside the caves were all hand carved by people in the past. When I went in, I saw so many cave paintings and statues. The cave paintings represented stories in different dynasties and the statues represented Buddhas. These things appeared because each Chinese Emperor from different dynasties ordered people to build it. I looked around and suddenly I saw the largest statue. This statue was built in the Tang Dynasty, by the one and only Chinese Empress called Wu Zetian. I was shocked and was wondering how the Tang Dynasty was when she ruled the country. As I looked around the statue, I saw its effulgence. I did not know what happened and what to do. I felt apprehensive. I stepped back and suddenly I fell into a hole and vanished. What just happened?

I heard horses whining and the movement of the carts. I felt strange so I opened my eyes and tried to investigate what was happening. It's a busy town. I thought I was dreaming. But I was sure I wasn't because I could feel people pushing me as I was blocking their way. I looked at myself and found that I was still wearing long sleeves and jeans, completely different from them. Then I realised that I was in the Tang Dynasty as they dressed just like the people in the cave paintings. I was super afraid because the Empress in this dynasty would kill people if you didn't support her.

Then the citizens were alert to me and stared at me because of my appearance. They each took out a weapon and were getting closer and closer to me and were about to attack. Suddenly, someone stepped out and stopped them. They listened and stopped. Nobody argued. That's weird, right? Naturally, people would act without thinking about the consequences. After that, weird things happened. I stood up and said, "Thank you for your help!" A woman looked at me and waved at me to follow her. So, I did because it's a mystifying place.

As I followed her, I saw many jovial people working and they stared at me. I guessed I was bizarre to them. We arrived at the destination. Where was it? It was the Daming Palace. The palace was indescribably big. I went in and was dumbfounded, flabbergasted and thunderstruck. At that moment, I realised she was Wu Zetian. So I quickly said, "Your Highness, I am very sorry that I caused you so much trouble." She said, "I forgive you! Now, you should get changed." I was speechless. I listened to her order and went to get changed. I followed two servants to the guest room. They gave me clothes and brought me to the changing room. The room was enormous, even bigger than my school hall. The costume was tight and hard to wear, so I asked the servants to help me. They didn't help. Instead they gave me a much comfortable one. The shirt was in red with some flowers on the buttons on the left, and the dress was in black. After changing, the Empress brought me everywhere. I said, "This Palace is majestic." She asked curiously, "So, where are you from? I have never seen you before." I replied nervously, "Well, I can tell you if you don't kill me. OK?" She said, "OK!" Then I began my introduction. I said, "I come from the future and my name is Apreold Chesta." She said, "What? The future?" I said, "Yeah! Can you bring me back where I belong? The future, the Mogao Grottoes." She said, "Of course! But you will have to finish a mission. I will tell you soon." I said, "No problem if I have a place to stay." She brought me to a tiny wooden house. It was clean, no worse than I thought it would be.

Days passed. Not much changed but someone told me there would be a meeting with the Empress. During the meeting, she told me about my mission. What was it? It was to save her dragon from the devils and try to get it back to her. I asked, "How can I rescue the dragon from the devils?" She said, "Something much brighter than sunlight can help. I saved the baby dragon from the devils and I raised it up myself. When it grew older, I freed it. I always used a mirror to reflect the sunlight on her to play with her. This signal would remind her I am there." Then, I knew what could solve this problem. After the meeting, she asked me whether she was a good empress or not. She insisted, "I don't mind if you say no. Tell me the truth." I replied nervously, "Before, I thought you were blood thirsty because you killed people who disagreed with you as Empress. But now, I don't think you are because you saved me from those citizens with weapons. And I found that your people are living in peace and harmony. I think you don't have to kill people who disagree with you. You just have to gain their trust and respect them. Therefore, you will have more trusted citizens." She said with a smile, "Thanks for your advice. By the way, the devils will come and start a war with us soon. You must be prepared. You will have training tomorrow with the general." I was shocked but excited to learn something new.

Time went by very fast. I had improved a lot in my fighting skills. I was prepared to save the dragon. At midnight, the devils came with black-clothed fellows and wanted to kill the Empress. The soldiers were fighting hard

with them as I headed to the dragon. I fought a lot and finally I reached the dragon. I raised my iPhone and turned on the flash light. The dragon awoke and remembered her true master, the Empress Wu Zetian. We fought together and protected the Empress. Finally we won.

We returned to the Palace. As I opened the door of the changing room and entered, I returned to the present Mogao Grottoes, in 2022. I looked at my iPhone and the time was the same as when I left. Was it a dream? But when I looked at my wrist and what I was wearing, I knew it was not a dream. I must have time travelled.

I got three gifts from my time travelling. The first gift was the costume. The second was the fighting skills and the last and the most memorable one, a bracelet from Empress Wu Zetian. What a wonderful trip to the West!

The Mogao Grottoes

Tai Kwong Hilary College, Kwok, Chloe – 12

“Guys ... I don’t like this.”

One of the members of the little ‘group’ they had looked back at the brunet. “Come on, George! Man up! We travelled all the way here to look at the so-called caves. If you wanna be scared, back out.” George sighed and looked at his friends.

“I mean, Tommy’s right.” Another Brit said, a bit shorter than him. “We did travel all the way out here. Might as well take a look.” Tommy cheered and patted his friend on the back. “Thanks, Tubbo!”

“Yeah ... thanks Tubbo.”

Tommy had been messing around on Google searching for stuff when he came across a page where he read about a place called the ‘Mogao Grottoes’ located in China, where artifacts had been found and kept. He quickly messaged George and Tubbo, who both asked for more information.

Now sure, they had George, an adult, but Tommy and Tubbo’s mom insisted that they needed one more adult with them, to which Tommy called Wilbur and politely asked for him to join.

“Tommy? What—”

“WILBUR YOU HAVE TO COME WITH ME AND TUBBO AND GEORGE TO A TRIP TO CHINA AND YOU CAN’T SAY NO.”

“ ... Okay—?”

“Thank you!!”

Wilbur looked up from his phone. “The GPS says the bus station is nearby. I guess we’ll be there soon?” Tommy was basically just happy that he could join them this time, since he usually had something in his schedule.

They sooned arrived and boarded, three of them having fun while George sitting by himself silently wondering all the worst possible scenarios. The bus soon arrived and Tommy rushed off, stretching.

“That was a long ride!” Tubbo said. “So, are we gonna follow the tour guide or—?” George asked, looking at the crowd.

“Pshhh, we’re not gonna follow them! We’re gonna have our OWN adventure! Besides, how hard can it be?”

Wilbur looked up from the guide map. “I think we’re—”

“Don’t even say it.” Tommy groaned. “We’re lost forever.” Tubbo said, looking around. “How are there this many caves?!” George groaned. Tubbo walked off while the others were discussing how to get back and stumbled on some more artifacts. He found a book that didn’t look old.

“Guys—?” He called out. “Come look at this!” They all followed his voice and looked at the same thing. “Is this supposed to be the oldest book in time?” Wilbur asked. Tommy peeked at it. “It doesn’t seem like it.” Tubbo nodded.

“I don’t think we should touch it.” George said.

Just as he said that, the book started glowing and a hooded figure faintly appeared. They all froze and stared at it. “I— Is that a—?” Tommy choked out. “Ghost?” Tubbo whispered.

The ghost started heading towards them.

“GO GO GO—” Wilbur shouted and they all ran out, the book still shining. Once they made it to the exit, they skidded to a halt to calm down and catch their breath.

Once they had returned back to England after a few days, Tommy had quickly messaged them an article, saying that the book from the Grottoes and disappeared mysteriously without a single trace.

What had gone on in the Mogao Grottoes?

Unwritten Truth

Tai Kwong Hilary College, Man, Kwan Wah – 12

There was a boy named Yuchen. He was a very adventurous and smart kid. However, he lived in a very poor home. He also lived in a village which was just as poor as he was. Yuchen was curious about everything; if there was something he didn't know about, he would get to the bottom of it. His mom, who he loved dearly, was sick. She needed to be taken care of, but Yuchen hadn't studied anything related to the medical field. Yuchen's dad died while serving in the army, so it was just him and his mom, all alone. Yuchen already knew about his mom's sickness even though she never told him.

One day, however, as Yuchen was reading a book, he discovered some mysterious caves. They said that they were impossible to find as they were nothing more than a dusty legend. Yuchen knew that they were not just some legends, but that they actually existed, he just didn't know where.

His mom then called his name.

"Yuchen, can you come to me? I need to talk to you about something very important," she said.

"Alright!" he replied.

"You read the book, correct?" she began asking.

"Which one?" Yuchen asked.

"About those caves," she said.

"What about them?" he asked. He didn't even think about how she even knew.

"Please listen to me. Those caves are dangerous!" she said with a sharp tone.

"You've been there?!" he asked in shock.

"No. Your grandfather did though, and he didn't come back alive."

"How did he die?" That was all Yuchen could ask.

"Monks thought that he was an intruder and murdered him in a way no mortal being ever should be," she said, sternly.

Yuchen was dumbfounded.

When he read that book, he had indeed noticed a small painting that indicated a man being tortured and killed. Before he could think this through, his mom asked him something.

"Would you like to go there?" his mom asked.

"Yes."

"Look into my cabinet, you'll see what I mean." Those were the last words she could mutter before she died suddenly, right before Yuchen's eyes.

He couldn't process what just happened, it was too fast.

Yuchen couldn't cry. He knew his mother wouldn't approve of him if he did. He did as his mother told him and opened the cabinet.

It was a map? There was a red dot on it with a picture of a Buddha's face.

"How strange," he thought.

It was about 1000 miles away, but that couldn't stop him from going. For the sake of his mother, he would do anything.

He couldn't do this all by himself, so he asked two friends to go with him. His two friends' names were: Yuxuan and Haoyu. They both also loved adventuring as much as Yuchen. They all decided to meet up at midnight. All went according to plan.

They set out and aimed to go straight to Gansu. They didn't think that it would be a challenge either. All three parties had backpacks with them, full of supplies they might need in the future.

During the time they started walking, they came across a forest. It looked as if it had been burned. The map told them that they needed to go through that forest in order to get one step closer to their destination. Walking in, they heard some strange sounds, rustling around the bushes and trees.

At some point, those noises went dead-silent. Yuchen knew something was wrong. He placed his backpack on the ground and told his friends not to move an inch. Yuchen picked out a pocket knife he had in his backpack and dared those creatures to come out.

"Come out, you coward. I will face you if I have to!" he said.

Both his friends narrowed their eyes.

"Are you insane?!" they both loudly whispered.

"Quiet." he demanded. Yuchen was ready to face anyone who dared to come near his friends.

Yuchen and his two friends stood in that position for a little while before they confirmed that it was safe. Some leaves were just moving with the wind.

Out of nowhere something touched Yuxuan's shoulder. He gasped. He turned around slowly only to find a branch that was hanging out from one of the trees. Everyone sighed in relief as they continued walking.

"Hey," Haoyu started, "Why do you think this forest was ruined?"

"I don't know" Yuchen answered, followed by Yuxuan making an agreeing hum.

It was 3AM by the time they got out of the forest, and they needed something to eat and drink. They took some supplies out from their backpacks and began eating and drinking as they continued their journey.

At some point, they came across a storm. A giant one.

"WE NEED TO RETREAT NOW!" Yuxuan yelled.

"No." Yuchen said with a stern voice, which sent shivers down their spines.

Yuchen positioned himself on the ground like a ball.

Yuxuan and Haoyu knew that they had to follow Yuchen if they wanted to survive.

They crouched down, hands over their ears and prayed for the best.

After about half an hour, the thunderstorm went away. They looked up in happiness. Haoyu and Yuxuan started hugging each other, as if it were their last day on earth. Yuchen smiled at the sky.

“Thank you, mother,” he whispered.

The three of them continued their journey for about a week or so. They knew that they were almost there. But, there was a problem. They had run out of supplies. They didn’t have food or water left, so their only option was to live on nature’s supplies. It was really rough, but after four days of living in hell, they finally arrived.

“I’m sure your mother would have been proud of you, Yuchen,” Haoyu told him.

Yuchen smiled. Haoyu and Yuxuan decided to stay outside of the cave, letting Yuchen be alone for a while.

Yuchen approached the shrine as he felt an aura surround him. It was a feeling of a god. Not just any god, it felt like someone he had known for years. He then decided to go in.

A statue of a Buddha’s head was inside of it, along with sculptures and wall paintings around it. He was shocked, he didn’t know such a weird Buddha statue could exist. He began walking towards it, remembering the map he had. It looked the exact same.

Out of nowhere, the Buddha’s forehead began to twist, faster and faster. Yuchen wanted to step back but fell to the ground. In a swift motion, and a sudden sound, the forehead of the Buddha statue popped off. He got back on his feet and walked towards it.

Inside of the head of the statue was a tiny golden Buddha sculpture. He touched it and fell to the ground again. What was happening to him? His eyes started having weird illusions as he saw two monks standing before him. They both bowed to him, as if he were their master.

He stood up in confusion, and asked who they were.

“Xinyi.” one of the monks said.

Wasn’t that the name of Yuchen’s mother?

“What do you want from me? What do you have to do with my mom? How come I can see you?” He began asking a stream of questions until one of the monks demanded him to be silent.

“I am your father, son. My name is Wang Lei.”

“...” Yuchen stayed silent.

His father? Impossible, he died during the war.

The other monk introduced himself: “I am your father’s friend, Zihao. You might be wondering what happened, correct?”

Yuchen nodded.

“You need not worry, my son. I will explain to you.” As Yuchen continued to listen, his eyes couldn’t do anything else but to wonder in shock.

“You are stuck in the past life, which me and Zihao created to find you. I wanted to tell you everything that had happened before you were born, so that I can move on to the afterlife without regrets.”

“Your mother wanted to protect you. Evading the truth, she told you that I had died while in the army, but that’s not true. I was a monk who took part in killing your great great grandfather. It wasn’t an option to begin with. You

see, your great great grandfather wanted to know everything about these caves. He came upon this one, but sadly enough, our master was meditating right then. He believed that your grandfather was an intruder. We monks, underlings of our master, needed to comply with every single demand he asked of us. We had no choice but to teach him a lesson that, “No mortal being ever would...” was all he said before disappearing.

Yuchen knew everything now.

Light in the Darkness

Tang King Po School, Cheung, Ricky – 14

"Look what I found," Fung said excitedly. "these caves are enormous!"

Fung had been clearing the sand blocking the caves as he was curious what could be hiding inside those caves. He had his good friend Li for help. Their work inspired numerous individuals to help them expedite the discoveries.

"Woah! What do those symbols on the manuscripts mean?" asked Li as he was examining a desk in the cave.

"I don't know. Let's ask our archaeologist," replied Fung. "Come here, Manuel."

Manuel was one of the many people assisting at the site. He's a pal of Fung who liked the tales from the past. He entered the cave and was immediately astounded by what they had managed to find.

"These manuscripts tell us the stories of a man who used to live in this cave!" Manuel blurted out excitedly.

A long time ago, a monk was travelling on the newly established Silk Road. He passed an uninhabited zone and saw an oasis, perfect for a stopover. He found a giant cave on the side of the mountain and stopped there before continuing. After he had returned to the temple, he invited the people from the temple over to his newly discovered oasis. Much of the population relocated to the oasis, and it became a location where people traded for goods.

When the place was first being developed, the most pressing problem wasn't the fact that there were no houses for the population to live in, it was that the place had no name! It was decided that the development is called by the discoverer's name, Mogao.

"We had never heard of that story before," Li commented. "Should we publish this?"

"Not before I finish reading the stories." Manuel replied.

As most of the population were Buddhists, a temple was built inside where the monk stayed during his trip. An army of 500 people worked on the greatest construction challenge of its time. They painted the history of their civilization and built giant statues of their almighty Buddha.

The construction workers worked every day to complete it as soon as possible. It was tough, but they got it done just before the annual Mid–Autumn Festival. Civilians in the city rushed into the temple as it opened in Mid–Autumn. This story taught us that we should be hard–working people.

The Next Year, they had an epidemic in the city. A lot of people died from the disease. The monk, Mogao, prayed every day for Buddha's help.

"Please save us," Mogao prayed. "We have been attacked by a disease!"

The disease magically disappeared in a month. People believed that their god had saved them, more and more started to worship the Buddha. A painting was drawn on one of the temple's walls, used to commemorate what their god had done for them.

Fung's team was delighted with their findings and published them as a book. The following year, another expedition team came after reading about their discoveries. They found even more goodies.

"Look what I found," Choi yelled eagerly, as he dug through a wall. "there's a ball that is glowing."

"I am more interested in the scroll next to it," replied Sam. "let's see what it says."

There was a person who loved collecting minuscule and cool stuff. He saw the small glowing ball one day and wanted it, but the person who owned it wouldn't give it to him. One calm night, he snuck into the temple and stole the ball.

The person who owned it realised that his ball had been stolen. He went to the court and told them what had happened and asked for help. The thief was found as he was flexing his new toy. He was arrested and put into prison. This story taught us that stealing isn't at all a great idea.

The cave collapsed and nobody lived there for thousands of years, but people like Fung, Li and Choi will continue to make ground–breaking discoveries inside this time capsule.

The Hidden Painting

Tang King Po School, Yip, Alvin – 14

Standing in a tall building above the prosperous Luoyang City, is not a man but a woman, no an Empress, one with tales to be told for eons, her rise to power, her rule. That's right, she is the one true Empress Of China, Wu Zetian.

However, unbeknownst to her in the decades past her death, her successor, Emperor Zhongzong, would order a painting, one that would place a dark cloak on her history, no, the history of China, what will this story tell? Let us find out.

“Alright.... Set up the gear here, it's literally pieces of history we're dealing with.....”

A man dressed in a yellow-ish white trench coat and a notebook walked in, he was the overseeing archeologist of this project, shocking isn't it? Despite being a not so established historian he gained clearance from the English government, after all a stone smith's descendant is not best fitted for this line of trade. With a bright smile he began to walk off into the caves....

“Oh my.... This is fascinating...”

Smiling, the man took a photo of the mural in front of him, completely immersed in the fabulous painting dating back to the Jin Dynasty. A small fissure was noticed on the painting in front of him. Fascinated, he took out his hand and touched it. Within an instant he was lost in a trance, he was alive most certainly, but the body he felt, it wasn't quite his, now he was living in someone else, perhaps an ancestor?

“It is to be done smith, per the Emperor's orders, not an inch less.”

A man dressed in ancient Chinese robes was seen by our archeologist, though not quite himself his years of study allowed him to recognise those robes, they were, without question from the Tang Dynasty, in fact the man in front of “him” was at least a mainstream tier three official, possibly a manager of internal affairs from the palace, or the Emperor's messenger....

“But Empress, your painting has much... suggestive art, it would not be wise to speak ill of the dead, surely you wouldn't want a ghost at your doorstep late at night, I would trust the Emperor would think the same.”

He heard “himself” speak, it was in an odd tongue however, not quite Cantonese but also not quite Mandarin, you could understand it indeed but it was baffling, had he really traveled to the past? If so, then why couldn't he seem to control this body? Some things just didn't add up.... What on Earth was going on?

“Her actions are against the very nature of Chinese, women do not deal with politics, and yet look at her! The one true Empress, this is needed smith, and you are to do as ordered, or your head will be removed.”

After that sentence our archeologist heard himself agree on these terms, though he was in fact unsure of what terms exactly, the painting he had been studying before this “transportation” was one about Wu Zetian, the only Empress of China. The painting was believed to show the realest scene of Empress Wu's rule, corrupt and falling apart, although seemingly prosperous but it was just an illusion. It also highlights the fact that her successor had to fix all the problems she had left behind.

“Are you sure about this master?!! If we get caught this is treason!!”

A young lad whisper-shouted to our archeologist, he seemed to be his apprentice, as stone smiths in the past worked as master and student. Glancing at the student the old smith continued his work, a painting, designed to slip under the one the Emperor had just ordered, in it is the truth, the fact that the Emperor had spoken ill of his predecessor for the sake of power. It is most likely people of his era would most likely not understand, his goal was to make sure the men of the future could learn of the past.

“Which is more important, the legacy of China and Chinese Culture or our lives? What the Emperor is doing is whipping out history, that I shall not allow, this is my pride as a Chinese, and my duty.”

The craftsman said in a stern tone, still focused on his work. It was true, the people of the future should be allowed to understand the past, for good or for bad, it is not right to speak ill of Wu, even though she was not the perfect ruler, she was certainly not a bad one! The reformations, development, with moving the capital to Luoyang being the most important, surely a portion of the Tang was lost during her reign, but that is no reason to say all her deeds were wicked! What the Emperor had ordered is dark and twisted, stemming from his greed, the true goal was most likely because Princess Tai Ping had attempted to become the second Empress, this was simply a political act at the cost of the legacy of China!

“What kind of man, no, human would allow someone to use the history of our own nation for power? You cannot take your power to your grave, but the history, stories you leave behind can teach generations far beyond ours. It is my duty to defend this, it is my mission.”

And with that our archeologist snapped back, falling on the ground, shocked, now a split path lies in front of him, does he remove the top and expose this fraud, or does he leave it and pretend he never saw what he just did? Which path is right? The truth? Or is it to be left hidden?...

The Oasis

The British International School Shanghai, Puxi Campus, Ward, Emily – 12

“Come on Lila, we are never going to reach the oasis at *this* speed!” Danong called to his sister, “I want to explore the caves!” Lila sighed; she preferred the oasis. The lake a sparkling turquoise, and the dragonflies sending ripples across its flawless surface. Lila never tired looking at the oasis, while Danong ran wild in the caves. She shivered. She never went into the caves.

Mulling over her thoughts, she turned the final bend to the oasis, bracing for a long, annoying lecture from her brother, but he wasn’t there.

“Danong!” she shouted. “Come out!” Lila looked around. Silence. “Danong?” She meant to command, but it came out as a meek, whispered question. She scanned her surroundings, quickly. Nothing was out of place, but...

“Oh no, please not there,” she begged the nothingness before her, “please say he hasn’t gone into the caves.” But where else would he have gone?

She mustered up all the courage she could find: pitiful. She had none. Then she imagined her family: screaming at her for coming home alone, with no brother, asking her what sister would have so little loyalty? So before she could change her mind, she tiptoed into the gaping mouth of the cave, dreading what may come next.

She had barely gone a few centimetres, before something cold brushed her back. She spun round. Darkness. She wanted to call out. To cry. To scream. But she had to find her brother. She gathered her courage, still lacking, and moved around to make her way forward again, but a shining light snapped on in front of her.

“Boo!” screeched Danong, waving his torch. She screamed.

“You filthy little scum!” she yelled.

Teeming with fury, she strode angrily along beside him, when something caught her eye. A groove in the wall. She snatched the torch, and inspected it carefully: it was a Buddha, and was the work of a swift hand and nimble mind. Danong stared in confusion. “Jiejie, what are you looking at?” She glanced at the Buddha. He followed her gaze, and said, “What? Just plain, old, boring rock. It’s ugly,” he added, as an afterthought. She blinked. Could he really not see it? She could be hallucinating, but still...gently, she brushed a finger against its knee, and then everything went black.

“Mogao, hurry, they’ll catch us!” a girl called to the panting boy behind her. He was pulling branches across the track, and onto the path, like some kind of blockade. “Done,” he whispered, “we have to find the grottos, they can’t find us there.” They rushed off, following the familiar path to the oasis. “We’ll be safe from the bandits there, Sutra,” the boy, Mogao, said to her.

“Jiejie? Lila? Are you there?” She groaned. What had happened? One moment she had touched the buddha’s knee, the next...she was unconscious on the floor. She winced. “The Buddha,” she croaked, “did you see it?” He looked at her strangely. “Lila, there are no buddhas in the caves,” he whispered quietly, “it’s just a cave.”

A CREEAAK awoke her from her slumbers that night. What was that? She jumped. It had come from the roof. Carefully, she nudged open her window—

She crept along the edge of the rooftops, then paused, and glared at the window in front of her. It was NaiNai’s window. Grandmother *always* slept with the curtains open!

Surreptitiously, she peeked inside...asleep. Relief. But then she saw a figure in a ghostly-white nightdress and golden hair standing on the rooftops. A sense of cool urgency crept over her. She scrambled back, and slipped inside her window again. Then a fiery pain sliced into her head; she had hit the bedpost! She fell limp onto the bed, cold as ice.

"Mogao, we have been in here for a week now, we should get out while we still can!" Sutra hissed. "MeiMei, they will catch us, and then we'll both be more dead than a squashed cicada." She glared at him, eyes like fire. "Look," he continued, "we have enough food, and we don't have a good reason to leave!" She sneered. "Boredom counts," and she stalked off. He twisted back to his almost-finished carving. It was of his MaMa. She was probably dead now. Deader than a squashed cicada.

Searing light pieced into her eyes. She groaned. What had happened? Had she been...knocked out? The dream rushed back to her then, in shards and fragments. Lila sucked in a quick breath of air. That was the Buddha she'd touched! The one of his mother! But then why had it disappeared, and why had it shown her that? Where could she find answers? She froze. *You know that*, a small voice whispered in her turmoiled head. *The caves...*

The day couldn't end soon enough. Her chores seemed endless! 'Clean the bedroom, Lila! Harvest the wheat, Lila!' Aaggghhhrrrhhh! As soon as she was free, she rushed to the caves, flying faster than the wind, and ran breathlessly up to the entrance. She looked into the gaping mouth. Did she really want to do this? But she was never one for drawn-out decisions.

She scurried through the silent caves, trying to peer through the dark clinging to the cave walls like glue. Or was it the ceiling? Stupid! she thought. In her hurry, she hadn't thought to bring a candle!

Eventually, after much aimless wandering, she came across a moonlit chamber. And there, in the centre, was a huge Buddha. It was of another woman, Sutra, she thought. Was it Mogao's work? Tentatively, she placed a quivering finger onto the woman's foot. Her touch was like a feather, but it was enough; the world went black.

Mogao was carving. He looked a few years older though, and his face was bent in concentration. "Mogao!" Sutra's high voice jolted him out of his thoughts, "there's a visitor!" He started up. They had had many visitors over the past two years; merchants, performers, storytellers even! He rushed to Sutra, in the main cave.

"On my morning hunt," she hissed when he arrived, "I saw a girl, a foreigner!" she whispered, breathless. His eyes widened. A foreigner? In all his time on this earth, he had never seen a foreigner! "Is she coming?" he whispered back. "Oh yes, she should be here right about—" she was cut off, as a new female voice called in hesitant Chinese, "Hello? Is anyone there? I'm a bit...lost." Sutra snorted quietly. No one ever found this place on purpose. Except them. "Well, should we invite her in?" Sutra inquired. A tall, thin silhouette darkened their doorway. "Too late," Mogao replied.

Lila opened her eyes. That had been interesting. A foreigner! She had never seen one before. She glanced back at the statue. Or rather, where the statue had been. Now, there was empty space. But wait...not quite empty, it seemed. A worn leather book lay flat on the floor. It was huge! The pages were a sorry, faded gold, and the leather was falling to bits! She grinned. So it wasn't just buddhas that held secrets in this place. Carefully, she opened it to the first page; the world went dark.

"The girl has been here for three days now. She is stealing glances at our precious artworks, and gazing hungrily at our vast collections of literature. That demoness! Also known as Aurelia Stein. She had darkened our doorstep a few days back, and had been legally stealing from our supplies ever since. Mogao is trying to make her feel welcome. He doesn't see! She will be our deaths! I swear it!"

"I cannot believe her! Aurelia said my cooking was TERRIBLE! And then she spat right onto the food! That evil girl is poisoning my life! I will get rid of her! I will!"

"I can't believe it. Aurelia...Aurelia drowned him! My brother was murdered. MURDERED! I'm fleeing the caves; I can't stay. Not while she's still here! I'm leaving this book behind. Maybe one day she'll get punished for her crimes. She deserves worse.

When Lila woke up, she immediately knew something was wrong. Where was her air? Where? She couldn't breathe! She thought of Mogao, drowned by Aurelia in the oasis. The oasis. The place she loved so much. Now it was her death bed. Her arms swung desperately, but something was pulling her down. She felt a tug on her ankle; chains. Her eyes fluttered, as her consciousness began to drift away. Just before she sank under, she saw a face. The face of a young girl, with cascading gold curls, peering malevolently at her. And she mouthed something, but Lila was too far under to understand. And, her spirit drifted quietly into death, as Aurelia walked away, secure in her deadly secrets.

Tales from the Mogao Grottoes

The Chinese Foundation Secondary School, Fung, Cheuk Long – 13

My name is Apollo, and I'm an inventor. Once I had finished my time machine, strange things started to occur.

After I'd woken up from my sleep, my head hurt as if someone had hit me with a fire extinguisher. I brushed it off as I'd thought it was just my stress compiling from all the errors the machine had before it finally worked. I decided to go out for some fresh air afterward, but what I saw finally made me realize what had happened.

Everything was different. The ground was covered in a thick, cold layer of snow that covered the bottom of my torso, and a sudden breeze of arctic wind pierced my bones, sending shivers up my spine. When I looked back, my house was no more than some logs with a thatched roof. The sky was empty, with no skyscrapers, no apartment complexes, or anything that would usually be there.

Before anything, I checked if I could return via the same machine where I entered from. But, as I expected, it didn't have enough energy to operate twice in a row.

I wandered around for a while and tried to figure out where I was. Just when I ran out of ideas for my location, I heard sounds of a horse trotting and some creaking, I waved at the carriage, and someone climbed out. I figured it would be a good idea to ask him about what he knew and learn about everything from there. His name was LèZūn, and he was on his way to a place where he foresaw a thousand Buddhas bathed in golden light. As a result, I realized I was in China, just before the Mogao Caves were dug up. I offered him help because I had nothing better to do as my machine cooled down. I hopped on his carriage, and we began our journey to the site where the cave would be built.

It was a pleasant journey, with stops along the way for us and the horse to rest. I enjoyed a lot of the scenery I saw from where we stopped, from stunning waterfalls to lush jungles that were filled with wildlife. It was especially fascinating because these were not things that we'd normally come across in the modern-day, but everywhere I went flourished with nature. I also borrowed a set of clothes from LèZūn so I would fit in easily. When I mentioned that I was someone from the future, surprisingly, he didn't question me further. He believed that no matter where I was from, it wasn't the point of the journey and that we shared a goal to construct the cave. I was shocked by this response, but I was also relieved that he would not put any more thought into the matter, and simply focus on his goals.

After around 10 days of traveling, we reached the site. We set up a small camp and began our construction. Although it was tiresome, progress went steadily. Eventually, someone named Faliang found our settlement and decided to lend a hand.

As I had gotten more and more used to where I was, more and more people found out about us, from Buddhist monks to local officials and wealthy families who wished to build karmic merit and perform an act of veneration. The site grew bigger and bigger, and our efficiency had increased by a lot. More and more caves were dug out, and countless drawings, sculptures, and literature were created or placed in every cave.

I had managed to look around different caves and recognized a few were famous in the future. There were a lot of shrines, where monks would meditate and worship. There was one cave that contained hundreds of manuscripts and seemed to be ready to be sealed off once it was full. I figured that would be the famous Library Cave, which would also soon be a memorial cave and hiding place for Hongbian, from a wealthy Wu family, responsible for creating the library cave. The Library Cave also contained banners, numerous damaged figurines of Buddhas, and other Buddhist paraphernalia.

While I resided at the Mogao Grottoes, I also used my knowledge of the future to teach new technology to everyone, even with the limited resources we had. I showed them how to build steady foundations and supports for caves so that they wouldn't collapse as easily, and more advanced tools to speed up processes for digging.

As an inventor, I knew how a lot of technology worked, I managed to utilize a small amount of electricity from waterwheels and such to speed up processes from weeks to only take a day. As such, more and more caves started to appear, even to the point where there were around one or two thousand caves that existed within the Mogao Grottoes.

Even though I was more advanced in terms of technology, there are a lot of things that were taught to me by the people in the grotto. For example, I learned how they created things like pottery, paper, and silk before everything had been automated and created by machines. They showed me a plethora of fascinating processes that machines couldn't have accurately interpreted efficiently.

During my stay, I also had lots of conversations with monks and people who helped build caves, I learned a lot about their culture and beliefs, and deeper meanings to the literature that came with the cave.

During my conversations with the locals, I also heard talk of people losing belongings that they never managed to find back. After that, I realized that I also had an important item that I've been lost; the key to my time machine. Thus, I and several other monks that have agreed to help, went on a search to find where everything went.

After walking around in the caves, we found an unlit torch that fell out of place when we found it. I decided to relight it, as it seemed unnatural to just keep one torch unlit, but right after I lit it, I heard sounds of rocks tumbling over, revealing a hidden cave sealed off from everything else. Our group decided to search the area and soon discovered that it was where the lost items ended up. I found my keys and found a lot of jewellery, we packed it all in bags and left to return items.

One day, I approached LèZūn, and I told him that I was going to leave the grottoes and return to the present day. After this month, we had become good friends. While he was hesitant about having me leave, he eventually decided it would be bad to have me stay. He also gave me one last piece of good news before I departed about the capturing of the perpetrator of the stolen goods situation.

Afterward, I decided to return to the present to complete my journey of the Mogao Grottoes. I once again thanked everyone who helped me during my stay and borrowed one of the carriages from someone, starting my journey back to the shack, where I could finally return to the present I know well.

I returned to the present and wrote a summary of my first adventure: an accident with a machine I built had led me to learn different things like culture, technology, architecture, and art that I could not have learned as extensively now. Detailed manuscripts cannot compare to seeing the process happen, with a more precise idea of how it's done. As I mark the end of my journey, I realize how important every small detail of history that has impacted our lives is. The Mogao Grottoes showed me how fascinating things from the past can be, and that knowledge from the past can be useful, even hundreds of years later.

Cave Adventure

The Chinese Foundation Secondary School, Ho, Leanne – 12

Black clouds spread across the sky, obscuring the clear blue sky, and darkness slowly swallowed the bright sunlight that was shining over Sadie and Brendan. Soon enough, they heard a clap of thunder, warning that a storm was on its way. Then as the first drop of rain plopped onto their heads and Brendan looked up with a worried expression on his face.

“I changed my mind. Let’s go back before Mom finds out!” Brendan yelled as the rain started to soak up his shirt, making him shiver.

He was done agreeing with the plan his younger sister, Sadie, had made. And he was fed up with her. She wanted to sneak out of the house at three in the morning and go out to explore the caves when it was still dark. He decided he was only going with her because he wanted fresh air, but he knew there was no stopping Sadie from exploring the caves on her own, as stubborn and determined she was once she was set on a goal.

Sadie was insatiably curious about the caves. She knew she had to see it herself no matter what.

“Sadie,” her brother hollered, “let’s go!”

She turned around to face her brother, who was only a few feet away from her, completely soaked as if he had taken a shower.

“Go back? But you promised to come,” she snapped. Her anger built as glared at her brother, who was pointing home, convincing her to go back. But there was no way she was going home when she had come this far. Sneaking out of the house to see the caves was one of her dreams, and she had been wishing to do this since they moved here. She wasn’t willing to stop and turn back now. Brendan would not stop her goals and dreams. “You can go back yourself; I’m going down there myself.” She shrugged.

Sadie started walking down the hill, determined she would see the caves.

Brendan looked at his sister angrily as she got farther and farther away from him. As he narrowed his eyes, a new idea formed in his mind. If she would not listen to him, then he would force her to. He was the oldest and he felt responsible for Sadie’s safety.

The rain had made the ground slippery and hard to walk on. But with his sister striding ahead, it was hard to keep up with her without slipping.

“Sadie, come on,” He shouted, “you really don’t want to go to the caves alone. You don’t know what’s down there!” He tried to walk as fast as he could by running a little, but then he slipped and fell on his back.

He groaned and rolled his eyes as he picked himself up, knowing that he was too slow. Sadie’s figure got smaller and smaller, and he knew he could not let her go to the caves alone. He needed to hurry.

Sadie didn’t care to even look back. She didn’t care if Brendan was going home himself. Either way, she was going to see the caves herself, alone or not.

As the rain poured down on her, she felt freezing water creeping down her back. The water filled the ground, and soon enough it reached up to her ankles, making it hard to walk.

She turned corners and walked down more hills, and finally, something caught her attention out of the corner of her eye.

Looking through the rain, she saw an opening large enough for a human, with jagged rocks by the sides. She had learnt about this. Caves were formed by the weathering of rock. Her eyes lit up at the sight of it and a smile pushed

its way across her face. Could this be the one? Her spirits rose, and curiosity and excitement took over her. Without looking back, she set foot in the cave.

It was dark inside the cave, and water was dripping from the ceiling. Sadie ran her fingers through the walls and felt the touch of the rough rock walls. Her smile grew wider, and she took her torch from her pocket and started to look around. She had found it at last, and this was a dream come true for her. After months of researching and looking around, putting all her focus into the finding the caves, the little hope in her still lived on. As she jumped up and down, she knew how much this meant to her. Not even Brendan would understand. But that didn't matter anyways, she was finally here.

She held out her torch, and the light swallowed the darkness and the shadows. The sound of the heels of her shoes clicking on the ground echoed in the caves, and that was when she realized the silence was deafening. Not a single thing could be heard. An eerie feeling crept over her as she looked around; it seemed like nobody else was here.

Her fear pushed her excitement away, and she could hear her own loud, panicked breathing. Suddenly the caves didn't seem so interesting anymore— her brother was right.

Sadie started to turn back, and as she did, she heard a familiar voice.

“Sadie! Thank goodness, I thought I had lost you!” Brendan's voice echoed in the caves. Sadie whirled around, her brother standing in front of her.

She heaved a sigh of relief, pressing her hand against her chest. She wasn't completely alone now; it was nice to have someone by her side.

Brendan scanned the area and frowned. “What are you doing here? Let's go back.” He grabbed her hand and pulled her towards the exit.

But as he did, he stopped and froze, forcing Sadie to stop as well.

“What's wrong?” She asked as she walked closer to face him.

Sadie gasped when she saw him. Her eyes went wide and fear overtook her.

There was something wrong with Brendan. Her jaw dropped as she stared at him in horror.

Brendan's icy blue eyes had turned into glowing red, and it gave her a dark, creepy, and cold feeling. She screamed and took a step back.

“Brendan?” She said. Something's wrong. As she frowned, she began to wonder if this was really her brother.

But before she realized what was happening, Brendan gripped her arm so hard that it almost broke. He stuffed his hand into his pocket and took out a long rope. He swiftly tied her up.

Sadie stared at her brother, horrified. What was going on? “Brendan, what do you think you're doing?” But he didn't listen. She felt his cold hand clamped over her mouth, “Brendan!”

Darkness loomed over them, and his red glowing eyes were the only thing she could see.

“Who are you and what do you want?”

The Gates of Mogao Grottoes

The Chinese Foundation Secondary School, Lam, Symone – 12

Mogao Grottoes is a Buddhist temple, located in Gansu. This temple was built centuries ago, during the Sui, Tang and Song dynasties. This temple are important evidence of the evolution Buddhist art in the northwest region of China. But what happened to this temple after it was built?

There was a man with supernatural powers, he could open gates and portals to other dimensions which ordinary people can't see or go to. Unfortunately, he was born to be evil. Therefore, he used these supernatural powers to open gates to evil dimensions instead of good dimensions.

Other than opening gates to evil dimensions, he has committed lots of crimes, such as murdering, kidnapping and lots of other illegal acts.

Aside from, he summoned a demon called Mara. Mara is a Buddhism demon. It had multiple heads, many arms and legs. It has very sharp and stabbing teeth. This demon eats every human soul it finds. When Mara was on earth, it went to every single city in China and ate thousands of human souls. This man was so wicked! How could he do this to his own planet?

After several years of Mara haunting China, a 12-year-old girl with supernatural powers couldn't stand it anymore, seeing Mara killing her village and her country. She went to Mogao Grottoes alone and fearless to fight Mara and the evil-tended man to stop him for once and for all.

She used her mind powers to throw Mara across the temple, then used a rock and stabbed Mara in the back. When the man saw her killing Mara, he was furious. Therefore, he opened another few gates and tried to let more demons out. Somehow, the girl broke the man's arm. He was too badly injured to use his powers. The girl immediately sealed all the gates the man had opened.

When the 12-year-old girl arrived in her village, all the villagers painted the town red and celebrated her victory. As for that unholy man, he was sentenced to death by the leader of the country for his evil and illegal actions.

Buddhists then went to Mogao Grottoes and painted the looks of the Buddha goddesses. They made statues and lots of books of the Buddhas to keep the evil man's soul away.

Nowadays, many people go to Mogao Grottoes to pray and to worship the Buddhas hoping to keep the devil away. Even though there are no more souls or evil spirits in the temple, I am still dare not to visit Mogao Grottoes. This story is far too terrifying for me.

New Tales from the Mogao Grottoes

The Chinese Foundation Secondary School, Nip, Ka Ching – 12

It was the year 2200...

A warm breeze cut through the air. The valley was peaceful and silent. Barely a sound was heard except for the occasional yet rare bird chirp. Two monks sat at the mouth of one of the grottoes, meditating silently.

"Hey Wong, do you know what's out there?" The stout one asked as he pointed to a freakishly tall tower roughly 5 kilometers away. "No." Wong replied. "But it certainly looks menacing, Chen. Don't go there. It might be dangerous." "You always tell me what to do! Why can't I do what I want to do?" Chen exclaimed. "I just want to be free. I don't want to spend my whole life hiding in a cave like...like a coward." Wong did not say a single word. Instead, he turned towards the grotto and walked back inside. Chen now wanted to go there more than ever. He stared at the colossal tower as the sun began to dip.

That night, Chen snuck out of the grotto and headed towards the tower. When he finally got to the bottom of the tower after a long trek, he overheard something he wasn't supposed to hear.

"So, Wong, you have decided to let us demolish the grottoes, eh?" Said a mysterious, deep voice. "Yes." Wong replied. "Do whatever it takes to turn them into nothingness. And make sure you kill that punk Chen." Chen gasped. His master had betrayed him in the dark. He ran back to the grottoes to warn the others.

"Guys! Wong betrayed us! He and some other people are going to...to...destroy the...grottoes!" Chen exclaimed breathlessly. "Say what?" A person replied. Hundreds of them were in shambles. "We can't let them destroy our home!" An elder said nervously.

"We fight back." A deep voice said. Everyone turned back to see who it was. "General Yuen!" One of them said. "You're here!"

"Yes, I am. He pointed at Chen. Tell me the whole story. After the explanation, Yuen was deep in thought. "Very well. Warriors! Get your weapons ready! Tonight, we fight to the death!" Loud chanting was heard across the grottoes.

Suddenly, a massive chunk of rock fell from the top of the cave. Everyone scrambled to escape. "They're here." Yuen grumbled. "Follow me! To battle!" An army of approximately 2000 people charged at the enemy. Shots were fired. People were slaughtered. Bodies piled up the valley.

Two weeks later...

"Hello? Yuen? Anyone?" Chen paced around the grottoes, looking for his friends. Not a single reply. At this point, Chen was biting his nails. "Where is everybody?" He thought out aloud. Just then, he heard a shotgun and a shriek nearby. He ran over to check it out. A couple of soldiers stood over a pile of corpses. "Hey! Who's that over there?" Chen immediately ran away, the soldiers right behind him. He ran to the mouth of the grotto, grabbed a vine and swung to a cliff on the other side. Chen had made his grand escape. The soldiers kept shooting at him, but their efforts were in vain. After the incident, Chen ran in the direction of Beijing, hoping he could start a new life there.

Present Day, 2230...

"Wow papa! That story was amazing!" A little girl said. "Yes, yes I know." Her dad smiled. "Ok, time to go to bed now." "Aww, but I don't want to! Can you read me another story papa?" "I'd love to, sweetie, but you have school tomorrow, and it's quite late. How about when I come back from my business trip next week?" "Ok. Goodnight papa!" "Goodnight sweetie."

At the Airport...

"You are Chen Ming, right?" "Yes. I have a flight to Jiuquan." "Ok sir. Gate A56. Have a good day. Next please!"

Plane Landing...

"We have now landed in Jiuquan. Please put your masks back on. We hope you have a great day. Thank you for flying on China Airlines." Said a voice over the radio.

Jiuquan, Gansu. Location of the Mogao Grottoes.

"Hello, Yuen. Thanks for picking me up." "No worries, Chen. Old friends always got to help each other out, right?" Chen chuckled. "To the Mogao Grottoes we go."

"It's been a while, eh? Place is still pretty much the same as the time we got attacked. Still hard to think we were the only two survivors." Said Yuen. "Shall we go in?" "Sure, why not?" Chen replied.

"So, after the attack, the government decided to purchase the grottoes. They're now turning it into a movie—shooting area, and they invited you to act in a movie: Old Tales from the Mogao Grottoes. They said having you, a famous actor to be their movie would be a great pleasure. You down for it?" "I'm an archaeologist. But sure, why not?" Chen said. "OK. I'll go tell the directors. Catch you later!" "Same!" Chen replied. He stared at the beautiful sunset. It reminded him of what happened 30 years prior. He sunk deep into thought...

"Hello!" Said a distinctive voice from behind him. "Woah!" Chen screamed as he fell back. "Who are you?" He asked. "My name's Agent Harry Smith. British Secret Force. Come with me. We have lots to talk about."

Secret Hideout. Location: Unknown.

"You remember the attacks on the Mogao Grottoes 30 years ago, right?" "Yes." "Well, Mr Chen, I know this sounds crazy, but one particular cave painting has some secret that no one should know. We have reason to believe that it is related to the origin of the coronavirus that ended 34 years ago."

"That...is a mouthful to take in." Chen said. "So...what do you want me to do?" "We think the attackers on that day were part of the American army. You probably don't know that the coronavirus happened over 200 years ago, and the Americans claimed that it started in Wuhan province." Harry said. "OK. Go on." "Well, all those claims made them suspicious, which is why we decided to track down who actually started the coronavirus." "I see. You want my help to navigate the grottoes, don't you?" Said Chen. "Exactly. You in or not?" "Well, sure, why not?" Chen replied. "OK. Here's my number. Meet me here in a month."

1 month later...

"Ok, crew. Let's move" Harry said. "We're looking for a blue phoenix." Another member of the crew mentioned. "I think I know where it is. I'll lead. And be careful, there's a ton of booby traps here." Chen said. "Down this hallway——" "Ahh!" A loud shriek cut through the air. The crew turned back. 6 members of their crew had sunk into quicksand. Their heads were already under. Just then, a squadron of about 50 Americans chased after them. "Go!" Harry shouted. The crew bolted for their lives.

"Turn left!" Chen screamed while bolting to the right. "Why are you running the wrong direction?" Harry asked. "It's a trick. Turning left will lead to an alligator pit. I'm trying to trick the Americans and buy us some time." Chen explained. "OK." Harry said. "Come on crew! Follow Chen!" Harry said. They ran down a long corridor, made a left, a right, a right, a left, a left, a right, and finally. There it was. A majestic blue phoenix. It was stunning. "There! That button!" Harry pointed to a hidden button the size of a grape. Chen ran up and clicked on it. Suddenly, the crew was encased in a mirage. Then, all of them blacked out.

Chen was asleep. He knew that he wasn't dead. He tried to wake up but couldn't. Suddenly, a flashing image appeared in his eyes. He was shocked. It was an image of some Americans creating something in a mysterious lab. He saw a woman drop a test tube with a green liquid. Instantly, everyone in the lab dropped dead. A label on the tube read: Coronavirus. Artificial Material. Do not touch. Then another image appeared, this time an American spy

sneaking into a Chinese lab and implanting the deadly coronavirus tube in the lab and sneaking away. Chen was astonished. ‘The coronavirus did start in America!’ He thought. He suddenly felt a cold shiver. In a split second, he went from laying on the ground to springing up. Harry was next to him, already on his feet. “The heck just happened?” Chen asked? “We all saw that. You were the only one who fainted. Come on. We need to get the evidence back to the government.” Harry said. They walked out of the grottoes and slowly disappeared into the darkness...

Despite seeing the coronavirus tube in the images, how would we have known if it was a man-made virus or a natural virus? We also saw the virus in an American lab, but would that fully clarify the fact that it started there? Also, the virus has delayed human development for decades... so which country should carry the burden of something such controversial?

New Tales of Mogao Grottoes

The Chinese Foundation Secondary School, Tan, Matthew – 13

Have you ever heard about Mogao Grottoes? What did you say? Mango Grottoes? No, I mean Mogao Grottoes in China. The Mogao Grottoes, also known as the Thousand Buddha Grottoes or Caves of the Thousand Buddhas, form a system of 500 temples at the southeast of the center of Dunhuang, an oasis located in Gansu province, China. It is situated at a strategic point along the Silk Route, at the crossroads of trade as well as being crossroads of religious, cultural, and intellectual influences. If you are curious about Mogao Grottoes, read on and even if you are not curious, here, my friend, is the “New Tales of Mogao Grottoes”.

First of all, when and how were the Mogao Grottoes found? During the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, Western explorers began to show interest in the ancient Silk Road and the lost cities of Central Asia, and those who passed through Dunhuang noted the murals, sculptures, and artifacts such as the Stele of Sulaiman at Mogao. There is an estimated half a million square feet of religious wall murals within the caves. On 25th June 1900, a Chinese Taoist named Wang Yuanlu, who lived in the Mogao Grottoes, carried out a large-scale cleaning operation in order to convert some of the caves that had been abandoned for a long time into Taoist temples. While he was clearing away the sand and made an attempt of restoration at the site of cave 16, discovered a walled-up area behind one side of a corridor leading to the main cave. Behind the wall was a small cave, known as The Library Cave, Cave 17 or Chang Jing Dong. It was stuffed with an enormous hoard of manuscripts from the 4th century to the 11th century. It is said to be the biggest discovery of the Mogao Grottoes. In 1910, a scholar Luo Zhenyu and others persuaded the Ministry of Education to recover the rest of the manuscripts and have them sent to Beijing. However, not all the manuscripts were taken to Beijing, some were retrieved, and some were stolen. Some of the caves were damaged and vandalized in the 1920s to the 1930s. The situation improved in 1941 when, following a visit by Wu Zuoren to the site the previous year, the painter Zhang Daqian arrived at the caves with a small team of assistants and stayed for two and a half years to repair and copy the murals. He exhibited and published the copies of the murals in 1943, which helped to raise awareness and promote the art of Dunhuang within China. In 1956, the first Premier of the People's Republic of China, Zhou Enlai, took a personal interest in the caves and sanctioned a grant to repair and protect the site. In 1961, the Mogao Grottoes were declared to be a specially protected historical monument by the State Council, and large-scale renovation work at Mogao began soon afterwards. Today, efforts are continuing to conserve and research the site and its content. The Mogao Grottoes became one of the UNESCO World Heritage Sites in 1987. From 1988 to 1995 a further 248 caves were discovered to the North of the 487 caves known in the early 1900s.

Secondly, let's learn about its history. The construction of the Mogao Grottoes near Dunhuang is generally taken to have begun sometime in the fourth century AD. According to a book written during the reign of Tang Empress Wu, Fokan Ji by Li Junxiu, a Buddhist monk named Lè Zūn had a vision of a thousand Buddhas bathed in golden light at the site in 366 AD. This inspiring him to build a cave there. The caves initially served only as a place of meditation for hermit monks, but later developed to serve the monasteries that sprang up nearby. By the Tang Dynasty, the number of caves had reached over a thousand. During the Ming Dynasty, the Silk Road was finally officially abandoned, and Dunhuang slowly became depopulated and largely forgotten by the outside world. Most of the Mogao Grottoes were abandoned. The site, however, was still a place of pilgrimage for some and was also used as a place of worship by local people at the beginning of the twentieth century when there was renewed interest in the site.

Mogao Grottoes encompass caves, wall printings, painted sculptures, ancient architecture, movable cultural relics, and their settings. The property area and buffer zone contained all the attributes that demonstrated the values of the Mogao Grottoes. This ensured the integrity of both the heritage site and its environment. The location of the Mogao Caves and their settings are faithful to the authentic historical context in which they were created. The design, materials, traditions, techniques, spirit, and impression of the caves, wall paintings, painted sculptures and movable cultural relics still exhibit the characteristics of the periods in which they were created. The continued utilization of the Mogao Caves for tourism has indeed promoted their historic significance. Conservation plans have established guidelines for the caves' utilization and conservation will therefore ensure the authenticity of the site and its settings to the future.

And that's the “New Tales of Mogao Grottoes” and the historical value of Mogao Grottoes.

Sunday in the Cave

The Chinese Foundation Secondary School, Yip, See Hang – 12

It was a Sunday. I had an exam the next day. I spent hours and hours studying in my room. I was drifting to sleep, then when I opened my eyes again, all I saw was yellow haze. It was so quiet that I only heard cicadas singing. The sky was so clear. There were no clouds but only stars twinkling. They were blinking at me.

Suddenly, dust went into my eyes. I had to close my eyes to let the dust go away. When I opened my eyes, a woman was standing in front of me. I looked up and saw the face of a Buddha. I was looking at a statue. Everything was so ancient and dusty. The walls were all covered in paintings and writings of an unknown language. Then, there was a monk walking towards me. I asked, “Where am I?” “You are in the Mogao Grottoes, China.” He left me hanging and my mouth was wide open. How could this happen? I was at my home in Taikoo but now I’m in Mogao Grottoes? What was going on?

I followed the monk. He showed me a brown door then he walked away. His back fading in front of my eyes. I opened the door with a creak. Then suddenly a beautiful woman was standing in front of me, smiling. “You are finally here.” “You sent me here?” I asked. “But why am I here? How did I get here? Have I done anything wrong? If I have, I’m truly sorry.” I lowered my head and apologized. “Oh, dear one. You are not in trouble.” The woman spoke, chuckling. “A while ago I was studying then the next thing I know, I’m here!” I raised my eyebrows, confused. She gazed at me with a frown. “It has been catastrophic since Amala has left us. And now Neveda is coming to take Amala, we need your help! You are the only one who can save Amala and Neveda with the ancient teardrop.” “Teardrop? Could you please explain?” “My apologies, I have forgotten you know nothing about Amala and Neveda. Amala is our sacred flower. She was once a beautiful girl, a fair maiden. She was also our dearest leader. But Neveda from the tribe of Katumala...” She walked towards a painting of the face of a lady holding a flower, then traced her hands on the drawings from the walls. “Neveda was cursed. She dare blames Amala, Neveda cursed Amala and transformed her into a yellow rose. The curse laid on Amala was not eternal – it can be cured. Amala is the only flower that would blossom forever. Recently, Amala has been withering. Yet, we do not know why. Amala has guided us through a scroll written by her once ago. It wrote, “Find the girl whose power is beyond our imagination. When you do, I will wither and wither. She is the only one who can save me and Neveda.” She kissed her fingertip and traced the remaining petals of Amala. “We have searched for generations. Ever since we laid our eyes on you, Amala has begun withering. There is a secret behind the curse only Amala knows. We need that secret to save us. You are the key to it.”

“Key? But... I’m just a twelve-year-old girl who should be at school. Why would I be the key to something I never knew happened? Why would I be related?” I narrowed my eyebrows. “I, Athena, had sworn to protect and solve the mystery of the withering rose. It is my duty and my honour to do so, and my duty to retrieve and fetch you to help me on this quest of the withering rose. I am asking you now Hailey of Taikoo, will you join me to bring harmony to the tribe and save both leaders of both tribes?” I didn’t even think, “Yes, I will help and bring harmony to the tribes even if it is the last thing I would do.” “Very well,” She smiled warmly. “I must take you to meet the others. They should meet their new leader.”

I followed Athena into the other side of the cave. All the walls were covered with unique paintings, drawings and statues of people in China. The statues were a little scary at first but I got used to these smug smiles. The walls were very attractive and I couldn’t stop looking. I kept examining the walls as we walked and strode through the hallway or whatever it was. Perhaps, a cave passageway?

We entered a room filled with golden armours and chants. I looked at Athena, with an expression filled with mystery. “Oh, do not be startled. Perhaps it is just the tribe celebrating the day of Azarah,” she saw my face, that said one word—huh? “Or you humans celebrate that special Christmahakas.” “It’s Christmas.” “Ah, I see, how different our cultures are.” I sensed a tint of humour behind that sentence but would ancient people understand humour? Too ancient to know I bet. “Yes, we do know what humour is since we always study your fine interesting way of communicating.” “How did you know that I was thinking about sarcasm?” I asked as if I was interrogating her. “We Azalanians,” she flinched to the sound of her own voice, “have a special way of knowing people’s thoughts. You fellow humans call this mind-reading.” “Woah, mind-reading? That is so cool.” “Yes, perhaps. We Az—” she paused, eyes focused on the ground, “Why did you pause?” “I... just can’t even say the name of our tribe...All of this, this mess about Amala, certainly is my fault.” “What do you mean? It is not your fault!” “But... it is. I was the one who cursed Neveda. Because she is my sister... I was jealous of how my parents loved her. I cursed her. If she

ever were to fall in love or be with the people she loves, she would lose something she valued. She was with mother and once they smiled at each other, mother passed away. She collapsed and stopped breathing.” A tear fell down her cheek. “She blamed Amala for her curse mostly, the hatred between them before the spell was bad enough...” “I’m so sorry.” “This is life, isn’t it? Full of ups and downs.” Her eyes were so full of water, I couldn’t see her eyes. After a while, she cooled down and we continued walking.

Athena suddenly stopped at a dead-end, “This is it, our dome.” I looked, “Your dome is a dead-end?” She smiled, waved her hand and dozens of plants and vines grasped the door and it immediately collapsed into mud and soil. My jaw dropped. She laughed, “Magic.” She invited me to go in and shoved me into the so called dead-end. I gasped in shock as I turned my head and watched the door re-build itself and covered itself in vines again.

A bunch of monks and girls that looked like Athena gathered around us. They suddenly knelt down and cried, “Leader! Lord!” “Wait, what’s going on?” “They are worshiping you oh great leader,” Athena said. I was in disbelief. I closed my eyes and used my hands cover my face. I said to myself, “Am I dreaming now? If yes, it would be a nightmare!”.

I gasped and opened my eyes. Suddenly, I was back in my bedroom, windows shut. I opened the window. I looked out and saw the usual buildings around me. The minibus was waiting for the passengers rushing to catch it. My monkey doll was next to me. I asked “Hey little Du Du Mon, did you know what happened? Did you see all the ancient statues and paintings?” When I tried to make sense of all of what I remembered, then my mom called me, “Honey! Breakfast!” A dream, it was all a dream. But it was quite a journey. I think it was because I was really interested in what we learned about the Mogao Grottoes caves in class yesterday. I wish I would continue my dream tonight.

The Legendary Mogao Grottoes

The Chinese Foundation Secondary School, Yiu, Hok Lam – 13

Once upon a time, in far, far away, not too far away, there were the strangest twins Janet and James. Why were they strange? Well, apart from learning like normal students would do, they decided to learn the opposite way. What do I mean? They were those who learnt by action. They loved going on adventures. They've been to many different places around the world, exploring historical monuments, gathering things, and examining them. This time, they're going on the best adventure in the world.

"James! James! Look what I just found here!" said Janet. "Wait, look at mine first, mine is way more awesome than what you just found!" said James. "No! Come and see mine first" "No! Mine first!" "UGH!! Why are you so annoying!" As you can see here, this is their problem, they can't even stay put for 1 second. "Ok! That's enough you two! Why don't you guys just exchange places with each other so that you guys could look at it at the same time?" shouted Jennifer, their mom. "Fine!" they both said at the same time. "I told you this was awesome." said James with the 'very proud of myself' face, "Oh really? Mine is way more fascinating to look at!" said Janet. "Can you two just stop it! You know I'm thinking of letting you guys go to the Mogao Grottoes for the school's field trip this time. Hmmm... should I do that?" said Jennifer hoping that it would stop James and Janet from arguing. "Did you just say that we will be going to the Mogao Grottoes, which is located at the religious and cultural crossroads on the Silk Road and has some of the finest examples of Buddhist art spanning a period of 1,000 years?" questioned Janet. "Yes, Janet, yes, James, so are you guys still going to argue now?" asked Jennifer knowing that both of them would say no. "No mom! We will not!" they both shouted.

Day after day, they waited for the day that could change their lives. Then it came. "Bye, mom and dad!" they shouted while waving to their parents. On the bus, Ms. Ellis counted "One... two... three... all here! We can go now, driver." Along the way, they kept talking and talking to the point that many students told them they were being too loud. "We're here, off you go now, please make sure to follow the guide, and don't touch anything until you get permission. We will be gathering here in 2 hours, are you all clear?" "Yes!" said the students together. "First of all, welcome to Mogao Grottoes! I'm your guide, Iris, and I will be leading you guys to explore this amazing monument. Let's go now!" The students then followed her, "Wow! Look at this Alice! This Buddha is big, and almost the whole wall is painted with Buddhas. "Wow!" said Alice. "What is this room for?" asked Sam. "Don't! No one opens this door! It is said that there is an evil dragon behind this door, so just follow me, don't open any doors unless I let you," warned Iris. Iris did warn but the warning wasn't enough to stop Janet and James's curiosity to find out what was behind the door. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" asked James with a kind of wicked smile. "Yes!" replied Janet.

They opened the door. Behind it was a mini room, with a very funny-looking bottle covered with a glass cover. "James, this room is the creepiest room I've even been to," said Janet with a trembling voice. "Same for me. Look at these drawings, it's all about this dragon. Its face looks horrible," answered James. "Janet! There is a bottle in the center, is it something important? Let me open it!" "Wait! No! James!" but it was too late James opened the bottle, a shining white light appeared in front of them and then changed to a shape of a...dragon! "Oh no! Janet! This is the... the... the horrible-looking dragon! Hide!" shouted James. However, there was no place for them to hide or even run away from. The dragon came closer to them, they were scared to death, though trying very hard not to show it. Suddenly, "Oh hey their kids, do you know where this is?" the dragon spoke in a gentle way. "Uhm... this is the Mogao Grottoes." said Janet, "Aren't you supposed to be scary and evil?" asked James. "Oh, it must be those books telling you that I'm scary and evil. I'm not! So don't be scared. But could I ask you guys for a favor?" asked the dragon. "Yes of course! What do you want us to do?" said James with a calmer heart now. "Well, it started about 1000 years ago, an evil buddha wanted to rule this cave, of course not with my permission. My work is to protect this cave from the evil. Unfortunately, the evil buddha tricked me into this bottle. However, I was able to pull him inside too. But I think he came out of the bottle with me, and so we need to find him and defeat him now," explained the dragon. "James, I'm not too sure if we can do this," hesitated Janet. "Come on! We need to help the dragon!" said James. "Uhh...Ok! Let's!" Just when Janet said this the evil buddha attacked, "Defeat me? What a joke!" "Hide behind me kids," said the dragon. Then they started the battle, RING- RING. A phone rang. It was Janet's phone and it drew the buddha's attention. "What's this?" asked the buddha. "Haven't you heard of this? It's so good even buddhas get addicted to it" "I don't believe you!" As it was going to attack, James stood in front of Janet and helped her, they showed the buddha a video from Netflix. Then... "What's this? Give it to me!" when the

evil buddha was attracted by the phone, the dragon gave the buddha a big hit on his chest. Then it disappeared in thin air. After they settled down, the dragon thanked them, and just like that their adventurous adventure came to an end.

When they got home, they were not like before. They were nice to each other and had become a team. Jennifer then asked, "Is it just me or are you two getting along with each other?" They both answered "Well... It's a long story." The moral of this story is that Netflix is too good it can addict even a buddha.

The Time Tunnel into the Hans Dynasty

The Independent Schools Foundation Academy, Lee, Marcus – 13

“Attention passengers. We are arriving at Beijing train station soon. Please pack your luggage and prepare to leave the train.” The overhead announcement crackled throughout the train.

Startled, Fu awoke from an unsettled nap. He stretched out his legs and sighed as he looked out the window taking in the views of the country rushing past him. The sun was setting, casting a brilliant red light across the horizon.

Fu grabbed his tattered luggage as he walked out of the train cart and into the corridor of the metal carriage. As he headed for the taxi rank, he felt the rough surface of his bag which reminds him of the day he had started, reminds him of every story he had, every memory of his paintings.

“Where are we heading tonight, sir?” The cabbie asked, making eye contact through the rearview mirror. Fu simply held up his phone and pointed at the location on the display. The driver grunted his acknowledgement and they weaved through the heavy traffic of the city towards the vast desert.

Fu’s excitement was hard to restrain. He looked out the window and thought about the events that had brought him this far. This was the break he was waiting for. Although he was a very successful private art curator for the biggest names in China, the black-market is where the money was, and the tip that Fu received was too good to pass up. The art world has been looking for one of the oldest paintings from the Han Dynasty. From around 168 BC, it was a funerary banner and worth a fortune.

The painting had many replicas, but Fu now may know where the original was located. The cab wound its way towards the Mogao Caves. He had only been to these caves once as a child. His grandparents had taken him and told him hundreds of stories about the Silk Road and the thousands of paintings, artwork and writing that Buddhist monks had created and stored in the caves.

Now he learned that the much-coveted painting was there. It wasn’t going to be easy though. The caves had been closed for so long and only a few were open to the public as a tourist attraction. He would need to avoid security and prying eyes. Everything would have to be done by cover of the night.

The frigid water ebbed and slammed against Fu’s body cruelly, almost pushing him into a state of hyperthermia. Muscle spasms wreaked havoc on his body. The storm had come suddenly and slammed Fu against the cave, before pushing him into the dark crevice. He limped almost unconsciously into the darkness, fumbling with his headlight.

He glanced around and saw everything around him unfold; this was it. He took out his hand drawn map, which thankfully was kept in a protected case. He followed the instructions carefully. When he finally wound around the last corner, he came across a tiny opening. Leaning down he couldn’t see much without squeezing through the small door.

He stared at the paintings, artwork, scrolls and silver which filled the back wall from floor to ceiling. He had never seen such beauty, such elegance. He wanted to take all the paintings here and sell all of them. As he limped over towards the treasure something caught his eye, something elegant. There was a painting, a painting which was so different from the others.

The painting had a wooden frame around it. Fu stared at the painting as if it spoke directly to him, as if it was a language he had learned to speak since childbirth. He grabbed the painting as he admired it, smiling with joy.

Fu glanced around, and then something else caught his eye. It wasn’t much – just a small light shining in the distance and as Fu walked closer and closer to the exit, he could almost feel a gust of wind blowing his way.

Fu held up the painting in one hand and ran towards the exit where he had come from. A wall of sunlight hit Fu in the face, blinding him for a bit. He chuckled and laughed out loud as he stared at his painting in dismay, afraid that something had scratched it.

"Hey, you there. I have never seen something as fantastic as that!"

Fu opened his eyes wide in shock and started backing away from this person who had just appeared before him.

"Your jacket the material is so special... I have never seen it before!"

Fu stopped in the middle of his track as he turned around and faced the person. He stared at the painting which he held up in his hand and back at the person.

"Haha, you're such a funny guy. Is this some sort of prank? Why are you wearing clothes from like centuries ago?"

Fu laughed at the person. The person stared at him in awe as he turned away as if he was drunk.

"Hey, I am talking to you!" Fu yelled at the person as he walked away. The person turned around and walked closer to Fu.

"Am I dreaming? Who are you?" The person stared at Fu in wonder and amazement.

"Tell me who you are first!" Fu shouted at the person and placed the painting on the ground. He stared at the person with frustration.

"I am a trader from the Han Dynasty!"

"This... This is the Han Dynasty?" Fu felt as if he was hit by a wall of reality, pushing him back down onto the ground. He felt as if his legs had gone numb and his muscles ached.

"You look lost, why don't you travel with me to the nearest city?" Fu looked at the painting and picked it up from the floor. He walked towards the trader.

The trader looked at him and smiled; he walked towards his horse and gestured for Fu to follow him.

Fu held the painting in one hand and limped towards the trader. The trader made a gesture to tell Fu to get onto his horse. Fu reluctantly did so. He watched the sky unfold as the city of emeralds came into view.

Fu stared at the paintings which hung over the walls of the trader's home. He was shocked by the art and silverware displayed. Then he saw a painting which looked oddly like the one which he had found. Something was different though, the painting wasn't finished.

"What is this?" Fu asked in wonder and shock at the trader.

"This is just another project of mine. I have painted and created so many across the Han Dynasty and I think that this may well be one of my finest projects. But it's very difficult, I don't know if I should continue with it."

"Do you want to draw it?" Fu exclaimed. His mind was racing.

"What will people think about it? Who will know about it?" Fu stared at the trader in shock to see the insecurities of the trader show.

"The night is falling, let me make you some tea."

After weeks, the trader and Fu started to get closer and closer. However, Fu could feel as if something was missing from him. Something had struck him every night he stayed there; he had missed something.

Fu had decided to leave, and he wanted to do it at night. So that the trader wouldn't know, so that he wouldn't regret anything. He wanted his life bad. He dreamt of going back to becoming a trader for weeks and it kept him up at night. Twisting and turning.

Fu took one last glance back at the small hut as he got onto the saddle of the horse he had rode to come here. He smiled as the birds in the distance cried, as the sun set.

As Fu was about to leave, he heard a shout coming behind him. He turned around and looked at Fu.

"Fu! I will remember you forever!" The trader yelled. The sound of the yell carried Fu back into the cave.

Days had passed, Fu had missed the trader, it had felt as if it had been years. He had learned about friendship, something that he had never thought that he would be able to feel.

Fu turned around and saw a painting which looked very familiar, as he stared closer at it. The painting had shown a drawing of an emperor. The drawing which had begun all of this. He chuckled as he stared at it in shock. He looked downwards at the painting to admire what his friends were able to create.

Something was different though, at the bottom of the painting. It said, "To my dear friend Fu." Fu felt tears flowing out of his eyes.

The Mogao Grottoes

Wellington College, Shanghai, Bo, Claire – 12

It was a bright and sunny evening in Shanghai. Kat was chilling on her bed, in her apartment, watching a documentary about the Mogao Grottoes. She was a bright girl with gorgeous, long, brown locks drifting down from her head. She had piercing blue eyes, perfectly complimenting her tanned skin. Oh, how she longed to visit the caves! She wasn't interested in the research, but she really wanted to go explore there.

Putting her mind back on the documentary, she heard that there was rumored to be a secret cave with the treasures of the ancient Silk Road! Her dream was to discover this cave and make her parents proud of her. She closed her computer, tucked herself to bed, and drifted off to sleep, dreaming of how wonderful it would be to be the first one to discover ancient Silk Road treasures!

Chirp! Chirp! Chirp! Kat rose up, wiping her eyes as she did so. She dragged herself out of bed, and gobbled up some cereal for breakfast. The weather outside was clear, bright, and sunny. She suddenly felt a wave of motivation drift past her. She thought about what happened last night, and thought to herself: What if I really did find the cave? What if I did become famous? What if I would be the first one to discover it? She felt very overwhelmed by all the questions, so she made a cup of tea, sat down, and started to make a plan.

On a new page in her sketchbook, was the word: RESEARCH. She opened her laptop, and started to search up everything there was. Days passed with no sleep. Finally, three days later, she was done. She had made the most perfect plan, explaining every move she would make, and everything she would need to know. All she needed to do now, was to get to the Mogao Grottoes, and set the plan into action.

Her car skidded into the entrance. She went up to a quiet place, and took out her plan. The first thing she needed to do, was to find clues. She searched the whole place, but found none. Just as she was going to give up, she spotted something unusual. There were the strange patterns on the floor. They were little men, facing different directions.

Her heart started pounding inside her chest. She followed these men, and on the way, she picked up some small stone ladybugs that she thought were pretty and would gift to her parents. Then, she got to a dead end. But there was a sculpture, a sculpture of a gigantic vase. The vase was really dusty, like no one had touched it for years. It was set in a strange position, it looked almost like a bug. A ladybug. Then, she remembered.

Yesterday, while researching, she had read something about how ladybugs were the symbol of the people who used to use and live in the Mogao Grottoes. She had thought this was not true, and that it was all fake, so she dismissed it. But now, this piece of information was priceless. She studied the vase, and found 5 strange dents inside it. There were four small dents surrounding a big one. She immediately took the ladybug stones out of her backpack, and slotted them into the dents. And now, only one was missing. She leaned against the wall, wondering what to do. Then she felt a brick move behind her back. She stood up, turned around, and pulled the brick out. Inside, was a dusty fabric bag, and inside, was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. It was a emerald green jewel, in the shape of a ladybug. It was crystal clear, and so shiny, that it almost created light. She slotted it into the remaining dent in the vase, and something rumbled behind her.

She turned around, not knowing what to expect, but the floor was retreating, and there was a staircase lit up with torches leading down into a shiny room. She carefully made her way down, and entered the room. Inside the room, were these magnificent treasures. Just when she thought it couldn't get any better, there was another door, at the big of the room. She quickly went in, and gasped in shock. This could not be true! There were two massive thrones in the middle of the room, looming over her. There was also a painting on the wall. They were pictures of her parents! It said: KING AND QUEEN OF THE MOGAO TRIBE!

Kat was so ecstatic she could scream. Not only did she discover the ancient treasures of the Mogao Grottoes, she also discovered that as an only child, she was the heir to this ancient tribe!

Mogao Grotto Story

Wellington College, Shanghai, Brennan, Anna – 12

As she shoveled the pineapple fried rice into her mouth, Anong felt the sorrow of the news she had just devoured. How could this be possible? How could she bear leaving her family and friends behind, to move to somewhere she's only heard about in story books? She slammed down her chopsticks and tore to her room.

Her parents let her go. They knew she would react this way, as she was very loyal to her friends and country.

Anong sat in her room, searching through piles of dusty books and magazines. Setting aside the ones she needed, she thought about how horrible it would be in Dunhuang, China, in a small house.

Surprisingly, what she read about the city wasn't that bad! It used to be a main trading center— part of the Silk Road! That must mean it has lots of riches! She also found out that it was in a desert, but she's used to the heat. Thailand, Buri Ram was her home.

A few weeks later, she was ready to move. Anong had said goodbye to her friends, her home, and her bags were packed. She stood on the dock proudly, waiting to catch the ferry that would take her to the coast of China. Seeing the wooden ferry made her suddenly doubt her confidence, but as it drew in she knew this was her destiny. Her Mum and Dad stood beside her as she carefully boarded the massive boat and walked to her seat. The boat was very slow, because it was powered by sails so she lay down and tried to sleep.

A few hours later, she woke up as the ship was rocking backwards and forwards. As Anong had never been in a ship before, she was starting to feel slightly seasick. She tried to go back to sleep, but then felt a hard bump. Suddenly, everyone started getting up and grabbing their bags, and her parents woke her up.

"Anong, we're here," said her parents.

Carefully getting up, she grabbed her bag and felt a rush of excitement. She was in China – the almighty China! She brushed her long hair to the side and ran to the doorway.

Anong had read about the city they were arriving to. It was called Guangzhou. Guangzhou has been the one of the world's biggest trading ports since the 17th century! She saw tons of ships and ferries lined up in their stops, a busy bustling city, lots of buildings.

However, the longest and hardest part of the trip was coming up. They had to travel by ox cart to get to Dunhuang, and that would take several weeks. Luckily she had brought a lot of books to read.

They had to walk to the station, which took about 45 minutes as Guangzhou was a big city and they had to keep asking for directions. When they finally arrived they were exhausted. By the time they got to their cart, it was 8pm so they set down their stuff and headed off. Slowly, Anong fell asleep to the beat of the ox's heavy hooves.

The next day, Anong woke up late. The cart was stopped and she saw her parents walking towards a small cottage. Suddenly filled with energy, she got out of the ox cart and ran towards her parents.

"Where are we?" she panted.

"We are on the outskirts of Guangxi province, and we needed breakfast so we stopped at this farm to ask for some food." said her father.

She nodded, and they walked on. They arrived at the cottage door, a small, round, red door and knocked 3 times.

A bit later, an old woman arrived at the door and said something in Chinese. Anong could only speak a little bit, as she studied it before she came.

"Ni hao! Qingwen..ni ke yi gei wo men chi ma?"

"O, ni ke yi shuo zhongwen! Ke yi!" She shuffled off back into the house.

"Okay, I asked her for some food and she said of course," said Anong to her parents.

“Wow, how did you know that?” asked her mother.

“I studied some Chinese before I came,” said Anong with a smirk.

At that point, the lady came back with a basket full of food. Her father got some money and paid her.

“*Xiexie*,” said Anong.

“*Meiguanxi!*” Said the lady.

They returned back to the ox cart and set off again. They unpacked the basket to find bread, eggs, tomatoes, three milk bottles, and some cheese. They only ate one third of it to save some for the rest of the day. Anong started reading a book on Chinese words.

The rest of the day passed quickly, the family played cards, read, rested, and by the end of the day they were already in Guizhou province.

The long trip passed quickly, stopping in farms for food and cards and books for entertainment. They passed a lot of beautiful views, like Guizhou’s beautiful mountains, Qinghai lake, Chaka salt lake, and saw many pandas in Chengdu. After about 2 weeks, they finally arrived to Dunhuang!

Her first impression of Dunhuang was not very positive. Sandy plains, small hills. She looked around. Actually, there was a small town in the distance! When they finally arrived, she quite liked it.

They got out of the cart and took their stuff. There were little kids running around, playing football and mothers inside small houses made out wood, yelling at them to be careful. As a fifteen year old, the sight of this warmed her heart. They walked past the local school, and she studied it quickly. It looked fun!

After walking a bit more, they arrived at their new house. Their house was small but cosy, with lots of storage space. She really liked her new room, being bigger than the one in her house in Thailand. Since it was late, they went straight to bed without unpacking and in the morning attended her first day of school.

Her school was quite small with very little people, but luckily Anong made friends on the first day. Her friends name was Fufu, and she told her all about Dunhuang. However, there was one thing she told her that she remembered.

“Recently, something amazing has been discovered in Dunhuang. Something made in 336bc called the mogao grottoes with hundreds of Buddhas and ancient drawings.”

Anong had a curious mind, and wanted to find out more about these grottoes. When she got home that day, she told her parents about them, and they decided to go and visit them. After the school week passed, they walked there. It was really beautiful with many caves. Anong got really excited, and rushed to one of the caves.

“Anong!” Her parents called her back.

She didn’t listen, so they rushed after her and in the cave they saw a beautiful sight!

A wonderful Buddha stood with its helpers, the walls painted with little people representing different characteristics and situations. It was very dark in this cave, and it smelt strongly of damp concrete and old paint. Anong looked around in fascination – it really was beautiful. Her parents joined her and looked around, sighing in amazement. As they went to go out to explore other caves, suddenly the cave door closed!

Anong screamed, as it was very dark and scary. Suddenly, they heard a noise behind them –like something moving that hadn’t moved in about a million years, a creaking sound that made everyone stop in fear.

“Hello, I see you have come to see us,” said a loud voice.

“Who’s there?” said Anong more bravely than she felt.

“It is me, the almighty Buddha, whose cave you stand within.”

They slowly turned around to see the almighty Buddha surrounded by golden light, floating slightly off the ground.

“Get out of my cave. I have lived here in peace for 10 million years,” said the Buddha.

“I’m afraid we can’t, if you haven’t noticed the door is blocked.” said Anong.

“Ah, so you’re a cunning one, I see. Fine. If you beat me in a fight, I will let you out of this cave. If you lose, you will turn into a Buddha and stay here forever.”

“Fine, I shall fight you, but I warn you, I mean no harm,”

They faced each other, and suddenly, Anong threw a punch that was instantly blocked by the Buddha. The Buddha threw back the punch and suddenly the fight broke out hard. There was kicking, punching, and it went on for a couple of minutes. Then suddenly, Anong used all of her strength to push the Buddha away and he crashed against the wall. He stood up shakily.

“You are victorious. You are free to leave,” said the Buddha angrily.

He unblocked the door and Anong gave him a small smile.

“Thank you,”

Anong and her parents ran out happily. They lived happily in Dunhuang and never went back to the grottoes again. They had learnt their lesson.

Mogao Grottoes

Wellington College, Shanghai, Guo, Sissi – 12

The steep monstrous cliff stood facing monk Yuezun. He found himself constructing an image in his mind, one of a thousand radiant Buddhas illuminated in golden light. And that was what inspired him to begin carving the image to life. And thus, the creation of the very first Mogao cave temple began.

The Mogao Grottoes is located in the Gobi Desert and conveniently alongside the Silk Road near the city of Dunhuang. The Silk Road was a path that connected China in the Far East, to the Middle East, and even to Europe in the Far West. It was a network that allowed for trades in products, knowledge, religion, and culture. The Silk Road led Dunhuang to become a melting pot.

The bare hands unseated large rocks, the shovels dug deep, the hammers cracked through, the ropes and buckets removed rubble, they did not stop. The year then was 366 AD. Drops of sweat quickly evaporated after landing on the grimy ground of powdered sand with the hard rough surface looking like the ground had just been dusted in the earthy red from planet Mars. The monks were hard at work creating a peaceful place for meditation.

Meditation is to practice and train the brain to reach a state of calm and concentration, with the hope to become enlightened. Monks want to become enlightened which is a point where they have found the truth and will no longer have human desires. After enlightenment, you arrive at a place called Nirvana, where you no longer live in the cycle of rebirth. Therefore, creating a proper place for meditation is extremely important in the world of Buddhism.

The cave temples were carved deep. Some were created by monks, some were sponsored by donors like government officials or wealthy families. To inspire a calm environment for meditation and reaching enlightenment, many different forms of art showing buddhist themes and teachings were created in the cave temples.

The walls are almost completely covered in exquisite and intricate murals, even on the ceilings. Colors red and blue were some that appeared commonly. Those spiritual paintings looked as if they were actually alive, breathing with beating hearts.

Every Buddha that could be found, all represented something, they all had their own life time stories. One example is the “Generous Moonlight King” Buddha in cave 275. After being a generous man who gave his head away in life, he became a Buddha. At one point in time, the colors were vibrant and more vivid, but now some parts had scratches, some were faded by time, and some were carved out, but most were well preserved. The paintings and even the caves itself were carved by hands by attendees from the ruling family of Northern Wei and Northern Zhou.

Buddhist sculptures, another form of art, in a more three dimensional way. Today, around 2400 sculptures made out of clay can still be found in the caves. The biggest statue was 33 meters high and the smallest was only 10 centimeters. Inside the statues, they have been constructed by centered stone, wood structure compressed in with red then lastly covered in paint. The average of statues are usually statues of Buddha. But there are also other statues of other spiritual devout creatures.

One out of the other Buddha is the sculpture of Maitreya Buddha. The Maitreya Buddha had always been looked up as the future Buddha, its name is a girl name meaning “loving kindness,” but it is also likely to be a him. It is a bodhisattva, who is believed in Theosophy will show up one day in earth in the future following by Gautama Buddha, but also believed that he is a talented spiritual being and who have a high position in member of a considered as unknown spiritual social scale, the Masters of the Ancient Wisdom.

Piles of dust gathered behind the monks as they chitter—chattered their time through their work. The scratchy sound of the friction against the grains of sand at the bottom of their shoes. Every once in a while, roasting wind would scamper hushing around. When later on, the sun cools, or maybe by the time it sets, the temperature would chill around sixteen degrees Celsius. The sky would darken into a spectral gloomy navy blue which would make it difficult to see.

It was not as easy as most imagined it would be. The work took time, energy, and effort, but then why did they do it? The purpose of this cave that they were constructing was to share Buddhism. Hopefully teaching pilgrims important Buddhist lessons, to proselytize, and to keep the religion breathing. Which it did achieve their aims.

The progress of carving kept on for about a 1000 years. In the year 1900, there were 4,500 precious cultural relics that were from 256 AD to 1002 AD found in the later discovered Library cave or Buddhist Sutra Cave. This was considered as one of the world's greatest Oriental cultural discoveries. Other precious items discovered were silk paintings, embroidery, and documents in other non-Chinese ancient languages.

Looking back from the present day, it truly was a great accomplishment from the 4th to the 14th century. Even after more than 1,500 years later, the caves are still pretty finely kept, the information of culture within them, mostly presented by art works.

The art and culture preserved in the caves are evidence of the development of art in China.

Today, the Mogao caves, or sometimes called the "Thousand Buddha Grottoes," serve as an important piece of evidence of history. The caves retained Buddhism alive, due to the cave, a lot of Chinese had become Buddhists. Even today, it is a popular tourism place and where pilgrimage takes place. Historians come to visit the Mogao caves for stories left from ancient China. Artists from all over the world come to this place to replicate the cave paintings so we can have a digital copy to preserve permanently forever.

The Mogao cave temples, containing the largest collection of Buddhist art, are not just rich in religion, but also in culture, art, history, military, and the economy of ancient China. The value of these caves truly can not be replaced, they are truly as their name Mogao means in Chinese "peerless." No other place on earth can compare. No other place on earth can match its value. And that is why the Mogao Grottoes are harmoniously protected by the world.

Mogao Grotto Story

Wellington College, Shanghai, Hewitt, Ashley – 12

“Queen Victoria, longest-reigning British Monarch has been reported dead this Tuesday morning and the Royal Family has confirmed that King Edward VII will be her successor. According to Dr Reid, the late Queen had been smiling on her deathbed as though recalling memories of her youth. Some have even said that she spoke a monologue in Hindustani, mentioning an unknown “Sagara” and 1837. Who this figure is, we currently have no reports on. Moving onto the topic of the Queen’s Funeral Procession....”

MARCH, 1837...

“Pa? Are we nearly home yet?”

“Nearly.” He grunted.

I sighed, he’d said that five times already. I twisted my neck, glancing at the vast land around us. The sand glistened under the harsh sun, tinged a golden orange colour. The pink sky morphed into vibrant red hues as they met the skyline. Gusts of wind swirl around us, twirling and fiddling with my dark hair as though I were merely another one of Surya’s many dolls.

As the sky darkened and the sun sank into the dunes, the torrid heat slowly faded away and was replaced by icy winds that left the hairs on my neck standing up. It would be around 30 more minutes before the darkness would completely engulf us. This meant that we would have to find somewhere to stay for the night, and fast. Panic began settling into the others, leaving pa extremely stressed.

“Sagara?” Pa called out at me, “Can you go ahead to see if there’s anyone ahead?”

“Okay, anyone, in particular, we’re avoiding?”

He shrugged, “The usual, Beckwith.”

Nodding, I ran ahead. Pa always sent me ahead to look for danger, he claims I have senses no other human has. Whether that’s the truth or he just didn’t quite trust anyone else to do it, I’ll never know.

The first thing that struck me as peculiar was the dead silence.

One thing that I’ve learned from constantly travelling between India and China is that the Dunhuang area is never silent. Whether it’s the wind, the distant sound of traveller’s laughing or the flapping of bird wings, silence is impossible here.

The next thing was the fact that I’ve never seen this road before. I’ve been through the area a fair amount of times, and yet, this road is one I have never seen or come across. I followed the path, my curiosity getting the better of me.

The last straw was when I saw a silhouette. Standing in the distance, they seemed to be staring up at something before disappearing into the shadows of the night. Eager to find out who they were and what they were doing, I followed behind. Carefully following the footprints they left behind, her footprints eventually came to an end. I raised my head and was met with what seemed like caves... Without hesitation, I rushed into the caves. What met my eyes was something that I knew I would never forget. Tens... No, hundreds of carvings and sculptures were everywhere. On the ceilings and walls, every corner seemed to be decorated. I spun a full circle, jaw stuck to the ground. My heart thumped against my rib cage and my head spun, trying to process the scene before me.

Moving closer, I took in the delicate strokes of each piece and gently traced my fingers over the patterns. This was worth more than anything I’d ever seen and yet, not even an ounce of me felt the urge to run back and tell pa about this Utopia I had just discovered.

“Yeah, it’s the sort of place you want to keep all to yourself.”

I spun around, alarmed.

The lady who stood before me wasn't quite who I was expecting her to be. Her eyes were the colour of jade, her chocolate hair ran down to her hips. "You aren't from here." I blurted out.

She cocked her head, "What gave that away?" My eyes ran over her light blue dress that reached her ankles, her pale skin and her sharp nose. Needless to say, everything.

"This was one of the main destinations when the silk road was still around. That's why, in these Buddhist statues, you'll notice elements from ancient Greece and other Western cultures. Such as wings that resemble angel wings." She paused, thoughtfully "Though this cave has been long forgotten."

We both observed the statue silently, taking in the faded paint and perfect carving.

"Why haven't you told anyone about this cave?" I questioned.

"The same reason you won't. This is the kind of place that will lose its charm once anyone finds out about it."

I turned towards her, "A place like this never loses its charm—"

THUD!

We both spun around, eyes wide as we realised someone else was there. Before I could react, she grabbed my wrist and pushed us behind one of the statues. I shifted nervously behind the decaying statue, my shallow breaths echoed within the cave. Chocolate hair turned towards me and glared.

'Be quiet!' She mouths.

I rolled my eyes, *'I didn't know breathing was a crime. Gosh.'*

Just when I was about to make another snarky remark, she clammed her right hand over my mouth. Both our eyes widened as the sound of footsteps grew closer and closer...

"Yes, the caves are a right turn from where we usually—"

Me and chocolate hair turned towards each other, eyes wide as both of us tried to comprehend what we just heard.
Beckwith.

Beckwith was a man of wealth, and because of that, he also had power. Throughout China, his name was one almost everyone knew. Within the swarms of people in the gritty streets, his name has left everyone's mouth at least once. Beckwith constantly travelled from Europe to China, as though he were walking from his house to the market. His endless fortune had caught the attention of nobles all over China, but also brought him plenty of enemies. For example, my Pa.

"I know someone is here, step out from wherever you are" Sensing no movement from us, he continued "And trust me, it won't be a nice ending for you if you don't do what I—"

And just like that. Silence.

We stood dead still for a few moments, making sure there was no one else here before stepping out. What lay before us was none other than Beckwith's corpse. His eyes widened, as though he had just seen a ghost, and his shoulder-length curls spread across the stone beneath him. A pool of crimson began to flood on the floor. The blood bubbled and spilt out like water from a tap. *Drip, drip, drip.*

“What on earth...” Chocolate hair murmured, “H—how is this possible? A knife like that shouldn’t have killed him...” The regret was painted all over her face.

My heart raced as I tried to comprehend what had just happened. And, more so, why he was here in the first place.

“Chocolate hair...”

She cleared her throat, nervously. “Alexandrina. My name’s Alexandrina.”

“Hm, I think I’ve heard of an Alexandrina somewhere...” I thought aloud to myself.

She laughed tensely, “Well lots of women are named Alexandrina.”

“But there was someone famous who— ”

“Anyways.” Alexandrina interrupted, gesturing towards the man splattered before us.

Flipping his body onto his back, our eyes land on a rapidly spreading patch of red. Blood. Ripping his shirt apart, we inspected the wound. A petite knife stuck out.

“Ah, there’s my baby.” She wiped the stains onto her dress and slipped the knife back into her dress.

I sighed.

We both looked down at the body, hands planted on hips. “So what do we do with him?”

She muttered, “That’s the difficult part.”

My heart started to pound, *if whoever Beckwith sent found us standing here... Not only will be both be ripped to shreds but Pa will never see the light of day again either.* Panic began to weave through me, my fingers trembled. Just the idea of Pa facing the consequences of my actions sent the nerves in my body haywire.

And that’s when we hear the sound of hooves hitting the floor.

“We need to leave. Immediately.”

She looked at me, watery eyes locked with my dark ones. She grabs my wrists and we jogged towards the exit, weaving through the multiple caves. Each one with its unique designs and details. Just thinking about the caves made my heart ache like crazy. I’ll never see this again.

As we sat on the staircase leading up to the caves, we watched the sunrise in utter silence. The soft tunes of birds playing in the background. We both sat there, minds trying to keep up with the events that took place in the past few hours. The dead body, the caves and each other. Both of us knew that we would never meet again, but both of us knew that that night would be one neither forgets until we’re lying on our death beds.

“I’m Sagara, by the way.” I realise I had never fully introduced myself. I stand up and shake her hands.

Alexandrina nods, smiling gently. “Alexandrina Victoria. It’s been lovely meeting you Sagara.”

“Well, I guess this is where we part.” I turn towards the caves, looking up at it. “Goodbye Mogao.” I’ll never see these caves again. I walked away from Alexandrina, a small smile plastered on my face as I put distance between us. And that’s when the pain hits me. It seared up to my neck and ran all through my body, I gasped. Lifting the hem of my shirt, I look down to see vermilion blood trickling down my torso and a wound the size of my palm.

“I’m sorry Sagara but no one must know of the caves.” Then she looked me deep in the eyes and said, *“And can know that I, a western princess, was here.”*

Mogao Grottoes

Wellington College, Shanghai, Lam, Sin – 12

I woke up with a ray of light peeking through the curtains, as if it was reminding me that it was my birthday tomorrow. I rolled off my bedsheets and sat up for a big stretch. I jumped out of bed excitedly and went to the bathroom. As I was washing my face, I couldn't help but notice the enormous grin on my face. However, the only thing that crossed my mind was my birthday tomorrow. I guess my humming attracted my mom's attention, because she came in and told me breakfast was ready.

When I was eating, I couldn't help but notice that mom was looking at me with a weird smile. Was it about the surprise present she promised to give me? But she *never* smiled at me like that before. There were thousand of questions in my head, but I tried to busy myself with the thought of what the mystery present might be. A new iPhone, a year's worth of pocket money, the bag I've been asking for? I was so excited. Suddenly, the doorbell rang, I went to open the door, it was Sally! My best friend since my first day of elementary school. We wrapped our arms around and greeted each other. I absolutely adore hanging out with Sally, she was so humorous that we'd laugh till our stomachs were sore. But she did not bring up it was my birthday tomorrow. Did she forget? Maybe she wanted to surprise me? After all these years of being her friend, she's never once forgotten my birthday. When we said our 'Goodbyes' all I did was bite my lip and walk to my room. I threw myself onto bed and stared up at the blank ceiling; I suddenly felt like crying, but I couldn't cry. I just couldn't.

I must've fallen asleep because it was five o'clock when I woke up. I was as hungry as an alley rat, I skipped lunch and dinner yesterday. I slid off my bed and onto the floor and my feet reluctantly carried me to the kitchen. I took a box of cereal and just started pouring some into my mouth. I was still starving but no restaurant is open at this time of the day. This was the worst birthday ever. Suddenly, mom came in and said 'Why are you awake?' But all I did was twitch and walk to my room in silence. She then walked away to make breakfast for me. After spending some time alone in my room, I decided to go down and grab a snack.

As I walked out into the living room, I was greeted with confetti in my hair and a loud 'Surprise!' And honestly, it *was* quite unexpected. I scanned the room for Sally. No Sally. All my relatives and friends were there, except Sally. My heart sank. All I could think of was her.

I made my only wish and I closed my eyes blowing out the candles as everyone cheered. I wished Sally was here. Then mom, looking elated as ever, cleared her throat as she started her announcement. I was holding my hands together so tight that my knuckles were white as snow and my palms were sweating so much. But when the news broke out, I thought it was a joke – We were moving to China! The most bewildered person was dad, his lips slightly apart, staring blankly at mom. No one said anything, not even mom. I was moving to Dunhuang. I didn't even know where that place was, all I knew was that it was in China. Mom has been blabbering about this place and said there was amazing artwork there. But that was not a valid reason to move somewhere. I couldn't digress what she was saying.

It was past midnight but my parents were still arguing. They are divorced but sometimes I stay at dad's place with his girlfriend and my step-brother. Mom has custody over me but I'd rather stay with dad. Mom was just so unpredictable and impressionable, she's so insensitive and doesn't understand me at all. I got so timorous that I just sat in a corner of my room and cried, my eyes were sore and I felt so morose. At about three o'clock, dad finally left even though I could still feel the enmity between them. He walked away and didn't even say 'Goodbye' to me. Did they agree on something? Does dad not like me anymore? Will I ever see him again?

Today was the day of the flight. Even though mom was with me the whole time, I felt so lonely and isolated. I felt so distant and disconnected from her. We took a cab to the airport. I felt like everyone was suddenly leaving me. I was about to fly away from my birthplace and no one is bothered to ask how I feel about it. Me and mom stepped into the plane and found our seats. We listened to the flight attendants' safety announcement before the take off. Goodbye Sacramento.

After what felt like ages later, the plane landed. We finally got out of the airport as we breathed in the fresh air and found a cab and drove to our new house. It looked like a mansion, the surrounding area was a large piece of land covered in trees. It was astonishingly beautiful. When we went in, the house was fully furnished. Funnily enough, the house was absolutely breathtaking but I plastered a frown across my face to show I wasn't fazed so that

maybe she could move us back. I walked through the house and to my room, I jumped in bed and quickly dozed off to sleep.

As each day bled into its night and each night followed another, I realized; I'm not going back. My mom has been pleading me to go to this Mogao Caves thing with her but I made sure not to budge. One night, I decided I've had enough of this place. I texted my dad and he agreed to let me fly back to him. In the meantime, I'll just run away from mom. I packed my bags and climbed down my window. My forehead was dripping in sweat by the time I finally reached the ground, my bare feet landed on the grass as I slipped my shoes on. Suddenly, I saw my room's light turn on and I ran as fast as I could. After about an hour, I was panting and on my knees. I didn't know where I was! All I knew was I was face to face with a structure I've never encountered before. It was big, enormous, gigantic! It was a layered crimson red and gold building which seemed to be planted in what looked like a desert mountain. It was about eight o'clock when I arrived. I had four thousand dollars with me as I was planning on renting a room but I decided that I was far too tired for that.

I decided that I should somehow sneak in but because my legs were so weak and I could hardly move. The security guards were busy talking and they probably wouldn't even notice me and that's when I saw a door that read 'Staff Only'. Perfect! Even though I was pretty young still, looked way older than I actually was. No one would suspect a thing. When the security guard looked away, I sneaked to the door and... It was locked. Then I took the hairpin out of my hair and wiggle, wiggle, wiggle. It opened. I was in complete disbelief, I pushed the door which led to what looked like a warehouse and saw another door which led me to an art gallery. The colorful carvings and silhouettes were so beautiful and mesmerizing, I ran my fingers across the delicate patterns and flaking paint. Suddenly, sirens went off and guards came barging in and started asking people something in Mandarin. Then I remembered, I left the door open. Suddenly, a guard came over to me and said 'Ticket' so I pretended that I didn't understand. I just started talking in gibberish and at the end, he lazily gave up as I continued to admire the artwork, the contrasting tones and textures were so unique and wonderful.

I thought about what I did to mom and decided to go back. When she saw me, her hug was so tight I couldn't barely breathe. She buried her head into my shirt and cried her eyes out. I was so glad to be back with her and looked into her tear-stained eyes with relief. Afterwards, she scolded me but I was very glad I was back with her. I spent my time in China studying their art and culture and I don't at all regret moving here. And I'm back in contact with Sally again and we're closer than ever.

City of Flames

Wellington College, Shanghai, Lee, Abby – 12

It was a hot sunny day; the heat of the desert was almost unbearable. The sand danced in the gentle breeze, and the sand phoenixes watched silently from under the sands, eyes unblinking. Helia looked around suddenly nervous, after all this time she had dreamed to return to this cave. It was a place where she belonged, a place where her people lived, a place where phoenixians, people of the phoenix lived. Helia took in a shaky breath feeling the warm sandy air, perhaps this wasn't such a good idea, perhaps she should have returned at all.

'no' She thought 'this is my home; they would have forgiven me by now'

But even she was unsure, what she did all those fortnights ago was unforgivable, forced to leave her home after saving a guiding a mortal through the large desert, she was banned to return for 1000 fortnights. But something felt wrong the cave have a sense of death, as darkness loomed over the cave, she knew that troubles lie ahead, she knew that it is time to return to her people, she knew the peaceful time of the phoenixian have ended, and trouble will come. Stepping into familiar cave, Helia let out a shaking breath she didn't even know she was holding. The orange light of the fire reflected off the tunnel on the other side of a wall so smooth that it feels almost man-made, the silence was broken by the steady beats of the sky drum as she approached the entrance to the City of Flames.

Once she appeared through the tunnel, she could sense the fear in the atmosphere, guards were stationed at the grand gates which were usually left open were now locked shut.

"What business do you have with the City of Flames" a tall well build man asked in a loud and demanding voice.

"What business? Hello, it is me Helia the one that got exiled?" Helia said almost in disbelief.

"Ohh its you" the guard said with clear annoyance, "wait here"

Then he disappeared into the guard house to make a call. No sooner had he disappeared, did she feel the presents of death again, it was weird because phoenixians don't die they choose to be gone from the world. But this death feels forces, it doesn't feel natural. Suddenly a scream filled the air, a loud and piercing scream as a house to her right caught on fire. The guard rushed out and was screaming at people to calm down within seconds.

"You here" the guard said pointing at Helia "stay inside the guard house"

Shaking her head she walked away, inside there is a huge CCTV with different parts of the small village. Then she saw it, a dark hooded figure walking quietly across the other side of the village. Their hood was lined with black fire, black fire was the symbol of dark magic. Helia watch carefully as the figure crossed the clearing and planted a small and barely seeable flame on the corner of the house.

'Explosives' Helia thought,

Explosive fires are one of the only things that can kill a phoenixians, it was made illegal after the war of the Qin when half of the phoenixians population were killed. Whoever were using those flames are highly trained in explosives and knows how to operate it without killing themselves. There is only 3 people in this whole place who knows how to do that, or at least before she left. Kannles the oldest in the group she was the one who invented them, Twilight the youngest one and the king of phoenix himself, Lee Huangdi.

Quietly she made her way out of the guard house, hoping not to attract any unwanted attention. But it was hard, guards were trained to be good listeners and fighters and this one was no different.

"Hey where are you going?" The guard shouted, not even looking her way, his eyes still on the dancing fire.

Helia looked back alarmed.

Then without another word she ran, she ran as fast as the wind, as fast as her legs would take her. It was a risky thing to do but Helia knew that it was necessary. Whoever had been setting explosive around this village needs to be caught or else the deeds would be too much for phoenixians to live here anymore.

Town square was the same, flickering streetlamps on both sides and a stone pavement leading to it. The hooded figure was still there, focusing on their jobs. Questions swam into Helia's head, who is he, why is he doing this etc. She could hear the heavy boots of the guard behind her, the hooded man hasn't and Helia run up to meet the guard chasing her. Putting a finger to her mouth, she silently beckoned the guards to look on. At first, he seems

to be suspicious, his eyes were narrowed like a foxes'. Then she heard a faint gasp from the guard, and she knew that the guard had seen it.

"You" the guard shouted, his fast feet carrying across the town square.

The hooded man looked up, startled. He tried to run, but in no time the guard were on him, pinning him down on the ground. A crowd had gathered by now to watch and as the guard throw the hood off the man, everyone one gasped, it was Lee Huangdi!

Later Helia learnt that Lee Huangdi had been overthrown by the will of the buddhas and his son Li Huangdi had taken over. Angered by this, he swore to destroy the peaceful village once and for all. Helia was honored as a hero and welcomed back by everyone. She was happy once again, her purpose served and fullfed, her name remembered.

Mogao Grottoes

Wellington College, Shanghai, Li, Eric – 12

Strong, bitter gusts of wind blew, churning the rapidly falling snow. There was no sun. A frigid hell. An opaque haze covered the land, stretching in all directions, like a meticulous hunter's trap. The wind roared, blowing in haphazard directions; a mischievous demon, doing as he pleased. A barren wasteland, secluded from the outside world.

Or so the Keeper thought...

The wind never ceased, the snow continued to fall...

Through the haze, came the silhouette of a man.

Followed by another, closely behind.

Soon, three more emerged.

Five ghostly apparitions broke the monotony of the chaos.

The snow covered their footsteps, the wind covered their voices.

They strode with purpose, masks covering their faces, with two circular cylinders protruding, that were the night vision goggles protecting their eyes; a faint, green light emanating from each. A tight apparel covered everything but their faces, which was covered by their masks. A heavy belt hung on their waist. Camouflage suits were worn over everything else. The masks and suits were ice cold. They prevented from the body's heat from escaping. The infrared cameras of the Keeper would not discover them, even when they were in range.

They continued to walk, until, after some time, stopping. A guttural voice came out of their commander's speaker. "We are here. Drill."

★

Four men sat before several large screens that delineated images of their surroundings. Infrared cameras scanned within a 1.5 mile radius, their lenses pivoting 360 degrees, and then slowly tracing upwards. The room was bathed in a ghostly, blue light, and was mostly empty of other equipment. None of them knew what all the secrecy and expensive equipment was for. And the bizarre location, in the middle of Antarctica. They had been employed by some mysterious character, who promised them high salaries every month. One of them, a corpulent, rotund man, yawned, and walked out. His shift was over. Just then, one of the screens started to malfunction, and then shut down completely. None of them knew of their fate.

In another room, a short, thin man by the name of Robert Dame was quietly sat on a velvet armchair, in an large, opulent room, watching the news of the outside world. He was not lonely. He didn't like the outside world. He had no friends, no family. He did not like people. And he did not consider his life dull. There were occasional moments of boredom, where he would pray. He hoped all his good deeds would place him in heaven. Intricately carved statues of Buddhas lined the walls of his room. This was his watery abode. In this world where secrets can be deadly, one has to be ever so careful. The fragrance of his perfume permeated the air. It was snug and warm. Keeper of the brotherhood's deadly secret. It gave him a sense of pride. He was in one of the most secure fortress in the world; a colossal hole drilled into ice, with a 1.6 mile radius, and a depth of around 75 meters. Upon completion, the hole had been refilled with water. He was enjoying himself...

An alarm sounded, breaking the blissful peace. This was unexpected. Furrowing his brow, he went over to his computer. There had been an error in the control room. Something told him, from his years of experience, that something was wrong. He experienced a burgeoning trepidation. He had been here for 6 years now. He knew what he was doing. He got up, put on some clothes, and went out into the corridor, headed for the control room.

He pressed the button to open the electronic door. It would not open. That was strange. He tried again. This time, it budged, sliding open. To his utter surprise, icy water gushed through the gap...

Stepping out, the icy water was to his toes, and filling the corridor at an alarming rate. The frigid water. A numb pain. Yet the pain, for a moment did not seem to register, as his brain tried to process everything. There was a moment of sudden clarity...

He rushed to the main database, and placed his finger on the scanner. The file. An ice cold hand clamped his wild thumping heart. The fear, apprehension, anxiety, all jumbled together. He forced himself to be prudent. There had been a leak...

★

The five men crept surreptitiously down the corridor. The most conciliating part of the complex's security for the Keeper had turned out to be it's greatest weakness. 5 sedative darts and slit throats had accounted for the watchmen. 4 more accounted for the resting ones. None of them felt any compunction whatsoever. This was their job. They killed. They get paid. The water was of a faint crimson quality beneath them. In entering, they had drilled through the thick cement walls with their advanced technology. The chefs and servants would be accounted for.

They had intentionally left their entrance unsealed, a plot by their employer to distract the Keeper, whilst the men were at it.

Now there was just the final task of retrieving the file. How their employer decrypted the file, was not their concern.

The procedure was that the Keeper, in sensing something was wrong, destroyed the file, and sent a copy to another Keeper. That other Keeper would then have the file. The 3 Keepers had all been sworn to secrecy. Their leader did not know the contents. The Keepers did not know the contents. It was encrypted, with a ten digit code that changed daily.

★

Robert Dame found a piece of clothing, and tried in vain to stop the water from doing further damage...

★

The five men arrived at the Keeper's room. As expected, the computer was open. One of the men produced an USB and inserted it into the computer, and with some rapid strokes, downloaded the file. He then connected a black, plastic box, to one of the computer's wires.

The five of them rushed out, frantic. It was any time now.

They rushed past the servant's rooms, towards the storage room, just about 50 meters away, crossing the back of the kitchen. A lone chef exited through the back door of the kitchen. A sedative dart found it's target on the man's chest, and he slumped, eyes glazing.

They had arrived. The flooding there was severe, around a quarter of the height of the room. The five men pressed some buttons on their wrists, as their boots turned into flippers, and their camouflage suits tightened. They submerged, diving into the water. Minutes later, the five arrived at their original entrance drilled into the ice...

Not long after, the ice shook, and a ball of flames shot up through an opening. The bomb had been set off, when the Keeper had opened his computer...

★

★

An elderly, shriveled man heard the faint sound of an muffled explosion. He was the messenger. It was midnight. He couldn't sleep. Just then, the door crept open...

In came a man, the darkness shielding his face; a shapeless malevolence.

Startled, he sat up.

He stared, at the darkness, at death's embrace...

★

The Russian Governor cruised along the desolate streets in his limousine. The file had been decrypted easily, using their state of the art computers, in a matter of minutes.

Recent intel from the CB department had piqued the governor's interest. He had always been a fan of Buddhism. He had visited many temples, in China and India. He had visited the famous Mogao Grottoes. The ornate statues were almost enticing.

From his intel, he found that there had been an ancient brotherhood dating back to the 16th century. The brotherhood apparently possessed deadly secrets. And being governor, he had the authority and power to investigate. How the brotherhood had 3 complexes built in ice in Antarctica was proof enough...

The file had been a string of numbers, coordinates, that pointed towards the Mogao Grottoes... He had already sent his team of 5, and they were due to return in a few hours...

★

His five men returned 3 to 4 hours tardy. They had found what he was looking for, in one of many grottoes. They explained that smuggling their luggage was not easy. They also requested a private room, without any cameras.

The governor agreed...

★

In front of him, was a statue of a 5 meter tall Buddha of gold and other precious materials...

However, the governor did not have time to examine...

As a silent bullet planted itself in his chest...

The governor crashed over the Buddha, putting in action a minuscule, sophisticated mechanism...

Opening a concealed door...

Where within wisdom lay...

The Mogao Grottoes mystery

Wellington College, Shanghai, Liao, Sandy – 12

The Mogao grottoes was flooding with tourists the day detective Bing arrived. Bing had almost lost himself in the beauty of the place. The cloudy skies cooled the summer day, and the gentle breeze tickling his face felt immensely comfortable. As he approached the grottoes, he snapped back into reality, he was here for the mission. News of the heist had travelled quickly to Bing. He had come promptly when he heard.

“Detective Bing, is it?” The guard questioned.

“Yes. Now where is cave 67?” Bing asked.

“Sorry sir, but the cave you are looking for is not opened for visitors at the moment.” Apologized the guard.

“Excuse me, I am not a visitor. I am a detective and I have come here to investigate the robbery.” Bing told him.

“Apologies sir. Cave 67 is on your right, down the stairs and to your left.”

Meanwhile, the strange thief had been sneaking away. You could hear the breathing of this mysterious person, careful not to get caught. The footsteps echoing behind them sounded like a beat on the drum, going on and on. Nobody was sure where, or who the thief was.

It was a couple of days later when Bing visited the caves. He had thought about the situation for a long time now. Slowly but surely the answer to this investigation will come out, showing itself. The robbery happened about one week ago now. The grottoes had been closed off to be checked carefully by the staff.

Bing suggested, “Have you guys checked the security cameras?”

“Good idea sir. We will go check it now.” The staff agreed.

Bing followed the staff to their security room. He could see a big sign hanging from the door saying “Security room. Staff only”. Bing had smelled a familiar scent in the room as he walked in. The computers were turned off and there was wires everywhere as if a tornado had swept through. It was so old that he could see his own footsteps in the dust.

“Detective Bing! I think we have found the tape!” The tall staff exclaimed.

“Really? Show me.”

The video footage was not very good, but they had to work with it. Unfortunately, they had found the wrong footage and lost the real one. The chance of catching the thief was gone...

The wooden, broken hut was standing alone in the forest. You could hear the wind howling in your ear. The orangey-reddish leaves looked like they were falling from the sky, being blessed. Suddenly, a young girl sprung out of the bushes and began to walk around. She had black hair as long as a horse's tail, eyes that looked like black pearls and a body as short as a gnome. Her stomach looked empty and she seemed depressed. Crunch. The pile of leaves under her foot looked like they turned into a million small crumbs.

“Come out wherever you are!” She shouted aggressively.

What or who was she talking to? Then out of nowhere a man revealed himself. He was wearing a black tie with a black tailcoat and was holding a piece of paper. The man looked at his paper and then looked at the young girl.

“Who are you and why are you here? This is my forest.” She shouted.

“Who am I? I am Detective Bing, graduated from the best detective school in Europe.” Bing spoke.

“Oh. I know why you have come here. You are here to arrest me, am I right?”

“Yes.”

“Why? Have I done something that has upset you?”

“No you haven't, but we have proof that you have stolen the ancient Buddha in the Mogao Grottoes in cave 67.”

“What? How can it be? It is not my fault! S—someone forced me to do it!”

“You admitted it! Now come with me back to the city.” Bing said as if he was the smartest man in the world.

After that, Bing took the thief to court. The judge made their decision to send her to jail for 10 years. Bing even got interviewed by lots of people and Bing's case even got spread on the news. Now, detective Bing became the continent's best detective.

Mogao Grottoes

Wellington College, Shanghai, Liu, Lindsay – 12

A chilling gust of wind swept into my eyes, bringing me awake from my ‘nightmare’. I crawled around frantically like a helpless mouse lost and searching for her purpose, hoping I could get in contact with one of the others. We were sent by our Beijing masters to travel across the country over the slippery moss covered mountains, over layers and layers of thick snow that never melted, over parched miles of desert land to steal battle plans for an upcoming battle. Their faith was put in us! But us, being the complete opposite from the lionhearted, dauntless soldiers of the empire, they had to choose us. Are we going to fail before the challenge even begun? A stale, ancient smell traveled across the room. “Perhaps... the spell has gone wrong?” I stuttered out loud to my fellow travelers. So this is what death felt like... or maybe I was not dead. Just as I was trying to shake awake Anzan, a quivering voice croaked from the corner of the room: “Cabbage stew! Mama’s cabbage stew! Mama...” Monks don’t feel hungry when they’re dead, do they?

I opened my weary eyes, the dungeons were lit by flickering candles that cast a dancing form on the hallow walls. Looking out into the doorway, it was nearly dark. The last shard of sunlight was hid amongst a towering strip of cloud in the darkening sky. In a dusty corner, where the sun lingered for a moment before it faded, a circle shape on the dusted floor emerged from the ground. Daiki discovered it first, and shouted: “Come on! Let’s dig! Let’s go!” Sigh. I guess the newly apprenticed monk doesn’t really know what was the right attitude to actually be one.

Anzan awoke from the excitement and snapped: “Oh, hurry up! It’s going to disappear when the moon comes out!”

“Dig! Dig! Dig!” Cheered Daiki who clearly seems excited about the events happening.

“Silence! You disturbing idiot... the guards will hear you!” Tengan scolded.

I chided in with no patience: “If you all keep on arguing, the guards will hear us and we will all get ourselves killed! And, Tengan, you being a monk should not speak to others with such bad attitude, especially younger ones.”

Thankfully nobody dared to argue back and all started digging in the awkward silence. The five of us stabbed at the dust, splashing it into the air, mingling with the night moths. “Thud” my shovel collided with something large and ancient. Soon, displayed in front of us was an antique chest glinting in the depths of the pit, submerged in the glistening moonlight. Anzan raised his wrinkled hands, and the chest steadily levitated out of the pit. I was abundantly impressed by how he could control the power that he grew from meditating. The waves of power sent gusts of warm, snug shrivels that travels up our spine, each planting a spark of hope into our hearts. We did it. Once again, Daiki got excited by the small success and screamed: “Yes! I knew you could do it!”

“Silence!” I half whispered half shouted out loud with a awkward frosty sigh. I gazed out of the hallway: shimmering star, clear dark sky, the full moon glistening like crystals upon the quiet, asleep desert. Summer nights are unbeatable. The sky is clear and the stars are twinkling. The wind blows gentle ripples on the crystal clear surface of ponds and the long grass nods in the wind. The night sky blew refreshing gusts of wind across the horizon. Every segment of this night sky seemed perfect... but I was missing home. What if I never see my mother again? I surveyed the horizon; the gentle beige color of the sand soothed my heart and calmed my nerves. The leaves rustled and the wind blew in an uplifting rhythm as the natural tunes washed into my soul. I soon realized the earth gods were trying to play me their lullaby and calm me down with their music. I gazed upon the glittering stars, mesmerized by the sight...

“Hey Amanthi, are you ok?” My thoughts were interrupted by Eisho. He looked at me and sighed: “It’s alright. I know what you’re feeling, and I’m feeling that too.” He whimpered pitifully, eyes mirroring fragments of his tormented soul. That pair of warm caramel colored eyes reflected the soft sand, and I immediately felt a tingle of happiness. I smiled at him and gently patted his back, hoping it would reassure him. I whispered: “Thank you.” to him then announced to all of my fellow travelers: “Come on, let’s go. We should get some food then escape from here.” Everyone nodded and didn’t argue back. The five of us slipped out of the dungeons, melting into the shadows under our capes of darkness.

Suddenly, a silhouette figure silently emerged under the soft guidance of the shaded moonlight. We spotted our first victim, a guard slumped against the wall, staring at us with blank eyes. We crept forward. He did not move. We darted to his right. He did not move. We snuck into the narrow passage behind him. He still did not move. Soon we were tip-toeing along the narrow corridor, still alert like guard dogs.

“Where’s Tengan?” groaned Anzan.

“Oh, I’m here... you know, just making sure that that guard is out of the way.” Drawled Tengan indifferently, his axe glinting wickedly in the moonlight, stained with fresh blood still warm from the victim. “TENGAN! You SHOULD know what it’s like to behave as a monk! We DON’T kill! And where did that axe from? I’m taking it away. How DARE you kill someone innocent in such a holy, heavenly, sainted place? The MoGao grottoes! Honestly, if you keep on behaving badly, I WILL tell master Kong when we get back ...” Eisho spat out his complains in a furry. He looked at the corpse of the body one more time. His eyes were tingled with blue and sadness.

We entered the food storage. Anzan twirled his hands in the air, weaving a net of magic around us, preventing any guards from seeing us. We cautiously crept around like traumatized mice trying to escape away from a cat. I started collecting food: rice, cabbage, mushrooms, pumpkins... even spices. Daiki was frantically cramming everything she could fit inside her mouth, her eyes were almost glinting like gold when she found food that she craved. Tengan slipped silently like a slithering snake into the wine cellar, filling his flask with the rich acidic drink from the wooden barrels. Thankfully Eisho and Anzan knew what they were supposed to do, they were helping me with the stealing.

After a while of feasting and packing, a huge ‘bang’ sound echoed across the dense air of the dungeon and it came from the wine cellar. Yes, Tengan was severely drunk. With one giant swing, he displaced yet another guard’s head before he could even discover us.

“TENGAN ! Seriously I AM going to report your disgraceful behavior onc—“ Anzan scolded.

“Heh...” Tengan smirked while swinging around like a cheeky monkey...

“I really think we should go...” I exclaimed after more packing and feasting from my greedy fellow travelers. Suddenly, a stubborn guard turned around and plucked out out his sword and waved it teasingly around my body with a smirk on his face. Everyone immediately froze and the exact same thought plastered across our minds. The room became awkward and the candles flickered with tension above our heads. Eisho violently pulled me along with the others across to the towering shadows. We scampered back to the tunnel, not daring to turn our heads back.

I stepped into the moonlight, breathed in fresh air that I thought would never fill my lungs again. We cautiously crawled on the pathway down the sand made hill, half asleep, but still alert. After crawling for ten minutes, Daiki collapsed down onto the sand. We lay down our sleeping bags made out of twine, sheets weaved from fine silk. Anzan and Tengan both silently slipped into their dreams but I was still admiring the glistening stars hung like silver lanterns above our heads. Eisho held my hand. “Look how the stars shine tonight for you...” he whispered. A smile graced my lips despite the cold:” they seem to be watching us don’t they?” I gracefully replied. “Ah, yes. Well, sleep well tonight. We sure do have a long and dangerous day planned ahead of us tomorrow.” He said. I couldn’t continue with this conversation as I was drowning in a pool of exhaustion. I gently said: “Goodnight.” And that was when my heavy eyelids collapsed into a puddle of blackness...

Tales from the Mogao Grottoes— Ashes

Wellington College, Shanghai, Loh, Serena – 12

Death.

What does it feel like?

A bird soaring up into the wispy clouds? An eternal sleep? A piece of coal being reduced to ash's under a dancing flame?

However it feels like, I am not ready to embrace it, just like the flight in a few hours.

Nowadays, I feel like I'm not ready to welcome anything.

I looked at the view of the Guangzhou skyline from the window of the car— the lights flashed intermittently, prancing from one window to the next. The glass glistened under the moonlight, twinkling and flashing. The Guangzhou tower sparkled pink, then purple, then red, winking at the excited tourists by the riverbank. All the urban luminescence wriggled about in the Pearl river, the neon reflections deformed and ugly, but at the same time beautiful and appealing.

Inside the car, it was pitch-black. The only source of light is the multicoloured show of bright ballerinas gleefully leaping from one place to the next. I looked down at the 24K bracelets around my wrists, the pearl and jade rings around my fingers. They were slightly moving to the dynamics of the evening traffic. Glancing at my blurry reflection in the glass, my hand darted across my chest, feeling its way to the diamond pendant around my neck. Carefully, I popped it open and peered down. I saw what I expected to see.

Mum's ashes.

I thought about the summer together, when we first went to Gansu to visit grandpa, and gawk at the astounding sight of the Mogao Grottoes. The magnificent shape and structure, the radiant cave paintings and artwork, the glorious history of the caves all appealed to us. Then, we went to Happy Valley in the capital. On the rides, mum, Veegee and Marie sat in a row with me, and Lorna, dad and a few others sat together in a row. There was shouting, there was laughter, there was joy.

Then, dad decides to betray us, crashing a Boeing 787 into a gas station because he chose to break the aviation rules and not listen to his doctor's advice. The cause was a bottle of wine. Who would have predicted that two years later, death threw its spear again. It missed me narrowly.

But it slayed my family.

The cause is also a plane. When they brought me to the crash sight, I was completely overwhelmed. It was scattered with burnt fuselage and ashes. Pieces of aluminium compounds were strewn everywhere. Corpses were littered around the debris. I honestly don't know why planes hate me so much. It first took my dad, then my mum and all my siblings.

As the car pulled into the staff entrance, I can't help but wonder about something. It was pondering me. Is perishing in a crashing plane my destiny? Would the deafening screech of helpless windows be my last lullaby? Would the clamorous crying of the cracked cabin be my last song? Would the ear-splitting wail of the warning system be the last sound I hear?

Brendon, my bodyguard, drove the car into the storage cabin and fumbled with the palette locks. I looked intently at his actions. After all, he was the one who. Comforted me when I was depressed and angry. I watched him as he carried all the luggage into the sitting room of the improved Learjet, where he stowed them on the luggage lock. I smiled at him when he went to get me a drink from the bag. I flopped down onto my seat and fastened the seat belt, hoping for the best.

Opening my iPhone 13 pro, I flipped through my photo album and thought about what Grandpa Song Ping An said when I last visited him. They were echoing in my head. When the jet took off, the bumpiness making the glass of coke rattle, the bubbles vigorously fizzing. Outside the window, landscapes flew past—Mountains, rivers, plains, lakes, farms.

And for the first time in my life, I want to be with Grandpa Song Ping An. Although I always thought that he was old and exasperating, he can be quite fun at times and I have much more liberty and freedom. Nonetheless, I'm not looking forward to the Gansu heat. When I'm there, I feel more like in an oven. The battered shacks don't have any air-conditioning, not even a fan or a cooler. The water runs yellow and smells of urine. Rats, roaches and other rodents joyfully roam the place. The mattress is a heap of dirtiness consisting of rotten hay and weeds. The only source of light is a web of cracks where the roof connects to the wall. Occasionally, a single oil lamp is lit, but it only lasts for a few hours, and it stains the air with a repulsive stench.

Outside the shack, more heat welcomed everyone, the sand attempting to seek sanctuary. Lizards played hide-and-seek with the sun. The thirsty land stretches out into angulated mountains, which looked like building blocks of lego that stacked up the fascinating attraction—the Mogao Grottoes. My thoughts drifted to a time many years ago, when grandpa first brought me to see the grottoes. I remember the colourful cave paintings that were strewn across the walls, and grandpa patiently explaining all of them. I remember the vibrant yet fading colours, the towering, gigantic sculptures that I mistakenly thought to be a giant. I remember the luxurious hotel that he brought me to, in the new-built Dunhuang Local History Resort, located within a two-kilometre radius from the grottoes...

The plane began its decent, and soon landed in the Dunhuang Airport. Through the terminal window, I caught glimpses of the people inside. Strangely, none of them were tourists. Instead, they were investigators from the Chinese transportation safety agency.

Investigators?

I ask myself.

Investigators?

I whirled my head around at Brendon. I expected confusion to be plastered across his face, but instead, I only saw his solemn gaze fixed on the bustling airport outside.

And for the first time, I noticed that the planes outside were not random commercial planes and jets. Instead, they were military jets and rescue helicopters. Rescue workers were hustling around, and a mountain of dead bodies were being hauled to an area some hundred meters away. There, I saw a lot of people. Police. Firefighters. Paramedics. Soldiers. And among them, there were also weeping family members.

None of them were tourists.

"Did the resort become unpopular?" I asked him.

"What's up with you lately?" He replied, "the resort is gone!"

Gone?

I thought, it's almost impossible.

Gone?

My memory went back to when I was only a toddler, Grandpa carrying me on his back.

Gone?

He showed me the meanings behind the cave drawings, and made sure I could see.

It sliced through me like a blade through butter.

"I'm sorry," Brendon muttered, breaking the silence, "a plane crashed straight into it a few days ago. I'm very sorry, Renesa."

A few days ago? How come I never knew?

"You never watched the news." He sensed that I was emotional.

I was.

As fast as my legs could go, I sprinted across the sandy desert, the Armani boots burning the sole of my feet. I raced across the town square, darted across the stony flatland, dashed until the breath was squeezed out of me.

I was at the village where I never looked forward to going, the street I resented for my life, the “porch” I never wanted to see again.

There they lay, serenely in piles of ashes. And so are the once terrific holiday resort. Reduced to a trickle of filth. The grottoes though, stood proudly in the distance, towering over pedestrians. Then, something struck me.

Grandpa.

My whole world crumbled. My eyes were pierced by tears. They rolled out like rain, slowly falling down at first, then rapidly turning into pouring rats and mice. Like a pearl necklace with a broken string, tears uncontrollably dripped off my chin, down the body that once stood straight, down the legs that once provided sturdy support, onto the feet that once stood on firm ground. I missed the train.

Grandpa.

A shrine was built for all the Waters and Songs who died in the acts of recent terrorism. Mum. Veegee. Lorna. Marie. Grandpa.

I carefully removed the diamond pendant from my neck, the three gold bracelets from my wrists, the jade wring around my left index finger. Cautiously, I lit a fire, and pried open each piece of jewellery, the ashes raining into the dancing flame, and I watched the roaring fire devour it.

Grandpa Song Ping An once said that people don't die when they die physically. They die when they are forgotten.

Tears dropped from my eyes, extinguishing the fire. I wished grandpa “Ping An” in heaven, and for my burning emotion to die.

And for the fire in front of me?

Well, all that's left is a small pile of ashes.

New Tales from the Mogao Grottoes

Wellington College, Shanghai, Mazzacurati-Newman, Daisy – 14

1.

‘I’m nervous,’ I whispered. Nigel chuckled beside me.

‘Of course you are, my boy,’ He said. ‘Everyone’s like that at their first auction. But trust me, you have nothing to worry about. Your work is brilliant.’

I forced a smile.

‘Truly,’ he continued. ‘Vibrant, unique—all the things a person is looking for in artwork. They’ll sell for thousands.’

‘Thanks.’ I replied quietly. Nigel gave me a brief nod, tucked his hands behind his back and strode off to greet the small group of people who had just come through the door. I sighed shakily.

The string quartet plucked elegantly at their instruments. The waiters circled the guests and silently offered them light snacks and champagne. Wide, crinkled eyes stared at my paintings.

I found myself amazed at the scene, amazed at Nigel’s ability to transform my studio. The peeling green wallpaper had vanished, replaced by sharp white paint. Where the collection of tarnished wooden planks I called a floor had once been was now a tiled surface polished as though it were a ballroom. Gone entirely were the mismatched chairs, leaving a vast space to roam freely. The walls were adorned with each and every one of the pieces I had painted in the Mogao Grottoes, my signature prominent in the bottom right-hand corner. Nigel insisted that he pay for the renovations, and that was when I realised how much faith my agent put in me.

I took two slices of bread and cream cheese from a nearby waiter to satisfy the rumble in my stomach. Nigel raised his eyebrows at me from across the room and mouthed a question: *ready?* I bobbed my head. He grinned, lifting a hand to signal to the string quartet. They ceased their playing and balanced their instruments sideways against the floor, waiting.

‘Greetings, all.’ Nigel said loudly. ‘The auction is about to begin. Please assemble near the platform.’ I approached it, but lingered near the back of the crowd; there was nothing worse than an arrogant artist. Nigel stepped up onto the stage, stood behind the stand, and smiled diamonds.

Nigel’s assistant, whose name was either Jennifer or Jane – I could not remember for the life of me – weaved through the clusters of people, placing numbered cards in each of their hands. When she’d finished, Nigel waved her over rather vigorously, and hissed something into her ear. Even as the warm light blossoming from the ceiling cast us golden, the way she flushed crimson was obvious. She retreated quickly to her post at the entrance of the room. I wondered what she’d done wrong.

The auctioneer, a short, bland-looking man with thinning grey hair, took Nigel’s place at the stand, gripping the gavel tightly. Nigel came towards me.

‘That girl cannot follow orders.’ He clucked, at a volume low enough so that no one but me could hear. ‘I asked her to hand out those cards as people entered the room, not just before the auction! How disorganised we must look.’ He shook his head. ‘As soon as the auction’s over, she fired, don’t you worry.’

‘It’s fine,’ I responded. ‘It was just a little mistake, that’s all. I’m sure it won’t happen again.’

‘Matthias, this isn’t the first time she’s made a fool of me.’ He glared in her direction. ‘She’s constantly spilling coffee and stuttering and losing valuable documents.’

I began to protest, but he interrupted. ‘It’s final. She’s fired. Elizabeth is fired.’

Her name was Elizabeth. I must have worse memory than I thought.

‘Let’s forget about it for now and enjoy the auction.’ Nigel cleared his throat. ‘I’m telling you, they’ll sell for thousands.’ He said again.

The auctioneer clasped his hands together, a sheet of paper tucked between his forefingers. He waited for the first painting to be put on display. I recognised the piece instantly. It was the *lamproptera curius* – the White Dragontail. It was one of the first I painted and one of the most rare butterflies to be found in Hong Kong. The wings were easy to paint – transparent, outlined in inky black – but the true challenge lay in its legs. They were like needles, so thin I had to pluck a single hair from my paintbrush to illustrate them. Incredibly difficult, but I'd managed it.

The man unfolded the paper and read: 'The Hidden Butterflies of the Mogao Grottoes: The White Dragontail, Matthias Haden.' His voice was gritty and deep, not at all pleasant to listen to. 'Bidding starts at £300. Do I have £300?

Two people raised their cards, a man and a woman, numbers 247 and 53. They looked at each other and the woman said quickly, '£350.'

'£400.' The man responded.

'£500.' Number 53 countered, and the man remained silent.

The auctioneer thrust his gavel against the wooden sound block. 'Sold for £500. Congratulations.' The woman smiled tightly and the painting was carried off the stage. Gentle clapping filled the silence.

Nigel patted me on the back. 'No one ever gets a particularly high bid on the first painting.' He said to me, though I wasn't feeling reassured. £500 was not concerning, but I sincerely hoped it wouldn't be the highest bid for the night. If it were, perhaps those renovation bills would come back into the conversation. 'I think everyone's feeling a little timid. But don't stress, Matthias. £500 is only the beginning.'

'Next!' The auctioneer said. The second piece that was brought in was my favourite: the Red Lacewing, also known as the *cethosia biblis*. It was not as uncommon as the White Dragontail, but in my opinion, it was more beautiful. The butterfly was the colour of a ripe pumpkin, lined with dots and smudges of black near the edges that made me think of smoke. The tips of its wings looked like pointed teeth.

Once again, the auctioneer announced the title of the piece, and once again set the starting bid to £300.

This time – to my relief – four bidders brought up their cards, the numbers 41, 9, 101, and 56. A man said, '£450.'

Another man claimed, '£500.'

Number 41, this time a woman, said, '£650.'

Number 101 said confidently, '£800.'

When no one challenged that figure, the auctioneer announced, 'Sold!' The clapping sounded, and my throat loosened.

'Not bad.' Nigel breathed with a laugh. 'Not bad at all.'

2.

Nigel slid a return ticket, a wad of cash and a bottle of mosquito repellent onto the desk. 'We need more.'

'More what?' I asked, my hands tentative as they grasped the items. The ticket caught my eye: a business class flight to Hong Kong.

'Why, Matthias! We need more paintings!' Nigel exclaimed. 'You saw how much they all sold for the other night, why not entertain this opportunity?'

'I—'

'Matthias, you must listen to me. I know what I'm doing; I've been at this job for 13 years—' He sipped his steaming coffee, fixing his beady eyes on mine. 'You said yourself that there are hundreds of butterflies you found in the Grottoes that you haven't yet painted. Don't let this pass you by, son.'

I remained silent, pondering. It didn't help that his office was intimidating: the blinds closed, the mahogany desk and chair glinting darkly, the way he pressed his elbows against the waxed wood. There was no way I could say no. Without him, I wouldn't have been able to become anything more than a struggling artist. Without him, I wouldn't be—

‘Fine. I’ll go.’ I said sharply.

‘Don't look at me like that,’ Nigel tilted his head, again bringing his mug to his lips. ‘It’s for your own good. You can’t keep all that potential locked away inside you.’

Tucking the ticket, the cash and the repellent into my satchel, I nodded and said, ‘Thank you.’

Nigel smiled. ‘You’re most welcome.’

3.

The warm air surrounded me, sticking to my face, tousling my hair. It wasn't the most enjoyable experience – in fact, it was rather awful compared to the plane. There were no fans in the Mogao Grottoes, so I was left to wipe away the sweat trickling down my jawline and neck with my sleeve.

It hadn't been difficult to find the right cave – I'd just needed to pay for a ticket, take a left and walk into the first one I saw, just as I'd done the last time I was here. Of course, I hadn't known what I was looking for then, but now I did. Behind the reclining Buddha was a very large crack in the wall; so large it could even be called a hole. I wondered why no one had ever noticed it before. I retrieved the small plastic net I'd bought at the gift shop – meant for capturing frogs and the like – from my satchel. I placed it through the hole, my wrist brushing crumbling stone and—

Snatch!

I retracted the net, dragging it along the dusty ground. It was the White Dragontail, a butterfly I'd already painted. I cupped it in my hands and put it through the hole again. Shoving my net back into the wall, I tried to capture another one. I couldn't see very much – the net's rod had a wide diameter – but once I felt that I had one, I withdrew it.

This one was not a White Dragontail. It was a Common Birdwing. Excitement tightened my chest. I left the creature for a moment as I searched through my bag for my tools. As soon as I had my sketchbook in one hand and a cotton swab in the other, I lifted the net slightly and pressed two fingers on the edges of the butterfly's wings to stop it from moving. It felt like feathers, delicate and soft. I opened the sketchbook to a fresh page and swiped at the bottom of the wings gently. Colourful, yellow powder spoiled the clean cotton and I dabbed it onto the page. I did this several times until the colour was vivid. I rubbed at the dark grey that consumed the upper half of its wings with another cotton swab and pressed it onto the paper.

I quickly sketched the butterfly, the small splotches of black, and the flicks of white against the dark grey.

Beautiful.

I watched as the Common Birdwing fluttered half-heartedly into the hole, helping it along with the pads of my fingers. I smiled: I had my first design.

Beautiful.

How to Plan Your Bucket List Before You Die Featuring Soujin Yu

Wellington College, Shanghai, Pearson, Jacqueline – 12

Dohwa met Soujin in the November of 2009, they were both 12 then, two children mourning the loss of their fathers. Both of them had gone through an ordeal and were in the waiting room of a psychiatrist when they found each other. Dohwa could remember that day like it was yesterday, he could remember that inexplicably unexplainable force that brought them together, and even now that unexplainable force drew him closer and closer.

Dohwa could clearly remember the countless moments he spent with Soujin, every memory branded forever in his mind. His first birthday without his father, he could remember Soujin on his left and his mother on his right as he blew out his candles. He could remember going to the mall a few blocks away from his house with Soujin tailing behind him yelling at him about the new computer that he really wanted. Dohwa remembered Soujin sitting next to him as he got called up to the stage in his high school to receive an award.

All of this flashed through Dohwa's mind five years later from the day they met as he sat reeling from the news, a dull pounding echoed in his ears. Soujin sat on his right smiling calmly as he asked the nurse quietly if he and Dohwa could have some time alone. Dohwa faintly recalled the nurse scurrying out of the room and locking the door behind herself. Dohwa looked down at Soujin laying on his right and whispered brokenly, "Soujin... Soujin how can you be so calm? How? Soujin?" Soujin only whispered back, "I don't know..."

"Soujin?"

"Yes, Dohwa?"

"We have a month left, right?"

"Yes Dohwa, I have a month left."

"Ok."

"Ok."

It had been three days since Dohwa found out Soujin needed a liver transplant that he probably wouldn't get after having been on the bottom of the list for so long. Dohwa wanted to shout every time he thought about it, though he needed to stop avoiding Soujin for the remainder of his days. Dohwa sucked in a breath and made his way slowly to the hospital where Soujin was residing. As he walked towards Soujin's room he passed Soujin's mother and she stopped him, forcing out the words, "How are you?"

"Oh... I've been better..."

"I see, Dohwa, I'm sure you know this already but I wouldn't be able to sleep if I didn't tell you, he's being strong for you right now and the shield he built up between death and himself is going to break soon and I'm asking you please, just please don't make him go through it alone, ok?"

"Of course Ms. Yu."

"Thank you..." Soujin's mother's voice broke before she composed herself looking at Dohwa endearingly and left the hospital. Dohwa peered down the corridor looking for Soujin's room as he trotted over he stopped at the door resting his door on the cool metal. He stopped pausing there for a minute, he could hear the sounds of the world fade away in the background as everything floated away and all that was left was him and this door separating him from a dying Soujin on the other side. He thought to himself: If I don't open the door right now he won't be lying there wasting away... right? As foolish as it was Dohwa could only latch on to small delusions like those as he steeled himself, pushing open the door. "Dohwa! You're back!" Soujin yelled from the center of the room, Dohwa could only stare dimly, treasuring every moment he saw Soujin animatedly talking at him for. Dohwa silently stared from the shadow of the door and slowly walked into the room and sat of a rickety stool next to Soujin. "Yeah, of course I'm back! Why are you surprised?" Dohwa stated in a matter of fact way. Soujin only laughed. Dohwa couldn't help but notice how much paler Soujin had gotten in three days, in fact Soujin didn't just look paler, he looked gaunt. Dohwa blinked heavily, "Hey Soujin?"

“Yeah?”

“What do you wanna do before...” Dohwa searched for the right words and when he couldn’t find them, he fell silent.

“Before I die?” Soujin asked, Dohwa looked down pressing a hand over his eyes.

“Yeah...” Dohwa mumbled quietly from his spot on the stool next to the bed.

“I think... I would like to visit the place where I was born”

“China?”

“I want to visit Gansu province, I want to say goodbye to my grandparents, but most of all I want to visit all the places my parents visited when my parents came to China as tourists and had me. I want to visit the Mogao Grottoes!” Soujin spoke animatedly, his eyes glistened with hope.

“Ok Soujin.”

Dohwa could never find it in himself to say no to Soujin.

Dohwa sat on the Soujin’s front porch waiting as Soujin and his mother disappeared inside to pack. His suitcase lay on its side as he looked around waiting patiently as Soujin and his mother went to get their suitcases. Sitting in the silence was a refreshing moment for Dohwa, especially since the flood of thoughts and emotions that were running around his head slowed down for a brief moment. Suddenly, a loud voice cut through the air, “Dohwa! It’s time to go!” Dohwa only nodded meekly trailing behind Soujin to the cab. Grabbing his suitcase off the curb he shoved it in the trunk of the car and got in. Soujin jumped in beside him, laughing as his mother opened the car door to the front seat and sat down next to the driver.

Dohwa couldn’t remember the details of the plane flight to China exactly, it all just flashed by him as he sat smiling back at Soujin meekly.

“We’re in China, Dohwa! China!”

“Yup, that’s good Soujin.” Dohwa mumbled sleepily as he dragged their suitcases behind him.

They got a cab and hitched a ride to their hotel and as they fell asleep in the backseat the orange sun fell casting a soft glow over the city, the night moon replaced its radiant counterpart.

Minutes turned into hours and hours into days as Dohwa’s eyes worked overtime trying capture every memory he had of Soujin. When Soujin laughed, he tried to captivate it the best he could, to brand every detail of Soujin ecstatically happy face into his mind, but even when he did try to revisit the memories he made that week he always found that they lacked something. Life. As the end of the week drew nearer and nearer Dohwa’s joy could only turn melancholy as all that is good must come to an end.

When they got back to Korea from China Dohwa would visit Soujin once every few days burning Soujin’s image into his brain before he left for the day. He wondered everyday if that would be the last time he ever saw Soujin.

Soujin Yu died three weeks later, finally succumbing to his bodies weaknesses.

His parents cried, his grandparents cried yet Dohwa didn’t. The strangest thing was he didn’t feel anything, he could only feel the rustle of wind above him and his heart beating loudly into the night. He pondered quietly what it would be like if it just stopped? So on that windy night in the middle of his usual bout of trying to be strong he broke. He broke apart like petals from a flower scattering into the wind, silently sobbing he could now feel his heart wail for his lost brother. As he sat repeatedly smacking his head into a wall trying to make the pain stop his hands fumbled at his collar. Scratching desperately at his skin and in a moment of clarity he suddenly realized he was trying to tear his own heart out. Chuckling bitterly, he looked up, his hands stained with his blood grasped at the air clenching down on nothing. His hand fell back and he sat numbly.

Dohwa sat on the roof of his apartment building contemplating whether he should go visit his mother. He sighed quietly and thought I may as well go out like he did. So on that rainy night under the neon lights of the city Dohwa made a promise with the empty wind: that he would make a list of things Soujin had wanted to do, and do them for Soujin. Then maybe, just maybe he would find Soujin again somewhere, somehow.

Dohwa sat, the rain soaking through his clothes as he thought about how he would plan his bucket list before he died.

Lotus

Wellington College, Shanghai, Rao, Vicky – 12

I hovered and glide through the fog and filthy air, the rain soaked me, the evening wind banged wildly against me, I held on to my glider. A beam of light stung my eyes, and I closed them. Through the pale red gloom of my eyelid, something shimmered in the distance. I sprightly stretched out one foot, I leaped, landed on the crystal-slag-like sand, lift up a trace of dust and made no sound. The chilly evening wind blows my hair briefly. How dazzling the bright moon was, sprinkled on my shoulder, on my glider. What presented in front of my eyes after the endless desert was the Mogao cave; the moonlight covered the surface like a carpet, it is as delicate as an ivory-white seashell, perfectly rendered like a eight-petaled white lotus flower lies and bloom still in the water. Silent, no birds, no noise, no sound; nothing except the friction of subtle sounds of my footsteps. I pulled a telescopic belt out of my backpack and held on to the edge of one of the windows nimbly, everything went so well and smoothly. I was like a slender, flexible snake, leisurely slides into the interior of the cave.

The purpose for me to be here is from the ruins of ancient language with history and culture, to take away the necklace "Eye of Flame" hidden inside the Mogao cave. Instead of taking away, not stealing but bring it back precisely; It happens in a overcast evening with whistling sea breezes and choppy waves, my great-grandfather spent a dangerous and difficult time on a sailing boat, he was an successful archaeologist. But the first thing he did when he returned from sailing was to show me this gem that he had gone through so much to achieve; that gem was wrapped in a turquoise velvet handkerchief, crystal clear red color as diaphanous as the pomegranate seeds, and as angular as flame. Therefore it could be described by all the elegant and graceful words in the world. Unfortunately, my great-grandfather passed away caused by a sudden illness on the way of traveling along the Silk Road, but this gem was picked up and made into a necklace hidden here. My mind was blank, a huge ghastly whiteness spreads over me, but it disappeared immediately in a few second.

I leaned sideways and flashed into a spacious room; smell of plant spice smoke and candle-burning essential oils rushed into my sense of smell, the pungent smell. The bronze walls are engraved with charming, delightful frescoes of lotus flowers, Chinese dragons, and some ancient figures in the background. My sight shift to the position in the middle, in contrast with the patterns carved on the wall, a buddha and it's whole body surface was raised from the wall. Furthermore, the solid, substantial but glossy and dazzling curve glows and reflected the candlelights, the whole room was lit up.

Leaving the previous room, I walked down the corridor, embroidery, carvings and colorful artworks created vivid imageries on the wall. Walking into another room, the table in front of the door was covered with silk, and I felt the smooth surface of silk with my fingers. There was also a gold plate filled with water, a lotus flower bloomed with a smile on its face. Pink is revealed from top to bottom from the tip of the petals. Just as I was infatuated and found interest by this scenery, I heard a doorman's footsteps upstairs—he was only a few meters away from me, I hid behind the door, stayed still and hushed, controlling my breathing. I saw a flashlight shining on the ceiling and then on the table, and I waited two minutes for the doorman to leave.

A ray of early-morning sunshine peeked through the windows on the east side, I thought about all the details and features of all the rooms and locations, and in an instant my brain felt like it had been struck by lightning; I stride quick towards in the direction of the sun, turned down the steps, the pale rose-pink sunshine dissolved in the last trace of dark sky. I rushed, hobbled into the pond, the clues all end up relating to the lotus flower. All of a sudden, my foot was tripped by a rectangular stone on an uneven ground, I was paused, and I took a few steps back and lifted the stone from the water, it's not just a usual, typical stone: Its surface was covered with moss and a few tiny cracks, I turned it over and surrounded by the cracks, a keyhole appeared. I fumbled through my pocket, pulled out the key, matched perfectly and insert it into the keyhole, twist and turn, I held the top of the box with my right hand and the lower side with my left hand, the box opened—

Inside the box was a turquoise velvet handkerchief—that my great-grandfather used to wrap around the gem. I unwrapped the smooth velvet fabric, here it lays a silver necklace, connected to a crystal-clear ruby, as diaphanous as the pomegranate seeds, and as angular as flame. I deliberately settled the necklace on the handkerchief in my hand, like holding a nest of newborn birds. I put the necklace back in the box and grasp it in my hand.

Mogao Grotto Story

Wellington College, Shanghai, Wang, Chelan – 12

Henry climbed up the ladder leading up into the Dunhuang tower. *The entire Dunhuang lay before him like a map. The place was deserted, no noise, no movement. What brought him here? Only have a dozen months ago, he, Henry Chang, was in wealthy, sophisticated Paris, he had all a man could ever dream of; money, fame, comfort, he had married the lady of his dreams, Nancy Chen, and they had a beautiful daughter, Shannon. the family was happy and complete. All was well. Until one day, an old book changed everything.*

That day, everything was normal. Henry was walking home as usual. He stopped at the second hand book sale as usual. He explored the books as usual. He flipped through the pages as usual. Suddenly, he stopped and gasped. Before his eyes was an old book, the pages were yellow with age, but they were still quite clear. The images of beautiful cave drawings seemed to come from a distant yet familiar place. On the cover, inscribed in fading writing was “Dunhuang: a Chinese treasure chest.”

Now, Henry had recently graduated from art school, so of course he knew a thing or two about his homeland’s art. However, he had stayed in Paris for a few years now, and had studied only European art. Seeing art from his homeland in the faraway place had always excited him, let alone art that he had never yet seen. Filling up with excitement, he quickly bought the book and ran home, excited to announce to his family his plan.

“Please, Henry, we have all we will ever need here, why go to China?” Upon hearing Henry’s plan, Nancy pleaded him to change his mind, but Henry insisted that he must return to China. Within a month, Henry had left. But Nancy loved Henry, and a year later, she and their young daughter left Paris for Dunhuang. The journey was hard, they met burglars and crossed deserts, finally arriving at Dunhuang. And she was not at all impressed by the old caves.

After a day of hard work, Henry returned to the camps. Shannon was sitting at the small table, adding color to her sketches of sky fairies (飞天). “Where is your mother?” Henry asked his now 14 years old daughter.

“Praying.” Shannon answered without looking up.

“Praying.” Henry whispered to himself. His wife became catholic on the way to Dunhuang. He could understand her, a lone catholic living in a Buddhist environment, but often he did hope that she could come to dinner on time instead of always being a few minutes late. “Where is little brother?” He asked again. Nancy had given birth to a second child, a boy, at Dunhuang.

“Playing at the crescent lake, I think.”

Henry sighed. He wished that he could spend more time with his family, but he did not have enough time to split between his family and the mogao caves. For Nancy, life was high heels, elegant dresses, and expensive makeup. All three became legend in the desert Dunhuang. Shannon spent lots of time coping the cave paintings and her art skills were developing rapidly, but he knew that a girl her age should be at school. As for their son, he spends most of his time playing, fishing in the crescent lake, staring into the statues of Buddhas. He wished that he could at least draw like his sister, but he also knew that he could not expect too much of his son it was himself who could not give him a proper, carefree, childhood.

Nancy went through the whole of dinner without saying a word. Shannon was becoming quieter and quieter, and their son, Thomas, was now 10, but could not read a single chapter book. Yet, after all his and his family’s sacrifices, Dunhuang was still in a mess. Every morning, he set off at 7 o’clock, when the sun had barely risen and every night, he returned home at 8 o’clock, the sun starting to set.

Back in Paris, the family was famous between the Chinese for being happy and complete. Henry studied painting and Nancy studied sculpturing. Both were successful, some of their artwork were even sought after by quite famous museums of the time. Nancy always dressed in the latest fashions, and Henry always left home in a formal suit and dress. That was the life Nancy liked. That was the life she wanted. That was the life she could not live in Dunhuang.

Over dinner, Nancy once again pleaded to return to Hangzhou, where family was. “Please, Henry, why can’t I go back to Hangzhou? I can take the children back as well.”

“No, Nancy.” Henry replied calmly but sternly. “We are a family. We stay together, no matter how hard the times might be. You are staying.”

Every night, before bed, Nancy prayed for safety and to leave the horrible place. Inside their small hut, Nancy, Henry, and Thomas shared the only bed while Shannon would sleep in a tent outside. For Henry, all was worth it so long he could remain close to Dunhuang, where his heart lies. But for Nancy, Dunhuang was hell. At first, she was moved by Henry’s enthusiasm but it was quickly wiped out by the horrible conditions. Day and night, she dreamed of leaving Dunhuang.

Just as the couple started arguing, a young and handsome army officer, Joseph, came to Dunhuang. He was from the same city as Nancy, and he spoke fluent Hangzhou dialect. Soon, Nancy’s heart began fluttering in the wrong direction, and she began plotting to end her marriage and leave Dunhuang one of the worst ways possible.

“Henry, I’m not feeling well.” Nancy announced the following day at breakfast.

“Why don’t you go to the Lanzhou hospital?” Henry asked. “You can use the car.”

“I’ll go with her,” Thomas announced.

Henry had been too busy to notice that his wife had been silently plotting.

And so, the next morning, Nancy and Thomas left, unknown to Henry, never to come back. After Nancy left, Henry went into the caves and asked his apprentice to clean his hut. On top of the family closer, there was a letter. Now, that was odd, because there was no mail service in Dunhuang, so he opened the letter, titled “to Nancy” on the outside.

Dear Nancy:

Our love is eternal, and neither Henry nor the great desert can end it. I have a plan, we will escape Dunhuang tomorrow. Pretend that you are ill, and I can go with you. We can leave Dunhuang by horse, for I have saved some money for our escape. We can ride train and return to our home, Hangzhou. All is possible when we leave Dunhuang.

Love,

Thomas

Henry took the letter from his apprentice’s hand. Reading the letter, he almost fainted with terror. The disbelief of Nancy’s betrayal and the hardness of the desert climate of Dunhuang fused together, surrounding him as if a terrible monster, trying to conquer him, trying to take over him, trying to swallow his soul.

“Shannon, if anyone comes looking for me tell them I’ll be home soon.” that was all Henry said. He then ran down to the small stables, saddling one of the horses, he left to chase Nancy.

The desert was silent, only the hooves of his horse pounding. So peaceful, so quiet, nothing but sand. No wind. No plants. No life. Nothing. Yet in Henry’s Herat, it was anything save peaceful. His skull seemed to pound, but with no pain. His heart seemed to stop, but it beat fast. The desert was lonely. But hadn’t Henry always been lonely, leaving China? Hadn’t he always been lonely when Nancy spent her time praying and left him alone?

Suddenly, Henry’s horse reared up and neighed loudly, sending him crashing to the ground. All the shock and exhaustion welled up inside him, and he fainted. The desert was dead still. Nothing happened.

Mogao Grottoes— The Four Buddhas

Wellington College, Shanghai, Yip, Jasmine – 12

Molly grumbled when she found out about the family expedition her mother and father planned. She had planned to spend the summer playing with friends, not visiting the uninspiring, unappealing, and unattractive Mogao grottoes. She decided that if she had to suffer, then the buddhist statues they were going to see should be punished too. She grunted, dragging her jampacked suitcase full of clothes down the marble stairs, and across the smooth, rock-hard granite floor. She heard her mother's high heels totter on the floor. Click. Clack. Click. Clack.

Molly heaved herself up the steps, and into one of the Mogao grottoes' majestic caves; a hollow cave with acres of dazzling Buddhist statues, staring intimidatingly at Molly. Each statue was bejeweled with detail. The walls had different kinds of Buddhas drawn colorfully. Each Buddha seem to have their own thing to do. Even the ceiling had decorations; colorful patterns symmetrically painted. She grunted, before giving one of the buddhist statues a swift kick. The statue came to life, and roared, "do not kick me, or you shall pay!" The girl just laughed at the thought of a statue making her pay. She had no idea what awaited her. She carried on. Kick. Kick. Kick. She kept on kicking at the statue until a woman screeched like a parrot, "Molly, please come back down now!" Molly slowly heaved herself back down the grimy stairs, only to be greeted by a slender, and elegantly dressed woman who was tapping away on a cell phone bejeweled with rhinestones. The woman was her mother.

After a grueling hour of staring intently and kicking buddhist statues, Molly finally returned to her hotel, where she collapsed into her bed. The statues in the Mogao grottoes came to life, every one of them ready to teach Molly a lesson. They floated into Molly's hotel room. The first buddhist statue Molly kicked floated in front of her, pinching her ears every time Molly gave out a deafening snore. The second tiny, round, and short statue floated beside Molly's bed, ready to slap her on the face each time she tossed and turned on her bed. The third statue crept silently under Molly's bed, ready to thump her mattress hard, as if an earthquake was about to arrive. And of course, the fourth statue floated into the bathroom, and emerged with a glass of water, ready to shower Molly with it when she woke up.

When the bell rang for midnight, the four statues did their part. At once, Molly shrieked like a banshee, springing up and wailing, "Get me out of here! Get me out of here!" At once, the four statues stopped haunting her. Instead, the first statue whom Molly kicked first whispered several times like an irritating mosquito, "Don't kick statues! Don't kick statues!" Then, the second statue whispered at Molly, "Promise not to kick statues! Promise not to kicked statues!" Molly immediately wailed, "All right, I won't!" Showering Molly with the rest of the water, the third statue whispered, "Promise! Say that you promise not to kick statues!" before shaking Molly vigorously. Molly wailed back, "I promise not to kick statues anymore! Now can you all leave me alone?" So, the four statues left Molly alone, and flew back to their home: the Mogao grottoes.

The next day, Molly went back to the Mogao grottoes, dragging two wooden baskets bulging with fruits; succulent pears, glossy vines of grapes, crispy apples, and of course, candied fruits. Molly had brought all of this as an apology to the statues she had kicked. The four statues stared at the sight of Molly dragging baskets of fruit up a pair of never-ending stairs, smiling and chuckling softly.

Murder

Wellington College, Shanghai, Zhang, Charlie – 12

The giant Buddha loomed over the chamber, its eyes staring straight at me, showering sparks of fear through my body. The chamber walls are delicately engraved with nymphs and angels, as if it was created by God. As I walked deeper into the chamber, the light became dimmer, until I couldn't even make out a clear shape of the chamber, all I can see were the shadows of the decorations around the chamber.

Then came the footsteps. Their footsteps, thumping against the floor, echoing through the walls. Three black-hooded figures emerged from the darkness, each with a gun in his hand. Their gun barrels shone a dim glow under the tiny streaks of sunlight peeking through the windows. It was too late, all too late. I was trapped deep in the chamber, with no way out. The doors were locked and they sealed the windows. I just stood there. My whole body was stationary, unable to budge. *It was over, I told myself, it was all over.*

They came closer, until our eyes met, and one of them held up his gun and pointed it at my forehead. His fingers pulled back on the trigger and CRACK! He released the trigger, and the bullet flew towards my chest. The bullet smashed me down to my knees. I winced and struggled to stand up, but the second blow came. This time the bullet was aimed straight towards my head. I just felt a surge of pain, saw a flash of light, then, everything was black.

Chapter I

Alex's eyes fluttered open. *It's just a plain, normal morning*, he thought, *with a plain normal day ahead.* He brushed his teeth, took a sandwich from the fridge, and was on his way to school.

After the first two lessons, it was break time. This was only his second week in his new school, so he didn't really have any friends yet. He just sat down on a bench, wondering about his homework, when he heard two boys, who looks slightly older than him, talking about some kind of "murder." At first, he just thought it was just some random story, but after he listened more closely, he discovered that the story matched perfectly with another one that he heard from his uncle a few months ago, before they had moved here to Gansu Province.

The story was about a person who was traveling to the Mogao grottoes but went missing and was never found again. Nobody saw him ever come out of the grottoes and many suspect that he was murdered.

On his way home, another thing startled Alex. When he was about to enter the compound, he saw a "wanted" poster about the murder in the Mogao grottoes. And that was when Alex decided to investigate my murder.

Chapter II

The next day, Alex found it *impossible* to focus at school, he just kept thinking back to the murder. He almost failed at his mandarin test and got in trouble for not doing his classwork in science. He was trying to find more clues about the murder, but nothing came. He even tried asking the boys who was talking about the murder a few days ago, but they said they knew no more than he did.

The next few days were all something like this. Searching and searching, but with no result. Then, a thought came to him, *what if I run away to the Mogao Grottoes to investigate the murder?* He did some more research on the grottoes and figured that this might actually be a good idea.

His parents would certainly be worried, once they know that he was not at home, they will immediately contact the school, whom would also be trying to find him. He searched his for what he has, and found in total fifty-seven *yuan*, eight *jiao*, his mobile phone, a watch, a small notepad, and some stationary. This would be enough for him to survive for at least two days, and after some more decision, he decided to start his journey the next day.

Chapter III

The next morning, Alex packed his runaway stuff into his school bag and slipped past his parents as if it was just a normal school day. His family had gone to the grottoes before, and he remembered it's just up the street, next to the Dachuan River. As he walked along the road, he looked around, checking that nobody who knows him is watching. He walked down the street, until he reached a gate where in bold Chinese characters were the words "Mogao Grottoes".

The guards were looking at him suspiciously, as he was supposed to be in school, but he still managed to enter the reserve.

Chapter IV

At first, the gorgeous view of the place stunned him. Carved into the edge of a cliff, a giant temple towered hundreds of feet high, casting a shadow on all the dirt and sand below. On both sides of the temple, rows of caves were scattered on the cliff like a gigantic beehive. Suddenly, he realized there was a problem: to find the crime scene, he must search every single one of the hundreds of caves, of which many are forbidden of entry. He needs clues fast.

He ran to the entrance of the caves, and raced up the stairs, carefully checking every piece of detail around him for any signs of a murder. None was found until after over half an hour of searching, he found a trail of blood on

a distant corner of the grottoes. “This has to be it!”, he muttered to himself. He followed the trail, going through a path crossing over the cliff, and going through a small forest just by the Dachuan River. In some places, the blood trail was fainter, but through some twists, the trail finally ended in an open grassland, where lay my dead body, his eyes staring straight into mine.

Chapter V

Alex was shocked. He has never seen somebody’s corpse before, and it did not make him feel comfortable. But he still followed the blood-stained track, returning to the grottoes, still thinking of what he had just witnessed. Once got back to the grottoes, he viewed the place, searching for any more clues of the murder. He still needed to figure out the plot of the murder, and how it exactly happened. Far away, he saw what seemed to be a narrow pathway, and the blood trail came from there. He went entered the pathway, where he saw a few rows of dark chambers. *This has to be the where the murder occurred*, he thought. It all pieced together — the blood, the story he heard, and the grottoes...

Finally, he decided to call the police.

Chapter VI

Later that day, the police figured out the mystery, and claimed that the criminals would be caught in a few days. Alex was home, but his parents were not really impressed. He was grounded for a few months and was told not to get out of home without his parent’s permission.

As for me, the detectives took my body, and examined it, to learn more about the murder, and how the bullet went through my head.

Epilogue

I admire Alex as a boy, how he helped capture the murderers, and the saved lives of many people, by getting rid of those bandits.

The Simulation

Ying Wa College, Cheung, Ka Wing Benedict – 12

“Mogao Cave,” said John, the leading pilgrim.

“What did you just say? Mango Cave?” I asked awkwardly.

“That was Mogao Cave, not Mango Cave, Sir,” answered John.

“Is there anything special?” I asked.

“Just a cluster of caves – only the 96th cave is really interesting though. That’s why recent explorers like to visit Mogao Cave.”

“How interesting? Can you tell me more?” I asked. I supposed everyone liked interesting things.

“Mogao Cave, well, there are books.” John smiled, trying to make his statement simple.

It was a long journey. We set off from the first cave. Every cave I went in, I was stunned with all the fine drawings there. Ancient pictures of vibrant colours were drawn along the walls. We studied the paintings one by one, helping each other to move forward. Time passed hours as if minutes. We walked through 95 caves like this, and finally we came to a small cave, the 96th cave. The tunnel of this cave was so narrow that it was just enough for a man to get through. The further we got in, the air got colder inside. I held my torch in my mouth and put on my jacket.

“It’s exciting,” thrilled I, “I like this sort of thing. I wonder where the tunnel leads us.”

We continued our journey. The tunnel went on for some way. I was beginning to believe that it went on forever. John flashed his torch to show us the way ahead. We stopped until we reached a dead end.

“What? A dead end! Is it the end of our journey?” I gave out a cry of surprise.

John did not reply. He touched the big rock with both hands until his fingers reached something. “Click” the sound it went. Like a science fiction, the big rock of the dead end suddenly rolled apart. In front of us was an enormous hall which was as big as a football field. The walls were all glittering with lights of phosphorescence. I stared in wonder.

Not until my pupils adjusted to the darkness inside, I dropped my mouth wide open with astonishment.

“What a magnificent sight!” astonished I.

It was an ancient library. Hundreds of rocky shelves stood quietly in an orderly way. Each twinkled in its weird light and made up the most beautiful sight I had ever seen. The ceiling was glittering with phosphorescence like a star night. Millions of books were piled up to the ceiling. It was a real treasure of history.

I flipped through the books very carefully as they were old and fragile, scribbling notes on my precious notebook. From time to time, I reviewed my notes to make sure I did not miss anything. Other pilgrims also tried to decipher the writing in the books.

John was a speed reader. Flipping through books at his top speed, he had already read through a whole shelf of books. Everyone was busy reading books and jotting down notes. Suddenly, a voice came out and broke the silence.

“Magic! We can even learn to be invisible!” John exclaimed.

“What was that?” everyone felt interested.

“MAGIC for invisibility!” he repeated.

“Interesting. Let me see,” I said.

“Forty–four cloved leaves, two Canadian pumpkins, four tiger’s teeth, a paw of a bear and a dinosaur’s tail” John helped.

“If only we could try them,” I said.

“Yes,” agreed John, nodding his head, “I don’t think we could get the dinosaur’s tail.”

John dived into the sea of books again, waiting for his next discovery.

“Here’s some more!” he shouted after a few minutes.

“I guess the books of this shelf are all about magic,” said one pilgrim next to him.

“Positive,” John replied.

“This one says about superintelligence,” John continued.

“Wow...” everyone exclaimed.

As a result, everyone heard the echoes of their own ‘wow’ and laughed.

“Superintelligence is possible,” John spoke with delight, “The things for the magic are obtainable... uh...But the right person may be not... someone who lived in the tenth century...”

“Well...Let’s see what else we can find,” I said.

With great enthusiasm, I sped up for deciphering the books.

A book titled ‘Technology’ came to my hands and caught my attention. Then I started reading it and find it really interesting.

“Here’s something we can really achieve!” I said.

“What’s it?” asked everyone, tired of John’s unachievable magic.

“It says that if you read these sentence loud,” I said proudly, “Our technology level would upgrade to one millennium from now!”

*Technology makes a difference.
Technology is the eternity.
Technology is our life.*

I read out the sentences as loud as I could. Then everyone did the same. However, it seemed nothing happened. I read the book again. I noticed that the pictures was in motion.

“The pictures are coming to life!” I said. “The progress bars were moving. I think it works. Something has just happened.”

“What is it?” asked John.

We looked at each other but no one could answer.

After seemingly a month, we started to run out of water and food for seven days. But it did not bother us at all. We still devoted ourselves to the ancient book treasure.

“Do you guys feel hungry and thirsty? It was the seventh day since we last ate or drank something. Why are we still alive?”

“It was the magic. Remember the sentences that we read out loud?” I answered with a big grin.”

We exchanged an eyesight with one another and returned to our ancient treasure. Most surprisingly, we never knew that we were still doing our explorations in a video game invented a millennium later.

Flashback

Ying Wa College, Cheung, Tsun Hei Lucas – 13

It was a sunny afternoon, fluffy white clouds drifted across the sky, a warm gust of wind blew the sand and dust onto my face. I was walking on the silk road, when I came across a mysterious rock. There were many rocks, but the one I was looking at seemed a bit stranger than the others. I walked towards it to take a closer look, and saw that it had an entrance.

When I was approaching the entrance, my mind immediately travelled back, like I was in a spaceship going really fast, and I saw a bald man in my memory. He was holding a magnifying glass and a notebook, and a pen in his other hand. He turned to me, and started saying, “Here, you’ll be safe...” Then I flashed back to the present. I glanced around, there was no one. I thought, “Hmm... Really peculiar that when I walk up to this cave I get a weird memory, but it must be something unrelated.” So I kept going. When I walked to the cave entrance, I felt as if I banged my head on a wall, a barrier was blocking me from going in. I held up my finger and slowly touched it, but the barrier still prevented me from going in. So, I put my whole hand on the barrier, closed my eyes, and took a deep breath. My hand started phasing in the barrier, and then my head, then my whole body.

When I opened my eyes again, darkness surrounded me. I couldn’t see my hands. My skin started to feel colder than normal, so without knowing what the cave had in store for me, I kept walking. I shivered with fear, and began sweating nervously, then I tripped on a pebble, my heart felt like it was going to fall out, I screamed for help while rolling down a slope that hurt my back and my butt, when I finally came to a halt, I saw a glimpse of light.

I crawled towards it, and peeked through a tiny hole. That’s when I saw blades of grass and houses made of wood. While I was peeking, a blade of grass poked my eye and I screamed, “OW!” I put my hands over my mouth, hoping no one heard my scream, but then a voice appeared behind me and said, “Who are you?” I almost jumped out of my skin, so I tried to tell him that I was lost, but he seemed to ignore me and brought me to their village.

I finally saw light again, the village was majestic, flowers were blossoming amongst the bushes, some villagers were chatting on the branches of trees. Statues of what looked like famous villagers were carved and shown at the center of the village. Some villagers were even relaxing near the pond. Suddenly, I saw the memory of the bald man again. This time, the man was saying, “Welcome...” I was really confused, but then a villager interrupted me and said, “Welcome to The Silk Village! Please, make yourself at home.” Many villagers came up to me and asked, “Who are you?” “What is your name?” “Do you want to come to my house?” I was flooded with questions, and all the villagers came together to celebrate my arrival.

Everything was going fine until I went to bed. I slept at a house which they reserved for guests, and I fell asleep. I was then woken up by a whisper by a villager. “Dude, isn’t he the rogue one? I thought he died years ago.” I rubbed my eyes, continuing to listen to their conversation. “Let’s just execute him in front of everyone tomorrow.” I was starting to get a bit scared. Execute? Rogue? I stood up and tried to make an escape when a mysterious voice came, “You weren’t supposed to hear that.” Everything went black.

I just started to regain consciousness, everything was going from blurry to clear. I found myself in a dark room with a spotlight on me. My hands were tied behind a chair, and I couldn’t see an exit.

“Well, well, if it isn’t 1069, the rogue one. We thought you died from the incident,” a voice said. “Who are you? What do you mean 1069? Who’s rogue?” I asked, shaking on my chair. A villager jumped right in front of me and said, “You think I’m falling for your lies... You’re Villager 1069, but as we like to call you, ‘the rogue one’. Us villagers tried to revive the monk, but you and your other rogue buddy, 606, tried to stop us from doing that. It ended up being a huge mess. Fire broke out in the village. Many lives were lost during the event we like to call ‘armageddon’. Your friend 606 died as well, but it looks like your didn’t”

Monk? What was he talking about? Then I remembered the bald man I saw in my memories when I was outside the cave and entering the village. “Now,” the villager said, “You can starve. There’s no need for execution when you can just starve to death.” The villager cackled sinisterly and walked towards the darkness. I was left alone in the room with no food, phone, not even wifi. I tried to wiggle out of the rope tied on my wrist, and surprisingly, it worked. “Looks like these villagers aren’t good rope tiers.” I walked towards the darkness and tried to escape, but I couldn’t see a thing. Right as I was about to give up, I hit my shoulder on a door knob. I opened it quietly and crawled out of the room.

I saw the villagers trying to activate a laser, so I got on my feet and jumped towards them. The villagers heard the grass rustle and they saw me. I jumped on the laser, trying to deactivate it, but I couldn't find the button. A villager then hit me in the face, making me fall on the ground and hurt my knee. I could feel the fire in me and with all my strength, I got back up. That's when the moonlight reflected something that caught my eye. The activation switch! I dashed towards it, evading all the villagers in my path, but it was useless. The laser fired out a beam of orange and yellow light. All the villagers' eyes lit up.

I could hear a man screeching, as if he woke up from a big sleep. All the villagers bowed, and as the mysterious man walked past, the villagers looked at me and said, "GET 1069!" The mysterious man looked at me panicking, and shouted, "HEY! Why are you attacking that innocent boy?" A villager said, "Mr Monk, he's 1069, the rogue villager, the one who stopped you from coming back to life. Isn't it fair if we kill him?" The monk said, "My villagers, violence is not the answer, 1069, what can I call you?" I answered, "You can call me 1069 if you'd like, but my name is Jim."

The monk replied, "Alright Jim, You're the rogue one right? How about we talk about this over some tea, would that sound nice?" I said, "Thanks, but no thanks. To be honest, I don't even know who I am after this 'Reviving the monk thing', would you mind if you show me how to leave this cave sir? I'm starving and my family's probably waiting for me."

"Of course." The monk said. "Of course."

Biding Time

Ying Wa College, Ng, Wing Him Steve – 14

As I sat on my blood red throne and watched as my subjects worked harder than ever to serve their ruler, I couldn't help but think back to how I managed to regain my power...

730,000 loops of light and darkness ago, I was the ruler of this mud ball known as Earth, everyone submitted to my might and followed my rules, so I told them to give up on the unnecessary thing known as 'entertainment' and serve me. Of course there were some rule breakers back then, but as an intelligent ruler, I tied them to a burning hot metal pole with their eyes dug out. Not only were their screams of agony music to my ears, it also made sure that no more rule breakers would rise up again.

I could've kept on ruling my subjects for all of eternity, but one day, a monk wearing a disgusting golden tunic walked towards me, towards this very throne I was sitting on right now, and said, 'Your reign of terror is over, weild before the power of the Buddha before he destroys you.' I was not going to let that shameless monk say those things without consequences, so I summoned my blade, Soul Burner, and lunged into battle. Even though the monk did not have any weapons, he was capable of evading and parrying all of my attacks using his pathetic fighting style and eventually he sealed me in an ugly vase with markings that show how our fight went with help from dark being known as the Buddha. He put the vase, along with me in it, in a cave at an oasis in a desert.

While I was in the cave, I kept on thinking about the fight, the loss and the humiliation. My rage grew like a rapid fire and vowed to make that monk suffer, as eternal pain is a worse fate than death. But even with all that anger, I never stopped counting the loops of light and darkness outside the cave I was imprisoned in.

After 547,500 loops of light and darkness later, I saw what I first thought was hope of getting out, which was a group of people walking right past the cave I was in. I used a fraction of what's left of my magic to lure them into the cave. After I got a closer look at them, I'd rather they hadn't entered this cave. The people were wearing ridiculous hats to match their stupid-looking clothes yet I tolerated there lavish clothing designs and let them set me free. However, while they were working out how to set me free, they made shapes out of piles of mud and rubbed colours onto paper and the walls of the cave while carrying on their mission. I was outraged by this, I could no longer tolerate the behaviour of those wretched people, so even though they found the spell to set me free and printed it into a book, I used another fraction of my magic to control a group of people who were wearing with rags and holding blades to slaughter them all, gut them, and throw their bodies in a corner.

I tried to give them the honour of setting me free, but those illiterate fools couldn't even understand a single word in the book. Furious with their stupidity, I manipulated them into killing themselves the way they killed the people mentioned earlier. Ah...I could never grow tired of admiring the music of screams of agony.

182,500 loops of light and darkness later, I began losing hope, that was until I saw three people, scholars, by the looks of it, go past this cave while riding several...speedy tortoises? (Since when were humans capable of creating creatures like that?) Ignoring this, I used a bit of magic to manipulate them into entering the cave. Upon seeing them entering the cave, I felt an emotion which I had not experienced for a long time, delight. Their clothes were simple and white with tags with names on them. The tag of a man with brown hair and green eyes had 'John' written on it, the tag of a woman with long, golden hair and grey eyes had 'Charlotte' written on it and the tag of another woman with short, dark hair and dark eyes had 'Xiao Xia' written on it.

When they saw the piles of mud on the floor and the colours on the walls left by people who first came here, John said, 'These things look terrible, whoever made those must have severe brain damage.' The two women nodded in agreement.

I was overjoyed upon hearing this. Finally, someone who hadn't been controlled by entertainment. I directed them towards the only book in the room and got them to read the spell in the book which could set me free. To my pleasure, the scholars were anything but similar to those illiterate imbeciles, they used the spell, setting me free without difficulty. I had waited for 730,000 loops of light and darkness, finally, was time for me to show myself to the world again!

As I used a lot of my remaining magic just to get someone to set me free, I could barely create a body for my usage, so I 'borrowed' a body from the only man among the scholars, told the other scholars to head back to where they started their journey, I got on the same tortoise as Xiao Xia and went back with them.

After we returned to the place where the scholars started their journey, we were immediately surrounded by people holding strange pieces of machinery, by noticing that some those machines the people were holding did nothing but flash lights at us and the fact that Charlotte and Xiao Xia were unfazed by the lights, I realised that those machines must contain powerful magic which could be used to broadcast images across the world. Using those machines to my advantage, I introduced myself on my soon-to-be subjects and, to regain enough energy for me to form a new body and to assert my dominance to the people of this mud ball, I grabbed two people who were holding the machines and used a bit of magic to drain out their life force. Watching their futile attempts to break free from my grasp as their life force was drained from their bodies filled me with pleasure.

After my arrival, I began my conquest, draining the life force of whoever stood in my way. Several persistent rule breakers sent metal birds and hideous-looking tortoises to shoot metal marbles at me. But I easily eliminated them with my ever-growing power. And the rule breakers themselves were punished by the method I used in my reign before that anonymous monk defeated me. After fifteen loops of light and darkness, I successfully regained what I had lost in the past.

Now, as I sat on my throne and watched as my subjects build a statue of me not far away under the keen eye of the people who were once the scholars who freed me. I gave them all new names as their names were far too plain for their positions as my three bringers of pain. For John, I changed his name to Marotias the Merciless. For Charlotte, I changed her name to

Triagonas the Death Canary. And for Xiao Xia, I changed her name to Arionas the Bringer of Death. Their main job was to scout this mud ball for any rule breakers and monitor the people carrying out my missions.

Even after the success in regaining the kingdom I had lost, I had never forgotten the time I was defeated and humiliated by that monk. Every day ,I acted like there was going to be a war, never letting go of the hilt of Soul Burner. I expected him, or someone like him, to approach me, so that we could end our rivalry once and for all. That day had not arrived yet, but when it did, I would be ready.