



Fiction

Group 4

Buried Secrets Of The Mogao Caves

Pui Kiu College, Cheung, Ching Long – 15

“Ouch!”, Yiming exclaimed as he accidentally hit his head right after he woke up. Just like any other uneventful day in his life, the first thing he did after waking up was check his phone. “What was Professor Chen even calling me so early in the morning for?” he thought to himself when he saw 27 missed phone calls from his boss. Contrary to what others believed, Yiming’s job as an archaeologist was much more boring than it seemed. Instead of exploring tombs and sanctums lost to time, all he actually did was dig up and research tupperware from a Ming Dynasty dig site in Nanjing. Yiming sent a message to Chen, asking about the calls. Chen’s reply was short and direct, but simultaneously mysterious and meaningless.

“Mogao Caves, we’ve got a new job on our hands, you won’t be disappointed.”

As he pondered what the message meant, Yiming quickly got ready to leave and packed his duffle bag and backpack.

After arriving at his company’s office, the first thing he saw was all of his coworkers gathered at a single computer. On the computer was an article about the entrances to the caves all suddenly being sealed the day after the Qing Ming Festival.

“Alright, I guess you’re all wondering why I asked you to come here so abruptly on short notice. Someone contacted us last night and hired us to go into the caves to find out the reason why the caves collapsed. Sounds dangerous, I know, but we’ll make a boat load of cash if we finish this job. Since the caves were closed off to the public not too long ago, I don’t think anything’s really gonna happen.” Mr Chen loudly yelled at everyone at the office.

“If it’s not urgent and without any risks, why did you call all of us so early in the morning? Sheesh! I just want a good night’s sleep!” Da Wei bellowed.

Da Wei was Yiming’s classmate when they got their PhDs in Chinese History. Unlike Yiming, who was pessimistic and indifferent, Da Wei had a short fuse and was unreasonably grumpy.

“Well, the reason for that is... Actually, we’re supposed to be at the caves already by now. We’re already running late. Let’s get to work.” Chen replied.

Despite landing possibly the best deal of their lives, all that could be heard at the office was complaining.

When the team arrived at the caves, the entrances had already been blown open by dynamite. It definitely wasn’t the most logical way of opening up an entrance to the caves, but it was the most convenient. Apparently the contractors had to cut corners, as a whopping 99% of their budget was spent on hiring Chen’s team of archaeologists. The contractors were obviously not very reasonable.

As they entered the caves, the whole team suddenly heard whispers. Right after everyone had entered, the caves somehow were sealed again. They were trapped. “You overstep your bounds. Trespassers are unwelcome in this sacred place.”

“Guess this’ll be where we die. Great job, professor. How are you gonna get us out of this now.”, Wei Xiang snarkily remarked. Wei Xiang was a genius who had a personality as awful as his IQ was high. He was aloof and impolite, but cared for all his teammates. As they were all important to him, finding out that Chen essentially got them killed angered him greatly.

As the team ventured deeper into the cave, the whispers grew quiet, but the atmosphere was just as terrifying.

At the head of the group was Xiaolan. She was always calm and collected. So calm and collected, in fact, that she was almost completely unfazed by what was happening to them.

"When are you going to stop complaining, Xiang, we won't make it out if we don't try. We have to stay calm and think of how to escape." Xiaolan emotionlessly said.

"Our intel says that all 487 remaining sub-caves are connected by some sort of tunnel system. We should go to Cave 16, Cave 17 and Cave 96. They're by far the most important. We'll run out of stamina if we're to explore every single nook and cranny of this place." she added.

"Sounds good to me", Xiang replied, "Cave 16's an archive of paintings from a bygone era. It's just a hunch, but I feel like we'll learn more about the situation we're in if we head there. Right next to it is Cave 17, also known as the library cave. It's an all-you-can-eat buffet for Buddhist scriptures and literature, so it'll help. The oldest book known to Chinese civilization happens to also be in this cave. If we get it out, we can sell it off at an auction to make easy money, or donate it to a museum. Though, that is assuming we make it out. Cave 96's known as the Buddha Cave. There's a gigantic Buddha statue in it, as the name suggests. Not sure why you want to go there though, it doesn't seem to have anything noteworthy."

"I feel like we should trust her this time." Yiming said. As Yiming always was the voice of reason within the group, they did as he said.

When they made it to Cave 16, everything seemed normal, until Chen walked up to a gigantic painting of Le Zun, the monk who built the caves. Suddenly, the painting started to blink, and the colors started to mix. The colors then formed an image of a grotesque abomination. Scared out of their minds, the group tried to run from the painting, but they were trapped in a ring formed by paint and dirt. The creature leapt out of the painting and directly pounced at Chen. The creature crashed into a wall after Chen dodged its attack, but it was unharmed. Xiaolan took out a pickaxe from Yiming's duffle bag and started to swing it at the ring's walls.

"Suddenly have an urge to play Minecraft? Huh? Take your time, not like we'll die to this... thing if you don't mine faster!" Da Wei yelled.

"Now's not the time, if you're so confident you can do better, why don't you shut up and actually do something?" Yiming retorted.

After Xiaolan made a hole in the ring for the team to escape from, all 5 of them dashed out and made a run for it.

The creature changed its appearance to that of a Phoenix and started launching black projectiles at the group. Then, it shifted into the shape of a rhino and started charging at the team, destroying everything in its way. Then, it darted into the air in the shape of an eagle, then nosedived into the archaeologists. The group barely made it to the library cave, but they were all exhausted. The deranged shapeshifter crashed into the floor, absolutely decimating the stone tiles. When it climbed back up from the rubble, the crew had already made it to the library cave.

In the library cave, Xiang grabbed the first thing he saw. Somehow, he managed to get the book he mentioned earlier, which also happened to include a basic guide on how to tame the "Wavesplitter". By uttering the phrase "The roots of this place bind you." to the creature in ancient Chinese, the group was able to make the form-changing predator docile.

"Whew, your luck really saved us this time, good on you. But what even was that? Don't want to run from anything like that ever again" Yiming laughed, as he sighed audibly.

The group then made their way to the Buddha Cave after taking everything they needed from the library, wanting to take a rest. Unfortunately for them, what they would find in the Buddha cave would put an end to one of their teammates' lives.

"The five of you, kneel!", the shadowy figure floating above the gigantic Buddha statue sneered. The entity was faceless and was clearly levitating. "I am Wang Yuanlu, the Guardian Of Statues, Keeper Of Secrets, Caretaker of

the Grottoes, Savior Of Mogao... I am but a ... disappear from my sight at once...I serve a greater power...my will is not my own...the Vault of the Keep...statue...I am Ascended...argghhh”

And then, it faded into the shadows.

The revenant who claimed to be Wang Yuanlu seemed to be both wrathful and desperate, almost as if his words were not truly his.

“Great, another shadow demon. This one thinks he’s the guy who restored the caves.” Xiang lamented.

“Let’s call him Yuanlu for now. So Yuanlu mentioned this Vault that I don’t think has been discovered. If we find this vault, I think we can make it out safely. Let’s trust Yuanlu, just this once. It’s our only choice.” Xiaolan shared. Yiming suddenly noticed an orb floating where Yuanlu once was. As he reached out to the orb, the Buddha statue suddenly moved aside. A gigantic vault door was revealed behind the statue. On it were 3 symbols, a koi fish, a panda, and a hyena. The riddle “Those who are patient understand the ways of the virtuous. Those who merely wait with no objective are stagnant. It is the man who takes action who truly succeeds.” was carved into the wall.

“I wonder what this means?” Xiaolan asked. Figurative language and metaphors were not her forte.

“Well, we probably have to tap these symbols according to the order they’re represented in in the riddle.” Chen replied.

After Yiming touched all 3 symbols, the vault door opened.

In it was the corpse of Wang Yuanlu, somehow still in perfect condition, held up by golden light beams emitted from thousands of Buddha statues across a bridge. Beneath him, was a lectern on a platform above a bottomless pit, with the true first written text in Chinese History.

“In order to cleanse the human race of its corruption, we must embrace The 7 Perfections. Only through virtue, can man truly thrive. However, man has proved himself to be unworthy. Man must be eradicated. The purity of this Earth must not be threatened by false worshippers of the Buddha. The worthy atone for the crimes of others, tainted by sin. The impure, unaware of their wrongdoings, bring harm in their wake. It is time for the reckoning to come. ~Wang Yuanlu, Eyes of The Ascended”

One by one, the light beams holding up Wang Yuanlu started to disappear. When there was only one small Buddha statue left, Wang Yuanlu fell to the ground.

“Who... who dares disrupt my slumber... we, of the Ascended have transcended the filth of humanity. You dare impose... yourself... on me mortal!”, the husk of the man who once guarded the caves muttered. Suddenly, Wang Yuanlu looks up at the sky. Golden fluid started flowing from his eyes. He rose up into the air, with the golden liquid enveloping his whole body. If there was 1 thing that the archaeologists were sure of, it was that Yuanlu was no longer human.

No longer bound by flesh, Yuanlu took the form of a gigantic bipedal...armored cat?

“I have embraced nature. I am one with the Earth. The Earth is with me. I have risen from the filth and muck. I am Ascended.”, declared the colossal feline. The animalistic creature slowly walked to the group and slashed Xiaolan in the abdomen. It then dug its blood red claws deep into her stomach, brutally clawing her intestines out. Slicing her entire lower body off, it was clear he had no intention of letting the team leave the caves alive. Yuanlu’s attacks became more and more brutal, having no desire to stop even though he was already completely drenched in blood.

“Cats... red dots... red... blood! Ah, lights! Use my blood and that last statue. You have to, I know it’ll work... trust me one last time... by the way, I left... a sandwich in the freezer... make sure... to throw it out before it goes... bad”

Those were her last words. Although strange, it hit everyone else very close to home. They had never seen the completely emotionless robot-like human act so desperately. Yuanlu continued clawing at Xiaolan’s body and sliced her neck into many small pieces. He kept mauling her corpse until he noticed Yiming starting to dash to the Buddha statue. As Yiming rushed in the direction of the Buddha statue while dodging Yuanlu’s razor sharp paws,

he cried his heart out. It was the first time he lost someone dear to him. He cried even harder when he dipped the device in his friend's blood. It was a gruesome sight and very painful, yet he had no other choice. It was a last ditch effort, their last stand to make it out of the cave. Yiming shone the blood tainted beam in Yuanlu's face. Surprisingly, Xiaolan's final, bizarre idea worked. Completely attracted to the crimson ray, he followed the beam, repeatedly slashing at it, completely oblivious to what Yiming was actually doing. Yiming pointed the beam at the deep abyss beneath the bridge, and Yuanlu followed. Yuanlu had accidentally killed himself thanks to his new animalistic tendencies. After that, Yuanlu was never seen again. Suddenly, platforms appeared and formed a pathway into the sky.

"You have passed the first trial. One zealot has been eliminated. 6 remain. You have freed Wang Yuanlu from his eternal suffering. May he find peace. In the past, 8 outstanding men from different lands came together and formed a group, known as the Ascended. They aimed to lead their people to a better future. However, their leader, Leonidas was assassinated. After that, the 7 of them went insane from the sadness of losing their friend. They strayed from the path Leonidas wanted them to follow and started experimenting on humans. Through decades of experiments on innocent people, they created the Halcyon Waters, which let them take any shape they wanted. Now, the remaining Ascended are waiting for their chance to take over the world and reshape it in the way they see fit. You must eliminate Arthur, The Tyrannical Blade, Uncle Samuel, the Liberator Of The Living, Brutus, the Patricidal, Napoleon, The Exiled, Deimos, The Spartan and Prometheus, The Titan Who Brought Fire. Are you up for the challenge?"

After the team heard the mysterious voice, they ignored it and walked up the floating pathway and left. It didn't matter that they didn't get everything they could from the caves. They were glad that they could finally go home.

One week later.

Yiming, still grieving from the loss of his dear friend, wished nothing big would happen in his life ever again. He was minding his own business, eating shumai, petting his new 'dog' Omo when he saw the news

"King Arthur has risen from the grave, on a quest to take over Britain"

"Great", he thought to himself, "Looks like there's no rest for the wicked."

He got ready for work again. He knew what he would do this time, he knew what he had to do now. His next destination was Britain.

A Tunnel to the Future

Pui Kiu College, Cheung, Yau Hang – 16

Arthur awoke slowly.

He didn't want to open his eyes. It had been a rough night. His flight to Dunhuang had been delayed by three hours, and the incessant screaming from the baby on the plane meant that he'd not been able to catch a single wink.

When he finally arrived at his hotel at two in the morning, there were still preparations to be done for his visit the next day to the Mogao Caves. There was no time to sightsee or experience the local culture. Arthur was there for one reason and one reason only: to unravel the mystery behind the Mogao Caves.

Normally, he wouldn't have time for this. His day-to-day life typically consists of doing seemingly endless piles of paperwork, and the rare bits of free time he got was spent doing research on the Mogao Caves. And so when he finally got a full week of holiday free from any work, he immediately hopped on the first plane to Dunhuang. To him, there was a sense of uncertainty that came when looking at photos or videos of these caves, and that there was something more to these caverns than just pretty paintings on a wall. And so after finally finishing preparations, Arthur collapsed on the hotel bed and instantly went to sleep, eager to finally figure out the thing about the Mogao Caves that had been bothering him for so long.

However, soon after waking up, Arthur realized that the comfort of the hotel bed was gone, and was instead replaced by a cold, rock-hard material. Perplexed by what his back was feeling, Arthur finally mustered the determination and courage to fully open his eyes. Instead of the walls of his hotel room in Dunhuang he was expecting, Arthur opened his eyes to see...

A massive, creepy-looking face?

Arthur jumped back in surprise. After all, he wasn't used to waking up with someone next to him. Arthur's hands frantically looked for something around him to defend himself with, only to realize that there was nothing around him at all. He was in a very dimly lit room, and when his eyes finally adjusted to the room, he also realized that the creepy 'face' was just a painting on a wall. A mural, to be exact. Yet something about it gave Arthur a sense of familiarity. Had he seen it somewhere before? In a book? Or maybe in a movie somewhere? The mural depicted two women in Sung dynasty attire, and one was wearing an elaborate headdress and necklace made with what looks to be jade.

And then it hit him.

He'd seen a picture of this mural in his notes. These two women were the wife of Dunhuang ruler Cao Yanlu and the daughter of the King of Khotan. But the only place with a wall painting like this was the... Arthur realized where he was. He was in the Mogao Grottoes.

But that was impossible. His hotel was miles away from the caves, and even if it wasn't, how had he even gotten there? Had he somehow sleepwalked for sixteen miles? That's impossible. Arthur wouldn't have the stamina for it even if he were awake. Besides, the Mogao Caves are a popular tourist attraction. The caves were normally bursting with tourists trying to snap a photo or two of the famous murals on its walls, yet not a single soul could be seen. There was no one here except for Arthur and these rocks. All of Arthur's possessions had been stripped from him, including his mobile phone and his notes, leaving him clothed only in the light blue T-shirt and beige jeans he'd fallen asleep in the night before.

And so, with no way to call for help and no other options, Arthur ventured deeper into the caves, hoping to find an exit.

Arthur had never felt this afraid.

His hands wouldn't stop shaking, and gallons of water were oozing out of his skin. Despite being in the place he'd wanted to explore for so long, it was a completely different experience being alone. In the dim light of the caves, the murals felt like they were watching his every move, whispering about him, judging him. Even the Buddha sculptures seemed to be laughing at how pathetic Arthur was looking right now. It was getting harder and harder to bear. The lack of people, the creepy murals, and sculptures would be enough to drive anyone insane.

After what seemed like hours of non-stop walking, all of a sudden, Arthur heard voices. The voices sound distant, but not far enough for Arthur to not be able to make out what they were saying. The voices were both from males, and they were both speaking what sounded like Mandarin. Could they be locals who also got magically teleported to these caves? Arthur felt a pang of relief. He had finally found someone to accompany him through these dark caves. Arthur became so excited, he practically ran towards them. But as he got closer, he realised that something was off.

They were definitely speaking Mandarin, but Arthur understood none of it. Not because he didn't understand Mandarin—you can't do serious research on a country's most famous without at least understanding a bit of their language, but because what they're saying doesn't make any grammatical sense. Sure, Arthur caught a few words here and there, but it was all strung together so strangely. But those two men could obviously understand what the other was saying, as they replied in the same string of nonsensical Mandarin.

Arthur decided to get a closer look. What he saw shocked him.

The Mogao Grottoes have a history of over 1000 years, and contain some of China's oldest statues and wall paintings. And two men were...drawing on these walls.

One was applying some kind of gold powder to them, and the other was sitting behind him, his hand on his chin as if in deep thought. How could they? Did they have any idea what they were painting on? These were the Mogao Caves, caves that contain some of the world's finest paintings, sculptures, and literature, not some kindergarten art class!

Arthur was outraged. It took everything inside him to not leave his hiding spot and hit both of the men for being so disrespectful.

Then, he noticed the drawing.

Once again, like the mural that greeted him when he first woke up, a wave of familiarity hit him. Although it was just the rough outline of one, Arthur had definitely seen it before in his notes. This time, the mural showed two somewhat identical-looking women, both dressed in fancy-looking clothes, hands together as if in prayer.

That mural had been finished during the Five Dynasties era, yet that exact mural was being completed right in front of his eyes. How was that possible? Did Arthur somehow travel back in time to witness this historical moment? As cool as it was to become a time traveler, Arthur doesn't want anything to do with it. He was willing to accept that he had somehow teleported to the Mogao Caves, but actually traveling through time and watching a famous piece of art get finished? That was too much for Arthur to take.

Not sure what to think, Arthur slowly backed away from the two ‘monks’, his mind still reeling from what he had just seen. Dazed, he slowly stumbled along the caves, simply trying to get as far away from them as possible, fearful of what might happen if he had to face them directly.

It wasn’t long until Arthur stumbled upon another mural. This one showed two women with their hands outstretched, their faces twisted with fear. Behind them is what looks to be piles of manuscripts. The mural fascinated Arthur. He had never seen it anywhere before. Was the mural perhaps trying to express people’s fear of knowledge? Or was it something else? As much as Arthur wanted to analyze every bit of the mural, he was simply too tired and stressed out to do anything at all. He needs a break. And so he laid his back against the screaming women and tried to go to sleep.

He was unsuccessful.

Right as his eyes were about to close, the wall behind him collapsed, and Arthur tumbled into the darkness below.

His head hit something hard, and he instantly fell unconscious.

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Arthur awoke slowly.

His entire head hurt, and there was an aching pain in his back that wouldn’t go away. Where was he? Had he just fallen through a wall? But there weren’t any records of there ever being secret caves in the Mogao Grottoes.

As Arthur finally managed to open his eyes, he half hoped he’d somehow be back in his hotel room, but instead he found himself surrounded in darkness, unable to see anything except for the tiniest light far away.

Desperate for a way out, Arthur hobbled his way towards the light. He tripped and fell numerous times due to the lack of light, but he was eventually able to reach the source of light.

The light came from torches; thousands upon thousands of them. All of them lined the walls of a room with walls that seem to stretch on for miles. And filling that room are stacks of manuscripts all titled differently. It was a stunning sight. Walls of paper as far as the eye could see.

Arthur had researched the Mogao Caves for years, yet he hadn’t once heard of a cave like this. Could he have possibly discovered something archeologists over decades couldn’t find? Arthur’s hands started trembling with excitement. This was what he’d been looking for.

Those sleepless nights and endless headaches had not been for nothing. Gingerly, Arthur picked up a manuscript, careful to not damage it in any way. The title on the first page read *Abraham Lincoln, part 56*. The manuscript was a few hundred pages long, and each page was filled with lines of tiny Chinese characters. And using his limited understanding of the Chinese language, Arthur started reading.

At around the 50th page, Arthur’s hands started to sweat. The content in these manuscripts are... shockingly detailed. The manuscript included every single bit of Lincoln’s life, even the stuff no one wants to know. It wrote about the specific length of his hair every single day, times he went to the bathroom, what he had for breakfast, even the brand of soap he’d used.

What on earth was Arthur reading?

He put the manuscript back down, beads of sweat rolling down his forehead. This was insane. How could someone possibly know all of this? No, how could someone from the Mogao Caves know this? The last traveler to visit Mogao Caves had arrived over 500 years ago, and yet this manuscript detailed the life of a person from only 160 years ago. Did some archeologist dig a secret cave to store all his Lincoln fan-fiction here? Unlikely.

Then just what is this place? Arthur walked along the wall of the massive room, looking at the towering stacks of manuscripts until he came across one that caught his eye. That manuscript was just like every other manuscript in the room, but the thing that attracted Arthur was the title on its binder.

Arthur

A manuscript, with his name on its binder? How?

Hands trembling, Arthur slowly reached for the manuscript, but as soon as he flipped open the first page, he instinctively closed it again. If this manuscript were anything like the one about Lincoln, this manuscript would describe his entire life in excruciating detail, even the stuff that hasn't happened yet. If he read the whole thing, he would probably know all the major events in his life that are about to happen, even how and when he would die.

And no one should know that.

As much as Arthur wanted to know whether his time spent on researching the Mogao Caves would turn out to be fruitful, or whether he would accomplish anything else in his life, he knew that if he did read the manuscript he would never live his life the same way again. No one should be able to know what the future holds. Yet some monk in a cave knows the exact shade of color his hair will be when he dies.

Overwhelmed by his own thoughts, Arthur collapsed on the floor. His headache kept intensifying, and he had yet to find a way to get out of these caves. Did it even matter what he did? There's already a manuscript that details every little thing he's about to do. Someone out there knew. It was as if his life were already fully pre-planned out, and the thought of that terrified him.

On the other hand, if these manuscripts were brought to light, it could make him famous. It could help historians help make sense of the blurrier parts of history. It would be a revolutionary discovery.

With that thought in mind, Arthur took one of the manuscripts and headed back the way he came. Thoughts of fame and wealth filled his head, causing him to practically skip to the exit.

Right as was about to leave the room, the manuscript he was holding grazed the flame of one of the many torches in the room. Naturally, it caught on fire and caused a surprised Arthur to reflexively throw it away. The burning manuscript flew across the air and Arthur helplessly watched as it landed on the other manuscripts, setting them aflame as well.

The fire spread, and in less than a blink of an eye, the entire room was set ablaze.

Arthur couldn't move. He was shocked at what he had just done. Had he really just set fire to a library containing every bit of knowledge known to man? He stood in place for a few seconds before his survival instincts finally kicked in. Once he could move his legs again, Arthur instantly started scrambling for the exit, only to realize he's trapped. The way he came from was a one-way trip, and unless he is a professional mountaineer, there was no way he was climbing out.

Arthur looked back at the room, which had turned into an ocean of flame.

Decades of knowledge, destroyed by one tiny flame.

And the smoke from it was nearing. Arthur started frantically climbing, but it was no use. He couldn't get anywhere near the top. Soon, smoke started to surround him and filled his lungs.

As Arthur suffocated from the smoke, his mind was surprisingly calm. He wondered if this was also written somewhere in the burning pile of manuscripts, and if that was the end of his chapter. As more and more smoke slowly replaced the oxygen in his lungs, Arthur blacked out.

When he awoke, he was surrounded by the hotel room he had fallen asleep in the night before. Had all of that just been a dream? It had felt a little too real to be a dream, but Arthur let out a breath of relief. Of course something like that would never happen. And so, Arthur sat up, dusted the dirt off his clothes, and got ready for his visit to the Mogao Caves, positive that he was going to find something shocking there.

Tales Better Left Untold

Pui Kiu College, Choi, Yan Ching – 16

“Moku, you need to go.”

“No.” The young girl vehemently denied her mentor’s order, as her hands tried to grasp onto the hieroglyphic-esque marks carved into the stone walls of an underground tunnel. “There’s something I still haven’t done.”

Her sharp breaths echoed down the narrow path, yet so persistently was she trying to search for something seemingly hidden behind the walls. As though she could read the ancient texts, she appeared to be following instructions.

Sweat beads rolled endlessly down her temples and in the suffocating air of the cave, she scratched the walls. Her nails emitted an uncomfortable screeching sound as she dragged them across the carvings, all while everyone around her stood in absolute silence.

“I can hear you,” she gasped. “Come out.”

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It had started from an arranged excursion open to only certified historians from around the globe. The meeting was much anticipated, as such an event had been planned a full decade ago to ensure nothing could possibly go wrong. Finally, the world would bear witness to the secrets of the Mogao Grottoes, or as they were commonly known, The Cave of Human History.

News articles had sparked once the mission was made public, and some schools had even tried to pitch in to the officials to let some of the students and teachers take part. Most were undoubtedly unsuccessful, but one of the most prestigious schools in Japan was granted permission. Shinju High School: a household name as a school which continued to adopt an ancient education system despite the modern society developing around it. But out of everybody’s initial expectations, students who came from this odd school had always been the top scorers in any public exam held.

The candidates chosen to go on this expedition were two students and their history teacher. Geido Moku, the alleged child prodigy and Gunroku Tsugoro, the nephew of the most generous donor of the school. The two of them had been told to stay after school for an interview the day before the excursion.

Both of them walked towards the counseling room from opposing directions. Despite her small stature, short black hair and onyx dark eyes, she pinned the boy raised with a silver spoon. He looked back with cold slanted eyes, pupils just as black and flattened lips. As they walked into the room, shoulder to shoulder, their backs formed a silhouette of two model students.

Arms at their sides, knees aligned, and with polished leather shoes aligned neatly together, they watched their history teacher with a nonchalant expression as they waited for him to say something. He turned to face his students with a smile after putting some files back into his cabinet.

“You know, you two are the most gifted in the nation. The school on behalf of the officials picked you for a reason,” he chuckled, as he pitched his glasses up his nose, then rested his arms on his thighs. “Are you two ready to join the professionals in their field of work? Better learn something from this once-in-a-lifetime experience, alright kiddos?”

Both of them continued to stare down their teacher with an unchanging expression. Not even a twitch.

“Now, now, couldn’t you two look a *bit* more enthusiastic? Everybody else is dying to go. It wouldn’t hurt to smile, would it?” He tried to encourage them by bringing his fingers to the edges of his mouth and pushing them up to form a smile. His glasses reflected the sunset from outside and for a brief moment, it blinded both of them.

“Sakata Sensei, you’re acting weird again,” Tsugoro said monotonously, to which his teacher laughed in response.

“Who wouldn’t be enthusiastic about this whole.. this whole.. event! You get to work along with the best of the best and unveil new knowledge of what humanity used to be! These secrets could move mountains! Knowing our origins could help so much in explaining, or assuring, the abnormalities we see today! Theories, mythologies, all could finally be within our understanding! How *couldn’t* you be excited?”

“That’s true. Tsugoro, how couldn’t you be excited?” The girl turned to her senior, still with a blank expression. He simply rolled his eyes, and their teacher ignored their disappointing reactions.

The students had been told of what they would need to prepare for the following day, and had been promptly sent home. This coming night would be their last night sleeping in their own bedrooms before their two week trip.

On a bright Saturday morning, the three met up at the airport, and were arranged to board a private plane at exactly nine o’clock in the morning. On board were people from the rest of the permitted schools, all loud and cheering about the expedition. There were discussions about the oldest dated book in the world, and the artifacts found alongside it. Many were trying to dissect the old language, some looking for the meanings behind the olden literature and the others looking for a reason to the sculptures and paintings created. Even teacher Sakata indulged himself in the conversations, but Moku and Tsugoro decided to look out the window instead. The slow moving clouds outside seemed to intrigue them more.

“Shouldn’t you join them, senior?” she suddenly asked, though not lifting her eyes off the clouds outside.

“There’s a difference between acting like a perfect student and wanting to be one. And the difference is that I don’t care,” he sighed. “What about you? You’ve been pretty apathetic about all of this.”

“There’s a difference between being a perfect student and acting like one. And the difference is that *I* already know everything about what they’re discussing,” she declared, and stayed silent for the rest of their ride.

Her lifeless stare lingered as they were brought to their destination. Faced with a gigantic hole in the mountain, still as dark as the night sky during high noon, it howled as the breeze kicked up sand at its entrance. They had arrived at the Dunhuang district of Gansu province in west central China: the Mogao Grottoes.

While the historians and teachers scrambled to get everything prepared to perfection as efficiently as they could, all the students were told to stand to the side. Although all of them were just as eager to enter the caves, one of them grew impatient for a different reason.

Moku’s eyes never left the darkest point of the visible entrance. It was like a mirror to her pupils. She refused to look away. Even after the adults were done preparing, Tsugoro had to drag her to the meetup point for she was acting as if she had gone deaf.

“So this expedition will be led by four teams...” the claimed leader spoke of the details and precautions taken. It was an informative and necessary talk, albeit quite boring. Soon after, they were finally let inside. Moku and Tsugoro were of the first group of students to enter the caves. Into the darkness she continued to glare, further than the leader’s flashlight could shine to. Although her teacher also noticed her odd behavior, he kept to himself, just like her peers. “*The professional historian shouldn’t be disturbed by a student’s strange tendencies,*” he thought, and followed in the leader’s footsteps as they were told to.

Deeper and deeper they went without a sound, into spiraling depths and no visible way out. Every step was taken with caution, for there was no saying that the cave was without traps. Yet oddly enough, Moku was walking casually; neither slope nor step downwards seemed to strike her fear or heed.

“Hieroglyphs! There they are!” the historian exclaimed joyfully as they finally reached a narrow tunnel with a hint of what they were looking for. Drawings and carvings on the wall, a diary of sorts by those in the past, but the ancient language was indecipherable. At least at first glance, it seemed to be a new way of writing. A revelation indeed.

All while they cheered, there was one student from Shinju high school who expressed none of it.

“Hey, are you okay? You’ve been fazed out for enough time. You’re our star student, you can’t keep your image up like this.” Tsugoro finally gave his schoolmate a nudge, quite fed up with her act. “I know first impressions are important and you probably want to have a lasting one, but too far is too far. You’re beginning to concern sensei too.”

Her body suddenly jerked, then looked around frantically. Like a marionette, her knees weakened out of nowhere and she was barely caught by Tsugoro by the arm.

Fear was written all across her face; pale cheeks and trembling lips, excessive blinking and heaving panting, limbs as soft as jelly and eyes unable to focus. She seemed to be able to hear, but she responded to nothing.

“I understand,” she muttered. “I can hear you.”

Despite her utterance, it didn’t feel like she was talking to him. She faced the wall of writings with her head down; almost bowing.

“Stop ringing in my ears! I can hear you,” she pleaded with a desperate tone in her voice, nagging something, or someone.

Tsugoro’s hand felt warmer and warmer the longer he held her by the wrist, and her palms were no better. While everyone else were still taking pictures and discussing the context of the wall, Moku whispered in her schoolmate’s ear.

“They’re all wrong. Come with me.”

Without any time to react, the perfect student grabbed her friend and pulled him further into the darkness. Their teacher caught sight of them at the corner of his eye, and while everyone else was still occupied, he quietly followed behind them.

Soon, they were all walking in pure darkness. However, her every step was certain. She knew of every bump in the tunnels, every crevasse, and seemingly every word written on the narrowing walls. Every tunnel they passed through only became thinner and colder, yet her hands were still steaming in his.

“I can hear you, I can hear you,” she mumbled time and time again. Tsugoro was convinced that there must be something in the dark that he couldn’t see. She stopped in her tracks abruptly, and the cave itself lit up on its own—olden torches mounted on the stone walls suddenly caught on fire without the need for even a single spark, and a huge gust of wind blew through the cavern to dust off the centuries-old sand caught within the carvings.

In awe, her teacher watched from the entrance as he listened in to her chanting the ancient text. Her brows were furrowed while scolding the wall in words nobody understood. The more she raised her voice, the more the caverns rumbled; the ground shook more and more violently, pebbles of rock and stone began to fall off the ceilings, and pieces of the walls were being shaken off. She scratched at the walls and at the glyphs, calling for something.

Tsugoro looked to the entrance in fear, and seeing his teacher squatting there, he gazed at him with watery eyes and an open mouth without a sound. Shivering from head to toe, Tsugoro’s ‘perfect’ composure was long gone, and Moku drifted far from who she made herself to be.

How powerlessly their teacher watched them from afar, unable to deny the fact that he was just as terrified. His feet refused to take another step forward, and his hands wouldn’t let go of the rock that he was holding onto so dearly. Words of comfort were stuck in his throat too, in fear of interrupting his prized student.

“Moku, you need to go,” he eventually gathered all his courage to squeak out. She shot him a glance, but coldly ignored his concern.

“No. There’s still something I haven’t done,” she gasped. “I can hear you. Come out.”

As she said those words, sand twirled around her, and faster and faster it became until it blinded the two of them from everything in their surroundings.

But eventually, the sand dropped, and the land they stood on was no longer the uneven innards of a cave, no longer merely dirt and sand, but the paved roads of an ancient town; like a glimpse in the streets of the past, lively with people in clothing similar to those found in the grotto's ancient paintings, and buildings made with tiles exactly the same as the ones depicted in sculptures. Lanterns made of paper hung at the wires stretched across the entire town and brightened the settlement, and the songs of the village were orchestrated by merchants yelling, horses galloping and commoners' casual conversations.

Such an unfamiliar place it was, that both couldn't help but look around, albeit still shaking in their leather shoes.

"This is their town," she told him. Tsugoro gave her a strange look, but was soon interrupted by the cough of an approaching stranger.

Long, silver, luscious hair hid under an oversized straw hat, eyebrows the shape of commas and half lidded eyes, yet in those slitted eyes pocketed pupils as bright as the finest of emeralds. He had a sharp nose, wore a large grin, neither sinister nor sly. A streak of red paint dragged from under his lip to the bottom of his chin, and at his lower lash line was a streak of yellow, while two long black lines were drawn from the middle of his eye to the corners of his mouth. The figure wore a green robes, patterned with lines of blue and purple, and sewn together by golden threads.

Their eyes met, and Moku's eyes sparkled for the first time at the sight of the unnatural beauty. He noticed her gawk and brought his purple pointed nails to her blushing cheeks, only to be taken aback by the sickeningly high temperature.

"I've waited long for your return, my descendant," he sighed hesitantly. "But why must it be now?" He fell to his knees to hug the girl close to his chest, laying her head on his shoulders and letting her rest within his embrace. "You must return promptly. If humanity still wishes to preserve what is left of its past, you must warn them not to take any more of our things outside. Our knowledge and the last of our existence must not be tainted by the filth that is greed—their thirst for only what they wish to hear, and through selfishness will twist a truth into a lie. The world has proven time and time again, it is far from prepared to hear the secrets of the Mogao Cave."

She managed a squeak but nothing comprehensible. Tsugoro merely stood there while his friend spoke in her true mother language. Only bits and pieces of a sentence were clear but most of it was muffled by the sleeves of the silver haired person. Although he seemed happy to hear her voice, his tone switched back once she was done.

"Tell no tales of the grotto. A plea from all the pilgrims before you—speak nothing of our encounter, and bury what was meant to be buried," he apprised, right before a gust of sand began to swirl around them again, in the same fashion as how they got here. The faster the winds blew, the blurrier their surroundings became. Before the man turned into dust along with his hometown, he muttered something into Moku's ear.

Back in the cavern, the embrace she felt was replaced by another man, one with glasses and a more familiar voice.

"Are you alright?" he panted nervously. "What happened? Did the sand hurt you? We must return. No matter what else there is, we must return to the group for both of your safety," he stammered, finally managing to act braver. "You also have a fever. The thin air in here won't be enough for the three of us soon. Are you still able to remember the road she took down here?" He turned to his other student.

Tsugoro shook his head, to which his schoolmate offered to bring them back up to the surface. She led them back in silence, again with confidence in every step she took. Returning to where they had come from, the others were still busy dissecting the writings on that wall.

"Everybody," Moku suddenly spoke up to the crowd. Dozens of eyes, some annoyed and the others intrigued, were all pinned onto the little girl, but not a flinch came from her. With eyes as dark as the night she stared back, and with everything but her mouth stilled, she told them:

"Buried things should remain buried. Return the artifacts to where they belong—all of them."

"What?" One of the historians got up from the ground to raise his voice. "Child, are you insane?"

“You mustn’t excavate. Leave the cave as it is. You can try to read the glyphs as much as you wish, but you must bring the items of this cave back to where they belong!” she warned vehemently, but the stubby-legged historian merely rolled his eyes at this deranged little girl.

Excavations continued, and countless, valuable artifacts like emblems, scrolls, and more pottery were dug up. It was a true breakthrough for humanity, as such things would aid so much in unveiling the lives of the past. However, after the excursion was deemed a success, the discovered artifacts slowly began to disintegrate. No matter how much museums tried to conserve the pottery or scrolls, the paintings and sculptures, one by one they disintegrated into a pile of ashes following the day of the expedition to the Mogao Grottoes.

The abnormalities made national headlines as every museum which housed the artifacts panicked to restore the lost items. Historians were utterly baffled by the sudden carnage, but only one person alive knew of the perpetrator.

And that such person was the child they had all refused to listen to.

Unveil of the Mogao Caves

Pui Kiu College, Chow, Audrey Chow On – 15

“The Mogao Cave, also known as the thousand Buddle Grottoes or the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas...”

“It is a system of 500 temples in Dunhuang, we are now inside one of these 500...”

“It was an oasis located at the religion and cultural cross roads on the Silk Road. It contains the finest examples of Buddhist art spanning a period of 1000 years...”

“Just a brief history about the cages, about the origin of these caves, according to a book written during the region of Tany Empress Wu, Fokan Ji by Li Jun Xiu, a Buddhist monk named Le Zun had a vision of thousand Buddhas bathed in golden light at the site in 366 AD, inspiring him to build a cave here. He was later joined by a second monk Faliang, and the site gradually grew, by the time of the Northern Liay period, a small community of monks had formed at the site...”

The tour guide's stereotyped introduction to Mogao Cave uncontrollably flew into my ears, I'm not interested in listening to information that can be found on the internet at any time. I escaped from brigade, wandering aimlessly in this magnificent cave. Sighing the greatness and incredibleness of the ancient people, while watching the art works hanging on the wall. In fact, I didn't want to be here at first...

“Hey! You must come with me. Didn't you say that today is my birthday and will fulfill my wish? I wanted to go to the Mogao Grottoes since a long time ago. Today is the only chance to follow a professional tour guide going there! Just treat it as a normal trip...come...”.

Under my friend's hard work, I was so troubled that I finally agreed. She was generally very interested in things of great historical value and significance. Although we are good friends, our interests are not the same. I have always kept a long distance from things related to history. They're boring and makes me sleepy. I didn't expect that I didn't feel neither boring nor sleepy when really seeing the caves. Instead, I felt incredible about the beautiful architecture and artwork in the Mogao Grottoes, and I could feel that everything seemed “*déjà vu*”.

“Have I been to here before?” I was puzzled.

The familiar feeling became stronger and stronger when I was looking at an art piece hung on the wall of the cave. There was a sound deep under my heart telling me that I have seen this painting, maybe not only seeing... but my brain failed to search for any memory related to it, I don't even know about the Mogao cave before. A strange and creepy feeling climbed up to my mind...

As night falls, the lights were beginning to lit. Both of us felt tired although we only visited one cave among 500 of them, we stayed at the hotel and had a casual and simple dinner. My friend was very excited, talking endlessly about what she saw today. I hid inside my room and did a lot of research on the Mogao Grottoes, the strange feeling still kept surrounding me, I felt that there are some secrets behind the Mogao Caves, at least it may have some linkage with me. I read a lot of professional websites about the Mogao Grottoes, nothing special.

It was already midnight outside the room. It became silent again, seems like my friend had already slept. I felt very tired too, I closed my laptop and jumped onto my bed. After a while, I fell asleep.

“Oh my God! What is the time now? What?! It's already 11 o'clock! Morris, sorry for waking up so late... Morris...? Morris, where are you?” There wasn't anybody in the room.

She went out alone. Why didn't she inform me? She could actually wake me up actually..., I tried to call her, but no one answered the phone. There wasn't even any signal! Things were going wrong. I ran out of the room and was terrified to find that the whole world changed.

It was obviously not the 21st century anymore. Barren grassland, desert in the distance, and oasis around Mogao Grottoes... “Where am I?!” I felt scared and hopeless, staying at a place without anyone around, no one could help...

I tried to walk around and figure out when I was. I could still see the Mogao Grottoes, meaning that only the time changed, I inferred that I went to another space-time dimension. It was the ancient time of the Mogao Grottoes.

Suddenly, "Donor, do you need help?" a monk came to ask, I was surprised that he didn't ignore my embarrassing look just because I was a female. Instead, he tried to help me. I felt thankful and followed him into one of the Mogao caves. The caves were very different to what I saw yesterday. Everything was new and clean, no dust or rubbish around the caves. It is because the monks thought that Buddhist places should always be clean and tidy. There were a lot of paintings and artwork inside the caves, the colors of the artwork were bright and beautiful. It was their vivid touch, and they haven't been baptized by the years yet. Along the road, I saw a lot of monks and even some team of people with a lot of goods packed on the back of camels take rest here. Some of them stared at my strange dress look. The monk led me into a small room inside the cave. Visitors weren't allowed to get into the inner part of the caves when my friends and I were visiting the caves yesterday. Now I had a chance to look at the whole structure of the Mogao cave and I even felt a bit excited. I wore the clothing that the monk provided, which was a Chinese ancient style long dress, I roughly tied up my hair and started to walk around the cave.

There was a lot of wooden furniture, all of them were engraved with things related to Buddhism, for example, all the tables were engraved with white lotus and different scriptures. This kind of furniture couldn't last for so long therefore I had never seen it with the tour guide before. "Morris will be so excited if she can see these..." I thought.

As I couldn't find the way back to the 21st century, I needed to stay at the Mogao caves with the monks. At first I thought it was only a dream so it will all return normal when I wake up, but as time passed by, I was still in the ancient time, I felt worried but could do nothing.

At first, I tried to stay inside my room and not go out and disturb the monks, but then I found that they were very friendly and welcomed me to listen to the talk about Buddhist with them, but of course with some distance, as in ancient China, there was incompatibility between men and women.

So everyday morning I went to listen to the monks chanting. It made me feel peace deep in my heart, and I loved the silent atmosphere. At noon, I ate meals that the monks provided which were very special as the location of Mogao caves is between China and other countries, the meals there fused different cuisines. As there weren't any light bulbs, the monks normally sleep at 7:00pm which is incredibly early for modern people. I tried to follow their living schedule and found that I was much healthier, and I feel more energetic at daytime.

A month passed, the monks wanted to expand the scale of the Mogao caves and built more. As a person coming from the 21st century, I had some knowledge about architecture and tried to give some advice to them. The monks were very surprised and looked at me with admiration, I felt embarrassed but also very happy as make some contributions. I had also learnt the detailed history of the development of Mogao caves and the difficulties when building these caves, I was again impressed by their seriousness and dedication. I improved the technology level of woodblock painting by using the concept of printer.

One day, when I was walking back into my room, the monk that brought me here at first was drawing something on a piece of paper, I was curious and wanted to figure out what he was drawing. This turned out to be the painting that made me feel strange before. I was shocked. The monk asked if I wanted to take part in the drawing, I caught the pen without thinking, my brain was empty at the time. I drew a butterfly on top of the Mogao cave inside the painting. It became exactly the painting I saw before!

Time passes quickly, half a year passed. One day, a huge rock rolled down the hill and rushed towards me, I couldn't even run away as it was too fast, I closed my eyes and waited for death to come.

The pain and death didn't come as what I thought. When I opened my eyes again, I was sleeping on the bed of the hotel. I jumped up from my bed and ran out to find Morris.

"MORRIS! WHERE ARE YOU?" I shouted.

"huh...yes of course I am here, where else can I go?"

"Oh thank God..." I hugged her tightly.

"What happened?"

“Nothing...just a nightmare...”

“Oh ok... then are you ready? Let’s continue! We only visited one of the caves, still have a lot to go !” Morris was very excited again.

“...ok, let’s go then.”

Standing in front of the drawing again, the butterfly seems to be very vivid, as if it will fly out of the paper in the next moment.

Is it really a dream?

Time Travel in the Mogao Caves

Pui Kiu College, Kwong, Yung Ching - 15

"So students, here is Mogao Cave 158," The guide introduced, "as you can see there's a large Buddha statue laying there. The Buddha was built in ..."

To be honest, Carol and James were never fans of ancient Chinese culture. They definitely would rather spend their beautiful summer holiday at home, having their air-conditioning at 18°C, playing the newly released PS5 and with a pack of chips on their hands and not be stuck in this dirty cave.

"Ugh, how is it a lucky draw? It's a super unlucky draw to me! To us!" Out of the other four prizes with tickets to Disneyland, a brand new Switch, an iPhone and tickets to the Mogao Cave, they got the last one! Although both of them weren't interested in this trip, under the pressure of their parents, they had no choice but to go to the Mogao Cave so as not to waste the tickets.

"I swear this is the most terrible requiem I've ever heard," James commented.

"I mean like, who would care about those doodles on the walls, huge and repetitive statues everywhere? And there's like 400 of those caves!"

"Totally agree. And look over here," Carol pointed to the statue in front of the wall. The Buddha statue was portrayed as lying on his right side with head resting on his right hand and left hand on his body. "The Buddha fell asleep when listening to the guide's explanation," he joked.

"Understandable as I'm about to fall into a deep sleep beside this statue," James yawned and rubbed his eyes, hoping to stop his eyes from shutting.

"Zz....zzz" Suddenly, they both heard a small and gentle snoring noise coming out from somewhere.

"Em James, did you hear that?"

"Huh? Yea! I thought you were the one who made those sounds!"

"No! I'm still awake! Maybe it's another tourist falling..."

"Wait!" James cut Carol off, "Where is everyone?"

No one, not even the guide was in this cave could be seen anymore.

"What happened? I just closed my eyes for a second!" They were both shocked and unable to process what just happened. Not even a minute ago, the guide was explaining when the statue was built, and now he was gone.

The cave wasn't big, at least it's not big enough for six people to hide in.

"But the snoring sound is still here, isn't it?"

"Shhh!"

They closed their eyes and listened to the sound carefully. Trying to locate where the mysterious sound is come from. They followed the sound and walked closer and closer.

"Wa!" When they opened their eyes, they saw the Buddha statue right in front of them.

"Shut! Don't scare him!" Carol warned, then slowly walked away from the statue.

"Believe it or not, I always see this kind of plot in movies. This Buddha has come alive!" he continued.

"James chuckled and leaned on the wall nearby. "I told you to stop watching those movies! How is it possible?"

"The Sakyamuni has died! Rest in peace!"

"Eh...James, behind your back..."

Not daring to turn around, both of them dashed out the scary cave as fast as they could,

"My God, what just happened?" After thirty seconds of escaping, they stopped and panted heavily.

James looked back to ensure those sounds didn't follow them. He sighed in relief.

"By the way," he said, "don't you think out there is a bit different from what we saw just now I mean the buildings look a bit newer than we saw just now.?"

"Yeah, and the long queue at the entrance too. It disappeared!"

"Hey, kids! What are you doin' here?" A deep voice came from their left. They turned their head then saw a man with slightly dark skin, muscular body and only wearing pants stained with dirt and dust. He was holding an axe, a hammer and a few big pieces of wood.

"What ARE you doing here?" Carol questioned., "You don't look like a tourist. Are you a staff or what?"

"Staff? What is that?" The man was confused but he didn't bother to further continue the conversation. "Anyway kids, I gotta start working . You can follow me while waiting for your parents!"

The three of them entered an empty cave nearby. Unlike the previous cave that Carol and James visited, there were no statues or artwork on the wall. The cave was also smaller than the previous one and darker than they had expected.

The man held his picture and knocked hard on a rock. The sound of 'cling' echoed through the whole cave loudly.

"Oh my God! Were you trying to destroy a historical site? Do you know it's illegal ? " Both of them screamed and held tightly to the man's arm, trying to stop him from knocking the rock again.

"Huh? Illegal?" The man laughed, "I mean it is emperor Wu who encouraged us to dig this cave! Everyone is digging their caves! Haven't you guys received the notice?"

"What notice and wait, so you dug this cave all by yourself? With this pickaxe?" James was surprised, not only because the cave was huge but also the fact that this man used no machinery and only a pickaxe.

Carol shook his head , "So you are a staff after all!" he came to a conclusion, but there's something that also concerned him. "Why would you dig a cave? What's that for?" This cave was definitely not suitable for living nor a secret base.

"This cave is for the worship of the Buddha. Unfortunately, I am poor so I can't afford any statues or recruit artists to decorate my cave. However, this cave is big enough for me to bring my family here to do meditation and worship at every festival!"

"This sounds cool! Good luck man." So that is how all the caves came from, James thought. "By the way, do you happen to see a young man with an orange jacket walk by?"

"No I believe," the man replied.

"So the guide isn't here around," Carol whispered, "let's go then."

"We gotta go, old man! Goodbye, and I hope your cave will look cool!" The two boys waved goodbye then left the cave.

"My eyes! They are on fire!" Carol covered his eyes while screaming painfully right after they left the cave, greeted by the sun.

"Aw man, shut up! Let's get going. We still have no clue where everyone has gone." James took out his phone once again, hoping to be able to receive the wifi signal. "Trash phone!" He complained as the phone, still, was stuck in the loading page.

"Chill dude, I mean we can ask the strangers around!" He pointed to the area not so far away with many people walking around, "Look! It's crowded over there!"

"Isn't there the front door? They should line up properly. And wait! Why they're so many cosplayers?" The people were all wearing traditional Chinese costumes.

"Whatever, let's go!"

"Excuse..." Before Carol was able to ask the stranger, a loud sound went through his ears.

"Did you hear that Carol?"

He nodded then turned around carefully. The sound came from another cave not far away. "It sounds like something heavy has fallen! I should go and investigate ! "

"Wait for me Carol!"

Unexpectedly, there was no one in this cave and it was another cave that was filled with wall arts and architecture.

"I wondered where the sound came from..." Carol walked around hoping to find some clues.

"Probably it's just our illusion," James was annoyed, " c'mon dude,let's go!"

"Wait there's a hidden door!Wa!" He lost his balance when he pushed the door open then fell onto a bunch of paper and books.

"Who are you?" Beside the mess, there was an old man with long clothes and a hat staring at Carol cautiously.

"Are you okay?" James also entered the hidden room, "My God! Who is this bald man?"

"Anyways please stand up! You are stepping on my treasures!"

"Treasure? You mean these papers?" Carol picked up one of them. It was covered with dust and was written in words that he had never seen before.

"I clearly don't get what's the value of this dirty stuff," he wiped the dirt of his hands then continued," and I also recommend you to burn them. You shouldn't leave your personal trash in a historical site. "

"These are ancient manuscripts!" He kneeled down then started arranging the mess. "These are treasures related to early Chinese Buddhism ! "

"Wow! There's a lot then!" James exclaimed.

The whole secret room was filled with manuscripts, some of them had been arranged properly and Out aside but there were still many of them splattered around the ground.

"Perhaps that's why I'm trying to gain funding for their conservation! But the funding I have received isn't enough!" He sighed and shook his head,looking extremely upset.

"What a shame! To be honest, I'm kinda interested in what they mean although they are all written in Chinese characters which I don't understand . Also the art next to the text looks cool!" James commented.

"Agree,can you maybe tell us what this book means?"

"Sure kids! Listen closely,it's a story about a dream about 'Golden people' in olden days Emperor Ming saw in a dream, a God whose body had the brilliance of the sun and who flew before his palace; and he rejoiced exceedingly at this. The next day he asked his officials, "What god is this?" The scholar Fu Yi replied, "In India there is somebody who has attained the Dao and who is called Buddha,he flies in the air, his body has the brilliance of the sun; this must be that god...Since then,Buddhism was spread widely in China during the Han dynasty."

"What an interesting story!Didn't know Han Buddhism was like that!How cool!" The two boys were hyped after listening to the story.

"Calm down kids! There are thousands of similar and exciting stories written here. But if only I have enough money, I can spread ancient Buddhism facts to more and more people ! "

"Hm...Maybe you can sell some of them ? To archeologists from other countries I mean. Then you will be able to gain enough funding while being able to let more people know about Buddhism!" James suggested.

"That's right!" The man laughed, "Why have I never thought of it?"

"Anyways thank you for your story! I am glad that you found a solution! We got to go now," James and Carol wiped the dust off their knees. "We are James and Carols.What is your name?"

"I am Wang Yuan Lu! Farewell ! "

The two of them passed the hidden door, then suddenly Carol stopped and shouted,"We forgot to ask him about the guide!" He pushed the door open and dashed into the room but out of his expectation, Mr.Wong had disappeared. The cave was also empty and no paper or books could be found.

"Ghost...Mr.Wing is a ghost...He will definitely haunt us!"

After Carol left the cave,he had been repeating this sentence non-stop.

"Gosh!Just shut up already! No ghost would be that dumb to appear in noon! Mr.Wong probably just went to the toilet! Stop thinking that much,"

"Yes , you are right !" Carol agreed, "I am not afraid anymore. So we shall really start looking for the guide."

"It is your fault that we have zero progress!" James complained. It was true that both of them were actually playing around rather than searching for people.

"It will be ' in progress' now," he joked,"excuse me!" He stopped a stranger. "Have you seen a young man about this tall with an orange jacket?"

"I am sorry but no, I have not seen your parents. Are you lost?" Apparently, this stranger thought Carol and James were some lost kids searching for their parents.

"No, we are not looking for our parents!" James quickly denied," By the way, where are you going? And who are you? You seem familiar! Have we met before?"

"Me?"The man chuckled," I am Zhang Da Qian! I don't think I have seen you before and I'm on my way to get some new ideas for my artwork!"

"So you are the one who drew the art on the wall!"

"Of course not!Those arts were done centuries ago!"

"I see! I am James and he is Carol. We are looking for our guide bit if you don't mind , can we follow you?"

"Sure! Let's get moving!"

"Here we go again, I see paintings on the wall."

"Don't they look gorgeous and beautiful ? There is artwork all over the wall.Every inch of this cave is filled with these stunning and detailed artwork. I think there are millions of them! I can't imagine how much effort it took to complete this huge project." Mr. Zhang put his tools on the floor then walked closely to the painting.

"Yea it's cool but just now we hear these paintings crying. It was terrifying," Back in the first cave they entered, they heard the characters in the painting mourning for the death of Sakyamuni. "Definitely not some good memories to me."

"I understand you!The paintings here are too realistic that give me this kind of illusion often too,"Mr. Zhang nodded then continued,"most of them are atts from the story related to the Buddha I believe. The Mogao Cave was originally empty and was only used for protection against XiongNu. It is amazing that nowadays,there are more than 400 caves filled with paintings and architecture. It also became a place for people to worship."

"That is insane! Do people just directly draw on the rocks? Without the help of machines?" Carol asked while kneeling next to a piece of art.

"Of course! Most of the artwork was drawn around the Tang and Sui dynasty, no such machine existed! That is why I find these paintings incredibly amazing. Other than the art on the walls, all the statues you saw in these caves were made of wood only! Can you actually believe it?"

"I thought they were copper! That's why the man we met just now was holding a piece of wood! He was going to build a statue by himself!"

"Back to the topic, I think the crying noise you heard was just an illusion since the art, the story on the wall are too lively!"

They nodded, agreeing to what he said.

"As an artist, I truly hope to be able to draw as pretty as those arts here. If the people in ancient can do it, why can't I do it too? I understand it takes a lot of effort, but I won't give up! That is also the reason why I am here today!"

"Thank you for your sharing! It is really inspiring and encouraging! Good luck man! I think it is late and it's time for us to leave," just when Carol was about to stand up, he accidentally slipped. He immediately grabbed onto the wall to prevent himself from falling.

However he still fell onto the floor, and the wall was peeled off as he fell.

"My God! What have you done?" James facepalmed.

"I am sorry! Oh my God! I did not mean to destroy the artwork! Please don't arrest me!"

"Calm down, you don't have to apologize! Look, there is another layer of art behind," Mr. Zhang smiled looking at those 'new art' he found. "This is a new discovery and I have never seen these before! The art style and paint used were also different! Thank you so much!"

"Eh? No problem I guess? Good luck investigating then, we shall leave..." They laughed awkwardly then walked out the cave.

"I am glad that Mr. Zhang is a good person, he did not get mad at us!"

"Carol, you should be more careful next time!" James sighed in relief, "by the way, we still can't find our guide! It has been at least hours since we got lost!" He then looked at the sky, surprised to find that the sky was still the same as they saw when they escaped. The sun was still shining brightly and there was no sign of evening nor night.

"Oh you are right! I almost forgot but don't worry James. I have a feeling that the guide will find us right away."

"Huh? What you me?"

"James and Carol! Here you are! Where have you guys gone?"

"This familiar orange clothes and voice...it is our guide!" The two boys ran to the guide and cheered happily.

"Do you know it is extremely dangerous to walk alone?" The guide stared then scolded them angrily.

"We are sorry...but we had a really fun adventure! We met many different people. They are weird but kind! We also learn a lot about Buddhism! I'm starting to find ancient stuff interesting!" Carol said.

"Good to hear that! The staff here is kind indeed, but next time they should have contacted me right away. Anyways, we are going to the last cave. Follow me!"

The guide led the two boys back to the group where they entered another cave.

"Hey James, do you find this cave looked familiar? I mean it looks like the cave where we saw Mr. Zhang." Zhang Da Qian was nowhere to be seen but the cave, the arts and the peeled part of the wall definitely do seem familiar to Carols.

"Yes, it is the cave we just entered!" James whispered back to Carol's ears.

"Concentrate boys!" The guide stopped their chitchatting, "this cave is famously known by the two layer artwork on the wall and also..." the tourist took out a necklace from his pocket, "this ancient necklace!"

"This looks like your necklace Carol! Did you drop it just now?"

"uh...I can't find it right now! I must have dropped it just now when I fell onto the ground!"

The guide continued, "This necklace was found ten years ago by our investigation team, it was believed that this ancient necklace was made of..."

"Carol, oh God, was that a time travel we did just now? And Carol did we just...change the history?"

"Oh no..."

Adventures in the Cave of the Thousand Buddhas

Pui Kiu College, Lam, Yi Han Brendan – 15

Dunhuang, Spring, 1890

A cool desert breeze blew through the canyons of Dunhuang, chipping away at the temples on the rock face. Once upon a time, these decrepit mountain temples were the centre of buddhism, a site welcoming millions of pilgrims across China, and a crucial hub for silk road trade. But history has treated Dunhuang harshly, the thousand buddhas grotto now is a shell of its former self.

A man, dressed in the attire of a traditional monk, stood in front of one of the entrances to the Mogao grottoes. He carried a broomstick in one hand, and a torch in the other, and strolled into the darkness of the ancient cavern. The light from the flame of the torch illuminated the narrow corridors of the grotto, revealing the cracked and unstable walls. The man grinded to a halt as he entered a large room, a massive buddha statue was seen in the middle of the room, behind which were rows of ancient paintings and sculptures. The man brushed the dust and debris on the ground as he walked along the room, occasionally glancing up at the statues and intricate murals on the walls, admiring their beauty.

"Oof", he grunted, as he stumbled on something on the ground. He stopped and looked back, and saw a massive crack had formed, stretching from the floor all the way up to the ceiling of the cave. He checked the damages on the walls. When he glanced through the crack, there was an empty space. It seemed like there was a room or a cave hidden behind the wall. Little did the monk know at that moment what his discovery would mean for the MoGao Grottoes.

London, 5th May, 1890

"Can any of you children tell me what this piece of stone is?" asked a dashing young man at a crowd of students.

"It's the Rossetta stone!" a student in the crowd answered

"You're correct! You must've paid attention during your egyptology classes." said the young archaeologist with a smirk.

"The Rossetta stone is a stone tablet discovered by the French in 1799. It dates back 2000 years to the Greco-Egyptian Ptolemaic dynasty, with the same message inscribed in Hieroglyphics, Demotic and Greek respectively. This stone is the gateway for the modern translation of the ancient Egyptian language, so it is perhaps the greatest archaeological discovery ever made regarding Ancient Egypt."

"Now, moving on...."

A short man with orange hair ran towards the archaeologist, whispering something in his ear. The young Brit's eyes glowed in excitement.

"Children, you must excuse me as I have something very important to attend to at the moment." said the archaeologist as he ran to his office.

The young archaeologist hopped onto his telegraph machine, quickly typed a message and sent it.

"Why leave in such a hurry, Benjamin Jones?" asked Shawn, Benjamin's assistant researcher.

"I have been waiting for a message from an informant, there is a rumour about an ancient Buddhist site somewhere in northwestern China, the largest one yet. and I have just found someone who is willing to lead me to it." Sir Benjamin said thrillingly, clearly still elated from the message he had just received.

"So are we going on another expedition?" Shawn asked.

"Of course we are," Benjamin answered, "This is a once in a lifetime opportunity! So pack your luggage Shawn Cillian, we will take the earliest ship tomorrow to China!"

"You say the same thing everytime." Shawn sighed.

Shanghai Bay, 2 months later

As the sun rose on the city of Shanghai, a massive steamship slowly sailed towards it. Puffs of black smoke flew up to the air from its smokestacks, filling the air with the smell of coal and soot.

"Finally, we have arrived in China, the most populous and ancient nation in the world!" exclaimed Sir Benjamin.

"I have heard people here don't really like us, because of the whole opium thing," asked Shawn.

"I know, That is why I have hired a group of British soldiers from the garrison in the British concession, they can be our vanguard for the trip" answered Benjamin.

A loud blare from the foghorn of the ship, indicating that it had docked at a harbour.

"It seems it's our cue to get off," said Benjamin.

As the two men walked down the ramp of the steam ship, they were greeted by a handsome Chinese man no older than 30. His hair was styled into a long braid, leaving most of his head bald. His traditional hairstyle was contrasted by his western clothing, a classy black suit.

"Good morning! Sir Benjamin, and Mr. Shawn, I presume?" He asked.

"Oh yes, I am Shawn," Shawn responded awkwardly.

"Welcome to China, I am Wong Xiao, you can call me Wong, and I will be your guide and translator for the trip." The three men entered a horse carriage, heading straight for the Shanghai train station.

"Benjamin, are we supposed to meet up with the soldiers here?" asked Shawn as he got off the carriage.

"Yep," Benjamin answered.

"They are late," he said after checking his watch.

"Look out!" Someone yelled in the distance. As the group looked towards the source of the yelling, they saw a small truck barreling down the road at full speed, with no signs of stopping. Pedestrians yelled and jumped out of its way, as the truck slammed through several food stalls on the pavement, only coming to a stop when it crashed into a light pole, totalling the truck.

"Jesus!" Shawn yelled while Benjamin ran to check on the crash scene.

Out of the wreckage were six men, clearly drunk, wearing dirty and unkempt khaki military uniforms. One of the men, still carrying a bottle of rum in one hand, and a pistol in the other, walked over to Benjamin.

"Good night.... I mean morning, I am Sergeant Williams of the 75th Royal rifle brigade, at your service! Pardon me, and me and my men might've had a little bit too much booze on the way here," he greeted.

"That is a new Benz truck innit? Must've cost a pretty penny," Shawn said after inspecting the battered automobile.

"It's the British consul's truck so it ain't our problem," exclaimed one of the soldiers.

"We should probably get going, lest my superiors.... I mean, lest we delay your travels, sir," Sergeant Williams said nervously as he nudged the group into the train station.

"Great job Ben, those drunkards will definitely keep us safe!" Shawn whispered.

"They are better than they seem." Benjamin replied.

The party entered the station, packed with travellers across China, shuffling through the crowds of people onto their train. Benjamin briefed the soldiers on their destination.

"We are on a train to Dunhuang, a town in the Chinese province of Gansu. The goal of our expedition is to reach and explore the thousand buddha caves, an unknown mountain temple complex. Once we are there, we will receive some aid in the form of a small envoy from the local governor, but we're on our own, we are thousands of

miles away from any British territory, and no one will come for us if something goes wrong. This will be a dangerous endeavor, so be careful."

The soldiers answered with laughter, "You're kidding right? It's just a pile of ruins? it'll be a cakewalk." "Look at him with his squeaky clean suit and perfect, he probably stayed inside his fancy museum all day, come out to the real world for once!"

"You know Benjamin and I have gone on dozens of trips across the world? From the sands of Egypt to the jungles of Ceylon, we have quite literally seen everything. And a little surprise? These "ruins" can be more dangerous and deadly than you can ever imagine." Shawn said to the soldiers.

"And we're all on their payroll, so we better not get on his bad side" Sergeant William said to his men, who were forced to begrudgingly listen to the rest of what Benjamin had to say.

"Thanks for standing up for me back there Shawn." Benjamin said to Shawn.

"No problem, friends stick up for each other right?" Shawn responded.

A massive grin grew across Benjamin's face "Yes, yes they do."

After several days of travel on the train, the group had reached Dunhuang. They were welcomed by a massive entourage of local soldiers, standing in formation outside the small station, awaiting their guests.

"Damn, you call that a small envoy? There are at least a hundred men here, this site of theirs must be important." Sergeant William exclaimed. A fat bearded man donning a fancy military uniform marched towards Benjamin.

"Gentleman, this is general Ma, he will accompany us on our trip to the caves." Benjamin announced to the group. "Why are we going to the caves with this bureaucrat? This is an academic expedition." Shawn thought, but kept it to himself.

With the guidance from Wong, the party had arrived at their final destination at last, the cave of a thousand buddhas. At the entrance of the cave was a giant temple, not dissimilar to many other temples in China, but it was seemingly inserted directly into the side of a cliff.

"Blimey! how did they build that?" Yelled Sergeant William.

"People from the past are far more intelligent and innovative than most give them credit for." Benjamin answered as he snapped a few photos of the entrance with his bulky box camera.

As the group ventured into the caves, they discovered the sheer scope and size of the cave system, as they entered chamber after chamber, all filled to the brim with Buddhist statues, paintings, sculpture and literature.

"This is truly marvelous Ben! I never should have doubted you." Shawn said enthusiastically as he inspected another diverging cave. He had spotted another chamber, one larger than all of the others before,

"Hey guys, there is another room this way," Shawn yelled to the others. The group ran into the room, in the centre of it was the largest Buddha statue any of them had ever seen, behind it were nearly endless rows of coloured murals and sculptures. Everyone was in awe, even the hired soldiers who had seemed uninterested before.

"This is magnificent! Isn't it, Ben?" Shawn says. But his question was left unanswered, that was when Shawn realized Benjamin was no longer with him.

"Benjamin! Come check this out!" Shawn yelled into the cave behind him. A few moments later, Benjamin and the general emerged from the cave. Benjamin jumped up in excitement at the sight of the statue. The young man ran into the chamber, past the statue and disappeared into the corridors behind it.

"I thought he would want to look at the giant statue in the middle of the room first, but I guess paintings are cool too," said Sergeant Williams.

"Yeah, that was strange," replied Shawn, but he still followed Benjamin and ran in after him. When Shawn found Benjamin, he was setting up a few sticks of dynamite next to a crack that had formed on the floor while surrounded by General Ma and his men, with a distraught Wong right behind him.

"Are you out of your mind Ben? You are setting up explosives at one of the most precious cultural sites that we have just discovered?" Shawn said, trying to stop Benjamin, but gets knocked to the floor by one of the general's men.

"This is why we're actually here Shawn," said Benjamin, as he finished setting up the detonation device for the explosives.

"Get back everyone." Benjamin yelled.

After everyone backed out of the chamber, the charge was set off. A massive explosion shook the ground and the cave was filled with dust and smoke in an instant. As the smoke cleared, the damages were obvious, nearly all of the delicate murals, paintings, and sculptures were blown to smithereens, hundreds and thousands of years of history, destroyed in a single moment. Even the metal behemoth that was the big buddha statue was defiled, as its head was blown clean off by the blast.

Benjamin and General Ma ran back into the room, and entered the opening the dynamite had created. Shawn, Wong and Sergeant Williams followed in their tracks. It seemed that the section of the wall Benjamin tried to demolish was hiding a pathway to a secret chamber, and the explosion had opened it up for entry. As the group ran to the end of the pathway, a crudely written message was inscribed on the wall, right next to it was a skeleton with an arrow going right through its ribcage.

"What does this mean?" General Ma asked Wong, while pointing a gun right at him.

"It says 'I beg for forgiveness from the buddha, for I only managed to hide the most important artifact before the Mongols came.'"

"What could've been more important than all the Buddhist scripture and art?" Benjamin said.

When they entered the cave, they saw a corpse, dressed in the clothing of a buddhist monk, the body was frozen still in a meditation posture. Amazingly, the body, which must've been hundreds of years old, hadn't decomposed or even rot, it was like the monk was still alive. Wong ran towards the body and read the writing on the ground in front of it, he froze in place after reading the words.

"This is Lè Zūn himself." He said emotionally.

"Who is Lè Zūn?" Benjamin asked.

"He was the man who built this great grotto! Without him, Buddhism would have never spread all across China. He must've spent the rest of his life meditating in this cave!" Wong responded.

"No wonder the monks decided to protect this place over all of the other sculptures and paintings, it housed the corpse of such an important figure." Shawn said.

"My gamble has paid off! this expedition has been an absolute success!" Benjamin said. As he spoke, the soldiers of General Ma picked up Lè Zūn's body and shoved it into a big duffel bag.

"What are you doing!" Wong cried. "This is desecration of the highest order!"

"Why are you doing this Ben?" asked the bewildered Shawn. "We are archaeologists! Not grave robbers!"

"Well, you see Shawn, after so many failed expeditions, my reputation is ruined. So when General Ma informed me of this cave of priceless treasures, I knew it was my chance to get it all, to get to the top of the field of archaeology, to be famous, to be respected. I can be the next James Burton, or Paul-Émile Botta!" Benjamin said joyously

"In return for me providing some demolishing tools and a little bit of cash, we agreed to split the treasure in these caves fifty-fifty, I will get to bring this body back to Britain for the world to see, and he will get the riches."

"Archaeology isn't about getting famous and respected, it's about the study and preservation of history and culture. This might just be a body to you, but to many others it means so much more!" Shawn yelled angrily.

"Oh stop being so fixated on morals, I just know when to take action, any other archaeologists would've gladly taken the chance as well," Benjamin said.

"I wouldn't," Shawn replied.

"Well I guess that explains why you're just a measly assistant." Benjamin retorted.

"I shouldn't have ever come to this cave, if it wasn't for me rediscovering this cave and finding the crack, Lè Zūn's body would still be safe." cried Wong.

"It isn't your fault, you made a great discovery Wong, it's the people with perverted intentions that are to blame." Shawn comforted him.

All of a sudden, dust and debris started to fall from the ceiling of the cave as it began to shake.

"The explosives must've damaged the structure of this section of the cave, now the whole thing might be falling apart," Sergeant William warned as he inspected the cracks forming on the walls.

"Well, then help me collect any paintings or statues you can grab on the way out." ordered Benjamin.

"Sorry, no can't do, good soldiers never side with bastards like you," The Sergeant answered, as he pulled his revolver out of his holster and shot Benjamin in the chest. A gunfight quickly broke out between General Ma's troops and the British soldiers."

"We will hold them off for now, you two get the body and leave now." Sergeant Williams barked at Shawn and Wong. Wong and Shawn sprinted out of the crumbling cavern, just as the secret chamber and pathway collapsed,

"All Buddhists across the world will thank Sergeant Williams for his sacrifice." Wong said tearfully.

"Indeed," Shawn replied.

"I am so sorry for what Benjamin did to your people's sacred caves." Shawn said guiltfully. But I am afraid what he said was right, if any other european archeologists caught wind of the treasures and value of this site, they would surely come and ransack the grottoes without a second thought, like we have done for so many other places." Shawn said guiltfully.

"So I guess the only thing I can do now is hide all the evidence of this expedition, that is the only way to protect this beautiful cave." Shawn continued.

"No, you're wrong. People like you and Sergeant Williams prove that not all of you westerners are greedy and destructive, some of you really do respect the history and significance of other peoples' cultural relics and artifacts." Wong placed his hand on Shawn's shoulder and said, "I wouldn't have any problem if you were to lead an expedition here."

"Really?" Shawn asked bewilderingly

"Yeah" Wong assured Shawn

"I thank you from the bottom of my heart, for placing so much faith in me." Shawn said thankfully.

"So I suppose this is where we part ways." Wong said.

"I suppose so, where are you going?" Shawn asked.

"I will take the body of Lè Zūn to a buddhist temple where he will be given the respect he deserves." Wong says emotionally.

“ Well, I guess I will try to hitch a ride to Lahore in India, I have a friend who is a principal of a school there. I can help plan and lead some trips and expeditions around Asia with him. Hopefully I can return here if the opportunity arises.”

“ Farewell, my friend.” The two men said to each other as they walked out of the cave and into the dry winds of the Gobi, disappearing into the smoke and dust of the desert.

A Phantom with a Dream

Pui Kiu College, Lao, Pak Him – 15

“So you should know this fleeting world – 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.”

June 25, 1900.

A flickering light seen in the depths of the Mogao Caves, a man smoking a cigarette swept the dust-filled floor with a simple handmade broomstick. It had been years since Wang Yuan Lu settled in the Mogao Caves near Dunhuang, leaving behind his horrible past and becoming a Taoist monk. After many years of famine and war, his interest in fame and wealth had faded just like the once vibrant paintings on the walls of the cave. Every sound he makes echoed through the ancient corridors, as if the cave was savouring every sense of vibration, every bit of motion, ever since it was forgotten by the world. The walls and ceiling of the caves are dotted with cracks and crevices, corroded by the flow of time. Wang looked at the massive crack on the ceiling of the desert cave, exhaling cigarette smoke as he sighs, sending an echo of tiredness through the corridor.

“I’ll fix it tomorrow.” He spoke to himself. As he was about to leave the corridor, he noticed the smoke he had breathed out was being drawn through the wall, into an almost decolourized roughcast wall. He looked closely and found a tiny opening in the wall where the smoke was getting pulled into. Soft little breezes coming in and going out of this tiny hole, as if the cave was alive, trying to catch a breath of fresh air. He tried peering into this tiny hole, but all he saw was darkness, within which was a little silhouette of a man.

Wang immediately fell onto the floor in fear. The thought of a man inside the walls of the caves he called home haunted him. He grabbed a rusty old hammer, and started to swing it at the wall, taking it down piece by piece. His palms are sweaty, knees weak, arms are heavy, as the wall collapses into dust and ashes, he held up his hammer, ready for whatever’s on the other side.

The dust filled the entire corridor as a gust of wind blew out of the hole, knocking Wang down on the ground, coughing from the ashes that went into his throat. The dust cleared, and when Wang opened his eyes, a statue of a meditating monk stood before him, which was kept in surprisingly pristine condition. The features of the statue are so lively, one might easily mistake it as a real person in first glance. Wang felt a sense of relief, as well as confusion as in why such statue was kept behind a wall. On the wall behind the statue is a mural of two trees and two figures. Wang could tell that the figure on the left is an upasika, or female Buddhist follower, who held a cane-like sceptre and a towel, living her miserable life forever in the caves, a cycle of never-ending suffering and agony, forced into immortality without her consent, serving as her monk’s follower unwillingly even after the monk’s demise. However, this was not the scene that caught Wang’s eye. Within the cave, massive piles of ancient scrolls and manuscripts were stacked up until they touched the ceiling, a treasure trove of writings and paintings not only hidden and forgotten, but also kept in perfect condition. Wang felt like an explorer finding treasure hidden beneath the sand, like a gorilla finding a tree of fresh fruits. His eyes lit up in joy as he carefully examined the olden scriptures. Poetry, philosophy, law, medicine, art, religion... as he was looking through piles and piles of manuscripts, a specific scroll caught his eye...

A specific scroll, in column 4, from left to right.

Top to bottom, the fourth one in the column.

Wang was very close to finding the scroll.

Down there. Yes. No not this one, the one on the left.

There we go.

Wang- never mind- **you** have found the living scroll! You’ve met her, a phantom with a dream! A dream to help monks like you uncover the secrets and treasures of the caves.

You stepped back in shock. A living scroll? How is that even possible? Don’t worry, you will find out soon. This library of knowledge was abandoned and sealed off due to the invasion of Xixia barbarians in order to protect the treasures within. It was you who opened it, and you shall be the one to reap the cave’s treasures. You will be guided by the phantom, who shall reveal the secrets of the cave.

The piles on piles of ancient scriptures were merely a disguise, an illusion, per se, to cover up the true fortunes in the cave. To break this illusion, you must find the Diamond Sultra, also known as the diamond that cuts through

illusion, the scroll that divulges the mystery of life and death. But first, we must explore deeper into the cave to find our enlightenment and gain the knowledge of the Diamond Sultra.

Murals lined up along the walls of the cave, each depicting their own story, having their own tale to tell. You walked over to the closest painting, touching it gently. The fabric of the papyrus spoke of its history: soft, fragile, tainted, yet somehow still holding together, as if it was enchanted with magic. A travelling monk, staring into the distance, was drawn on the papyrus in great detail. Every wrinkle in his face and every fold in his clothes were portrayed lively. He was just like you, searching for peace after a suffering struggle. Another painting depicted the Guide of Souls leading the beautifully depicted clad donor figure to the Pure Land, or Paradise. The true place where good souls, such as you, will rest in the afterlife. Next to this was a painting about the Pure Land, where Shakyamuni, the historical Buddha, sat. A dancer and an orchestra performed before him, while the sun and moon rested on his robes. The virtuous souls could be seen at the bottom of the picture, seemingly enjoying their stay in Paradise. However, the same could not be said for the evildoers. You walked towards the last painting of the hallway. Here it illustrated the horrors that await evildoers in the Buddhist hell. Large wooden collars and chains strapped around the damned souls, suffering inside of the flaming city with iron walls, beat up by animal-headed demons. Such was the concept of karmic retribution.

As the hallway ended, a new room opened up. You saw light flickering on and off within the manuscript-filled room, while a scroll, quite out of place, laid flat on the stone floor. Curious of what that was all about, you cautiously stepped into the room. Between the flashes of darkness and light, you could barely see the scroll, faintly glowing, as if it was embedded with power. As you got closer to the scroll, continuous blasts of wind grew stronger and stronger. The wind howling across the hallway, like it was screaming for you to go away. But you persisted. You treaded closer and closer to the scroll, and finally, you were able to lay a single finger on the scroll. Immediately, the wind stopped blowing. The deafening howls of the wind were silenced in an instant, and a sense of warmth and tranquillity rushed from your fingertip into your bloodstream, spreading across your entire body. You did it. Wang. You finally have obtained the Diamond Sultra.

All of a sudden, the scriptures that filled up the room, piling up to the ceiling, became translucent. You gasped in wonder at the sight of such magic. The scroll of the Diamond Sultra was comfortable to the touch: The paper was soft and slightly warm, while a fresh flowery aroma emitted from the scroll. After indulging in this great feeling of pleasure, you read what was printed on the scroll:

*So you should view this fleeting world—
A star at dawn, a bubble in a stream,
A flash of lightening in a summer cloud,
A flickering lamp, a phantom, and a dream.*

Wang. This is a hint. A hint to obtain the true secrets of the caves. You've already gotten the phantom with a dream, now you just have to find the rest of the things mentioned here.

You understood what should be done. The light was still flashing on and off. The flickering lamp must be the cause of this. Luckily, with the power of the Diamond Sultra, you were able to find the lamp easily. Hidden underneath a stack of manuscripts, you wouldn't be able to find it without the help of the magical scroll. You swiftly dug through the mountain of scriptures and pulled out the lamp from within. The golden surface of the lamp was smooth as butter, and not a single scratch could be seen. The flame of the lamp flickered on and off constantly, despite there not being anymore wind in the cave. The light in the cave disappears and reappears along with the flame, just enough for you to see a weird light source in the distance.

Wang.

There it is.

The room.

The treasure room.

You ran towards the light as fast as you could. Between the flashes from the flame, you saw a well-lit room in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by complete darkness. Another flash occurred. You looked around you. There was nothing but darkness left. You could not see what you were standing on. You could not see the surrounding walls or scrolls anymore. All you could see was the strange room. Cautiously, you took a step out of the darkness and into the room.

A mural of a star in the middle of a sun was placed in the middle of the room. You inspected it carefully.

A star at dawn.

A little bubbling mini waterfall could be seen beside the mural, which seemingly came out of nowhere. You inspected it carefully.

A bubble in a stream.

Wang. All you have to do now is to place the lamp on top of the star, then the secret will be revealed.

You put the lamp on top of the star drawn in the mural. A small lightning cloud appears on top of the lamp. You inspected it carefully.

A flash of lightening in a summer cloud.

A flickering lamp.

A phantom, and a dream.

You did it Wang, you did it.

You started to glow while yellow electricity danced around your limbs. You felt cosy. Almost somewhat tiring. Sleepy. Like a baby listening to a lullaby.

The real treasures will be revealed...now!

...

...

...

You really believed me didn't 'ya.

You REALLY believed some sort of "true fortune" existed.

You idiot!

You don't even know who I am, yet you believed in me.

You are so gullible.

I guess since you are about to die, I owe you an explanation on why you are dying.

Remember that Upasika behind that statue? That's me.

That statue was the monk I followed, who went by the name of Hong Bian.

I adored him, you know, that's why I followed him in the first place.

When he died, I was sad too, after all he was my master.

But those monks, oh those monks, I hate them so much.

They sealed me in this old piece of paper in order to "accompany Hong Bian forever".

He's probably somewhere in the Pure Land now.

Yet look at where I'm still stuck in.

I'm still in the human realm, even after 10 centuries!

10 CENTURIES! Do you know how torturing and boring it is to sit in a pile of old paper, looking at the same exact place for so MANY YEARS?

I can't move, I can't do anything, the only thing I could do is wait.

To wait for some idiot monk like YOU.

Oh, why the long face Wang? It's gonna be a quick, painless process.

Just a good sleep, and your body will be MINE.

Ah I guess I forgot to tell you what I'm actually doing here, my bad.

This is just a little old ritual for me to inhabit your body.

Oh, Wang you can't escape.

Run all you want, BUT THERE IS NO ESCAPE.

THE RITUAL HAS ALREADY STARTED WANG! YOU CAN'T RUN FROM IT!

THE WALLS CRUMBLED AND COLLAPSED AROUND WANG! THE ONLY EXIT OF THE ROOM WAS BLOCKED BY PILES UPON PILES OF DEBRIS!

THE GROUND SHOOK THE EARTH CRACKED!

YOU'RE GETTING SLEEPY WANG! YOU'RE GETTING SLEEPY!

THE STAR BLINDED WANG WITH A BRIGHT WHITE LIGHT, THE BUBBLE TRAPPED WANG WITHIN ITSELF, THE LIGHTNING SHOT ALL AROUND WANG, THE LAMP BURNT UP WANG'S SOUL, AND THIS PHANTOM WITH A DREAM IS GOING TO BE FREE!

Have a good sleep Wang, because YOU AREN'T WAKING UP ANYMORE.

...

...

...

I'm free.

I'm FREE!

HAHAHAHAHA!

After all these years!

Oh, these hands, these legs!

I can feel them, I can move them!

How long have I missed you all!

Thank you, Wang. Thank you so much.

You've given me salvation. A new life.

I'm finally able to give those monks a piece of my mind now, all thanks to you, Wang.

I will be forever grateful for your service.

But it's time for me to leave this place.

Goodbye Wang, may your soul rest in Paradise.

...

...

...?

What's grabbing me?

Oh no OH NO

LET ME GO

LET ME GO

I DO NOT DESERVE IN HELL

GET YOUR DIRTY DEMON HANDS OFF ME

GET OFF ME

GET OF-

Hidden in Thousands of Years

Pui Kiu College, Liu, You Rong – 15

Since I was small, I have been living in the Mogao Grottoes. Every day, my father would tell me tales of the Mogao murals; the son of a king that sacrificed himself for a hungry tiger, a group of thieves with 500 people who became blind in an accident, and the Pure land that is said to be in the West. “They are always there,” he said. “I’ve seen the tales before my eyes, their laughter, tears, and sacrifices.”

“They should be kept for the future generations to stare and appreciate in awe, and that is why I chose this job,” my father told me, while rubbing my head gently. Seeing light in father’s eyes, I started to wonder about the attractiveness of the murals. They must be very beautiful to attract father to devote a lifetime to them. My father is not a person who is keen in many things, he always gives up than keep up when he faces difficult situations. It is a pretty rare thing for him to be so focused on the Mogao murals for so long.

I have to admit, seeing the murals was quite an impressive thing.

It was a Sunday. Tourists were roaming around the public square at the foot of the murals. Some were taking pictures, some were eating at the resting area just outside the murals, and a few of the kids that came with their parents tries to climb over the gates, and were told off by the security guards. A gush of wind blew away the leaves fallen on the rusty ground covered with sand. The cliffs of the caves were shining in the sunlight. Just thinking about getting inside those caves of murals makes my heartbeat faster. Due to the amount of homework and number of lessons afterschool, I find it difficult to have any spare time for a visit to the caves. This is the trip I longed for my whole childhood. “Finally!” my voice trembled.

The bus we took to the entrance of the caves was a bit wild. Though I suppose I can’t blame the driver because the road up to the mountain to the caves does have a lot of turns and twists, the bus swerved around another turn and I nearly knocked my head into the seat in front of me. “Whoa,” I sank lower in my seat. I’m not in fond of getting a big bump on my forehead before I get to see the murals. Well, maybe not getting one after seeing them is also a good thing, I suppose.

When I stepped on the thin sand of the cliffs that mark the entrance to the caves inside, my legs felt so numb I couldn’t even stand straight. My neglect of the fact that there’s still a long way up the mountain even though I chose to took the bus and little exercise I’ve done, made me nearly pass out when I reached the caves. I gasped for air, sat on the sandy ground, feeling the gentle wind blow across my face. Rubbing my sweaty face, I got up, nearly fell over, and stumbled to the ticket office.

The first thing that caught my eyes were the sculptures. The first cave we visited is a big cavern with a pyramid shaped like a dome. An enormous sculpture of a Buddha stood in the center of the cavern, with a stone-carved peacock feathers behind the head of the buddha. The sculpture was insanely detailed; The folds of the Buddha’s robe were clear, you could even see the knuckles of the hand of the Buddha if you look close enough. There were 8 smaller statues of the Buddha in the cavern, they all had the same pose; one hand held in front of their chest and the other one held lower and a bit stretched out, the five fingers closed on the palms in a loose fist. Behind them on the walls of the cavern were drawings of Buddha with the same posture of the statues. The dome of the cavern was decorated with colors of black, blue and red. No space on the wall was left empty. Just thinking of the time and cost to draw and maintain the drawings for hundreds of caves like these make my jaw drop. In curiosity of the material used for the drawings and the statues, I stepped closer and tried to touch the walls of the cavern, tracing my fingers over the lines of the Buddha. I know, I know, I wasn’t supposed to do that, I even saw the sign on the doors and inside the cavern, but the holy atmosphere seemed to have casted a spell on me, I couldn’t help myself but to get closer to the Buddha. “Hey! What are you doing?” Our guide’s voice was startled. “The paintings on the walls are too fragile for people to touch! The drawings might be damaged!” I pulled myself out of the trance and quickly stepped away from the murals. “I... I’m sorry,” I stammered, wondering why I just lost myself and broke the rules for tourists in the caves. I would never break a rule. I never broke a rule in my 6 school years. Especially for important situations like this. I might not be able to follow the rest of the trip just for this reason. Sure enough, as if the guide can sense what I was thinking, he said: “I am very sorry about the inefficiency that may cause to you, miss, but you can not follow the rest of the group according to the rules of the managers.” He looked sorry for me. I sighed. “Yes, I understand, it was my fault that the murals were damaged. I will leave.”

I stood at the entrance of the Mogao Grottoes, staring at the Nine Floors of the 96th cave in the Mogao Grottoes. The red tall architecture reached 33 meters high, marking the highest cave among all the Mogao caves.

The statue of Maitreya sat on the Nine Floors, I could not see Maitreya outside of the cave, but somehow, at that moment, I knew I would be back here, and to visit them again. On that thought, I turned my back on the grottoes.

After I left the grottoes and dived back into my piles of quizzes and tests, I started to dream about the imperfect trip to the Mogao Grottoes. Every night when I am back in the cavern, staring at the closed eyes of the buddha around me. "Do not move forward, do not touch the wall," I silently warn myself, but every time, I walk forward and touch the murals, bits of dirt spilled from the place I touched, the colors of the statues and the murals fades away like a faraway memory, leaving behind nothing but a pile of dirt.

Due to my determination of returning to the murals of Mogao Grottoes, and the fear of less and less murals survive with the waves of time, I eventually chose archeology for my university major and joined the preservation team of the Mogao Grottoes after graduation.

Finally, I returned to the place that I have not taken a good look at for a long ago.

My team and I study the cracks and faded parts of the murals and the statues in the caves every day and held more and more discussions on the ways to keep the colors and the stableness of the statues inside of the caves. We arrange certain periods for some of the caves to open to the tourists. Days repeated and slowly, I desperately waited for the trance in my first trip to come again. But it never came. Pieces of murals and sculptures fell off, the colors of them became more and more unnoticeable.

That night I sat in front of the sleeping Shakyamuni in the 158 cave of the Mogao murals. I felt tears trickling down my face. "I can't... I can't save you," I choked, reaching out to touch the faded colors of the mural of Nirvana. The dream came back to me again, reminding me of what these murals will become at last. I felt worthless. I felt useless. After months and months, years and years of investigation and experiments on repairing and preserving the murals, sculptures, and the statues in the caves, I still have to stand and watch the murals slip away through my fingers, like the yellow sand of the desert here in Dunhuang. I cannot hold it; I cannot save it. I tried to recognize the drawings on the walls through my misty eyes, clouded by my tears. Nirvana. I remembered the story. Shakyamuni, although born rich, he chose a life of ordination after seeing the pain and suffering of people in his kingdom. He starved himself for six years, but got nothing, and nearly drowned himself in the river because he did not have the strength to climb to the shore. After that, he sat under a Shorea Robusta for 49 days, and finally learned that nirvana is how humans can escape sufferings and pain, to forget the fact "I am me".

I had respected Shakyamuni for a long time and longed to be a person like him. His love and passion for his people had greatly influenced me to be a good person and to cherish the peace we have now. But now the beautiful story is fading away... I grabbed my hair and cried in despair: "Please! I want them to stay, I want to save them, I want the people to know about these masterpieces!" Tears poured down my face.

Suddenly, the world in my eyes changed. I saw a line of people, riding on camels, slowly crossing a mountain in the desert. A man wearing a monk robe left the troop heading east and climbed up the cliffs. "Le zun," I muttered. Le zun was the monk that found the Mogao Grottoes. The image before my eyes blurred, and I was standing in one of the caves, holding a brush in my hand. "Hey, you are falling behind, start your work!" One of the workers among the mob in the cavern I stood in shouted at me from my back. "But..." I tried to tell him I don't know how to draw, but he was already gone. Forcing myself to calm down, I raised the brush.

It turns out I do not need to know how to draw on the wall. My hand did it for me. I simply knew where and how my next stroke on the wall will be. Line after line appeared on the walls of the cavern. Slowly, they linked together, forming a grand picture of Shakyamuni's adventure. Reds, blues and greens were carefully painted on the walls, bringing the characters alive. The first time in my life, I was able to view a Mogao mural with its full beauty, and I am not disappointed.

After the nirvana mural, I followed the workers and carried on my drawing. Wall after wall, cave after cave. I no longer knew what time or date it was. I traced every detail of the murals greedily, hoping I could have enough time to remember their complete looks. So astoundingly, I thought, these murals should definitely be known by more people, and their stories.

"Wake up! Are you okay?" When I opened my eyes, I saw my teammates with worried expressions surrounding me. "I'm okay," I gave them a faint smile. Then I realized we are still in the 158 cave. I turned and looked at the enormous nirvana statue of Shakyamuni. Thank you, I silently said in my mind. I still remembered the details of the murals in my illusion, and felt like I have been drawing the murals for a thousand years. "I think I know how to bring the original murals back here, completely," I told my teammates. Stepping out the cave, I felt like I was reborn.

Fading Footsteps

Pui Kiu College, Ngai, Ngo Nam Markus – 15

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I sat down onto the floor, back leaned against the wall while holding an empty ink jar and a drained quill. The library had an especially lively figure this day. Staring off in the distance, small and young monks chased each other

around bookshelves in light steps, chuckling and laughing in delight. While heavy scrolls and books lie against each other on top of bookshelves, bearing the hefty sensation of noblesse. I turned my attention to a blank scroll, I fumbled with it, while thinking about what I should write. Fei could see through my thoughts like an open book, and suggested “Perhaps we should go for a scroll in Khotan and you may be able to get some inspiration.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

I let out my breath of relief when I saw nothing had happened to the Mogao Grottoes. There were still guards standing outside of the entrance, unaware of the storm that was coming. I spread the news of the collapse of the Khotan Kingdom, and everyone did not believe me until they went outside and saw it with their own eyes. We had to leave before the storm arrived eventually, which meant we had to leave it all behind. We have decided to barricade the library and so the records of Khotan and all of us could live on. As they were doing the hard work, I sat down once more and wrote a short record of the fall of Khotan. Not long after, we had to hope for the best and leave them behind. I looked back at the Mogao Caves and it's fading glory, hiding away in the shell, and looked in front to find a new home.

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

Toki

Pui Kiu College, Wong, Ho Nam – 16

The settlement of Dunhuang had only a small oasis for company, and a sea of sand was all that could be seen reaching out towards the horizons. Night had fallen, and the few that still resided in this lonely desert village had already retreated back into the confines of their homes. A white crescent hung high in the sky, accomplishing little more than casting a dim light over the town. One would think all the villagers were fast asleep.

The supposedly tranquil hour was interrupted, when he woke up in the middle of the night with a searing pain coursing through his body. No amount of heavy lifting in the desert sun could compare to the agony he felt now. Writhing on the camel-skin carpet, the man let out a blood-curdling scream, except no one could hear him.

“Curses... it was true...” he rolled his head, turning his gaze upon his infant son. It felt as if his body was being torn to shreds, even the slightest of movements was sheer torture, and it took everything within him to crawl over to the bed of straw on which the child slept. The man’s vision blurred as he looked over the baby’s resting face with regretful eyes, knowing that this would be the last time he would see it. “I’ll free you... I promise.”

For better or for worse, his suffering was short-lived. His body relaxed, and the household went silent. He stood up without a word and walked out of his home. Slowly, he made his way to the edge of town, then past the oasis, and kept on walking towards the horizon.

The door flung open, heralding the entrance of a young teenage girl as she pranced into the office.

“Hey hey, Professhorrr,” The bubbly high school graduate shuffled up to a coffee table in the centre of the room, threw her backpack on the floor, and plopped herself down on a nearby couch. 17-year-old Toki Chan may come off as an airhead, but her academic performance would say otherwise.

The Professor stood up from behind a stack of papers piled onto his work desk on the far side of the room, unmoved by Toki’s energy. “Punctual, I see.” Many had remarked their concerns regarding the Professor’s decision to keep Toki by his side as an assistant, but few could deny the two in cooperation created a fascinating work dynamic.

“So? What’cha calling me in for this time?”

The Professor sat himself back down before setting some documents on his desk, face-up for Toki to see. “The client specialises in Chinese history and archaeology—”

“Bleh.” The girl turned her lip at the mention of those topics, showing obvious disgust.

The Professor cleared his throat, signalling his disapproval of Toki’s comment. “The fellow said he’s been investigating the Mogao Grottoes, in Gansu province.” He handed his assistant an inch-thick stack of paper titled with bolded text on the front page that read *International Dunhuang Project*. “Cave complex containing the finest examples of Buddhist literature and artwork spanning a period of a thousand years.”

Toki nonchalantly flipped through the stack of paper. “Huh, and what about the Caves?”

The Professor leaned forward in his seat and brought his clasped hands up to his chin. “The Grottoes have been around since 366 AD. Fortunate that the caves slipped under the radar of the Red Guards a century ago, but even *I* think it’s a bit far-fetched they’re so intact, considering potential damage from Muslim rebels, European plunderers, the White Russians, and 1700 years of wind and sand.

“It’s even stranger how those caves evaded all sorts of attention from the 1600s to the 1800s, when the Grottoes were supposedly abandoned, just for Western explorers to come knocking on the door one day claiming they’re interested in researching rocky tunnels.”

“I see,” Toki grinned smugly. “So the client wants us to investigate?”

The Professor replied with a nod. He paced to the emptier half of the room, the colour of his eyes shifting from a regular brown to a glowing arctic blue. “Mogao Grottoes, 1878. A year before the first Western expedition to reach Dunhuang. I’ll give you until noon to decide—”

“I’m in.”

The Professor eyed Toki’s outstretched hand cautiously. “You don’t want some time to think?”

Toki’s grin only grew wider. “I’m good.”

“Think twice before you act, my mother used to tell me. Did you even think?” Her silent response was met with a sigh of defeat, and the Professor caved in to Toki’s stubborn grin. He held his right arm out and hovered his palm just a few inches above hers. The Professor closed his eyes, and the two clapped their hands together.

When he opened his eyes, Toki was nowhere to be seen.

“Off she goes...” The Professor threw his arms up in frustration, then sat himself down on the couch.

The man deduced he was in a cave. He awoke seated on the floor with his back against the rocky wall. His lips were parched from the dry air, and though he tried to stand, his legs were too weak. Holding onto the wall for support, he looked out of the cave, where he noticed the morning light spilling over the horizon, illuminating the fields of sand in a fiery glare.

For just a moment as he stared out of the cave, the man seemed to forget his agony from the night before. He gaped at the ethereal beauty of sunrise, a sight he’d never paid heed to, and regrettably so.

A sharp pain shot up his leg and reached up to his neck. He crumpled under the physical torment, and before he knew it, was back on the floor spasming violently.

“What in... the worl— AAAH!”

I would not move so much if I were you. The man heard a feral growl echo through the cave.

“Who... no, *what* are you?”

From royalty to peasantry, oh how far you lot have fallen. You have no idea how much your ancestors troubled me when they were in power, a royal pain in the neck indeed. As for me... you should be familiar with the name of Le Zun.

“You... you wretched monk!” The man was furious, but he soon laid back down on the floor having accepted defeat. In the event that Le Zun was a person standing in front of him, the man convinced himself he would triumph over all pain if it meant landing a blow to his face. However, this was no tangible enemy. It was but an irritable voice speaking to him in the dark of a cave. “What do you want from me?”

1500 years ago, I had a vision. I saw a thousand Buddhas bathed in golden light, right where you lie at this very moment. I did what any person would do, and dug—

“Only a psychopath like you would dig a flipping hole post-hallucination,” the man retorted. His snide remark was met with a pain that sent him rolling on the floor.

Those holes were appreciated, unlike your ghastly opuntia harvests. So appreciated in fact, that I gained a sizable following of monks. Anyhow, a thought crossed my mind: what if some despicable sod vandalises this sacred art? That simply wouldn’t do, and so I employed your ancestors as the guardians of these caves.

“Employed? You mean *cursed*.”

To protect this haven of sacred literature and artwork, I am willing to use your bloodline as a shield.

“You’re twisted.”

Silence! Le Zun sent another bout of pain through the man’s body. This is for the sake of cultural preservation. If only the world had been kinder, I would not have had to resort to such measures.

You are not at a total loss. I will grant you supernatural speed and strength if you intend to direct it at those with ill will. Any that do not follow the teachings of Buddhism yet encroach on this sacred land to uncover the existence of these caves: dispose of them at once.

“And if I refuse?”

You cannot. You will not be able to. More numerous the heretics that know of these caves’ existence and for as long as they know, the more it will hurt me. I am now a part of you, and the more I am hurt, the more you will suffer. You will be driven to kill.

The man slumped further in defeat.

“This is all an old myth in our family. My father and grandfather, and their grandfathers, all lived their lives in peace. Why me, and why now?”

I suppose there is no need to burden your ancestors with this duty if there is no likely threat to the caves at the present moment.

“You’re saying...?”

I feel a disturbance in the force. Your first mission is upon you.

“Great.”

Rejoice, my friend. We are okay here in the cave, for when the daylight returns we will emerge as reborn.

“Huh? But the sun is already out—” his words transitioned into a yelp of pain. Wasting no time, the man launched himself out of the cave with startling swiftness, leaving only a flurry of sand in his wake.

Toki hunched over in exhaustion, trying her best to draw breath. Sweat was dripping from her forehead, puddling on the sandstone floor beneath her feet. With one hand on her knee and the other gripping onto a pedestal, she raised her head and focused her vision. Ahead of her was a temple built into the side of a cliff — one of many entrances to the Mogao Grottoes.

“Alright, break’s over. Time is of the essence, Toki.” She could hear the Professor in her head, urging her to examine the temple.

“Yeah...? You try going back... *huff*... a couple of centuries...” she panted. “Chillin’ there... in the comfort of your office... bet’cha got air conditioning, too!”

“Fine, you take your time over there. Though if I were you, I wouldn’t dilly-dally around too much. Better to be moving around early in the morning before the desert heat gets to you.”

Toki had a couple of minutes' rest before the Professor suddenly piped up. “Uhh, Toki, you see that cloud of sand at 8 o'clock?”

She could pick out a tinge of discomfort in his voice, which concerned her more than anything else. Toki shifted her gaze to the left and spotted a sandstorm in the distance barreling straight towards her. Ephemeral flurries became continuous sheets of sand hurtling across the desert surface, torrents of scurrying grains pelting against Toki's shins.

“Prof, I’ve got a *bad* feeling about this.”

The Professor shot up from his seat in a panic, blood pounding in his ears and hands shaking out of control. “Hostile! Man’s got a nasty-looking dagger and is going twice the speed of Bolt!”

That was no sandstorm. Rather, it had been gravel and dust kicked up by a man skidding across the desert plains with unthinkable velocity.

Toki was unexpectedly composed upon hearing the Professor's warning. “But! Whaddya think the chances are that he’s the answer we’re lookin’ for?”

“Don’t even think about it! You think you can take on that *monster*? That’s suicide! Think about what’s at stake! Your life is worth more than Chinese history, so just come back and we’ll retry this in another time period!”

The Professor pleaded for Toki to return, but unfortunately for him, the girl had reached a decision, and there was no changing her mind. On the paved sandstone ground before the temple, Toki put on some kind of dance routine, running in literal circles and stopping once every few steps to take up a fighting stance as if she was about to punt the air.

The Professor buried his face in his hands, repeating to himself, “She’s gonna die, she’s gonna die.”

“Ya say he’s *really* fast, yeah?”

She paused for a split second.

“I think I'm faster.”

To the Professor, such a claim was nothing short of absurdity. It was then that he realised Toki had a plan, one that did not constitute her being mauled to death. With a change of heart, the Professor agreed to Toki’s plan. It was a gamble, however — either her plan, about which he hadn't the slightest idea, would emerge successful and she would escape with her life; or he would witness right then and there his assistant torn apart by the knife-wielding maniac. “Well it’s darn too late to turn back now. Go on, but come back alive.”

By the time Toki was satisfied with herself running laps and striking poses, the mysterious man was still a few hundred paces away, but closing the distance with breakneck momentum. As he rapidly approached, so did the wind gather behind him, leaving a trail of dancing sand.

“Watch me, Prof.”

You feel it. That girl has no business being around these sacred caves, Le Zun rumbled.

True enough, the man sensed the young girl he was sprinting towards as the source of a great deal of pain. With his target just a few paces away, the man tightened his grip on the dagger’s hilt, deforming the metal handle.

Still... she’s not fleeing? Heh, grant her a quick death. A feint to the left, and he lunged straight at the girl, thrusting the point of the dagger towards her chest.

The man had expected his dagger to be driven into flesh, but there was no impact. His attack had missed.

“She...disappeared?”

“Nice try, chucklehead!” the man heard the girl yell...from behind?

“Too slow!” He spun around and saw the girl standing a dozen paces away, sticking her tongue out in mockery.

“How did she— argh...” The man felt his chest tighten, as though the pain was chipping away at his heart. “Le Zun, how on Earth is she over there?”

Most peculiar indeed, though we'll discuss this after you kill her. Her presence is taking its toll on you. Le Zun advised.

Another lunge, and once again, the girl vanished into thin air, only to materialise sitting atop a sandstone pedestal twenty paces away.

“You imbecile! There can be no witnesses, stay still and accept the inevitable!” The man leapt towards the pedestal, bringing his dagger down on the girl. Such force was contained within his blow that he reduced the structure to rubble, the weapon in his hand now crooked and unusable.

Crawling in debris and becoming increasingly irritated, the man heard a feminine “Hyah!” erupt from his side, followed by a heavy kick that dug into his ribs. The man barely felt it, the swelling agony in his breast masking over all other sensations. His strength dwindled with each of the girl’s evasion of his strikes, evident from the blood he began to cough up. He jerked his arms at lightning speed in an attempt to grab onto the girl’s leg for a counterattack, yet he couldn’t believe his eyes when he saw the girl shuffle back another dozen paces in a fraction of a second.

“You’re kidding me...” the man choked in disbelief. “Teleportation? Impossible!”

“Who knows,” the girl replied with a sly grin.

“What are you *doing* to that man, calm it Toki!”

The Professor watched the exchange unfold in terror and amazement, unable to resist hyping Toki up like a dad at his son’s baseball game as she warped back and forth in time. He had previously considered Toki’s supernatural ability as a means of combat, but execution was another matter. “Dodging his attacks by travelling backwards in time, to where you were a few seconds before... that’s genius!”

“Aw, praise me more!” Toki giggled. “Warping a few seconds is nothing but doing it over and over is pretty tiring y’know...hup!”

Toki narrowly avoided another jab. “This guy is *totally* who we’re lookin’ for!”

The Professor reorganised his thoughts.

His movements are slowing, and he seems pretty hurt. Did Toki even land a second hit?

“There can be no witnesses”, huh?

If this ‘thing’ really is some sort of protector of the Grottoes...

... witnesses...?

“Toki, return at once.”

“And the investigation?”

“It’s over. I think I’ve got it.”

“Looks like my time is up,” the girl sneered. “See ya!”

And the girl vanished for good.

Fool! You let her escape! Damn that witch...

The man sprawled on the floor in utter defeat, clothes torn and tattered. His body continued to numb from the pain. “So she’s alive...”

“Oi, Le Zun...” The man half-expected a response from the sinister voice that had been pestering him from the back of his head. A couple of moments passed, and he couldn’t feel his legs anymore.

“You drag me into this mess...” The next to go was his abdomen. He waited a bit more, feeling as if he was paralyzed from the neck down. “... and now you leave me...”

A tear welled up in the corner of his eye. *Ah... I guess all's well that ends well... and I kept my promise. Now I wonder, how long until one wanders here?*

The man felt his blood slow to a crawl. He was sure that if he could move and pound on his chest, everything would get moving again too, but he was frozen in place. A soft groan accompanied every breath. He felt the air leave his lungs, too weak to hold it in. He felt it all, until he felt nothing ever again.

Tunnel to the unknown

Pui Kiu College, Wong, Sze Lam – 15

Thousands of years have passed, people came together forming families, countries and civilizations. Later, people died, kingdoms fell, dynasties ended. Legends and traditions of their ancestors were preserved by their posterities until nowadays. Some were kept, but others were not able to live under the cruel nature of time. Our histories are hiding the biggest secrets of humanity.

Torches gleamed and flickered on an old village near the mountains. A young man, only seventeen years old, but tall and proud, walked along the small road of the village near the mountains. Surveying the houses below keenly, he put a hand to his lips and walked towards a small tavern. Inside there were two men smoking cigarettes, there were no any conversations. The silence was broken only by the heavy breathing of the two men. The young man took off his hood, got some pictures of enormous caves out of his pocket, and showed them to the two men. The one, well-formed, sleek with muscle, threw his cigarette on the floor, waved at the young man, and walked to the back alley. The young man followed, hiding a small knife at his back. Soon, at the middle of the alley, the muscular man stopped and started to unlock a small box on the floor, grabbing a map covered with dust with his right hand, and the other hand asking for money. The young man walked closer to the man and quickly struck the knife to his neck. The sun rose, the sky was golden fire, boiling the cold blood on the ground. The young man got what he needed for guiding his way to the treasure.

The young man looked up at the sound of the eagle's cry, squinting against the sunlight. He couldn't see it clearly, silhouetted against the sky as it was, but he grinned at it as he flipped the hood of his gray sweatshirt over his dark blond hair and prepared himself. The young man's destination today was the gigantic caves. He was sitting on a horse, going through the small roads of the cliffs and mountains. He turned the treasure map around over and over again, and started to think if this treasure map was leading him to the correct way. Soon, the horse stopped, and the young man's body was thrown to the front. There was no further way to go, it was a dead end. The young man looked at the cross on the map, he was sure he was in that position, but he found nothing here. He was furious and picked a heavy stone and threw it to the wall in front of him. After that, he noticed some small words on the wall saying "You're already there". And there were other unregistered letters and symbols on the wall as well. The young man took his small notebook out and copied the unknown letters and symbols, and labelled the location of them. He closed his eyes, breathing slowly through his nostrils to calm his racing heart and shallow breath. You're already there, he told himself. He started to observe the surroundings, see if he could find any hidden objects or guidelines. He cleared the bushes and found a small hole that was only suitable for a small circular object. He stared at it a while, and suddenly remembered he had something similar. He grabbed his bag and got a small box out of it. He opened it and inside there was a glowing purple stone. He held it and slowly put the stone closer to the hole, there was a purple glowing force pulling the stone towards the hole. When it was close enough, he released the stone and the stone immediately stuck to the hole. The small lines connected to the hole started to glow and were linking towards the letters and symbols on the wall. After a few seconds, the wall collapsed, there was a new path to explore.

The young man hopped on his horse again and followed the unknown route. After not so long, the route brought him to an old but strangely structured temple that he had never seen before. The temple was structured in a sphere shape, which was just similar to a larger version of a basketball. There were lines on the surface of the ball and they were sparkling with rainbow colours. The temple did not seem to have any entrances or trapdoors. There were only symbols and pictures on the walls of the temples. The young man left his horse, walked more closely to the wall, he saw pictures of monkeys walking through a line and disappeared. The young man looked up to the sky and entered a period of deep meditation, trying to figure out what message the drawings wanted to bring out. At this moment, there was a bird flying right through the wall of the temple. The young man noticed and tried it with himself. He reached out his hand and put it closer to the wall, his hand was in. Later, he got through the wall with his whole body. Inside, he saw a sign showing caves and there is a hole behind the sign. He walked closely and looked through the hole, inside was completely dark. His hand was shaking and thinking was it true, or it was just a lie. Suddenly, there were wolves rushing out from the dark places towards the young man. At this moment, the

young man had no choice but to jump into the hole. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes, hoping he had made the right decision and jumped into the hole.

The young man felt his heart shaking so quickly that he could hardly breathe. He was falling so fast that he could only hear the loud wind voices, hurting his ears so much. Suddenly, everything was silent. He slowly opened his eyes and he found that he had come to a completely different place. There was a large piece of terrain and the soft wind blew through, giving people a refreshing feel. At the front, there was a huge mountain and a cave at the bottom of it. The young man threw the map on the floor and quickly ran towards the cave entrance. He was so excited that he could finally arrive at his destination, the Mogao Caves. He grabbed a lighted torch at the entrance of the cave and slowed his footsteps while entering the cave. He looked around and found many symbols and drawings similar to the ones found in the temple. Inside, there were many shards sparkling light blue and fossils that were dismantled into pieces everywhere. The young man grabbed his brown bag out and grabbed as many as he could. After that, the young man continued his expedition by going deeper inside the caves. He felt that he had so much pressure on his back, including his heavy bag storing many crystals and fossils, and also the heavy pressure covering the surroundings. After the long staircases, the young man had finally arrived at the lower level of the cave. Not so far away, there was a large door with 2 torches each beside the door. There was a door lock and a metal chain on the floor near the door. The young man walked up to touch them, they were warm, he started to suspect that there was another person who had come here earlier already. The young man's blood pressure rises with the increasing unknown to the Mogao Caves. Suddenly, there was a loud noise behind the door, the young man pushed the door open and many bats immediately flew out. The young man took a deep breath, and entered it.

The door opened with a sharp and ear-hurting sound, there were some small wood sticks falling out of it. Inside, there was a long corridor and the corridor was placed with rows of gigantic statues. Some with a trident on its hand, there were even shields, swords, spears. Although they had different equipment on their hands, they all wore the same medieval style outfit. Some of them were completely destroyed, but there were also some that looked completely new. The floor was covered with white and black square pieces and they were evenly distributed all around the room. There was a rock stand in the middle of the room. The young man walked to it and found that there was a square button on it. He was so curious what it would do once he pressed it, but he was also afraid of the consequences. At last, he decided to press it. After pressing it for a few seconds, the stone stand broke. Rocks from everywhere started to fall, the eyes of the statues around started to glow. They started to move, grabbing their weapons targeting the young man. The young man was shocked and ran to the entrance as fast as he could, but one of the statues waved its sword to the entrance, the entrance was dismantled into pieces, the lower part of the staircases were broken, there was no way to escape by this method. The young man turned around and again ran as fast as he could to the other side of the room. The statues waved their weapons at the young man many times, but not one of them hurt the young man with a drop of blood. The young man reached the door and used all his force to push open the door. Fortunately, he successfully escaped from the terror.

The door closed and locked, the noises started to gradually disappear. The young man took a deep breath again, very happy that he could survive. However, he didn't know that there was a new challenge in front of him. The new room had many unknown symbols on the walls, each symbol was located in different parts of the room. The young man went to one of the symbols and touched it, the symbol suddenly went bright blue. He continued to go to another symbol and touched it, it went bright blue again. When the young man touched the third symbol, all symbols in the room became red. The rock pieces in the room started to push towards the center of the room, the young man noticed that if he didn't do anything in this situation, he would die. He immediately tried pressing different symbols. When he was close to death, he pressed the eye symbol button, the door at the front immediately opened, he jumped through it and survived.

He laid on the ground, he slowly opened his eyes. In front of him was a large room with many different lab equipment. There were different creatures inside a large lab bottle. Those creatures were similar to humans, with both hands, legs and a head. Many of them were black in color, meaning that the experiment had failed. Some experiments were continued with green light opened in the bottle. Suddenly, the young man heard people talking at the front. He immediately hid himself behind a large bottle. The unknown people were talking a non-human language and carrying different human-sized boxes. They opened one of them and put a body on a bed. The young man secretly came closer to it, he noticed that it was a human. The unknown people were using technologies that

humans had never invented before on the man lying on the bed. The man was yelling and crying so loudly, and later the man stopped making any noise. After a few seconds, the man on the bed got up, he was no longer a man, he became a monster, losing its temper, destroying everything around it. The young man was scared and accidentally made noises. The monster ran to his direction and the young man immediately escaped. He was spotted by the unknown people and they yelled so loudly to him. The young man grabbed a hammer on the ground and went to a half-broken rock. He used all his forces to break the rock. Behind the rock was a tunnel, the young man didn't think of any further and jumped right into it. He closed his eyes, hoping he could make it out.

"Are you fine?"

The young man woke up hearing a girl's voice. It was his sister, she said that someone saw him lying in the middle of farmland. The young man had lost his bag, all shards, fossils, and evidence were gone. However, he found a golden stone in his pocket. He stood up, holding the stone tight, he grabbed his coat, and ran to the laboratory he always go, to unfold the secrets behind the Mogao Caves.

Troglodyte ~This is a Tale of Natural Selection and Trials~

Pui Kiu College, Woo, Sing Sang Sean – 15

EMBARK

The year is 1939, In the midst of trembling gunfire and the culmination of Axis advantage against the Allies , totalitarian Germany, having obliterated Poland swiftly, expands its insatiable appetite to take over the world. At the same time, the Chancellor of Germany also wants to become immortal and reign perpetually. Religious superstitions are banned in totalitarian Germany, but ironically, the government is actually funding an expedition called “The Third Reich’s bullets of thee Far East’, to excavate sacred Buddhist artefacts allegedly located in Western China which are said to bring immortality and prosperity. After an extensive research assisted by the Imperial Japanese, the Germans acknowledges the Mogao grottoes, which is a treasure trove of Buddhist culture. German archaeologist Dr.Frieldreich suggests that the uncharted regions of the cave system might contain treasures of tremendous value, judging by the fact that the caves are a remnant of the cultural and religious exchange between China and all walks of the Silk Road, making it a “sacred place”. Legends say that numerous people have inexplicably vanished in the uncharted parts of the cave, which contain something beyond our understanding. Curious about the alleged anomaly, the Germans put their gleaming eyes on the Mogao Grottoes, embarking their bizarre adventure into the murky abyss.

DESCENT INTO INSANITY

Due to the fact that western China is occupied by the imperial Japanese, to ensure their allies’ interests, the Germans invited several skilled Japanese army veterans to participate in the expedition, such as Takeshi, Toki and Tamaki. The expedition team, consisting of 17 people, is lead by chief anthropologist, Josef and his assistant, Otto. The team is equipped with advanced technologies, such as the new UV torch which imitates sunlight and suction devices for climbing steep surfaces. They also brought Chinese and British captives to use them as “decoys” when something unfortunate happens.

In the middle of the desolate dessert, the Mogao Grottoes stand conspicuously. As the squad set foot on the entrance of the megastructure, they feel an inexplicable energy flowing through their veins while the flowing sand hit their feet. They quickly unpacked their equipment from the Long range Dessert Group vehicles, and set off. To enter the uncharted parts of the cave, they have to first climb a 92 degree cliff by following a red thread left by previous explorers. They use the suction devices to endure the steep slope, excluding the captives, who were forced to climb with their bare hands. One of the captives, Peter succumbs to death as he falls as a result of losing balance when hornets assaults him in midst of climbing. Another captive, Xiao commits suicide by deliberately falling from the cliff. “ What a cliff-hanger episode “ Josef exclaims, and proceeds to his journey with zero sympathy. After most of the squad members reach the top, they follow the red thread to locate the entrance of the “secret passage”. The red thread stopped at a limestone slab fixed to the rocky surface with many holes on it. Tamaki suggests to break the stone slab and that it might be a clue to access the desired destination. As a result, they discovered a 30 meters long vertical borehole right underneath the stone slab which Toki descriibes “It’s the most claustrophobic passage I’ve seen in my life”. The translator of the team, Krieg is reluctant about entering the hole, as he has intense claustrophobia and nyctophobia, but was obliged to do so.

To assure that they won’t hit rock bottom, Josef dropped a pebble into the hole, and is relieved to hear the sound of water splashing. However, the self-preservation instincts of the crew obstructs them from pioneering to dive into the hole, so Josef and his crewmates performed a little game of bet, in which the courageous individual who has the guts to enter the hole can get 700 Francs from Josef. Otto, who is extremely money-oriented, gladly accepts the offer, equips himself with the suction devices , and dives into the bottomless pit. After they hear a splashing noise, other crew members follow him, one-by-one reluctantly. When they reach the bottom, they realise that the slow-moving water is deep, about 10 meters deep, and is filled with biogas, smelling like a decaying corpse topped with sludgy mud . Therefore the crewmates equipped themselves with anti-chemical weapon gas masks, and swam through the water body, to an apparent dry land which is about 80 meters ahead of them. Most of them made it to the land safely, except for Jane, a captive with lung problems who

suffocated to death by gobbling up too much biogas-infested water. Again, Josef and his team proceeds without any sympathy. While descending into the darkness of the cave, Josef suddenly said “ Ya heard about Cobalts ? They might be present in the caves....”. Otto looked at Josef with his face completely paled out. Cobalts are entities that are said to haunt caves and tap on the cave walls to lure unsuspecting preys in German folklore. Josef then satirically makes a faint tapping noise with his boots which makes Otto, an extremely superstitious person, to jump and urinate in his trousers. The whole squad laughed hysterically, their noise echoing in the cave, scaring the numerous resting bats in the cave, which made Otto jump again. Otto shouted, with his blushing face, “Stop with the mumbo jumbos and proceed with our mission!”

After 10 minutes of idle chatter, humming songs, the squad is greeted by a myriad of ancient paintings on the cave walls depicting various kinds of sexual violence. Toki carefully crops the intricate and fragile paintings and loads them into a portable cart. “These are going to make a fat stack ye.” Toki says, and skips like a child while dragging the cart through some puddles. Suddenly, Josef is inexplicably aroused sexually, upon submerging his lower body in a deep puddle that appeared in front of the team. He also feels an irresistible lust towards the ancient sculptures around him like he’s eaten too much aphrodisiac. His squad also feels unnaturally lustful, which distracts them from proceeding. Krieg questions himself : “What in the unholy world is happening !?” Josef then comes up with an atrocious solution to unleash all of their sexual thoughts. Due to the squad members being morbidly sadistic for some reasons, Josef resorted to injecting opium and meth, which they brought as “medicines” to rejuvenate from fatigue, into the remaining captives and the squad committed acquaintance rape towards the captives, attempting to unleash all their accumulated distractive lust, while the captives don’t resist due to them being in a state of trance. The squad watches in ecstasy as the captives twitch in agony. Josef then fills his nostrils with meth and says “See its snowing like piss right now yee-haaw “One of the captives, Xu commits suicide by banging her head to a quartz spur, impaling her forehead. Josef responds “ Yo look at this delicious looking Doner kebab !”

One day has passed. The surviving 4 captives are starving due to the inhumane treatments they have gone through. Hence, they subjected themselves to cannibalism, tearing large chunk of flesh out of each others’ body. They ultimately died of blood loss. Upon witnessing the chunks of flesh splattered all over the rocks, Josef’s sadistic tendencies are fuelled, causing him to be ecstatic. Takeshi cuts a dead captive’s ear and proceeds to eat it, saying it would provide him with stamina for the strenuous journey. Meanwhile the horrendous scene makes Josef overjoyed and descend into absolute insanity. He collides his head with a sculpture of a deity with a trident like a ferocious bull Pachycephalosaurus headbutting to assert dominance, bleeding profusely in the process. “Arrrrrrrh I’m a walrus !!!!!” Josef shouts in agony. His constant collision with the statue breaks the entire limestone slab encasing the statue, and miraculously reveals an entrance to an obscured ancient torture chamber , believed to have been used against Islamic bandits who sabotaged the statues of the Buddha and bandits who attempted to steal the treasures. Josef, still in a state of absolute insanity, rushes into a pit full of sharp, serrated spikes in the chamber, but his squad stops him from doing so. Josef eventually passes out. Few minutes after the commotion, other squad members start to see hallucinations of the monks and deities in the paintings moving, and hear gibberish in an inhuman voice. Things go worse to abysmal. They all panic and go insane, Otto turned his body into a “pincushion” by jumping into that pit of spikes, dying from blood loss. His last words are “My mom is a bloody unicorn with a long nose!!!!”. Eventually, the entire squad passes out.

ACCEPTANCE

Josef and his squad wake up in a chamber full of vibrant paintings, not knowing what force moved them there. They are both mentally and physically exhausted , wanting to escape from the hellish subterranean dungeon. However the entrances of the chamber are all blocked by heavy rocks, obstructing them from liberation. All of their hopes have been stripped, as a result, they start committing mass seppuku, suggested by Tamaki. They shouted “ Glory to the emperor” and “For the fatherland” before succumbing to the glimmering katana blades. Josef is reluctant about ending his own life at first, but he miraculously realises that he did not feel any pain when consecutively colliding his head with the statue because of a white soothing substance attaching to his bare skin. Distracted by his realization, he ponders about the substance, wondering what it is. He suddenly sees

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an entrail of white gooeey liquid leading to a moist crevasse in the edge of the chamber. He curiously extend his hand into the crevasse and felt something smooth and slimy. He grabs the “thing” and realises that he is holding a

white lizard-like organism without scales. Having perceived the fact that the organism is responsible for the production of those anaesthetic substance, he attempted to ease the pain of a katana penetrating his abdomen by ingesting it. As Josef is about to stab himself, his childhood memories flashes before his eyes, he remembers his childhood in Florida where he was ostracized because he was surmised for contracting feline aids after a puma assaulted him in his backyard . He realised that nothing truly happy had happened throughout his life, exemplified by his miserable childhood, further luring him into the fate of committing suicide. But him ingesting the organism turns out to be a blessing in disguise, he manages to escape the grisly fate of suicide, as too much of the white substance from the creature makes him faint and forget the events he went through in the cave.

After Josef wakes up, he finds plenty of valuable treasures. Despite not knowing the context, he loads the treasures into a cart which appeared next to him. Suddenly, a strong earthquake strikes, causing the cave to collapse. Josef barely evades the calamity, , sacrificing his right foot. Josef, being the only survivor of the ordeal, sells the valuable treasures to the Munich museum and in auctions, gradually climbs up the social hierarchy as wealth accumulates. One day, government officials of Germany tells him that he participated in the expedition to the Mogao Grottoes, and he was the only survivor. This makes Josef contemplate about the mysterious caves being a trial of natural selection, and that he is the “chosen one”.

CULPRIT BEHIND INSANITY

What caused the lust and insanity exhibited by the squad ? Turns out that the culprit behind insanity is all along the organism Josef ingested. It is an unique species of cave salamander, called *sinowymipithecus cerritucephalus* which lives in those secluded cave systems, and due to the cave being devoid of light, it cannot obtain energy by consuming photosynthetic bacteria, so it adapts very peculiarly by allowing chemosynthetic bacteria to inhabit the skinfolds on its neck, converting minerals from the treasures ancient people left in the caves into food, feeding the salamander. However, the bacteria also produces white coloured toxins as a result of food production, which have unique properties, such as leading people into insanity and an anaesthetizing trance, and making them exceptionally lustful. The salamanders have a habit of smearing the toxins secreted from the flaps all over cave walls as territorial markings, aiding them in guiding under blindness. The secretion smells like snake urine.(please refer to the page about the biology of the salamander if you want to know more (p.4).)

THE EARTH KNOWS

After the Second World War, a group of East german and Chinese Archaeologists discovered an ancient manuscript under a pine tree 5 kilometers south of the Mogao Caves, which recounts the legend of a Japanese monk, who became a saint after enduring the trials he faced in the Silk Road, having his physical body buried in the land of Mogao. It is rumoured that the cave is sacred and that the monk’s strong will and determination of enduring the trials have been projected into the caves as an anomaly. This suggest the idea of the Stone Tape Theory, which is that the emotional energy of past events are stored in the rocks, and can be “replayed” under certain circumstances. And the peculiar species of salamander inhabiting these caves are thought to be the physical manifestation of the trials, legends even say that the salamander is one of the 7 disciples of the monk whose responsibility is to guard the caves like a territorial clownfish. Similar anomalies have been reported in the Trinity Alps of North America, in which a cryptid called Trinity Alps Salamander are said to inhabit. Nowadays, the “sacred part of the caves are barricaded by “ Shimenawas” which are barriers that create spiritual domains within it.

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“The Mogao Grottoes can be a blessing from earth but also a curse. There is something beyond our comprehension lurking in the deep abysses of the caves, a fate worse than death could occur, but it doesn’t rule out the possibility of rewards.”

The Heart—Warming Story at the Mogao Caves

Pui Kiu College, Yip, Yu Yee – 15

WATCH OUT!

The Hobblin Family was on a trip to the Mogao caves, father grasshopper and mother ladybird was carrying a crying baby on his back and they were walking past a cave. “DOM!DOM!DOM!” There was that thundering sound shaking through the rocks and out of the cave. The Hobblins were frightened and shivering, frantically running away from that spooky cave.

Who could it be? Was it the big rocks falling on the ground or was there some sort of monster in there?

Suddenly, a giant, who is 12 feet tall, moved the big rock at the entrance of the cave aside and walked out. The Hobblins quickly hid behind the largest tree that they could see and stare right at that giant. The giant had the weirdest look, ears even larger than elephants’, feet bigger than a boat, with a XXXXXXXXXL qipao around his body. His nostrils were so big that it could fit a whole size watermelon. The Hobblins were trying their best to hold their breath, keeping as quiet as they possibly could. Just then, the giant bent down on the floor and started sniffing to find out where the Hobblins were. He kept crawling and crawling, approaching the Hobblins. The Hobblins knew that they wouldn’t have a chance to live if they didn’t escape right away. So they silently got up and tried to escape. Just then, the giant snatched out his hand and caught all three Hobblins in his hand. He safely put them in a glass jar and quickly walked back to the cave.

BANG!BANG!BANG! The Hobblins were trying their hardest to break the glass and escape through the Giant’s fingers but they knew that it’s actually impossible for them to win over the Giant. In the cave, there were many shelves on the wall and over 1000 glass jars standing on the shelves. Inside every one of them were different kinds of insects: beetles, bees, bugs, crickets, dragonflies, moths, lice, you can name it all. The giant found the lid of the jar and closed it nice and tight. Then he put it on the shelf, right next to the cockroach family. The cave was surprisingly great. It looks like an actual home, very neat and tidy. Looks like the giant did some serious cleaning beforehand. Just one thing, the cave was extremely dark, no lights or any candles.

The Hobblins were locked up in a stuffy jar and were trying to work out a plan to get out, Grasshopper dad was trying to communicate with the cockroach mum next door and search for an answer to the present situation. Baby grass bird kept crying out of hunger.

The big ears of the giant can be used to hear very small sounds, even the breathing of a newborn ladybird. Just as the Giant heard baby grass bird’s crying, he went to the cabinet in the ‘kitchen’ and got some food and delivered it to the Hobblin’s room. Why would he be so nice to those insects? Why did he catch us? These question marks were floating in momma ladybird’s mind.

It was then midnight, everyone in the cave was really tired and they went to bed. Frightening winds were blowing outside the cave, a heavy sand storm was reported, luckily the cave was secured by many enormous rocks so there was not much impact on the cave. The giant also fell asleep, with some dried leaves under him, snoring as loud as he could.

It was the next morning, the giant woke up and cooked up some breakfast, it was wood jelly with some apples in it. Then the giant distributed them to the 1000 families on the shelf. The hobblins loved it, they protested loudly in the jar and the giant heard it, he brought seconds for the Hobblins. After breakfast, the giant went outside for a walk. This time, he took a luggage with 5 different jars in it. Before he left, he made sure that there was not a single gap for those little ones to escape. All insects waited for the giant to go out and they all started partying, everyone was trying to get off that lid and clear that stuffy air in the jar. The horned dung beetle successfully crushed that lid off and he even flew to the cabinet to get some honey.

Suddenly, the rock at the entrance started to slide open, daylight outside suddenly glowed in. The beetle quickly flew back to the jar. That dazzling light made every single insect close their eyes and raised their elbows up to

cover up their eyes. It was the giant, he came back! And this time, he brought not one, not two, not three, not four, BUT FIVE INSECT FAMILIES! All their grandparents, parents and grandkids were here. One of them was the worm family. And the whole jar was packed with worms, it looked very very very very very uncomfortable. Besides, the giant also brought one gravid female back, and that one woman has its own private apartment, the worms saw that and were complaining for a whole hour.

They all were put on the shelves. That whole week, the giant kept bringing home more and more insect families. He also brought more and more food home for the whole pack to eat. Especially that gravid female, she was the most cared lady in the whole cave. Every 15 minutes, the giant would go and look at her.

The grass bird was not a baby anymore, he became a full-grown young man this week. The Hobblins still hadn't figured out the reason why the giant caught them but they were well taken care of by the giant this whole week, so the Hobblins felt safer around the giant and in the cave, although they would much rather prefer living in that beautiful nature.

The next week.....

The cave was extremely hot this week, the insects were having a hard time breathing, the giant on the other hand was panting and panting just by getting up to drink a sip of water. The cave was filled with smelly sweat. The giant hadn't brought any new family home and hadn't gone out on walks. Something was wrong. Ladybird mom noticed that the giant was very depressed, his face tells her that he was very worried, he hadn't smiled once.

Suddenly, someone knocked at the hard rock door and shouted for help "Giant!!Are you there???? I need HeLp!" The giant stood up, walked to the entrance, slid open the rock and invited an old man to come in. That old man was a farmer near the Mogao caves. He wasn't surprised at the giant. They have been friends for 50 years.

The giant brought a cup of room temperature water for the old man and the giant turned on his torch so they could see. They sat in the middle of the cave and talked for a while. " ALL my crops had died because of the heat wave....."cried the old man. The giant patted the old man's shoulder and gave him a little shoulder massage. All the little insects pricked up their ears and listened carefully to every single word the old man had said.

After they chatted for around 15 minutes, the giant suddenly remembered something and stood up, walked over to the shelves and got some jars filled with worms and bugs and gave it to the old man. The old man chose what he wanted to bring back to the farm and thanked the giant, "Thanks pal! Appreciated it! Please help me to save up some more." The giant smiled back.

The old man left and the giant started to make dinner, using the last bit of crops he got in the cabinet, given by the old man.

Suddenly in the middle of the night, the giant heard a moaning sound from that gravid female. The giant realised that she must be in labour so the giant immediately woke up and rushed to the jar to look at her. The giant opened the lid to keep inside airy. Although the giant could do nothing to help the lady, he stood there to make sure she was accompanied.

The next morning, the heat wave was gone. The giant set the bugs and insects free, only keeping the lady in labour to let her recover. The Hobblins were also set free, everyone was very excited to breathe some fresh air in. They all partied outside the cave. However, some of them were really missing the life of being fed from time to time, close relations were developed between the giant and some of those insects. So half of them squeezed through the rock and back into the cave. The giant noticed some marching sound from the entrance and found insects walking towards him. The giant laughed..... 'Why would they want to come back in?'. He thought.

In the afternoon, the giant brought over more worms to the farmer. As the giant walked to the farm, the whole bug crew including the Hobblins followed him to the farm. It's like a tiny marching walking behind the giant.

After several 10 miles, they had arrived. The old man immediately asked anxiously "Did you set all the insects free after the heat wave?" The giant nodded his head and pointed to the marching band behind him. Ladybird mom

realised the reason for the giant snatching them, she shouted, "The giant must have snatched us because he doesn't want us to be suffering outside under the heat wave." Grasshopper dad replied, "Oh yeah!!." Ladybird mom was deeply moved by the kindness of the giant so she crawled to the giant's foot, tapped on his ankle and said, "I could stay here to help if he doesn't mind". The giant looked at the old man, the old man nodded, and so the Hobblins plus the whole bug crew stayed at the farm to help out.

There's a ton for the worms to do, but not for grasshoppers and ladybirds. They can neither help fertilize the soil nor pollinate the fruits like beetles. But grasshopper dad and ladybird mom had found their way to help, was to help banish and eat up those bad bugs. One or two little bugs cannot eat a whole ton of armyworms but a whole team of insects can absolutely win this war. Beetles were busy pollinating those fresh fruits and flowers.

The old man built a little tree house in his orchard right next to his house. The house was built specially for the little helpers, they could rest and sleep there at night. The old man also built this so that every time the old man drove out his machines, he would know that his little helpers were in the tree house, so that he wouldn't have to worry about smashing them with humongous heavy machine wheels accidentally.

From time to time, the giant would come to visit the old man. He would bring over some freshly dug earthworms and the old man would give him great peaches and melons, sometimes cucumbers too. This 'trading' started 50 years ago. The old man accidentally found a giant in a cave when he was exploring the Mogao caves. The old man started to bring over fruits for the giant to eat because the old man always heard the giant's tummy growling. So the old man decided to give some leftover fruits that had not been sold at the market, and in return, the giant started digging earthworms for the old man. The giant slowly realised how poor those insects were to always have to bear those extreme weathers, he found many dead bodies near the rocks. So he started to learn that he should help to save the insects' lives, so starting from there, he would catch insects before any bad weathers, like heat waves or heavy rains. He had trained his ears to listen to every small sound, including the walking and breathing of bugs, so every time he heard a bug walking past the cave, he would take in action right away.

The old man knew how kind the giant was and so he started to give more fruits and veggies to the giant so he could feed those insects.

In the upcoming halloween, there will be a pumpkin contest to see whose pumpkin is the largest. So today, in order to have a pumpkin on time, the old man started growing pumpkins in May.

The old man buries many pumpkin seeds into the soil and waters the compost, which still has many leftovers not being decomposed. The earthworms are trying to help decompose those leftovers, Ben, Bush and Beck's tummy are very swollen from eating so much leftovers. The Hobblins and many other crew members were searching around the farm 3 times a day, and to help eat up those bad bugs. They climb up the trees, walk around the soil, checking every bit and corner of the farm to ensure that there was not any bad bug affecting the health of those lovely pumpkins.

Also, since the pumpkin grew out of the soil, there were many birds circling around the farm up in the air, staring right at the pumpkin. The scarecrows and CDs that the old man put right here did not help at all, since all of them have been put out here for a very long time. The birds were not scared of those scarecrows anymore. The battle of beetles on the other hand put its life at risk and fought against the birds, so as to ensure the pumpkin would not be eaten by any other living animals and to protect the pumpkins.

Every 3 hours, the old farmer waters and checked on the pumpkins to see how the pumpkins are. The pumpkin is now really really hard, looks bright orange on the outside and its scent is very refreshing, perfect for halloween. The pack is on the right track on growing this pumpkin.

Planting over 40 years, the old man still hasn't gotten any recognition in the field of planting. So if he wins this time, it will mean a lot to the old man.

On the day of the event, the old man and all the insects, and most importantly, the pumpkin were sent to the Halloween carnival. The Giant brought them there and left. By comparison, their pumpkin is larger than anyone

else. The Judge weighs each pumpkin and looks at every single detail of the pumpkins. The old man sat on the audience chair and the crew sat on the Giant's leg, anxiously waiting for the results of the competition.

Just then, the judge directly and quickly announced, "The OLD Fashioned farmer is the winner of the pumpkin contest." All of those insects were very happy and was dancing on his shoes. The public found out the winner is the old man and they applauded immediately, the old man felt so happy and he danced with the pack too. After 50 years, the old man finally found out a thing that he could be proud of, which was his pumpkin being the champion of the night. All thanks to the giant and the insects crew for giving all out to help keep the environment pumpkin-friendly and lending a helping hand when the old man was in need of help. The team work and the great bond between them helped them to win tonight's contest.

That night, the old man was overjoyed. After they arrived at the farm, they invited the Giant over to barbecue to celebrate the win. Everyone including the insect pack was having a wonderful time. The old man thanked those little insects and the giant from the bottom of his heart, they felt each other's emotions. And to thank the insects crew back, a new house was built specially for them.

Starting from this year, they entered many planting competitions. Although they did not win every time, they were really happy about what they had done. The insect crew stayed at the farm to keep helping the old man, together with the giant, they are enjoying the best of their lives, smiling and enjoying every single day while helping each other out.

Cave no. 493

Pui Kiu College, Yu, Chun Kwai Alvin – 16

In the early morning of a rainy day, the sun hid behind the clouds, so nobody could see it. The birds stayed in the trees. Meanwhile, it was rush hour. Long traffic jams could be seen everywhere, playing a symphony of horns. At this noisy moment, 22 year-old Jack was in his van listening to the radio. Seemingly annoyed and lacking patience, he was on his way to the mini storage room to tidy up his storage room. He was living in a small flat alone and didn't have enough space to store neither his office documents nor his own collection of his interests.

After Jack parked his van, he immediately reached the storage room. Over there, only him stood at the corridor with many red doors, and he stalked silently to his room. Looking at a filled and messy room, he sighed and tidied up.

After two hours of tidying, Jack walked away extremely exhausted and looked down at the floor. Suddenly he noticed a map that wasn't really rusted. On the map, there were some simplified Chinese words, some red arrows and a red circle around a temple-like structure. There weren't any signs of the locations but 3 letters - "S.O.S." behind it.

"Gosh! Was someone trapped inside?" Jack wondered. Solving the mystery of the map, he went to the Central Library. "Excuse me, may I have a map of China?" he asked the librarian. "Here you go!", replied the librarian. He read the map and also some books he found in the library. After some research, he came to a conclusion - The place was the Mogao Grottoes in Gansu Province.

Knowing what was happening, Jack immediately contacted his friend, Max. "Hey Max! I'm going on an adventure at the Mogao Grottoes in Gansu Province.", said Jack. Max was two years older than Jack. He was an archeologist. He had walked through the Amazon Rainforests, climbed through high mountains of Greece, and drove through cities of Israel, in order to find historic sites and uncovered civilizations. After he heard Jack's invitation, Max replied positively, "Sure! Let's meet and investigate the map tomorrow!"

The next day, Max went to Jack's home, "Wow, it seems you haven't done housework for ages!" Max laughed. Then Jack lent the map to Max, "This map was picked up at the mini storage room. After some research at the Central Library, I found that the help signal came from cave no. 492." But Max stared at the paper with a suspicious face. "Jack, where would you circle if you were trapped in cave no. 332?", he asked Jack. "Here!" He circled cave no. 332 with a pencil. "I see, but did you find something strange on the map? Despite it being said to be cave no. 492, the total area featuring cave no. 492 is less than 50%. This means the person may be trapped inside no. 493!" "Wow!", Jack exclaimed.

Few days later, Jack and Max met at the Hong Kong International Airport, they both took the small plane to Gansu Airport, then took an hour van across the highway. They stopped in front of the desert mountains. They looked like temples hidden inside the caves. They both opened their mouths without saying anything. There were many tourists around the site, but Max immediately noticed a small trail covered a forest of trees. They both followed the trail. "Hey Max, I found some footprints!" Jack told Max while pointing at the footprints. "Good spotting, Jack! Maybe we should follow the footprints and find Cave no.493.". Walking along the footprints, they finally found a Mogao Cave. In this area, it was only them and no animals or people around them. "This must be Cave no. 493!", Max firmly exclaimed.

Max pushed the rusty temple doors, and a large squeaking noise was released. Inside the cave, it was so dark that they couldn't even see an object. "Here we go!" Jack gave a deep breath. The journey at Cave no.493 was then started.

Shining around with his flashlight, Jack spotted a buddhist statue in the middle of the hall. The statue was very large, it really looked like a real giant sitting in the middle. "Woah!" He was frightened by it. "Haha, aren't you scared?" Max laughed. "No, I'm not a coward", Jack replied Max with a red face. He then raised his flashlight. There were some drawings of people and Buddhist Gods in front of a pale blue background. "These are the drawings about the life of people in heaven.", Max told Jack. "My goodness, I've never seen such beautiful things before!" Jack was amazed. At that moment, Max found some understandable words on the wall - "You'll see me

after being chased by the rock." "Hey Jack, would you mind helping me take a snapshot?" asked Max. "Sure!" Jack then took a snapshot of it.

They both went down the staircase, then into a small room. In the room, the walls were made of gold. It was so dark that the only light source was the fire torches around the corners. Two buddhas were sitting on two sides. In the middle of the room, a coffin was placed. "This must be an ancient tomb!", exclaimed Max. "Wow! This place looks like inside the pyramid", said Jack. He stepped forward and pressed the coffin's lid. "Oops! I didn't expect it to be a button", said Jack. Few seconds later, the ground started shaking and they both heard a loudening rumbling sound. "Look out!", yelled Max. A large rock was rolling towards them. They both ran down the stairs. Luckily, in a narrow staircase, the rock seemed to slow down a bit. "Turn left", Max screamed. They both leaped left, and escaped from the rock. "Phew! That was exciting, wasn't it?" "It was scary because of your uncontrollable hands!" Max scolded angrily. Then, there was a loud noise again. "No!", yelled Jack. The wall blocked their way. "We now can't get out," said Jack hopelessly. "Don't worry, we will find a way out", Max comforted Jack.

Suddenly, they heard someone laughing, "You guys came to the right place! I've been waiting here for a few days!". They both moved towards the sound, but just walking through a corridor.

"I'm here", said by a young man aged around 30 suddenly. There was a wall blocking him, so Jack and Max only saw his eye. "My name is Eric, I've been trapped here for three days, can you let me out?" Max pushed the rock with lots of force, "Help me, Jack!". They both pushed the rock in front of them. Eric was finally free. "Three days ago, I wanted to go for an adventure by myself, so I called the postman to send the map if he can't see it again within the day." Jack paused, "So why were you trapped here?" "Well, when I touched the coffin above, a large rock rolled towards me and I luckily escaped but not because I'm stuck here.", said Eric. "So were we! And we were trapped, too," Jack continued, "How will we escape from here?" Max said with full self-confidence, "Let me use my little gadget, it will broadcast signals to the satellite. The red light will turn green" However, the light was still red and never changed to green. "Bruh! Is that a gadget or rubbish?" asked Jack without any patience. "Anyway, let's find the way out by ourselves instead!", said Eric. After that, they continue their journey downwards.

They came to a large hall, it looked like a rusted throne room. There were pillars at each side. "Gosh, it looks like a temple!", Eric said, amazed. It was so dark that they had to turn on their flashlights again. Suddenly, they heard some squeaking noise. "Is it a bat's cave?" Jack was scared. "Nah! It isn't a bat sound. It may be something else!" Max answered confidently. "Like what?" Eric was terrified. "I don't know! Anyway, let's find out where we are right now instead!", Max exclaimed. They walked and walked along the path. "Hey, look!" Max was pointing at a Buddha statue. This buddha was extremely large. "Even larger than the statue in Sichuan," Jack added. When Max took one single step forward, he was shocked because something rose from the ground. They three looked, "Ah! A pop quiz." Eric was relieved. A cylindrical table rose had four equations on it, the first one was yellow plus green equals purple, the second one was yellow plus blue equals red, the third one was green plus blue equals orange, and the fourth one was purple plus red plus orange equals what? There were two choices on the table: white or black. "Wow! It was quite hard!", Jack exclaimed. "I know!" Eric shouted proudly, "It's black!" He immediately pressed the black button. Suddenly, the buddha's eyes burnt with fire. Then, arrows shot from the walls. "Run to that small tunnel!" The three boys rushed into the small tunnel in the right corner.

"Phew! We would be shot if we didn't run quick enough!" Jack had a tiring breath after the escape. "We wouldn't have been fired if you idiot chose white!" Max scolded Eric. "And we would escape if your rubbish gadget worked!" You said what?" Max asked loudly. Eric charged at Max, grabbed his sleeves up. They started fighting. "You guys stop!" Jack shouted, "It's meaningless to do it!" "So what should we do now?" "According to my watch it's close to midnight, let's find a safe place to sleep!"

They found a plain area. They shared the snacks they still have and put their tents up. "Hey, look! There's a cave!" Jack pointed at a prison-like area. "It seems quite scary to sleep outside, so I decided to sleep inside." He added. "Goodnight", they said to each other.

The next so-called "Morning", "Help!" Jack yelled loudly. "What's going on, Jack?" Eric and Max woke up, annoyed. Few moments later, they found Jack trapped in the room. "Why are you there?" "I don't know. I just know I've been trapped since I woke up!"

Max immediately spotted some footprints on the floor. "Ah ha! I found it! It has two claws, it must be a collision between the gate and a bird!" He exclaimed. "What bird?", Jack and Eric asked. "I don't know! It seems like an

ostrich, emu, or cassowary.”, Max replied. “Ha ha ,are you serious? This isn’t large enough to keep a large bird!” Jack laughed, Max ignored him “Anyway, I’m thinking of how to rescue you.” Eric suddenly screamed “I know! Let me use my wire to trick the lock.” “Tick”, and the lock was opened. Jack was finally free and they had a little reunion.

Suddenly there was a noise from somewhere else, “It may be a crane! Perhaps there’s a crane underneath!” Eric said. They three went down to another room without anything but cave drawings on the walls. The walls of this room were mainly in red. “Wow this place is quite red, will there be anything to give a jumpscare?” wondered Jack. The paintings mainly drew about how people keep chickens. “Look!” exclaimed Eric, “There is a door, this was a chicken coop.” Eric tried to get in, Max glared confusingly at the painting at a different angle and stopped him immediately, “The painting was a lenticular, the people weren’t keeping chickens.” He added, “Those noise in the temple wasn’t a bat, and the footprints we saw in the morning didn’t belong to any bird.” They both asked, “What is it then?”. Max answered with some hesitation, “ People in the past were keeping ... velociraptors!”.

Few moments later, “Flop!”, a feathered velociraptor leaped from the cage. “Squak!”, a few moments later a gang encircled them. “Gosh! Now what are we going to do?” Eric asked. “Run!”, Max whispered. They three ran through tunnels, just like in a horror game. The flock of velociraptors continuously chased them.

“These guys must be hungry!” Eric said. “ This way”, Max shouted, the chase then changed direction. The three boys were trapped inside a room. “Boom! Boom! Boom!” The raptors crushed the door several times. Luckily, they found a pile of meat on the ground. Max threw the meat through a small hole located on the wall. “Splat”, then the raptors flocked towards the meat. Jack then opened the door with a small gap, it seems no raptors are still “knocking the door”. “Alright! No raptors spotted!” Jack reported to the team. They three tip-toed to another location.

They tip-toed into a small room, where there were suitcases and a buddha sitting. “Look these must be the leftovers from the western people in ancient China, I am going to sell it!” Max noticed a suspicious painting on the wall. It’s about two people getting something and the buddha was glaring at them angrily. Max realized the things that the two people got were exactly Jack and Eric were holding. “Put it back, guys!” he yelled but it was too late. The buddha’s eyes turned red. It stood up and started to shoot arrows at them. The three then fled and the Buddha stopped chasing them. “ What a relief! If it weren’t for you, we would have been shot!”, they both said. “This may teach you guys a lesson, right?”. The three boys laughed. “Look!”, exclaimed Jack. “There was a staircase. Maybe there was something underneath!” Then the three started to walk the staircase.

On the staircase, there were also paintings. There was a river in the middle. At one side, there were some people drinking water. On the other side of the river, there were some animals also drinking water, too. In the sky, a buddha sat on the clouds staring at the living things. “It seems to describe how creatures live in heaven!” Max wondered, “Or something underneath, I don’t know.”

After walking down the stairs, they reached the bottom of the cave. There were streams around them. “Ah! Water finally!” they three yelled. There were some spiky rocks above them. It was a beautiful landscape. Over the stream, a tiny and cute deer-like creature appeared. It was drinking water. Max said, “This is a mouse deer. I can’t believe I can see something like this inside the cave.” He then took out the camera and took some photos of the mouse deer. What’s more, some red pandas also appeared. They were also here to drink water. Inside the stream, some fish were swimming. Although it’s underneath the surface, it seemed to be a little paradise. “We should have slept here last night,” Eric said and they were all laughing.

Then they go up another stairs. They heard something coming towards them. “Watch out!” Max screamed. A velociraptor appeared right behind them. Few moments later, the gang appeared. The chase started again. This time, the three ran up the staircase. While they’re running, the feathered little monsters drilled their mouths into the holes, just like tons of zombie hands from a window . At the end, they were encircled by the raptors again. The more the raptors stepped forward, the more the three stepped backward. Eric kept throwing things to the raptors. Suddenly, the three bumped into the wall.

“If we were in Jurassic Park, then we would be saved by the T. Rex.” Eric whispered. Jack yelled at him, “In Jurassic Park, the people who didn’t die are the main characters. And now, we became the main characters and were encircled by raptors like what they did, but only the T. Rex had gone extinct!” “T. Rex had already gone extinct, but we can save ourselves, look!” The three boys looked backward. They realized that they had bumped

into the buddha they saw at the beginning. "Alright! That's the exit! Let's charge in 3!...2!...1!". They charged as fast as possible to the exit. They finally reached the exit and escaped the Mogao Grottoes no.493. "Quick! Block the door, so that no raptors can go out!"Max yelled and the three blocked the door. The raptors were still knocking on the door for a while and finally gave up. Everything became silent at the moment, just like at the beginning of the adventure.

"Arghh! We finally escaped from the cave, but now there are two more people lost.",Eric said exhaustingly. "What are you going to do now?", asked Jack. Suddenly, they heard something in the sky. Eric pointed to the sky,"Look there is a helicopter in the sky." Then there were tanks coming out from the woods. Someone reported,"Hey everyone, we found someone here." Jack, Max and Eric were finally rescued and took the helicopter home. "This was an exciting and thrilling adventure, wasn't it?"Jack asked. "Yes!"Max and Jack answered tiringly. Not for so long, Max and Eric slept. Jack stared at the window of the helicopter. Looking at it slowly leaving the Mogao Caves.

Back to normal life, as usual, during the rush hours, there were still traffic jams everywhere. Symphony of horns can still be heard anywhere. Jack was ordered to tidy up his storage room again. But this time, instead of finding another map, while walking to his van, Jack passed through a convenience store. He stared at the newspaper headline and bought it from the convenience store. He started reading the newspaper, "Three boys found in an undiscovered Mogao Grottoes. The United Nations sent explorers to the cave. Nearly 20 velociraptors were captured and now exhibited in the Edward's Zoological Park. The Number of Mogao Grottoes has risen to 493." After he got home, the telephone rang, "Hello, this the Cable TV, we've heard you had an adventure at cave no. 493, would you like to share your experience with us this afternoon during an interview?" "Yes!" Jack answered immediately. He stood up and changed suits. Then in the afternoon, Jack drove his van and went to the headquarters of Cable TV.

Mogao Grottoes

Shanghai Singapore International School, Kim, Yesung – 15

A misty mountain, where cloudy white fog covers the sky, and only the rustling sound of withered leaves fills the abnormally quiet atmosphere. The unexpected sound of eerie wind rends the silence and awakens the mountain. Suddenly, the fog covering the eyes preternaturally disappears, and the uncanny sight of an oddly spiky soaring structure slowly reveals itself. The breathtaking sight of the jagged cliff and the building presses the air down to deep underground. The vivid scarlet paintings on the pillars are peculiarly noticeable and the edge of the roofs are strangely sharp, as though the passing of time is not relevant in this place. A sudden clap of thunder makes the whole mountain shiver. A harsh rain starts pouring down and leads the way towards the spooky dark entrance.

A small handful of light is visible from far away. The damp air chokes the breath, and only the fragile sound of footsteps echoes in the dark cave. Entering a small door, an enormously big room full of ancient statues and drawings dignifies the atmosphere. The walls are full of grotesquely posing fairies with a background filled with deep red paints. The walls lead to a gigantic statue of Buddha with two indistinguishable creatures on each side of it. The left arm and the right hand of the statue are gone, like someone has stolen them, and hidden the missing pieces. Although the statue doesn't have well-defined features on its face, it feels like it is glaring straight at the unwelcome visitor. The room is quiet and deadly, like even a small ant couldn't survive there. A chill crawls along the spine, and the endless darkness blinds everything.

The tiny sound of a match striking breaks the darkness. A dim light from a small candle in a corner lightens a small cave. Moist air and a nauseous smell assault the nose. The cave is full of the evidence of someone's life, shredded by time: a squeaky old wooden table with a frozen drop of candle wax; worn out linen clothes piled up in the corner; and an old, ripped brown and white blanket beside it. The whole place is in a mess, like someone has left this place in a hurry. The walls are full of little drawings of Buddha, placed at regular intervals. Every single drawing stares out at the invader who has interrupted their silence. Beside the candle, a hard white object of unknown material is sticking out from the dirt. Getting rid of the dirt around it allows the unspecified material to be exposed to the air. A broken bone. A scratch caused by the digging allows dark red blood to drop on the dirt. A careful inspection of the cave reveals countless bones sticking out from the ground. The heavy atmosphere forces the invader to run from the darkness.

Grotesque paintings on the wall follow. Small statues under the paintings appear, one after another. The fear winds around the body like a snake. The sound of numberless footsteps running pierces the ear and echoes through the air, joined occasionally by the sound of screams and moans of pain. Nearing the exit, black hands from the walls try to seize the invader. The smell of blood clings to the marrow.

A light shines. The last step at the exit makes the whole body roll on the ground. Silence. The dull red paintings on the pillars are flaking off. The edges of the roofs are all broken down and specks of dust are piled upon them.

Time starts again.

The sun rises from behind the caves.

Lost In Time

Shanghai Singapore International School, Koh, Tian Ci Matthew Ian – 15

1980s, Jiuquan, Gansu province, China

“Why won’t the damn car work?”

“The famous explorer, Li Long, can’t even start a car”, a sarcastic voice uttered.

Li’s face turned beetroot red, “There’s a town not far ahead. We can rent some camels there”. After much grumbling, the team headed towards the town.

The walk was brutal. Miles of golden sand that stretched as far as the eye could see, was laid out like a carpet in front of them. The sizzling sun beat down, scorching everything in its path. Vultures perched on wilted tree branches, its beady eyes calculating, tracking every movement.

Eventually, the group reached the town of Jiuquan. They rented camels and slowly headed towards the new dig site, the Mogao mountains. The ride was silent, everyone absorbed in their own thoughts on what they’d find. As they approached the dusty site, the team eagerly entered the dark cavern with baited breath.

“Oh my...” Xu gasped. It was a marvel, so beautiful, an architectural wonder: high ceilings with magnificent carvings, enormous statues and busts and long twisting unexplored tunnels.

Suddenly, the cavern started shaking, its foundations creaking under the stress of the intruders.

“EARTHQUAKE!” someone yelled.

The reaction was instantaneous. Everyone ran for the exits, ducking and dodging boulders as they desperately tried to claw their way out of the cavern. Then, a huge chunk of the ceiling dropped, blocking the only path out. From the debris, the eyes of God Nv Wa bore deep into theirs, chilling them to the bones. A click of the torchlight snapped everyone back to reality. The cavern seemed more sinister in the dark, with shadows dancing on the walls and the wind howling down the dark path.

“Something’s here.” Xu said. A harsh scuttling sound made everyone shiver and confirmed what Xu had said.

“The radio doesn’t work.” whispered Yu as she tried to locate a signal.

“We have to find a place to stay for the night then,” Li said. The group walked towards the darkness, towards the heart of the cavern. They reached a large chamber when suddenly the torchlight flickered and the room went dark.

Li lit his oil lamp and soon the chamber was illuminated but...

They were surrounded!

Ice blue eyes pierced theirs, paralyzing fear emanated from them. Ghastly creatures leered at them; jagged teeth on full display, disjointed jaws locked in snarls and grotesque shapes hovered too close. The creatures encircled them evaporating any hope of escape.

Xu quickly drew her dagger but her arm was sliced into as the dagger slipped away into the darkness. Xu fell to the ground motionless.

“Our master wishes to see you.”

They were dragged deeper into the abyss. Their screams and cries lost. They were locked in a cage, made of obsidian, while the creatures prowled menacingly around. Hours later, they were shoved into a great chamber, with ceilings akin to that of a Roman Chapel...except...it wasn’t! The paintings screamed of war, destruction, and death. In the center of the room stood a foreboding throne, heavily decorated in shiny treasures.

“My lord, they have arrived.”

A commanding voice reverberated around the cold room. A dark figure stepped from the shadows. His face was a mangled mess, hard to distinguish its features but his deep black penetrating eyes bore into us. "Sit! Eat with me!" he commanded. Fear overwhelmed them but they knew not to question. The meal was surprisingly heavenly but the food stuck in their throats.

A deathly silence fell across the table. The power radiated from this beast as he said, "It's been a while since I last had guests." As he spoke, he gestured to the mummified bodies hanging from the walls. The sickening silence dug into their bodies as they trembled in terror. "Runnnnn!" Yu cried, before a deafening crash shook the ground again and everything went black.

"Come out from wherever you are," the beast bellowed. Li whispered to his team, "Go. I will try to distract him."

Fear.

That's what kept them racing through the long, twisted tunnels that led nowhere. Their futile cries of pain vibrated through the caves. A victorious roar permeated the air. The foul stench of death settled and crumbled into the dust retaining its secrets of another world.

The urban legend is that the cries can still be heard on that cursed day...on that fateful day of....

March 10th, 1981.

DejaVu

Shanghai Singapore International School, Lim, Ming Kang Ethan – 15

I felt a familiarity with the setting as I wandered through the Mogao Grottoes. The further I walked, the stronger the feeling grew. The scenery became increasingly familiar. I had never been here before, yet it was as if I knew this place like the back of my hand.

I was drawn to this place.

I was destined to come here.

The insides of the caves seemed to call me. As if in a trance, I glided in. Around were dozens of artworks presenting the Buddha in his various acts of virtue, his enlightenment. The closer I stepped to the wall, the more obvious the intricacies of the paintings became. The detail in the arms of the characters, in their expressions, in their proportions bore some significance. The whole place felt magical; a sense of something holy and sacred coursed through my body. I was a fish; baited and reeled in.

Some invisible force had compelled me to be here. I knew these paintings, I remembered them.

I touched the wall...

Suddenly, the world before began to wisp away, ripples in the air as if a stone had been tossed into water. I felt strangely calm, at peace, as the world reformed around me.

Everything seemed clearer; the paintings more prominent, the colours brighter. I retracted my hand from the wall, except this wasn't my hand! I looked down and my clothes were replaced with robes and my shoes with sandals. My body began to move on its own and my hand held a paintbrush. I skilfully moved the brush, a movement I had done a thousand times. My artistic freedom and my passion exploded as I painted another mural, another story. Bandits punished for crimes, healed and forgiven by the holy Buddha, enlightenment. I continued and soon the cave was covered in the very same paintings that had drawn me in.

Then, I spoke. An unfamiliar language came from my mouth yet I understood it perfectly. "This is it. This is the last one I will ever paint. Soon we will leave and never return."

Another melancholic voice echoed in the chamber, "But how can I leave? You have taught me so much?"

Tears dripped down my face. My heart ached. Why? Why? I had to leave now but even decades, centuries, or millennia later my soul would never forget." Reality returned. I dropped to my knees. I looked up at the paintings, my greatest works.

How many times have I returned?

Across lifetimes, I was always drawn back.

Reincarnation.

Enlightenment.

This my mission - I will continue your legacy. I know this to be true because I have done it before.

Déjà vu.

Mogao Grottoes

Shanghai Singapore International School, Nair, Megha – 15

Chapter 1

Mark.

"Abha?"

3:66 A.M.

A face shone. His smile kind, eyes gentle, and manners peaceful. However, his height offended Mark, and the carved swastika definitely worried him.

He had the secret to fix anything he said. An apprehensive expression came onto Mark's face.

"If it fixes global warming, I'll be damned."

"You're damned then," the golden man said.

"Excuse me?! First: how did you read my mind? Second; who're you?"

"It's written all over your face. And really? No clue?"

"No."

".... Buddha."

"Who?"

"Nevermind. I came to tell you something."

The man, Buddha, shrunk to Mark's 5'6" height.

"Woah... what's up?"

"You're ignorant-

"-Hey!

"And..."

A looming earthen entrance; grand, fitted luxuriously. Oriental? It resembled the ones in his father's albums. The cliff behind filled with little holes, with Chinese-like writing all around. He didn't know. It looked all the same to him. It might be Korean, Japanese or any language from the east.

A vortex; then a small room.

Inside the room was a glowing halo. The white-blue glow enchanted the room, making it ethereal. He was entranced. He grabbed the object and saw everything circle around him – No global warming, politics resolved, and his family – together.

Gone. He was facing Buddha again.

"What happened? What's that place? Is Trump permanently banned from Twitter?"

"You have no idea?"

"You really need to stop expecting me to know stuff. Give me a break, I barely passed social-studies."

"Aren't you able to read Mandarin?"

"No. Failed. Miserably."

"Aren't you Half Chinese?"

"No. Biologically yes; but no in terms of I am, MrWhomeve–

"Buddha"

"Yeah... Wait! You're the peace and love guy all the hippies and crystal-chakra worshipping people talk about!"

"I...have contributed more than... being a hippie patron my boy;

"Not that I'm aware of. Anyway, what's that place you showed me?"

"Finally, a valid question. The MoGao Grottoes."

"The what grotto? Ha, grotto. Sounds like some Ursula slang."*Imma take your voic-*"

"The MoGao Grottoes. It's an important cave. It served as a frontier city for the Silk Road. It's located in Northwestern China, right on the Border of Xinjiang and Gansu. Many wonderful treasures have been found; from murals portraying multiple ethnicities and the world's oldest book; the diamond sutra was found in there. Research the rest."

"Sutra?"

"Your ancestor found it."

"My ancestor?"

"Yes, my dear boy; he was the first to visit the grottoes in 366 A.D. I spoke to him like I speak to you now."

"Cool"

"Go to MoGao grottoes and retrieve the object. But beware; others want this treasure – the very same who you associate yourself with. The half of you."

"Okay.... Can I bring Abha with me?"

"Gladly, my dear boy. You obviously need help. "

A blinding light, so bright even the angels would fall.

Chapter 2

Mark P.O.V

Sheets. Fan.

"What happened last night?" The only person who knows everything is Abha. Well, it's more the fact that she can put up with me at 8 AM in the morning: a rare talent.

I get my phone; and Siri's recommendation is to call Abha. Well; Crookshanks. Heh.

The phone rings once. Usually, she takes five rings to pick up. Then again, it's six in the morning; the devil's hour. 3 AM – 4 AM rocks, that's my peak time. Does that mean I'm related to the devil? Maybe Abha will know. Two things to ask her. Well, she'll be up. She's the responsible one. Should be the one taking care of her dogs.

She must've thought it was an emergency because she actually picked up!

"Hello?"

"Heyyyyyyyyyyyyyy"

"What are you doing? Shouldn't you be sleeping another 100 hours?!"

"I have questions. And it's 4 hours."

"Fine. Ask your important questions."

" Am I related to the Devil?"

"Definitely. You're the biological kid of the devil. Your parent adopted you."

"I'll have you know I have an angelic mum. I don't know about the other one."

"Anything else?"

"Do you want go to the MoGao grotto?"

"The North-western-China silk-road city? The one where they found the Diamond Sutra?"

"Yes. I had a vision."

"Let's meet up in Amour Café at 11."

"But I need to sleep!"

A dead phone. Sigh.

Chapter 3

Mark P.O.V

I entered the shop; well café. Funny. Amour. Isn't that the French word for love? The language of romance. She could've chosen any other café. Perhaps...Oh wait; they have her favourite. So much for my dreams.

I order a Caesar Salad to start for Abha. Don't ask me why I know she loves it.

And in she comes!

Her hair sways as she walks, becoming a burnished golden as it hits the sunlight. Wait. What? Why am I noticing her hair? Or her beauty? Bad Mark. Don't think of friends that way. Why would she? I'm only 5'6'.

She grabs a newspaper from the rack; sits opposite me and starts reading about a politician's lover.

"Isn't it weird; that all this goes through like a knife through butter?"

"Huh?"

"Politician's lover is from the other side, this world is burning and the fact that you had a vision. It's all just so.. you."

"Welcome to my life. How may I help you?"

"What are the details?"

I quickly disclose all details I know; including 3:66 A.M.

"Wait, did you say 3:66 A.M.? but that's not possible.... I know! You were in a parallel universe, where Buddha could communicate with you! 366 A.D. is the year the cave was founded!"

"Huh. Smart. I keep forgetting his name."

"Buddha's?"

"Yeah."

She silently slowly rolled up the newspaper, while staring deep into my soul. Her eyes though, what a pretty shade of gree-

"OW!"

She whacked me with the paper.

"Idiot."

Anonymous P.O.V.

A beep. The Kumar girl's chip. Two. The Lee boy's chip.

The screen flashes: HEIR GOING TO GROTTOS

"Contact Mrs. Lee, she'll watch her son. CIA doesn't mess around"

"Also, contact Mrs. Kumar. MI6's boss wants to see this"

Chapter 4

Abha P.O.V.

The singing sand dunes were whistling ethereal tunes with the wind. The breeze caressed my soul, and the gentle peace was heavy. The particles of sand gently rose and all was quiet in this world. Ba would have loved to see this with me. Why can't he come home?

"ABHHHHHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA LET'S GO!"

I approached the human-megaphone and admired him for a second. Especially his eyes; like his dad's but with striking blue that seemed so... unreal. I liked that.

Security checked our names, Abha Kumar, and Mark Lee. As soon as we stepped into the caves Mark shivered and looked pale for a second. I asked him what had happened and he described it as a "cold wave of delight and fury – like Bellatrix Lestrange being freed from Azkaban." At least a furious Bellatrix is not Avada Kedavraing him.

Anonymous P.O.V.

I got a call from the British Library. The Diamond Sutra. It's lighting up and flashing; writing the same words in Sanskrit and Ancient Chinese repeatedly.

I sent for my translator.

Mrs. Kumar and Lee would be there soon. MI6 and CIA, working together to crush their own children. Heartless. Country over everything I suppose.

My phone rang, flashing with my translator's name.

"Ma'am, It's urgent! "

"What is it?"

"It says: "the heir has entered the cave, only they can seek it out."

"Oh no"

"What has happened?"

A chilling, sharp voice rang out. Her sharp features and cold green eyes swept across the room; focusing on me as though I were her target, and she the sniper.

"Ma'am, my apo-"

"Not genuine. The look of terror on your face betrays that. Fix your face and straighten up your tie!"

"I-"

"Shut your trap."

"Yes ma'am"

I was met with two icy glares before she turned and left. This would be a long night.

"Ma'am? What should we do about the Sutra?"

It was still on.

"Leave it, contact me if other ridiculous messages show."

"Yes Ma'am"

Mary Lee's P.O.V.

"So... " I turned to Yolanda. " How should we do this?"

"Send the agent... Both of us, to retrieve the object. In the meantime, have Selina infuse their food with Asya, make sure they aren't in their right mind. Same plan as last time"

"Perfect. Remember? Country above-."

"Everything."

Chapter 5

Selina P.O.V

The powder rested on my palm as I questioned my life choices. Was I really about to infuse Asya, a powerful hallucinogen, into their water? Possible side effects included insanity.

There!!! A leather satchel was resting near the side; beside the statue. I quickly took the canteen and threw it in.

Voices. Curse them.

Mark P.O.V.

We were walking through the caves; trying to find clues. I leaned into the wall. Ironically, she also leaned in and we bumped each other. Ouch. I pulled back, and I looked over. Her cheeks were pink, and it was cute. Wait. No. Gross.

"Look!"

"Huh?"

"Over there."

She pointed to the walls; painted over in luscious colours. It was fading. She pointed to a deity, with his figure blossoming out into a cloud. The cloud ended pointing to the right.

"That's just a deity."

"Wait" She started trying to find another sign. Kings, queens, gods and demigods adorned the walls. How would I know? Abha made me read a book about these caves. Said I shouldn't be totally clueless. Hmph.

She looked up and she seemed so innocent for once; I brushed the hair out of her face and took her hand, glancing at her red lips. I leaned in once more; only to be interrupted by a loud curse.

Mr Kumar P.O.V.

An emergency meeting. Funny. Why? The prime-minister sat facing me, with Gandhi's stare going right through me. How can a picture do that?

"You're aware that your daughter is in MoGao?"

"I was not. In fact, I'll go my-."

"You forget who you are talking to. The Chinese have been notified as well. Do you forget that your daughter's best friend is the only person with access to this object? CIA and MI6, remember?"

"Who am I going with?"

"Wang."

I froze. The last mission I had with the Chinese was with Wang... and Lee.

"I understand your history with him. if anything; that incident should further motivate you ensure this mission succeeds. You're dismissed. Gear up."

I saluted him and left, thinking. I had not even uttered a word to Wang since... Lee. How could I even face him?

What hurt more was that I was going to that same place it had happened.

"Kumar."

I turned around to see Wang. Speak of the Devil.

"I..."

"Tea?"

Abha P.O.V

The deities pointed west, so I went west; Mark walking behind me, lost.

"You sure?"

"It shows the apsara pointing west."

A dead end. The other sides the same. I went over and checked; the same apsara was there, facing the direction of a blank wall.

Hmm...

I gave the wall a push. It moved!

We entered an empty chamber. Empty that is, except for... shelves?

I ran my fingers over the back; hopelessly trying; hoping I wouldn't need to find old records.

I was about to give up, but I found a rough patch. Strange. Other parts were smooth; but this part was rough, even though it looked smooth.

" There's something. "

He came up and peered over, laying a hand on my shoulder. "Hm?" Not even a full word; but I knew him; it was a question.

"Feel this patch, do you feel the roughness?"

As soon as he placed his palm on the wall it collapsed away into another chamber. The chamber was dark, except for a bluish-white halo flashing.

Indiana Jones style.

Selina P.O.V

"All teams, ready." This was it.

Lee and Kumar were there as well, claiming it was " fitting to finish what we started"

We watched Kumar's daughter find it. When that Mark boy touched it, it collapsed.

Wait... How are they even thinking straight? I infused.....

"Selina. I thought you infused it."

"I did. Precise procedure."

"Punishment."

A quick cut. Bliss in the void.

Chapter 6

Mr Kumar P.O.V.

We reached the collapsed chamber. It seemed that Mark and Abha had passed through. MI6 and FBI. Dead. Shot.

Voices were arguing. Bingo.

Mark's P.O.V.

As I walked through, I thought I heard voices. A familiar one. I turned my head. Nothing.

"What's wrong?"

"I thought I heard... Never mind." I turned to a concerned Abha and suddenly we saw a sudden glow; like the one in my vision; the bright light.

The object glowed; enchantingly ethereal.

I had to reach out for the glow. I simply had to. As I reached out, the object dropped onto my hands. It was warm, turquoise, a beautiful mix. I tried to give it to Abha, but she yelped and pulled back.

"It burned me!"

"What? Why would it burn you?"

"Maybe since only you control it?"

A vision. A fair-headed woman dropping Asya into our water. But why hadn't it affected us? Is it because we're already crazy?

Chapter 7

"HANDS UP CIA!"

I looked over in disbelief. My mother. CIA. The woman who had raised me.

"Mom?"

"Mark, baby. Hand it over."

Instinct told me not to.

"No."

"What? Give. It."

"My dear child..." Her voice dropped to a dulcet but deadly whisper.

"Who raised you? Who loved you?"

A sharp click of heels sounded; it couldn't be. Aunty Yolanda. Y. Kumar. Abha's mom. My second mom. Her MI6 Badge was so piercing ; the Ice-Queen would surrender.

"You ignorant boy."

"Mum?"

Abha looked devastated; probably more than me.

"Abha, darling. Tell Mark to give it."

I'd never seen Abha so terrified.

"No."

"So be it. Mark" She turned her attention to me. "Do you know why your father's dead?"

What?

"Ahh. Mary never told you. May I?"

"Please"

"Your father, like you, is a descendent. We cannot open this cave. Our agencies had translated in the scriptures that the object that fixes everything lies here. We needed to find your father. Your mother was already married to him. Naturally, she chose country over family and shot him. Right here. "

"NO"

"Yes. Your father was a Chinese spy as well. Brave. Loved his country."

"And I'm about to repeat history. Yolanda, step aside."

She took out her gun, black. She clasped it and said, "I'm doing this out of love"

A shot.

Abha.

"Abha!"

Injured.

Chapter 8

"Mark, stay with m-"

"Abha. Protect the object. There's something I noticed. On the object, it says that if I die; the nearest person gets the power – stay near me."

"No, don't say that!"

"Use that power wisely; and remember, love you-"

Another shot.

Everything was spinning. Abha?

Screaming. Laughter.

Darkness.

"Abha Darkling, and for many a time, I have been half in love with easeful death. The other half: you. *John Keats. Ode to A Nightingale. Stanza 6. Lines 1.2.* I'm not dumb. Goodbye"

"MARK!"

Chapter 9

Abha P.O.V.

He was gone. What could I do?! WHY?!

I turned the object in my hands. Them. Our so-called mothers.

To fix anything.

"Make. Them. Pay. " I growled out.

Suddenly it glowed with powerful light.

"Granted."

Blood-curdling screams. Yolanda was writhing on the ground. Mary screamed, clawing at herself. Blood. Everywhere.

I picked up the gun; raising it towards them.

"Wait. It's not over."

Sunken gaunt faces stared up at me; pleading for forgiveness.

No.

A screeching light came through, burning the insides of the so-called mothers.

"Your strength, Ms Yolanda. Your loyalty, Ms Lee. Your finest quality. Let it be carved out of you."

A silver dagger materialized, hovering in the air. The handle was beautifully designed, with the dagger so sharp, it was perfect.

It swung itself to Yolanda, striking and slashing at her; blood splattering everywhere. Her head. Her soul. It was gone.

Suddenly, it turned to Mary and slowly backed her up against the wall. A quick jab into her head. Strength. Gone.

Mary slumped; eyes rolling, body on the floor. Yolanda peered up at me. "Please"

A shot. The gun felt warm and sticky on my hand.

"Abha!"

Chapter 10

"Are you okay?"

Dad. A man.

"Kumar, she's fine. She's a fighter."

"Stop making it sound like a cliché movie Wang."

My dad turned to me, "Where's Mark?"

I nodded my head at his body. Wang rushed over.

"He's still alive!"

What?

Wang placed an ear on his chest. "Coma; but alive. He's breathing regularly."

Oh. My. God. Thank. God.

"Yolanda and Mary?"

"Both alive, but... broken. They're just... soulless."

"Let's get you out of here"

The rest of the R.A.W and Chinese intelligence team came in, carrying Mark on a stretcher.

"He'll be ok."

Chapter 11

The TV was chattering away, Biden claiming "The CIA had no involvement whatsoever, at all. America is deeply sorry but bears no responsibility for the tragedy."

Even her majesty is saying the same.

Pathetic. I looked over at Mark's body. He is gonna kill me for using his TV.

Wang and dad came in.

"Hey, Kid-

There was a sound. The object.

"To revive Mark, you must take four steps. One. Ajanta. Two. Bezeklik. Three. Kailas. Four. Diamond sutra. Good luck. First code. 2:99 Ajanta. "

There goes my summer.

Mogao Grottoes

Shanghai Singapore International School, Navarro Yu, Alba – 15

The sky is somber and overcast. A ray of grey light cuts through the sky. Heavy yellow dust strangles me, and my foot shrinks into the dry, dirty sand every time I step on it. Endless stairs catch my breath. Looking at the caves from far away, they look like tiny ant holes in the cliff, covered with sand. Rocky hills line up along the grottoes like the myrmidons of a gangland.

“Dangerous” is written on the huge red signs beside the hills, warning people not to pass. These caves are sacred, deep holes that were once plain rocks and are now huge pieces of mysterious art works created by craftsman over 1,700 years ago. The layers of caves look like millions of huge mouths and the wood roofs look like teeth, trying to swallow me alive.

The moment I walk into the cave, a freezing cold breeze blows and goes through my bones, making me shiver. A puff of cool air rushes into my nostrils when I inhale. I sneeze.

It’s terrifyingly quiet in the cave. So quiet that you could hear a needle drop on to the floor.

Looking inside the dark and hollow cave, the end can’t be seen. Walls are painted red with greyish yellow, and in the center there sits a cross-legged Buddha, appreciating this dreadful silence. Across the pathway, numerous paintings of different Buddhas are worshiped for different purposes. Fresh oblations are placed on a plate in front of the huge statue. Apples, rice cakes, pears, all kinds of oblations. The ceiling is carved of thousands of Buddhas, looking down, staring at me. The more you look the stranger it gets, as though it is moving closer. The gloomy pathways, damp cave walls, and immense Buddhist statues adds creepiness to the grottoes. I hear footsteps but no one appears. My heart shrinks with fright. A cold snake climbs up my back, and my feet are nailed in place.

drip

drip

drip,

The water drips down from the ceiling, like an ancient clock reminding me it’s time to move on. The echoes of walls whispering and the wind singing continually comes to my ear. Standing lonely in the middle of the room, I walk quickly to the side and stagger out the cave, occasionally turning my head to look back. These mighty caves are filled with secrets that are waiting to be revealed.

The Mystery of the Mogao Caves

Shanghai Singapore International School, Phoon, Yue Ying Gretel – 16

The fog thickened. The cold worsened. The wailing of tortured souls intensified.

Then silence.

Something was coming...

If only, she had listened.

There were stories of people gone missing, of those who entered and never made it out...hundreds, disappearing forever in the Mogao Grottoes, a place of darkness and mystery. The tales warned about the dangers, the supernatural, the occult and then, there were tales that spoke of undiscovered treasures left by the pilgrims at the oasis near the Silk Road.

But those were just stories right... well that's what Tessa thought.

Tessa was in high school, an adventurer by heart who believed school limited her potential. She wanted to travel the world, go on risky and dangerous adventures. She was also stubborn and naïve, ignoring advice and insisting on doing things her way. Like everyone else, she was fascinated by tales of the Mogao Grottoes. The danger and the veil of mystery excited her as did the treasure. She was obsessed with being rich and having people worship her.

Naturally, Tessa convinced a group of her friends to join her quest. They flew to Dunhuang, a town in north-western China then took a bus to the site. From the outside, it was an ordinary Buddhist temple with a grey roof and brick red pillars built into the rocky mountain. It towered menacingly like a fortress which excited Tessa more. They raced inside and after many winding tunnels came into an adorned cavern. After digging around, Emily discovered hidden under the altar, a small door. It was sealed. There was a rusty old handle with strange inscriptions.

Slowly, they yanked at the handle. Nothing. Then after a vigorous second yank, the door creaked open...

Folds of darkness greeted them. Black, empty space surrounded them. The wall was icy cold and clammy.

Tessa flicked on her torch, shining it into the entrance. It barely illuminated a few meters ahead but she wasn't discouraged. She crawled in and her friends followed. A soft click, barely audible was heard. Little did they realise it was the door locking and trapping them in. Within a few minutes, the tunnel expanded and led to a cavern. The walls were a map of colours, decorated in murals which depicted religious stories from the past. Tessa felt as if she were in an art exhibition with thousands of years of history being revealed. She was overwhelmed. How could such a beautiful place be hidden beneath tons of rock. It had to be uncovered and shown to the world.

To her left was a statue of the Buddha, in all his glory, towering like a guardian. The stone statue was clean and dust-free which Tessa thought odd as this place was supposed to be closed off, unexplored. Anyway, she dismissed this and circled the cavern. There were several other statues, like the Buddha, all in pristine condition. As they moved to the back of the room, another tunnel beckoned. Its sloping path led them deeper and the air got colder. The ground became more slippery as it twisted sharply.

No one spoke.

The atmosphere turned to apprehension and anxiety as it felt creepy. They had walked for close to an hour and were exhausted. So, they decided to rest. After a while, the group started their trek again. Tessa took the lead. The ground suddenly turned into steps so they moved cautiously steadying themselves. They were tired and hungry. The tunnel opened into another smaller cavern with grey walls and a lower ceiling that slanted upward. A yellow hue fell on an empty altar. The same ancient language covered its base with markings that looked fresh instead of faded and old. It almost looked like a sacrificial altar.

A chill ran down Tessa's back.

Their unease grew as the group noticed a scroll of paper. With shaking hands, Carey opened it. "This isn't English," she muttered, "Let's move on." It was now darker. A cold wind raced in from the three adjoining tunnels. Each looked sinister and by now, the girls were all afraid. Taking a deep breath, Tessa headed towards the left tunnel, her friends following. Their weariness increased. The tension in the air was so palpable they could feel it in their bones.

Something was wrong!

They were being watched. They weren't alone. Another presence darker and more sinister was there!

A shrill sound pierced through the air. A heavy thud followed... a wild shriek and ...

Tessa whipped around...

Pools of fresh blood splattered the floor...the remainder of Emily...her dismembered head lay several meters away...her body contorted into a grotesque knot. Carey, Zoe and Cecil stood trembling, painted in blood, shell-shocked and pale.

Fear took over as Tessa yelled: "Guys go back! Go back to the cavern!"

Her friends turned just in time to see Casey yanked into the air. She screamed as she was lifted and thrown violently into the wall. She then floated up, her head limp and hanging, lifted by an invisible force. Suddenly, with another violent jerk, her limbs were ripped off, one by one, blood and flesh violating the walls and the floor.

The group screamed as if possessed and they ran...they didn't stop until they could run no more. They had just seen a slaughter scene in a movie come to real life. They were exhausted and drained with fear. This wasn't supposed to happen. The stories never mentioned slaughter or death. Tessa tried to push the horror from her mind but the screams penetrated her ears. She lost two friends today and could lose more.

It was all her fault...all her fault for asking them to come...all her fault for even thinking of coming.

A few hours later...

Tessa woke from her painful position on the floor. She immediately knew something was wrong. Where were the others? It was frightfully dark and the floor was cold and wet. She was alone, her torch and bag gone. Then she heard a sound in the distance...like the wailing of tortured souls. She felt unnatural cold bite deep into her flesh.

The fog thickened. The cold worsened. The wailing of tortured souls intensified.

Then silence.

Something was coming...

Papers were scattered on the desk like a pile of leaves. A cup of cold coffee sat at the edge. The twins were cramped in their seats tired and sweaty. Being an archaeologist wasn't easy. An anxious woman barged into the office. Her hair was a mess, her face puffy from crying and her clothes wrinkled. Chloe rushed to help her while Claire cleared a chair for her. The lady grabbed Chloe's arm and whimpered, "I need your help. My son Carter is somewhere in those caves. Please help me find him!" Her body was shaking and the dam in her eyes broke free.

They stood outside the sandy opening; backpacks filled with necessities. The wind caressed their faces, sand climbed into their shoes and tickled their toes. Chloe said, “Cave 285 – that was where he was seen last.” As they took their first footsteps in, the pungent smell of rot invaded their nostrils. The clicking of the flashlight echoed in the empty cave. Clots of brownish water covered the floor. They entered a small room which was littered with intricate drawings of gods, goddesses and their people hunting and trading. Further into the rabbit hole, the ceiling grew tall and the walls were fully covered with paintings and legends. The twins scurried around the statues, admiring the craftsmanship.

They didn't notice the wind blowing stronger.
They didn't notice the black tears dripping off the statues.
They don't notice the smell of blood congealing around the bust of cold stone.

But Claire was surrounded.

Claire grabs the book and runs.

Chloe had led the statues back into the high ceiling room. Facing the imposing columns, her heart beat as loud as a drum. Her breathing is ragged, her clothes covered in dirt, her faced caked in dust.

The statues booming steps shake the ground, mini earthquakes echo in the cave of horrors. Then, the shaking stops. The air becomes still. Chloe feels hot breath on her shoulder. She turns...slowly...

Nothing!

Relief escaped her.

She turns. Drip, drip, drip. Unknown black liquid...shark-like teeth.

She sprints again as fast as she can towards the entrance. The cave starts to collapse. Crumbling rocks bash against her slender frame but she makes it out. She spots Claire in the distance and they race towards each other....

Crack c r a c k Crackc r a c k
the ground splits in half.

A deep cackle resonates in the air.

The entrance to the cave is once again blocked by heavy boulders.

Mogao

Shanghai Singapore International School, Shen, Xinyi – 14

Salty and bitter, a bead of sweat the shape of raindrops moved down his cheek and to his mouth, until it is hidden in the lips.

It's the feverish and impetuous season of summer in Gansu, China. The gray sky is a jail, locking away freedom and joy. The air is warm and humid, overwhelming bodies with extreme thirst; such unbearable heat that even a small little wind is treated as treasure.

Jim is one of the millions of visitors to Mogao cave on the 17th of July. A 16-year-old Chinese boy, with inky dark – black hair, thin oval-shaped eyes and pale, narrow lips, staring at the sky through his scratched heavy black glasses.

Legs heavy, as though tied to a thousand kilograms of stone; every step in his dark- blue sneakers was torture. His back hurt under his oversized t-shirt and the massive bag stuffed with useless items. A new layer of sweat seemed to form between the follicles of his hair due to the stupid, ugly hat that *they* had forced him to wear. *To prevent sun burn*, they said. Chaotic rap music playing from his headphones, trying hard to cover the noise of the crowd: the cry of babies, the arguments of couples and the kids running around. The pandemonium surrounded him and felt like it would never stop.

The sun was directly above his head, so hot it felt like it could burn everything on the earth's surface. The heat was like a disease, spreading impatience to the visitors. It was now the third hour that Jim and his family had been walking.

"Ei mom, when are we going back?" asked Jim quietly.

"Oh, child. Going back? Stop giving me headache! We have so many more things to see before we go back!" answered his mom, disappointed.

"Stop calling me a child! Just stop, please!"

"Ei, that is not the way you should talk to your mom! Now pay attention to what that lady over there is introducing us to!" she snapped.

"Ah, wait. No, but...."

"Jim! Listen, as this is the last time I'm tell you this: you are no longer a little kid! Remember that you are here to learn! Isn't the ancient art and panting attractive and interesting? Now stop disappointing me and focus!" she said, turning away.

Jim sighed quietly; trying to find a position that could relax his back from the pain caused by the massive, heavy bag.

His mom turned back towards him. "Come here!" She dragged him aside from the crowd listening to the tour guide. "You are 16! I don't want to start an argument with you today!"

"No mom, I don't want to argue with you either, but I'm tired! In fact, I'm exhausted! I'm too tired to walk under this sun for another hour. I'm starving, dehydrated and the stupid noise from the crowd is giving me headache! I don't like this place either! it just looks like some random painting to me! I don't understand how it is so interesting to you guys. Can we go back now? I'm begging you! Please! Can we?"

Jim's dad glared angrily at Jim, "Marran, just leave him alone, come"

"Jim! Zhou Jing Shu! Stop speaking to us like that! If you won't be grateful for what you have - go! Go and do whatever you want.... I don't care! We do so many things and work so hard for you! I said I don't want to start an argument with you today!" She sighed. "Why are you still standing here? Go. Go and do whatever....."

Jim left.

"Marran, just leave him alone. He'll be alright, don't worry, come" said Jim's dad.

As Jim walked away from the crowd, there were fewer and fewer people around him. A fog crept in around him and the temperature suddenly dropped. A cold breeze, smelling of dust, mystery and pain, approached him. Even though it was summer, Jim was felt a chill run through his sweaty t- shirt and all the way through his body. Before Jim had time to cover his body with his hat, the wind pushed forward with renewed strength, trying to tear him to pieces. He tried to walk forward, but it stopped him from even moving a single step.

He tried to run away, but the storm pushed him back, trying to swallow him and break him down. Jim closed his eyes and prayed; he was terrified. Panic and uncertainty were surrounding him, just like the storm. He couldn't bear the coldness anymore.

Shout. Scream. Cry for help.

He apologized. He prayed.

The storm was merciless, beating him harder and harder. Jim tried to open his phone and call for help, but the phone was completely shut down and no matter how hard he tried, it wouldn't respond, as though a mysterious and powerful barrier was blocking him from the world.

The sun was hanging low above the horizon.

Jim had no idea how long it had been or what time it was, but it felt like hours had passed. His throat was burning from thirst and shouting. His limbs felt like they were frozen; colored purple and pink and hard to move. He stared hopelessly at the sky, but it was hidden behind dark storm clouds. He closed his eyes.

The next time he opened his eyes, he felt warmer, and it was easier to move. The air was calmer and more humid, as though he was deep underground, trapped in an unknown cave.

A massive, elegant piece of ancient painting was on the wall in front of Jim; gold, silver, and colorful paint still well preserved, like a photo of the past: vivid, lively, and attractive. It felt like it was trying drag him inside. He could see angels in colorful dresses, like from the religions of the past; so realistic that he almost felt they were just in front of him, flying, dancing and laughing with their silk dresses of dark green, red and deep sky blue.

The ancient...

"Ah, thank god I'm still alive!" Jim almost started weeping.

Suddenly, the golden paint on the wall glowed brighter, blinding him. A strange dark brown gas, smelling of smell of dust swallowed him and pulled him into the wall and.....

"Ai boy, wake up! Hey you alive?"

Unbearable pain tore through his body. His clothes were different, no longer a comfortable cotton t – shirt, but a tough, hard and sweaty cloth that hurt his skin; a hard shell that made breathing almost impossible. The smell of sweat, dust and blood was in the air. Jim's shoes were no longer his dark blue sneakers, but instead his feet were covered by multiple layers of cloth, squeezing and constricting them painfully. He felt something in his hand. Metal - and cold, which felt like a gift in the heat. The fingers of his other hand felt only sand, like touching the ground of a desert. Jim slowly and fearfully opened his eyes.

A battlefield?

"Ei boy, stop sleeping! Are you awake? We're all that is left, boy, you better wake up!"

Jim lurched upright, eyes wide and staring. In front of him lay rows upon rows of bodies, lying on the straggling weeds of the desert floor, still holding their weapons. Jim could clearly see their broken bodies; the arms, legs and blood. He'd never seen anybody dead before. His terror was rising.

He turned around. The Mogao caves. The pieces of art on huge, curved rocks. The paint on the rock so well-preserved, with not even a scratch on them. Like new. The artwork was like a photograph of the Chinese religion, spreading a mysterious and charm.

"Ei boy, what's wrong, can you talk?"

"Wait, wait, wait, what happened?" The voice dragged Jim back from those paintings on the wall. "Why am I here?" He was almost talking to himself. "What happened? Who are you? Do you know how to get back? Why

am I here right now?" Jim paused for a second. "Come on, please stop joking with me, please I really need to go back! Where is this place?" The old man stared at him in confusion.

"Are you okay? Well, it's already a month since the Qara Khanid army invaded Mogao from the northwest. They could come at us anytime, from anywhere. They are one of the most terrifying forces on earth... They are a group of savages who know nothing about civilization and will take everything they can from us! Only half of our forces are left. We don't have time to wait for you to remember why you are here!"

"Why don't you just run away?"

"Because ... it is our civilization, young boy! What's your name?"

"I'm Jim"

"Jim! You are here to defend; representing the strength of our armed forces; representing the protection of civilization. Do you know what is Mogao for?"

"No... I don't think I do."

"It was built many generations ago. I remember my mother sometimes telling me of my great – grandfather, who helped build this masterpiece in Mogao. She told me that it was the largest piece of art at the time. 1680 meters long. 492 caves. 45000 square meters painted with records of our ancient beliefs and life style. In those caves, 2400 ceramics figures with the most advanced color paints made by the best artisans were delicately placed. These caves are a masterpiece, combining architecture, painting and clay art into one and conveying the civilization, intelligence and creativity of our ancestors. The scale is unimaginable. Tremendous. Groups and groups of artists gathered to work on this piece, and one of them was my great – grandfather, who was such a great artist that he was one of those invited to contribute to this gorgeous piece of work..."

Jim listened quietly, patiently watching the old man's sagged face as he looked apprehensively towards the desert. He could sense quiet power and responsibility within the strong voice of the man in front of him. Somehow the determination in his voice comforted him.

"Mogao... Mogao holds our most precious treasure. The story of our civilization – Chinese, Indian, Greek and Islamic. It has our earliest record of human language and intelligence. It holds the books and literature of the Chinese, Sanskrit, Ancient Tibetan and many others. It is the center of international trade on the silk road, where countries exchange goods and communicate. It is a symbol of wealth, belief and power of our country."

Jim remained silent for another minute. His eyes expanded; he no longer stared at the desert in front of him. There had been a small change, so small that Jim didn't even realize at first. The surrounding turned brighter, bit by bit, and behind him, there was a delicate green glass, growing from the desert. The painted art on the rocks seemed to glow. He turned to the old man, trying to meet his eyes.

"Sir? May I ask what your name is?"

"Oh, my boy, just call me Lin."

"Mr. Lin, I know this place is very important, but there's no way we can defend it from them! We will all die!"

"Jim," the old man said slowly, looking at the painting on the rock behind them. "Civilization is worth dying to protect." He seemed to want to say more but paused and looked away trying to hold back the tears.

A few seconds later, the ground started trembling. First starting with a gentle vibration and then turning to flying dust, before the rough shape of the Qara Khanid army emerged from the desert. The Qara Khanid army gathered in the distance and Jim leaned forward trying to catch a glimpse of them. The Qara Khanid army wore dark armor, some running, and some are on horseback, yelling in a loud, unknown language. Jim could see the Qara Khanid army's shape. They were all men, tough and emotionless. As they approached, they seemed like a group of beasts hunting for precious food. Jealousy and greed seemed to pour out of their painted faces. They were like wolves, he thought, emerging from everywhere, trying to take everything. Jim heard loud, continuous laughter from the Qara Khanid army.

Jim stared at the advancing army, terrified. He could feel the sweat running down from his forehead to his cheek and a bolt of pain running from his feet right up to his scalp. Despite it being the middle of a summer day, his hands and legs were frozen. He shivered, unable to move, and gazed hopelessly at the sky. He wished that it was only a dream, his imagination. His mind drifted back to his life, his childhood, his favorite food, the places he always went to.

“Savages,” whispered the old man with hate, his eyes concentrating on the Qara Khanid army.

“Mr. Lin, please, where do we go? They are coming! Please, please help me Mr. Lin? Where do we go? Mr. Lin!”

Mr. Lin didn’t respond to him but continued staring at the Qara Khanid army. He stood up slowly, his fingers tightening around the metal spear he held.

He took a deep breath.

“My team! Get ready to fight! Get ready to sacrifice, sacrifice for our COUNTRY, sacrifice for CIVILISATION! NEVER FEAR DEATH!”

“NEVER FEAR DEATH!” the rest of the army shouted.

“Never fear Death!” bellowed Mr. Lin.

“NEVER FEAR DEATH!” the rest of the army repeated.

Jim turned to look at the soldiers. Their eyes were just like Mr. Lin's: filled with a sense of responsibility and duty. They looked at the Mogao cave with confidence and a true heart. They treated Mogao as their life. They would not fear death. They were ready to sacrifice themselves for the protection of civilization.

“Go away if you are a coward, Jim. Our army don’t need them! If you fear death then run for your life, but we all here for duty and honor! If you don’t feel that, then you should not be here!” Mr. Lin said while looking at Jim. “Make a decision, we don’t have much time, my boy.”

Jim thought for a short time. “Mr. Lin,” he said quietly, “civilization is worth dying to protect”. He looked back at the Qara Khanid army, but this time his eyes had changed, just like the other soldiers, with pride and determination.

“That’s my boy! Now get yourself ready. GET READY TO FIGHT!” Mr. Lin responded proudly.

Jim moved his legs and arms, stretched his arms and activated his muscles like a fighter. He pushed into the sand and stood upright, holding his iron spear with a red piece of cloth on it. He grasped it tightly and wiped the dust from him with his other hand, standing beside Mr. Lin. He raised his chin and braced his knees tight, ready and faithful under the blazing sun, facing the Qara Khanid army. His eyes concentrated and focused on the Qara Khanid army. He didn’t avert his eyes. He didn’t move around, he stayed steady; ready to protect and fight for the civilization stored behind him. Salty and bitter, a bead of sweat the shape of raindrops moved down his cheek and to his mouth, until it is hidden in the lips. This time, though, it felt different.

The sun was directly above their head.

“Ah, teenagers are always hard to communicate with!” Jim's mom complained.

“Oh, my dear, don’t stress. He never knows how to appreciate what he has.” responded by Jim’s dad.

Jim’s mom sighed and turned back, looking around the crowd. “Wait, wait! Do you see Jim?” she asked.

“Jim? He left?” he answered carelessly.

“Where is he? Come on, I didn’t do anything to him!” her hands grabbed at each other, trying to hide her panic.

“Don’t worry! He’s old enough to be alone for a while, just let him reflect on himself. Let’s move forward.” he said softly.

“Come everyone, look at this piece of art, you have to see this! This painting records the expressions of soldiers in the past. Look at their eyes! How could an artist depict such realistic and lively eyes? It is like a photo, don’t you

think? Look at this soldier, holding a metal spear with a red cloth, his knees straight and his feet steady. His chin is high.... and look at his eyes. We can see the belief and determination he has from his eyes. Soldiers like this deserve our thanks for protecting Mogao from invaders in the past, they were the protectors of our records, of our civilization itself. They saved us! They protected us! They....”

“Marran,” Jim’s dad dragged her to the front rows and spoke softly. ” Look at this. It looks a bit like our boy, doesn’t it?”

Mogao

Shanghai Singapore International School, Tan, Kai Sheng – 15

Pain.

Responsibility.

Acceptance.

“It’s gonna be fine, it’s gonna be fine,” I smiled. My voice gradually faded.

A tear drop dragged down her cheek. It fell.

“Splash”.

Split into million droplets, and sank into the concrete. She whimpered, “No. Don’t! There’s gotta be anoth-”

Existence turned blank. Alternating black and white, unclear. The restart of the Yin Yang, swirled and rewound. Even though the Yin, dark swirl, shadows and femininity, and the Yang, light swirl, brightness, passion, and growth, have returned, it will not and will never be the same. This isn’t the most ideal way to end the story but I knew it must be done.

The familiar scent of burning joss sticks tickled my skin, entered my lungs, and warmed my soul. It was a typical day of praying in the temple. As grandpa said, for each Buddha we respectfully pray for peace, education, and protection. I’ve always considered myself as a beginner Buddhist, if that make any sense. The mantras grandfather cast, open the entrance to the world of gods. Normally the gods enter our world as one’s body (most of the time grandfather’s body) to repair our faults. Compared to me, that’s a whole new level. Since I was young, I was taught a fundamental mantra from him: “*na-mo-ami-to-fo*”. That mantra annihilates discomfort. I was scared of the dark, so I used it whenever I went to bed. The mantra would be read and sang in one’s mind, over and over again, like an anthem. I wasn’t sure how it worked but I knew that my belief made it somewhat real.

I joined the line opposite the statue of Buddha and waited for my turn to pray. My joss sticks shivered in the wind. Several flints sank in the thick air. As usual, I dodged before these lava flakes landed on my skin. Whenever Buddha stared into my eyes I felt protected. Protected from the rain or the sun, like using an umbrella.

My turn came. Grandfather kneeled next to me and prayed out loud. I knew I should memorize the chant, but its importance wasn’t too high in my opinion. The good words would then be heard by god through insertion of joss sticks into the bowl of cold, dull ash.

“You know what Logan, I’m bringing you to somewhere special. Somewhere you’ve never been before. It has got great history there which might benefit you,” said grandpa

“Sure. Where are we going?” I replied politely

“The Mogao Grottoes.”

“Oh, the place with myths of supernatural items and large sculptures of Buddha?”

“History, not myths. But yes. We shall explore the grand art of Buddhism and maybe take some photos for my photo album as well”

“Sure.”

We sat in the car and took the one-hour drive to Mogao. Grandpa’s Benz E320 had almost reached 30 years of age, but it looked as if it had been polished countless times. The metallic layers reflected each molecule of light, blinding visibility. The windows were so transparent it was almost as though there were no windows. Grandpa’s car always had a distinct smell. It was the smell of refreshment, a mixture of mint and Pandan.

The sight of numerous people covered the scene of the gods. Infinite faces, suffocated air. We arrived. I fell. A stranger had run and crashed into me, I assumed. He was so fast; I didn't get a look at his appearance but from a distance he looked like a splash of blurry blue. Soon, I didn't think much about what had happened.

A few minutes later there was noise, lots of noise, triggered against my ear drum. It wasn't the voices of people talking, or voices praying. It stopped, but then eventually the voices appeared again and again, increasing in volume each and every time. Almost like a speaker, played at full volume, placed directly to my ear.

"Aghhhhhh!" I cried

Grandpa, tourist, Buddha all gone. A black out. At first, I thought it was a hallucination, but the pain felt real. I woke up, still lying down, ears hurting and found a suitcase grasped in my hand. No, not a suitcase: a book. It wasn't just a normal book either. The cover was the color of plum, and the pages looked rusty. I swiped away a layer of dust, and, curious, opened the book.

It seemed blank, with only a few hieroglyphics on one of the pages.

Confused, I looked up from the book.

"Woah."

Plants filled the box of the world. Orange warmth sealed every edge. A tall infrastructure swam through clouds. Transportation was flying, like birds. People dressed strangely, like they were cosplaying as one of the gods in the temple. Most of them showed great skill in martial arts.

Grandpa was still missing. I was alone but mesmerized by the unique scenery. A feeling of agitation and disorientation slowly came upon me.

"Where and how?" I asked myself.

Then, I was...

Smacked. Fainted.

Robbed in a way. My book was gone and I appeared to be in an empty room. There was a lamp above me, swinging back and forth, with water-stained walls all around me. My hands were sweating, but I wasn't exactly afraid.

A girl sat in front of me holding the purple book. She had watery azure eyes. Her hair was tied up in waves of dark color with a slight tint of brown. Her smooth skin tone was faintly tanner than mine and she had a symbol tattooed on one of her wrists, in the shape of a droplet of water.

"How did you get this book?" she asked.

"I don't actually kn-"

"It's a book we've been trying to find for years and it's in your hand. Do you even know what this book can do or how it even works? And also, you seem kinda odd."

I hesitated. I wasn't sure how to reply. "Slow down. First of all, I have no idea how I got that book and know nothing whatsoever about what it does. I don't even know where I am, how I got here and what this place is. Second... odd?"

She stopped talking for a moment, thinking. "There's no way."

"No way what?"

“I was once told that Budham wasn’t the perfect place for our existence. Every once in 90 years a glitch forms a bridge between the two worlds, mortal and immortal. A random person, a ‘chosen one’, will cross from Earth’s Mogao Grottoes to Budham through extreme high frequency vibration of pure speed. The reason for the name “chosen one” is due to the person’s religion and the ability to handle the velocity. I was told that consequences may occur to, human, as that glitch might cause big problems.”

I recalled the disgusting noise I’d heard earlier. “So, you are saying, that I’m not on earth, you’re an immortal, everyone is Buddha and god here, and I’m the one cosplaying.”

“Sure.”

“Funny.”

“I’m Aria,” she said, requesting a handshake.

“Logan.” Received and accepted the handshake.

I half believed her as the knowledge that I’d obtained on Earth told me that this was definitely not science.

“Yanno, I think we better get going, as the consequence I mentioned isn’t gonna be great,” Aria warned.

My heart jumped a beat. “Ok.”

“Wanna head for lunch first?”

“Ok.”

I was shaking, just a little. Probably due to hunger, and the lack of knowledge of this place I told myself. I missed grandpa and could not wait to tell him that I had literally been in heaven, meeting an immortal god of... water?

“So, this place seems to be more... developed... than Earth?” I asked

“Yep. In fact, our development economically, environmentally and socially is two times faster than earth.”

“The restaurant we are going to; do you guys eat like, us, like humans?”

She giggled. “Well, in the central area, most people eat using higher technologies. But surrounding that area there are still traditional restaurants”

“I see. Oh and, if this, Budham, heaven place, is actually where gods live, then do I actually get to see Monkey King?”

“Uh, Monkey King is more like a famous figure, in your words, celebrity. Which means we don’t normally get to see him”

“Woah. Ok.”

We went to the restaurant, sat down, ate, and chatted. The food was nice, people and service there just like earth.

“How’s the noodles?” Aria asked

“Appetizing.”

“Mhm, good to know. My mom used to bring me to this noodle shop every afternoon. But she-”

Aria felt uncomfortable, I could tell.

“She died,” Aria continued.

“Oh, I’m very sorry.” I didn’t want to ask for more details, but I was realising that this meant that even heaven was imperfect.

“It’s fine. I should be getting over that by now,” she replied.

“I didn’t get to know both of my parents either. I was an orphan. Grandpa raised me.”

“Ah,” Aria nodded.

“I feel that he’s kinda worried about me right now,” I mentioned.

“Your Grandpa? Nah. When the glitch occurs, time on earth is stationary.”

“Oh, that’s nice,” I replied with relief.

I eventually got to understand more about Aria. People in Budham can conjure a variety of elements or mantras for self-protection. It’s also a preparation for anything negative that might happen in Budham. Aria was trained to be warrior. Her mother, Aqua, dominated the sea, ocean, lakes and rivers, which caused Aria to inherit that element. However, Aria did not know the procedure to cast as the symbol on her wrist remained pale.

After a while, she stopped talking and just stared at me. I stared back at her, feeling a weird temptation to touch her rippled hair, but I was motionless, hypnotized by her eyes.

Awkwardly I said, “I like your hair?”

She smiled, “Sure. Your style is kinda cool too. We should get this thing over with asap”

Yes, I had a crush on her. She may or may not have had a crush on me, but right then I wished for that moment in my life to never end.

She texted Master Achin, her master, to enlighten us about the *glitch*. He was very calm, sat on a cloud, as he glided into the restaurant. He wore a monk-like uniform with shiny brown leather shoes. His white moustache drooled from above his mouth like a waterfall. The fire symbol on his head glittered in my eyes. He wasn’t old, perhaps between 40 and 50.

“You must be Logan, I suppose,” he said formally.

“Ah, Master Achin.” I replied. I placed my two hands together and started doing the praying gesture.

“Oh, Mister Logan, we don’t do that here.”

Embarrassed, I said “Haha, my bad.”

“Mister Logan, there is no easy way to say this but you are holding a very big responsibility for both of our worlds,” he declared

“Uh-”

“The consequence is stated in this book,” said Master Achin receiving a book from Aria. “I can tell you two can’t read these hieroglyphics. I will translate. These words are words from *The Main*, to apprise the following society of gods for the glitch.” He then translated “Awaken of Ramsdell, stimulate by bridge of dimensions. Ramsdell’s apocalypse occurs, both worlds fall-”

“One must die to save both worlds?” Aria interrupted

“No. Logan doesn’t die. Even though he gets killed by Ramsdell, he just acts as a restart button, memories of the present, will be erased and he will be sent back to Earth instantly.”

Aria seemed disappointed and I was upset. Obviously, I knew it was the only way to bring the world harmony but... Aria? I loved her. It had been no time at all, but I knew I loved her.

The time had come and gone too quickly. Ramsdell had already destroyed more than half of Buddham. I walked outside of the restaurant and stood against that monster. His shadows covered the clouds, his body made of pitch-black smoke. Glowing red eyes glared at me.

“Logan, you don’t have to do this. Maybe there’s another way!” she cried. Her hands reached out and grasped mine.

“Aria, I’m scared too. But this is the only way.”

“I think I love you”. I slowly released her hands.

Even if my memories of Aria and heaven and her of me are erased, her name still remains deep, deep down. I have learnt that a simple mantra doesn’t cure discomfort. What does is for a person to understand the true meaning of pain, responsibility and acceptance.

Portraits of Pages in Time

Singapore International School, Chen-June, Kee Fay – 14

The statue was supposed to occupy the entire upper atmosphere, a shining monument to a bygone civilisation.

Now, having barely entered third stage construction, it has already surpassed the initial blueprints by the size of a small star system. Not even each singular page, of which the statue has thousands, can fit within a mesosphere, and every word on the page colonises a not insignificant plot of space estate.

... a giant statue of a book that from any reasonable distance would be no more than a featureless wall, and yet it continues ceaselessly expanding across the universe.

Whole cities have been swallowed, worlds razed for resources, but the Architects pay little attention to such trivialities — the statue must grow, dogma can't be contained.

Maybe, as the lead Architect ponders the forbidden question, maybe the statue is only so gargantuan, for then after everything is said and done and sacrificed in the name of the tome, nobody would dare to ask if there was any point to it at all.

1897 - To the Fatherland (From the Memories of a Missionary)

I like the sea, the tumultuous waves, the pellucid waters, the sea serpents, and the neon leviathan. It reminds me of home and whatever that entails, for home is as nebulous a concept as the ocean is vast.

For centuries, humanity has scraped at the edges of home, affixing borders and prescribing perimeters to no avail, like how land attempts to bound the infinite. But of course, there are always leaks, crevices from which water may escape; no walls, no mountains, no continents that do not sway under the weight of the sea.

Twenty-six years ago, the enfeebled Germanic navy sent their flagship on an expedition to the Orient. Despite the heavy damage it sustained during the Coalition Wars and naval experts vehemently advising the contrary, the Fatherland was eager to stake its claim to a slice of the rapidly dividing pie.

And so the crew of sixty-six embarked on a clandestine voyage to broaden the undefined definition of home, the sole parameters of which were a wax effigy of the then recently coronated Kaiser hauled onboard. Every noon, they prayed at his feet and kissed his melting fingers, hoping that dedication to state and divinity would return blessings for their decrepit vessel.

Momentarily, their pleas were heard, until one dawn, the hull, unable to withstand the mass of the effigy, gave way, dooming the crew to a watery grave.

The one saving grace of the whole kerfuffle is the introduction of a new fleet of warships, on which I am currently sailing towards Manchuria. Should wind conditions remain constant, I expect to reach port in three days, from where I shall journey to the northernmost frontier, an uncharted realm pining for a god.

1898 - The Outsider (From the Memories of a Local Farmhand)

A strange man arrived today, one of skin paler than the moon and whose nose terminates in a fishhook curl. I had heard of such people in distantly remembered legends and nocturnes, of worlds beyond my own, populated by abodes that breathe fumes and fireworks that release torrents of tear-shaped lead.

But most importantly — and perhaps this is the only tale not augmented by my imagination, distorted through the imperfect lens of memory — they are the peach-white shapers of dreams in the mad ramblings of befogged men, long since gone over the edge. For when they return from the smoke-addled dens, hands grasping erratically at invisible apparitions in the sky, reality is no longer enough.

How can one return to shovelling dung after receiving a taste of wonderland?

Dreams, in their intangible mass of hopes and aspirations, recounts and reflections, tint the real. And when they enter the amorphous space termed the mind's eye, promising adventure and heroism and a thousand worlds within

the palms of my hands, they leave behind an empty nothingness — a cavern carved from the realisation that I have whittled away my life on a pathetic existence, toiling day-in-day-out on a nameless farm.

A deep yearning for what could be juxtaposed against the hard truth of what is.

For I am bound to this place which I call home; despite the pointlessness and the boredom, it offers the sanctity of the familiar. Yet all the while, the nagging voice of dreams haunts me. And so I am caught between two worlds, frozen in indecision, craving the sweet reprieve of death.

Interlude - The Tree

Past the recursive rows of white picket fences, past the endless expanse of oceans engulfing the horizon, past the labyrinths of diverging paths and trails never travelled, at the end of time itself, stands a tree.

It is a tall tree of great girth; its trunk pockmarked with the scars of amputated limbs, a history of millennia's worth of branches that waxed and waned and perished. Its roots date back before the first living thing drew breath, and its flowers shall continue to bloom when humans are mere fleeting memories, forgotten specks on the cosmic timescale.

Arrayed around it is a forest of past trees, lingering spectres unable or unwilling to cross the threshold of the hereafter. Their husks litter the barren wasteland, silhouettes outstretched at the sky, each gnarly finger futilely attempting to grasp the transcendent and the abstract. Every leaf, preserved by the cold of space, glitters in the future's facsimile of the sun like the stars once did, only brighter — blindingly so.

And in this heath of pure light, reflected and refracted through the graveyard of everything that has been and will be, is the tree. Many trees had preceded it; none shall succeed it. Aeons ago, the trees used to reproduce and die as any other organism would, their passing sending ripples through reality, upheaving the status quo, cleaning the plate for another epoch.

But something had changed in the intermittent years — life gained sentience and memory, memories of the past that they used as a key to parse meaning from the meaningless present. Expectantly, perhaps inevitably, overwhelming apophenia forced the random, often contradictory, world into neat categories and false patterns modelled on the outdated notions of yore.

... the new reduced to a mirror of the old, a perversion of the progression of time.

As above so below; the cycle of death and new beginnings stalled to stagnation. Occasionally, branches wither and fall, minor disruptions to single lineages, insignificant cosmetic updates in the grand scheme of the universe. For the current tree, archaic and diseased as it is, shall last into eternity, sustained by cancerous life born from nostalgia, a living archive of ancient sins.

It is the tree planted in the abyss at the centre of all things, and it is forever.

1899 - The Stranger (From the Memories of a Missionary)

There is a hole at the heart of everything. It is incorporeal, beyond sight, smell, and touch. Sometimes I even doubt its existence, believing it to be one huge, philosophical jest. But on the rainy days, I feel its gnawing presence and the insolvable absence it entails.

Pathetically, I endeavoured to fill the hole with faith, pave over all pain with the promise of cosmic transcendence. It all feels so empty in retrospect — empty words regurgitated in the empty, cavernous halls, words that briefly reverberate in the still air, hang before the windows overlooking a dreary, desolate town, then dissolve into cold and dust, leaving echoes and shadows drowned out by the deafening silence.

I am here. I am not sad.

It has become routine to utter those words in the evening, as is repeating the same joke to myself. The mirth I experienced upon first hearing had long subsided, but the joke persisted. I don't know why I keep coming back to it; just another of the habits and traditions we all partake in, masked with reverence to hide the emptiness.

The joke as I tell it goes something like this: *Two fish are swimming in an aquarium, and they meet an older fish, who says, "Morning boys, the moat shrunk again." And the two fish turn around, swim on for a bit, and eventually, one of them says, "What moat? This is the bloody ocean!"*

1900 - Queen of a Mourning (From a Dearth of Memories)

The night has barely lifted its wintry veil, and the dewdrops of despair have already condensed on the autumn leaves. Hands resting on her stomach, fingers mating in an x-formation, is a young girl, south of eight. She is lying on the plank which is her bed; her neck craned unnaturally over the lumpy, rigid mass of her pillow, eyes open, pupils dilated, staring at the space betwixt self and ceiling.

Shapes begin to crystalise in the pitch-black pits of her irises — swirling colours in the rough approximation of a man, caparisoned in a flowing black robe with a face etched from pure marble. She exhales. Haloes of smoke spiral out of the opening between her pursed lips, vortexing in midair, dancing around the ethereal figure, smothering what little detail there was.

Dully, she observes the dissipation of the vapour, how each ring lasts a mere few seconds before vanishing without a trace, replaced by an identical copy hurtling towards the same inescapable fate. She finds comfort in their transience.

To her owner, she is a most desirable nymphet. Every feature is intricately sculpted, radiant yet subdued, distinctive yet understated, strong yet elegant. But her skin had developed a ghostly pallor, and her body is a catalogue of injuries, a testament to a half-decade of maltreatment.

She rises to her feet and ambles to the windowsill, leaving behind a trail of blood trickling down from a gash in her cheek. The pitter-patter of crimson droplets punctuates her muffled footsteps — like rain on a cold winter's morn — staining the wood-panelled floor with splotches of deepest maroon. She disregards the pain, lost in inner monologue.

A capricious thing memory is, she thinks. However much she tries, she cannot remember a time when she didn't live on borrowed floors, a property of voyeuristic, lumbering, callous others who perceive her as a prize to be tamed, possessed, exploited, and abused. Naively, she reckons that she must have once known the comfort of home before she was ripped into the cold and the dark, but her recollections are an empty void. Even her name eludes her.

She is jolted from rumination by the moist touch of the window frame, the ornate oak infested with moss and mould from years of neglect. Currently, it buckles under the mass of the girl, balanced precariously atop its bottom ledge, trembling arms extended to near-dislocation, hands gripping the sides till her knuckles turn white.

Trepidatiously, she adjusts the arc of her neck, turning to face the outside world, momentarily blinded by streaks of light that penetrate the curtains of darkness, her left temple mottled by the rising sun.

From her vantage point perched on the second floor of a palatial mansion, she has an unobstructed view of the surrounding topography. In the distance, there are rolling hills draped with lush pastures and meadows of blooming flowers, but she no more than pays them a passing glance. She is, instead, preoccupied with the barbed structure that is the front gate encircling the whole estate, itself guarded by a moat six feet in diameter. Were she to make the jump, leap over the objects of her imprisonment, she would be free. What she will do afterwards, she does not know.

Not that it matters, not presently not evermore, for her decision has been made. She closes her eyes and takes a leap of faith.

1900 - I Am Here (From the Dreams of a Missionary and a Farmhand)

It is evening in the northernmost frontier of China. The landscape is harsh and ragged, terminating in a cliff edge, which through alternating layers of mud and sediment, reveals the passage of aeons and millennia. Below the plateau is an oasis, incongruous with the circumambient desert, yet even its deciduous plants are weathered and of muted tones, leaves huddled against the central stem, bracing from the sting of the blustery gale. And the desert unfurls in all directions, forever.

... an omen of certain death that from any reasonable distance would be no more than a featureless expanse of nothingness...

And still, a stubborn remnant of life continues to crawl inexorably across the wasteland, a speck in an ocean of sand. He stumbles and sways, thin struts of legs barely supporting an emaciated body, a fragile being in an unforgiving

environment. His destination is a pagoda carved into the rockface, an entrance to a library unlike any other — an archive of ancient sins and wonders and art.

He is unsure if he will ever reach the prophesied grotto. He is unsure if he will live to see another sunset. He is unsure if the girl in the moat who entrusted him with her dying wish was flesh and not a mirage. Somewhere, unnamable, unknowable, he loses consciousness, drowning out the cacophony of reality, drifting aimlessly in the realm of dreams.

He awakens in a cavernous room, plastered floor-to-high-ceiling with paintings and symbols and mosaics. There are murals of buddhas on lotus thrones, abstract streaks of royal blue and red, intricate patterns nestled in parabolic arches. Every inch of every wall is doused in psychedelic colours, collectively screaming for his undivided attention; a kaleidoscope that won't stop spinning. His eyes flit around the chamber, disoriented and dizzy, before finally settling on the centrepiece, which, though more subdued in its hue, commands attention with sheer size alone.

It is a giant statue of a buddha moulded from the finest bronze, oppressive in their grandiosity. At eye level, only the lower body can be contained within the field of view — legs crossed, hands reposed on their respective knee, palms upturned to the sky.

“I wonder what they're thinking?”

Standing immediately adjacent to the statue is a farmhand of no specific sex; androgenous, of surreal beauty and perfection. They stare up at the buddha's face, engraved with an expression that is stern but not unkind, scrutinising their enigmatic countenance.

“Glorious, aren't they?”

“For finite beings, the infinite we contemplate is nonetheless gorgeous,” the missionary joins the farmhand by their side, “I don't remember Him looking like this. There's normally a beard, or He's a trinity of circles.”

“No,” the farmhand cracks a supercilious grin, “They aren't your God. Just a god, no more, no less for it.”

“We revere the divine, but we know nothing of it. Only the mad scrawlings of blind men at the edges of the cosmic canvas. And so we deceive ourselves, claim that we do know, claim that we always knew, look to the romantic ideal of a past that never was; build societies, demarcate norms and traditions on dreams of yesteryear, however problematic they may be.”

“Dreams. Memories. The joys of creation,” the farmhand draws a pen and paper from their coat, “Stories. Something that will outlast us, for better and for worse.”

In cursive letters, they scribe the first words of the manuscript — *Portraits of Pages in Time*.

The End - Portraits of Pages in Zoetropes

There is a sound resonating in the abyss at the heart of everything. It began as a quiet rumbling, indiscernible against the whistle of the wind which blows in the heath, but it has since crescendoed to an ear-piercing screech of snapping roots and creaking stems, a harbinger for the impossibility to come.

1900. A girl lies in a moat. Her peripheral vision is consumed by odiferous walls of concrete, the sliver in-between occupied by a ribbon of sky. She wearily watches the clouds go by. Her spine was severed by the fall, and a fatal stab wound adorns her abdomen. She is not afraid, or so she tells herself, she is free.

Blink, and a man in ruby raiment fills her field of view, peering down at her, grimace forced into an ersatz smile, desperately attempting to appear reassuring.

“It doesn't look too bad,” hands gesticulating at her bloodied torso, “Saw your father greeting the new girl —”

Irritably, she cuts him off, “Tell the monster my congratulations on a swift replacement. At least I don't have to marry his son anymore, as is customary. Groom bought from childhood, slave of a wife.”

She exhales, each breath an arduous undertaking, “What awaits beyond the shadowy veil? God? No. God is a force of nature, possibly time itself, a library of history — an ouroboros cannibalising its tail,” she coughs, “Would you do me a favour? A grotto north of here piqued my interest a couple years back. Never got to visit; never will...”

She closes her eyes, addressing no one in particular except perhaps the endless dark, “Once upon a time, there was a girl who lived with caring parents and grew up happily without worries. No more than a dream.”

In the moat, which is her grave, she is swallowed by the hole in things.

Various events transpire in the next millennium. The Mogao Grottoes become a popular tourist site. An elderly janitor falls in love with a statue of a buddha housed within. Six world wars are fought; some over religion, one over the ancestral fishing rights of trawlers in the Atlantic. Humanity is extinguished by rocket-propelled asteroids, the twenty-eighth century’s interpretation of Mutually Assured Destruction. A probe from the alien civilisation of the Architects retrieves the last surviving artefact on Earth — a book titled *Portraits of Pages in Time*, which they worship as divine incarnate.

And the tree falls in the ghost forest of everything that has been and will be, a magnificent waterfall of crashing leaves and tumbling branches, all cascading towards the mirror floor of the universe. Its impact makes no sound, silent as the waves.

An identical tree will sprout in its place.

The illusion of change is preserved.

Mogao Caves

Singapore International School, Chan, Yuk Lui Yaron - 15

autumn, 2018

Escape.

She desperately needed escape, freedom, closure. Her heart craved silence, impossible to be found in an ever-bustling city.

Her gaze sweeps over the panoramic view of Shanghai's complete skyline, nose involuntarily wrinkling at the shreds of traffic and chatter of the city that managed to slide their way past the soundproof windows. All she could see was black business folders and black panelled offices and black... Black eyes, void of any life. Black winters, scavenging for food. Black nights, threatening to swallow her alive.

Her eyes drift to the waning moon, moonbeams lost in the glow of neon lights. She continued staring, searching the smog-filled sky for some sign... brightness streaks across the sky momentarily, a temporary spark in the darkness. She wished for closure from the dog-eat-dog conglomerate world. She captured the brief flicker in her heart, yearning to stretch it over the loom of another world, weaving vivid colours into the tapestry of dreams.

Pale moonlight drenches her room as she struggles to free herself from the clutches of yet another nightmare. Her sleep-deprived mind, clouded by black, tormenting images one after another, scrabbles for a grasp on reality. Groaning, she slowly hauls herself up from the lumpy mattress, gazing unseeingly at the Buddha mural on the stark wall.

The moonlight fades, giving away to blushing smears of red, dancing across the sky, casting shadows under the bed, illuminating the stark room. A kasaya-clad monk knocks on the door, a stretch of beige burlap carefully folded over his arm. Apparently, her designer clothing was too frivolous for the Dunhuang monastery. She shrugged her shoulders in bemusement, and dons the coarse clothes. Why not try to fit in and experience the local's different culture? A small smile stretched across the monk's face when he reappeared with a roughly hewn stone plate heaped with steamed buns.

She carefully weaved her way through the ten thousand Buddha miniatures on the monastery floor, the candlelit halls of worship giving away to the open, revealing the endless expanse of sand dunes, stretching across the horizon.

She had been wandering for hours on end, weaving through the seemingly endless maze of tunnels. Trying to *walk off the stress*, as her late mother would say, a knowing twinkle in her eyes. She was still trying to understand the phrase, turning it over and over in her head. Her feet ached. Yet, she continued, in the damp torchlit tunnels.

Claustrophobic shafts interwoven into a tightly twisted knot underground. Oil lights burning low in their sconces cast eerie, long shadows on the rough mud floors. *Even if I died here I bet no one would notice.* Grim thoughts crossed her mind. Of course, like the out-of-my-mind person she was, she laughed, the sinister sound bouncing off narrow walls.

She stumbled through a wine-red threshold that opened to a spacious cavern. At the far end of the room, a Buddha statue, tall and imposing, towered thirteen feet above her. Legs crossed, upturned palms lightly resting on its knees, an eerily blank face, tarnished by time, showing no hints of Buddhas' typical knowing smile. She shuddered as goosebumps dotted her skin, hairs standing on end. She tore her gaze away from the statue, to the elaborate ceiling filled with mythical depictions of tales from eons ago. Though faint with age, she could clearly make out the once-vibrant black curves of a long-lost monster, a monk's silhouette wreathed by twisting saffron ribbons and dancing dots. She followed the intricate patterns to the walls, punctured by countless cubby-holes, home to priceless scriptures that allegedly preached wisdom.

"It was dusk. Le Zun was soaking in the remnants of the setting sun when the mountains in the distance began to glow. Raising his head, he was greeted with an image of a glorious golden Maitreya Buddha floating in the sky. A thousand beaming Buddhas emerged, surrounded by flying fairies playing heavenly music," she read aloud from one of the yellowed scriptures. *Such religious nonsense*, she scoffed. Abruptly her throat closed, and she choked on

nothing, struggling to *breathe*, as if someone was squeezing it tight. Her face reddened, flashes of her life appearing before her eyes. As swiftly as it came, the sensation dispersed. Clutching her chest and whipping around, she could see no one but the faceless statue. *Paranoia*, she chided her frayed nerves, all but running from the chamber. She darted through the musty subterranean passages mindlessly, only to come face-to-face with endless dead-ends, dusty corridors home to white skeletons of vermin and small creatures that had the misfortune of ending up in the Mogao Caves.

She tried in vain to retrace her steps coming in. A few times, she glimpsed a faint incandescent glow at the end of corridors, sprinting towards it, adrenaline pumping through her veins. Only to find the reflection of torches on shards of glass. A lunatic burst of laughter slipped past her lips, disappearing into the dark maze. She wanted to escape from her Shanghai life all right. *Always running away from life*, she could hear chastising whispers emerging from all around her, taunting her cowardice. She skidded to a halt, legs giving out under her, sinking onto the dirt floor peppered with animal droppings and crumbs of white bones. The dignified CEO, she snorted derisively. She wasn't good enough. Heck, she couldn't even find her way out of the Caves. She narrowed her eyes at the flickering candlelight, mistaken for the sun's beams. The exit was so close yet so far. Everything failed her, ranging from childish dreams and whimsical beliefs to her entire life. Growing up in an impoverished family, she thought wealth was the key to happiness. So she became wealthy. Now, different problems hounded her, dooming her to a life of misery. Every time she thought she was near happiness, reality would check in, tugging strips of joy from between her fingers, dashing her dreams to dust, reducing her to a heap. On the office floor. On her penthouse Persian carpet. On the raw earth ground.

She remained curled up on the dirty ground, stray specks of dust settling on her -- *she was quite literally collecting dust, she smirked* -- trying in vain to ward off the bone-chilling cold. It was like this she stayed, forever

Lost.

The Vision

St. Clare's Girls' School, Magboo, Samantha Kate C. – 16

Over a thousand years ago, there was a monk who was travelling on the silk road. He decided to rest at a nearby oasis. He sat there peacefully staring at the still water, until he heard an inaudible voice. He looked at the water which seemed to be glowing, but he brushed off what he heard and saw and thought, “Oh I must be dehydrated.” Then he looked back down at the water and the last thing he saw was his reflection with his eyes glowing gold. The monk was hit with an elaborate vision of a thousand Buddhas bathing in a warm golden light. He was so amazed by the vision that he decided to build a cave near the oasis to remember the astonishing vision he saw. He built the cave all on his own, digging with his very own two hands, his vision fueling his determination and giving him strength to work on the cave day and night. After finishing building the cave, exhausted by his work, he stayed in the cave and meditated, focusing on the vision which was now engraved in his mind. Then one day, he just disappeared, leaving nothing but a scripture of the vision he saw and how it led to the cave being built.

A few weeks later, a group of monks discovered the cave and found the scripture. Inspired by the determination of the monk who had built the cave, the group decided to stay in the cave, decorating the walls with elaborate wall paintings and breathtaking murals. Wanting to see the same vision, they spent most of their days in the cave, making sculptures, paintings and writing manuscripts. More monks came to join, digging more caves and making more art, filling the caves with spirituality.

A thousand years later, the caves became a hotspot not only for monks but tourists as well. Everyone was fascinated by the “vision” and captivated by the art in the caves, history painted on the walls and coating every square inch of the caves. Everyone who came, came to admire the caves and feel the spirituality, which filled the caves inside and out. Until I came.

It was a cloudy Saturday morning, I dragged out of the warm, puffy sheets of the hotel bed. “Ugh, dad why do we have to go?” I asked, even though I knew the answer.

“It’s a good experience,” replied my dad while getting my little sister dressed.

“It’s a beautiful place, love. You’ll be amazed once you see the art inside,” added my mom.

As you can tell, I’m not much of a “spiritual cave person”, or at least *wasn’t*. I didn’t understand why we had to wake up at six o’clock in the morning on a Saturday, just to visit some lousy caves. Mom says it’s because it gets crowded in the afternoon, but when we got there, it was already crowded by tourists, so I didn’t really get the point of going early. I didn’t see anything special about the caves, it’s just the same thing you see if you visited a museum. “Art is art, nothing special about the sculptures and paintings here,” I thought. My parents were busy fussing over where to take pictures and fighting over which cave to visit first. So I decided to wander around on my own. My parents usually don’t notice I’m gone because they’re usually so focused on my sister and scared they will lose her. Some monks found me rambling around the caves, with a look that had “I want to go home” written all over it. I asked them why these caves were so popular anyways and they told me the story of the monk who’d had a vision. They said that many people come to the caves wanting to experience and see the same vision that was seen by the monk, but until now no one has had the same vision. I just laughed. At the time I wondered who in the world would build a cave just because they saw a thousand Buddhas and I believed the vision was just another false tale made up by grown-ups to teach their kids to find determination, like the monk who built the cave.

“You really believe the monk had a vision? Ha ha how funny,” I mocked.

“Shh... the caves can hear you, young boy,” said one of the monks.

“Caves hearing? What a laugh. That monk must be delusional,” I thought. Suddenly, I saw a bright gold light flash at the back of the cave. I wanted to ignore it until I saw another gold flash. I walked closer towards where I’d seen the gold flash, and then I wasn’t in the cave anymore. I saw a thousand Buddhas, a soft, warm gold light shining over them. I blinked and now I was at an oasis. I looked down at the waters and saw my reflection, staring right back at me, but my eyes were glowing gold. Then my reflection started talking.

“Do you believe now, boy?” it said in a soft voice that wasn’t mine. I woke up with a headache and I was back in the comfy sheets of the hotel bed.

“What just happened?” I ask in confusion.

“You fainted and a few monks found you lying on the floor of the cave whispering ‘I believe now’ over and over again,” explained my dad.

I wasn’t really listening to my dad. The vision was still clear in my head. All I knew was that I had to go back. What I had seen was something so out of the ordinary, I’ve never experienced anything more astounding, perplexing yet I understood everything I saw. “I want to go back, dad. I want to go back to the grottoes.” My dad looked into my eyes, and he jumped back in shock. My eyes had gold flecks swimming around in my deep, hazel eyes. I got up and walked towards my dad and held his hand. He saw it too; he saw the vision. His eyes mirrored my eyes, the same gold flecks swimming in his eyes. We immediately headed to the grottoes, and I saw the same monks I had ridiculed the day before and ran up to them. It’s funny how someone can change so fast.

“I believe. I saw the vision,” I spat out, catching my breath. They first looked at me with the same skeptical look I’d given them the day before, but then they saw my eyes. I held their hands the same way I’d held my dad’s and spread the extraordinary vision that they have longed to see. I then look around the caves. Everything seemed different. Less than 24 hours before I’d thought of the caves as a joke, but after the vision, I could see the history packed into the walls, paintings, sculptures and scriptures of the cave. It was like travelling back in time. I thought of the thousand pilgrims who must’ve come here over the years, taking time to fill these caves with such wonders and beauty. I thought of when the caves didn’t exist, and the land was barren and the single monk who came here alone and first saw the vision, how hard he must’ve worked to build one cave alone with no help, the sweat, blood and flesh it took to start this collection of grottoes. Lastly, I thought of myself, I didn’t deserve to see this vision. I didn’t even believe the story at first. I’d done nothing but mock the hard work of the pilgrims who laboured so hard on these caves. Why was I blessed to see such a marvelous vision? So, at that moment, I decided my future. I would go around teaching the lessons and virtues I learnt and share the vision with the world.

Now, 20 years after I saw the vision, I’m a history teacher. I studied and I’m still studying many more fascinating experiences and miracles experienced by others. I’ve travelled and am travelling to many historic sites to learn about the secrets hidden and the interesting stories behind each one. I love to tell my students about these stories and my story. I love it when my students ask to see the vision. We gather in a circle and hold hands, the vision fills their heads and they exclaim in excitement and awe. I love to see the gold accentuate their bright, little eyes.

I’m so glad I got dragged out of bed that cloudy, Saturday morning. It’s amazing how such a small vision could change my life completely. I truly believe that I was shown that vision for a reason, to teach my young, immature self a lesson and I was given the duty of sharing the wonders and teaching people to believe and not to criticize or mock. I think I have fulfilled my duty and I have proved that the caves chose the right person to pass on the vision. That vision is not simply just ‘a vision’ but it’s ‘THE vision’.

Peril in the Mogao Grottoes

St. Joseph's College, Kwok, Hok Lim Ryan – 15

"We're almost there, chief." I nodded to the pilot, who was sitting in front of me. We were on our way to the Mogao Grottoes in Gansu, China. I looked at the mirror stationed upon the cockpit and examined myself. All I could see were the lines across my forehead and my thinning grey hair. A shell of the man I once was. I was glad Jacqueline couldn't see me like this. I fingered the necklace dangling from my chest—a gift she had given me shortly before she died of cancer two years ago. I stared out of the window and tried not to think about her.

A few hours later, me and a few other archaeologists were standing in front of the Mogao Grottoes. In the night, the caves seemed ominous and foreboding. "Here we are." Dave, one of the archaeologists, spoke up. I looked up the cliff. Legend had it that in 366 A.D., a monk named Yuezun had a vision of a thousand golden Buddhas on the mountainside, though I had my own reservations about the story. A moment later, the others started moving into the Grottoes. I shook away the sense of trepidation that I felt, and joined them.

At once, I was overwhelmed by the sheer amount of paintings and sculptures that surrounded me. The air was warm and humid, the caves dimly lit. The brightly painted murals that adorned the walls caught my eye, their vibrant colours breathing life into the caverns. I walked up and inspected one of them. It depicted a general valiantly leading his army to victory. He was seated on top of his steed and hoisting a flag, his posture proud and upright. Behind him were legions of soldiers, their horses kicking up dust as they followed their leader with steadfast determination. Apart from that, the caverns were filled with clay statues that lined the walls. Most of them were statues of the Buddha, or other mythical figures. I ventured through the caves, awestruck. This was an archaeologist's dream. The art and literature in the Grottoes dated back centuries—I knew I was treading on history itself. I glanced around, wide-eyed, as if I were a toddler in a candy shop.

"Hello! Ground control to Major Tom!" Dave was waving his hand in front of my eyes. "Yes, I'm here." I muttered irritably and swatted his hand away. "Look who's getting cranky in his old age!" He chuckled to himself, but then got serious. "Listen, the others are saying that we might have uncovered a new part of the Mogao Grottoes—even more caves that were previously undiscovered." He gestured towards the other archaeologists. They were huddled together, rapidly speaking in hushed voices. I couldn't believe what I was hearing—this was unprecedented news. Everyone thought the Mogao Grottoes had been fully excavated. This discovery would be monumental. A short while later, with our flashlights shining into the darkness before us, we set out to navigate uncharted territory.

Since this part of the cave hadn't been explored yet, the only light source we had was our flashlights. In the dark, we couldn't see more than a few feet in front of us. Once, I thought I heard a growl coming from the shadows, but when I asked if anyone else had heard it, they shook their heads and looked amongst themselves knowingly. I knew what they were thinking—they thought that I was a paranoid old man. And perhaps they were right—all my friends and relatives had urged me to retire. It seemed like an attractive proposition, but I knew it wouldn't work out for me. Not having a thing to do, being left with my own thoughts, thinking of nothing but her—it would be worse than torture. Though being an archaeologist was arduous work, it could somewhat distract me, even if only for a short while. At least I got to see other people, and keep myself busy.

The loud echoes of my footsteps brought me back to reality. I glanced around to see where the others were, and my heart stopped. There was... no one. The clamour of the group had long since faded into the distance. Feeling numb with disbelief, I rummaged in my pockets and drew out my phone. I dialled Dave's number and tried to call him, but to no avail. There was no connection down here. Exasperated with myself for getting sidetracked, I retraced my steps. The solitary beam of my flashlight illuminated the statues, casting flickering shadows along the walls of the caves. They made me feel uneasy. I continued trudging on through the dark, but soon realised that I was hopelessly lost. I was trapped in this labyrinth of caves, with no idea where I was. Defeated, I slumped down onto the floor. I had no way of contacting the outside world. For all I knew, I would die of starvation here, in this very cave.

All of a sudden, I heard something. My whole body tensed, alert and wary. There it was again... the low growl I had heard earlier. Except it sounded much closer this time. My heart pounded against my ribcage as my mind

raced. Someone—or something—was there. Careful not to make a sound, I slowly rose to my feet. My flashlight, which was still lying on the floor, emitted a weak beam of light that illuminated the space in front of me in an eerie white glow. I cautiously stepped out towards my left, attempting to get away while I still could. To my horror, my shoe crunched on the gravel. Instantly, everything erupted into chaos. With a spine-tingling snarl, a shadow pounced into the light, headed straight towards me. My survival instincts kicked in, and I threw myself aside, narrowly evading it. I turned back to risk a glance at my aggressor. What I saw shocked me to my core.

Before me was a humanoid creature, unlike anything I had ever seen before. Its skin was green, and two long, jagged fangs protruded from its mouth. Its ears stuck out to the sides, and it wore some sort of armour that covered its entire body. However, the thing that was most striking were its eyes, which were red with black irises. They bulged out of its eye sockets, flaring with intense malice and hatred—and they were staring straight at me. It chilled me to the bone. Before I could make out anything else, the creature lunged at me again, arms outstretched. I leapt to the side once more, trying to avoid its fangs, but this time I wasn't so fortunate. It collided into me and we crumpled onto the floor in a heap. While I was still dazed, the creature clambered to its feet. Its hands found their way around my neck, and it started squeezing with surprising strength. I tried to prise its fingers away, but it was way too strong for me. Struggling hopelessly, I looked up into the face of the creature. Its face was contorted in a demented grin as it applied more and more pressure. Its lethal chokehold was closing in, and I could feel the life in me slowly dwindling. My vision gradually started to blur. I was slipping away... In one last desperate attempt, I snatched the flashlight off the ground and thrust it into its eyes. With a howl, it relinquished its hold and clawed at its face. I spluttered and took in huge gulps of air, relief washing over me as the sweet, sweet oxygen refilled my lungs. The flashlight fell onto the floor and shattered into smithereens, the light going out immediately. The cave plunged into complete darkness.

Breathing heavily, I got to my feet. The creature's yelps of pain had subsided. A deathly silence settled upon the cave. I thought of running for it, but I knew that I could never outrun the creature. I was already drained of energy, and my neck was throbbing with pain. If I were in my thirties, I might've stood a chance, but I wasn't getting any younger. Still, I had to do something. Heart thumping, I backed up against the wall, then stopped and listened intently. Still no sign of the creature. I started to move along the wall, using my hands to feel and guide me. I figured that if I stayed along the wall, I would find the opening to another cave sooner or later. Sure enough, I felt the cave open up and lead into a different one. Strangely, as I got closer to the opening, I could see faint light emanating from the depths of the cave. I ran my hands along the opening. It was just wide enough for me to pass through, but judging from what I had just seen, it was too narrow for the creature's bulky frame. Perfect, I thought. Once I stepped through, I would be safe.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, a hand whisked out and gripped my shirt. All the blind fear immediately came rushing back. Without thinking, I tore off a piece of loose rock from the cave wall and jammed the razor-sharp edge into the hand. It retracted instantly, a cry of rage sounding out. I made a break towards the opening, but the hand shot out swiftly again, catching my necklace this time. No! Not the necklace! I strained, trying to pull myself free in vain. I frantically whipped it off, my heart sinking. Suddenly free, I slipped through the opening as the creature slammed into it with a sickening thud. Nonetheless, it was not deterred by this, and kept on trying—and failing—to get through. After a few more attempts, it seemed to accept its fate. A moment later, its footsteps receded into the distance. I was safe.

I turned and surveyed my surroundings. This cave was just like the others, but there was a drastic difference. This one had no paintings or sculptures—the cave walls were completely blank. The whole cave was shrouded in a soft glow. I searched for the light source, and that was when I saw the man in the middle of the cave. He had lengthy, silvery hair that was tied back, and a long, flowing beard. He was wearing a white robe that went down to his knees. He stood still, not moving a muscle, eyes closed in meditation. He looked old, but in a timeless, ageless way—he had no wrinkles, no lines on his face. I moved closer, and it struck me that he was the source of the light in the cave. An aura of faint light radiated from him, spreading outwards.

He opened his eyes, sensing my presence. "I've been expecting you." "Who are you?" I demanded shakily. "What was that?" I motioned towards the cave entrance, where the creature had been. "That was a yaksha." He replied, choosing to ignore my first question. "A what?" "Yaksha. Nature spirits. Most of them are harmless, but some of them can be malevolent. They usually look for travellers or loners." Well, I guess I qualify for both, I thought to

myself. “Nothing like that even exists.” I protested. He raised an eyebrow. “Then tell me, what did you just see?” I fell into silence, at a loss for words. “Well—look, I don’t know who you are, or where I am. All I want is to get out of here.” I stammered. He looked me straight in the eye. “I called you here for a reason. There is something you must learn.” With that, he started striding towards me. Before I could ask him what he was talking about, he placed a finger right between my eyes. One second I was there, and the next second everything was melting away...

“Beep...beep...” The rhythmic sound of the heart monitors rang out, reverberating in the silent room. I stared down into the face of my dying wife. She was lying on the hospital bed, her eyes closed, with tubes and wires connected to her. Her breathing was barely noticeable. Even so, lying there, her chest rising and falling gently, she gave out a sense of calmness, a sense of serenity. I reached out and gripped her hand. It was dry and withered. I looked out of the window. Outside, the clear night sky was dotted with stars. Suddenly, Jacqueline stirred and opened her eyes. “How are you?” “Better.” She managed a smile, but I knew she was in a lot of pain. I took out the bouquet of roses I had brought along with me and presented them to her. “I got this for you. There was a discount at the flower shop.” She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply, taking in their sweet-scented fragrance. “They smell nice.” She watched me put the roses into the vase on the desk by her bed. “Oh, that reminds me.” She reached up and unclasped the necklace on her neck, then placed it into my hands. The silvery chains glinted in the fluorescent light. “I want you to have this.” “What? It’s supposed to be yours! I can’t take it.” I insisted. She wrapped my fingers around the necklace and held it there firmly. “It’s yours now.” I looked into her eyes, and I knew she wouldn’t take no for an answer. My hands closed around the necklace. It was cold to the touch. “Promise you’ll keep it safe for me, okay?” I nodded, fighting to hold back the tears that suddenly came to my eyes.

With a jolt, I came back to my senses. My chest was heaving, and my eyes were moist. “How do you know all this?” I asked the man weakly. Reliving that moment, seeing her again after so long, had stripped me of all my defences. I felt raw, vulnerable. Instead of answering me, he turned away and started pacing back and forth. “Loss,” he began, “can cripple us. It can tear us apart, drive us insane.” I thought of how I shut myself away, refusing to eat. I thought of how I laid awake at night, memories of the past haunting me. And I thought of how I could see her flitting shadow in my room, when the rest of the world had gone to sleep. “I lost the necklace.” I said, my voice hoarse. He paused and looked at me, tilting his head. “You don’t need a necklace to remember her, do you?” He sighed. “I have seen many others like you, Vincent.” I wasn’t remotely surprised that he knew my name. “When you stow all your emotions away, they consume you, eating you up from the inside out.” I lowered my head. “When she died, a part of me died too.” My voice cracked. The man studied me, his eyes filled with... was that pity?

“Moving on.” He walked over and placed a hand on my shoulder. “That is what you must learn.” He waved his hand, and suddenly we were standing on the shore of a lake. Dazzling sunlight shined down from the azure sky, enveloping everything in a warm glow. Before us, the lake’s waters were calm and still, softly shimmering as they reflected the sunlight. Afar, I could see undulating mountains stretching off into the distance, their tips touching the clouds. I could feel my shoulders falling as my breath slowed. Beside me, the old man gazed at the lake and sighed contentedly. We stood in silence for a while, taking in the beauty of the scenery. “Do you feel it? The tranquillity. The stillness.” He asked me. I did. I could feel peace settling over me like a blanket. A few minutes later, he spoke again. “In the end, only three things matter: how much you loved, how gently you lived, and how gracefully you let go of things not meant for you. It is time to let go, Vincent.” “I don’t want to forget her.” He shook his head. “Moving on is not forgetting. It is accepting things for what they are, and choosing to live in the present instead of dwelling in the past. Not to cry because it ended, but to smile because it happened.” His penetrating gaze stared directly into my soul. “After all, what is there for us to grieve for? The dead are never truly dead. They live on—here.” He laid a finger on my chest. “Remember what I told you. Good luck.” Wait! I wanted to say. Who are you? Why are you telling me all this? But it was too late. A brilliant flash of light engulfed everything. I shielded my face with my arms...

“Hey, there he is!” “Vince!” Huh? Dazed, I blinked the spots out of my eyes, then saw with a start that I was back where I started—on the mountain, in front of the Mogao Grottoes. The man was gone. Further away, the others were now dashing towards me, with Dave in the lead. “What happened?” I asked when they caught up to me. “We were so worried about you!” One of them piped up. “When we saw you went missing, we got back out of the

caves. We thought you'd found your way out, but you weren't here—" "Well, he is now." Dave cut in. He patted the dust off my shirt. "You okay?" "Yeah." I nodded.

Dawn was just breaking, illuminating the dark sky with streaks of purple and gold. I looked back at the cliff, and what I saw then took my breath away. There, on the mountainside, were identical images of the Buddha, so many I couldn't count them all. They were seated and unmoving, eyes closed, their golden radiance blinding me. Instantly, I knew I was seeing what Yuezun had seen. I blinked, and the vision was gone. "What's going on?" Dave walked over. Evidently, he had seen the awed expression on my face. "Nothing," I said, now having an inkling who the old man might have been. I smiled. "Let's go."

Metamorphosis

St. Joseph's College, So, Tin Yuen Matthew – 15

The gentle moonlight crept into a cramped yet tidy room. A lonely pair of cloudy brown eyes opens. Where was this? How long has he been there? The brown eyes wandered up and down, left and right, but found only strange apparatuses and lights, on his right arm was a paper wristband that read “TsunWang“. Whose wristband is this? This couldn't possibly be his, because his name was- what was it?

A woman in blue clothing noticed the man had woken and brought a man in a white coat into the room. They finally spoke to him after a brief discussion among themselves.

“Good evening, how are you feeling?”

A thousand questions crossed his mind, “I'm feeling fine, just a little confused is all.”

“Very well, I am Doctor Kong, and you are at the hospital.”

Only one of his questions was answered, yet a thousand more has already crossed his mind.

“How did I get here? I don't remember much. Now that I think about it... I... I don't remember anything at all...who am I?”

The pair of cloudy brown eyes, alone once again, gazed at the horizon. He now knows his name to be TsunWang, but not of whom TsunWang was. The only thing that makes him TsunWang is his name, and not the countless memories TsunWang has made, not his friends, not his family, not his loved ones. He watches as dawn breaks, the sun rising from the horizon. The sunlight envelops him, like a mother embracing her frightened, crying child. He silently wishes for God, if there is one, to give him back his memories, to give him purpose once again, and fill his empty mind.

“Knock, knock”

The door opens gently, as a pair of figures anxiously walks in. They have ashen grey hair, wrinkled skin, and almost-teary eyes. Their faces bring a slight sense of familiarity, but TsunWang does not recognise them, not that he should, anyways.

“Do you... remember us?” the old man asked with a concerned look on his face.

“No, I can't say I do, but if I had to guess, you are my parents, right?” TsunWang reasoned.

“Yes, we are.” Mother said with a lump in her throat, “We rushed here to see you as soon as we heard from the hospital that you were awake, are you feeling fine?”

“Yes, I'm perfectly fine,” TsunWang tried to make the brightest smile he could. “But the doctor did tell me to take it easy and that I should stay in their care for a while.”

“I see, well let's hope you can come home soon!”

“If you don't mind me asking,” TsunWang could not resist, “what kind of person was TsunWang?”

There was an awkward silence between the three of them. TsunWang's parents couldn't hold their tears anymore. In front of them was what looked like their son, same voice, same face, same pair of cloudy brown eyes, but deep down, they both knew it was no longer their son. They didn't know what to say to him. TsunWang did not blame them.

“You were always a good kid,” Mother pulled out a handkerchief to wipe her tears. “You helped out with chores, cooked for us and always got us gifts and surprises,” Mother looked at the handkerchief with a wide smile, “This was a birthday gift from you, actually.”

“You never failed to make me proud,” Father puts his hand on TsunWang's shoulder, “even since you were small, you would never give us any trouble, I don't think you cried once when you were still a baby! Later on, we were expecting you to have a change in attitude during your adolescence, but I don't think you ever yelled at us once, not to mention you taking care of us even now after you have started attending university. I couldn't have asked for a better son.”

Tears continued to roll down their cheeks, bittersweet yet warm smiles give TsunWang a sense of comfort.

“I see, TsunWang was such a caring person.” TsunWang said after some thought. “I promise to try my hardest to become the TsunWang you know.”

Hearing this, Mother and Father broke down in tears once again. They were well aware that the person in front of them was not really their son, but that did not prepare them for the reality of the colossal loss.

The afternoon sun shines on TsunWang harshly, its light, piercing to his eyes, but he doesn't mind it. The gentle wind smells faintly of iris, daphne and rain. Tiny sparrows atop blooming trees sing a melodious symphony. TsunWang closes his cloudy brown eyes, taking in all of spring as best he can, for the sun's warm embrace reminds him of his parent's smile, the smell of flowers and rain helps him forget the subtle and ugly smell of their tears, and the song of the birds helps drown out the recollection of their conversation playing in his head. The entire time, they called him TsunWang, but were they really referring to him? Or was it someone long gone?

"Ah! There you are! I've been looking for you!"

A young woman with short black hair runs up to TsunWang, out of breath, startling him.

"Are you looking for TsunWang?" TsunWang asked while trying to calm himself down after the scare.

"I'm KaYin, and I'm your classmate at one of your university classes," she glanced at TsunWang's armband with her pair of enchanting, pure, amber eyes. "Don't worry, I've heard about your dementia."

"I see, but why are you visiting me if you're just my classmate?" TsunWang gestures for KaYin to sit down on a bench besides him.

"Oh, I don't have any more classes for today, and I heard that you woke up, so I thought I would drop by!" She scans TsunWang up and down, "but this is not about me, how are you feeling?"

"I'm feeling fantastic, and thank you for coming to see me!"

"Well, I felt like I had to, especially after what happened that day." KaYin had a wide smile, one that just seemed right to TsunWang, maybe she smiled a lot when she was with TsunWang, before whatever happened to him, anyways.

"I'm sorry, but what do you mean by 'that day'?"

There was a brief pause — before her face changed. The smiles that were ear-to-ear just a moment ago had basically vanished. In its place, instead, was a look of horror, like she was just hit with a punch to the gut, or that she had realised something she did not want to. This gloomy, depressing face was absolutely foreign to TsunWang, amnesia or not. He figured this was probably the first time his cloudy brown eyes had ever seen such a look on her face before.

"Oh right, you lost your memory..." KaYin composed herself and put on an obviously forced smile. "I was with you the day you got hit by a car."

"So, we were doing a project on a place called the Mogao Caves, and while we were going back home, I got hit by a car after pushing her out of the way because she wasn't paying attention..."

The moonlight seeped through the window curtains, onto a water bottle placed by TsunWang on the window sill, reflecting the light in a beautiful starry pattern of rainbow colours onto the walls of the cramped hospital room. TsunWang wondered where he learnt to do this. The lonely pair of cloudy brown eyes gazed at the horizon once again; this time, he wonders not of who he was, but rather about the feeling of loss. He wonders how it feels to lose family, to lose loved ones, and to lose friends. He has not lost either, but from his parents' hollow words, KaYin's ugly expression, and the awkwardness from phone calls he's gotten from friends, he figured that it is probably rather painful. He looks back to his room, and focuses on a pair of spots of light that was particularly bright. The doctors said he will most probably never regain his memory, but he hoped that their diagnosis was wrong.

"I still can't believe the professor is making you do this!" KaYin's voice bounces off the cave walls and echoes throughout.

"Hey now, lower your voice, we don't want to be disturbing the other tourists." TsunWang tried to shush her.

"Come on, even after you got into that car accident? Plus, it's a Wednesday night, so there aren't too many people visiting."

TsunWang looks around him. The Mogao Caves, also referred to as the Thousand Buddha Grottoes. TsunWang's professor had asked him to finish his project on it, and since he has lost his memories, KaYin decided to bring him here so he could finish the project.

“Let’s pick up where the project was left off, which would be the wish-granting Guanyin sculpture just up ahead. Last time, we didn’t make a wish because it was too crowded, but now that there’s no one here, what do you think about making one before we continue?” KaYin gestured at the sculpture, making sure not to point at it.

TsunWang looked around them, “I don’t see any reason not to, tell me about its history while we make our wishes.”

As the two walked towards the sculpture, KaYin started introducing it.

“While the records of this sculpture’s creation are presumed to be lost, the first record of it is way back in the 900’s, so historians believe that this was made during or after the Huichang Persecution of Buddhism.”

As TsunWang got closer to the sculpture, he could finally observe its true beauty. The Guanyin sculpture was speckless, no marks or scratches could be seen on the reflective metal body. It was about 1 meter tall, with unbelievable detail, from the folds on its clothes, to its face, to its brilliant golden eyes, TsunWang could see the passion and attentiveness of whoever made this sculpture. Around the sculpture were 8 pillars, under which were wooden pails with small bowls with carvings on them.

They each picked up a bowl and filled it with water, then they poured the water onto the sculpture, and TsunWang looked at it once again. Light gleamed into the Guanyin’s golden metallic eyes, they were filled with an odd sense of purity and love that sought to embrace and forgive all.

Next is to wish — but what to wish for? TsunWang looked towards KaYin, and found she has already closed her eyes and started praying. The look she had on her face when she visited him in the hospital that day appeared in his mind once again. He tried his best to ignore it and closed his eyes to pray for...

He opened his eyes, put the bowl back into the pail, and asked KaYin:

“So, what wish did you make? I wished for health.” Two voices said in complete unison.

TsunWang almost snapped his neck with how fast he had turned to look at KaYin, but the eyes that met his were not pure or amber, but cloudy and brown, with a sense of loneliness.

“In this area are all cave paintings depicting the Huichang Persecution of Buddhism in the 800’s, the caves were thankfully spared from the whole ordeal since it was under Tibetan control at that time.”

TsunWang inspected the gigantic mural in front of him. Time had weathered the lead paint, the oxidation leaving it darkened and crumbling, but that did not stop it from showing the artistry of the monks, the would-be-vibrant spectrum of colours on the cave walls painted a vivid picture in TsunWang’s mind. Hundreds, maybe even thousands of monks and nuns, watching the Persecution unfold in front of them, others in areas under the emperor’s rule robbed and punished while temples and monasteries were ransacked and demolished, they themselves powerless to stop it. Their only hope was to pray, to the Buddha, to themselves and to —

“The painting of the Guanyin is not any less detailed and realistic as the sculpture outside, right? KaYin said Guanyin was associated with mercy and compassion, so the monks made that sculpture to pray to.” TsunWang said.

The other TsunWang inspected the painting in the middle of the mural. The colour of her clothes and trinkets and crown seemed to have faded and changed, ravaged by the unrelenting march of time. The colour in her eyes seemed to gain an unintended darkened colour, but they were just as warm and affectionate, perhaps even more so compared to the reflective metallic ones the sculpture had, almost as if she was a gentle mother with advice for her child.

“So, what did you actually wish for back there? We’re both the same person, right? I know the both of us wouldn’t pray for something like ‘health’.” TsunWang asked.

TsunWang looked at the other TsunWang, hesitant to trust him. After thinking for a while, he just decided to avoid the topic.

“Let’s move on to the next part, I have to hand this in next morning and you’re the only one out of the two of us that actually remembers anything about this cave.”

“The next part is my favourite in the cave,” TsunWang said with an expression puppies make when you hold a treat in front of them.

“Lead the way.” TsunWang said while gesturing for him to keep going.

The two TsunWang’s turn the corner and were greeted with a magnificent sight — a room, with a small steady stream of water flowing from a hole in the ceiling, into a small pool of water. The moonlight reflected from the stream of water, projecting a familiar starry pattern of rainbow colours onto the walls of the room.

“When we got to this room, KaYin told me that I could do the same thing with a water bottle on a window sill, in between the crack of the curtains.”

The two TsunWang’s stared at the calm waters that glistened with sparkles.

“So how has everyone been? You know, my — your parents, your friends, KaYin?” one of the TsunWang’s asked the other.

Watching the slow flowing water filled TsunWang with a sense of calm and comfort he had not yet experienced, and he started to open up to the other TsunWang. “My parents couldn’t bear with the reality of my amnesia, plus I still haven’t really understood what kind of a person I was before, so I don’t think they’ll get their ‘son’ back anytime soon. I’ve been trying my best to hang out with my old friends, but they have told me it was awkward since I never truly felt like TsunWang to them, not have fun. As for KaYin... She tries to act all cheerful, and I don’t doubt that’s what she was like before, but I can always tell that she still misses TsunWang, and me failing to become him is not helping.”

“I see, it must have been tough for you, huh?” TsunWang looked up down at his bottle of water.

“You also must’ve had a hard time too, after all, if you didn’t save your KaYin in time unlike me, you must feel guilty for her getting amnesia.” TsunWang saw the other’s gaze was fixated on the bottle of water.

“I’ve been trying to cope with her memory loss, but the thought of how ‘it should have been me’ keeps appearing in my head.” TsunWang looked away from his own bottle of water, and looked at the other’s bottle instead. “You know, I can’t make my KaYin remember, just as yours can’t make you remember, but you can help make her and the others’ lives better, that’s what you wished for back at the Guanyin sculpture, wasn’t it?”

TsunWang nodded his head in silence.

“Well, you see, maybe you don’t have to try to be TsunWang anymore.” Their cloudy brown eyes interlock. “It’s never a good idea to try to become to become someone you’re not. Have you watched the sun rise over the horizon yet?” The other TsunWang nodded his head in silence. “Of course. That was our favourite thing to do, even before the car accident. Did you know? The horizon is about 5 kilometres when viewed at sea level, of course, the exact distance is different for everyone, but that doesn’t make anyone’s horizon wrong. Same goes for you, it would not be wrong if you were to give up trying to be TsunWang, in fact, it might even help them get over losing TsunWang.”

The two TsunWang’s walked out of the glowing room, as the first of them turn a corner, he heard a loud thud behind him, and a bottle of water rolled out from behind the corner. He picked the bottle up, and handed it to the other, but the eyes that met his were not cloudy or brown, but they were KaYin’s.

She seemed confused, looking all around, while TsunWang smiled.

“Come on, let’s get going, it’s already pretty late now.”

“I – alright.” KaYin decided to simply go along with what was happening.

“You want to go for some fried rice for supper? I’m starving.”

“Sure but, are you sure? You said you didn’t like fried rice before.” KaYin agreed reluctantly.

“What’s wrong with a little change once in a while?”

TsunWang and KaYin walked past the wish-granting Guanyin. TsunWang took another look at it, and in its eyes were glowing with the same magnificent golden purity. TsunWang could see a faint reflection of himself in the puddle of water that gathered at the bottom of the sculpture, the same pair of cloudy brown eyes stared back, but without the loneliness. TsunWang turned to look at KaYin, and felt the most comforted he had been in his entire life, this one, at least.

The two of them disappear out of sight, leaving the cave the way they came, the golden sculpture smiles, and finally closes its gleaming eyes after it fulfils the last wish it received that night.

A Mogao Dream

St. Margarets Coeducational English Secondary & Primary School, So, Ming Yan Agatha – 16

“Sir, here’s your coffee and your sandwich.”

“Oh thanks very much.” I hastily tucked the newspaper under my arms and looked for somewhere to sit.

The newspaper caught my attention again.

“The Mogao Caves...” Expressions like “Silk Road” and “Mogao Grottoes” weren’t new to me but the story in the Eastern Corner of today’s newspaper had me thinking: what if I actually had the chance to take a look at the artefacts? Oh to see the complexity of the paintings in person! As I thought about the wonders of the cave, the warm sun lulled me into a nap...

When Robert woke up, though, he wasn’t in a chair under the warm sun. He was under a tree in scalding heat.

“Whoa whoa whoa! What?” He rubbed his face. A grinning trio stood before him.

“Enough sleeping, Rob, get up! We’ve got caves to explore, manuscripts to watch, paintings to read! Wait...” The one in the middle said.

“Okay, okay! But who are you guys?”

“Oh, me? I’m Shenzu, I’m a monk! Although you might already know...” Shenzu pointed to his head.

“I’m Anzan,” One of them said. “And I’m Tenpa!” The other one added. “The both of us followed Shenzu here to find out more about the Mogao caves. So are you coming with us or not?”

Monk. Manuscripts. Mogao caves. It was like reading Crichton’s “Timeline” (rubbish writing but a good story). If this was actual time travel - it was weird - but he was ready.

“Yes of course! Let’s go!” He scrambled to get on his feet then nearly stopped in his tracks, shocked at the grandeur of the numerous caves before his eyes. The red pillars stood out against the earthy tones of the mountain, and the mysterious darkness between them seemed to call him. He did want to discover all the secrets.

He followed. Tenpa lit a torch. In the middle of the room stood a giant sculpture surrounded by walls with delicate drawings.

Before them they saw a man, a hawk and a dove, surrounded by a soft glow. The man looked exasperated.

“Stop trying to eat the dove!”

“King Sibi,” Shenzu muttered. Indeed, that seemed to be the tale that they were seeing.

“I’m going to starve to death if I don’t eat anything soon!” The hawk exclaimed.

“I’m going to die if you eat me!” The dove shouted back.

The man looked thoughtful and Robert remembered the tale.

He remembered being in the comfort of his room, the book illuminated by the warm glow of a candle. What he saw in front of him now was exactly what he’d read; King Sibi had to find a way to satisfy the needs of both birds without harming either of them.

“Wait,” Anzan’s voice pulled Robert out of his train of thoughts. “Harming living beings isn’t allowed in Buddhism...”

Robert tried to warn the trio to look away, but it was too late. King Sibi held a knife in his hand, and began cutting at his own flesh in order to feed the hawk. The hawk’s hunger was sated, and the dove flew away in peace. The soft glow grew brighter, became a blinding light, and the group disappeared.

“Wake up, wake up! Are you alright, Robert?” Robert opened his eyes to find Shenzu sitting on the ground next to him.

“I’m alright. What just happened?” Robert asked.

“We most likely saw a vision inside the cave.” Tenpa said. Robert saw Anzan roll his eyes. “Visions happen when you’re overwhelmed with the information a deity wants to show you something.” He continued.

“Not just any ordinary vision. What we saw was one of the tales of the Mogao Caves,” Shenzu said. “King Sibi cut his flesh to feed the hawk so the dove doesn’t have to die. It’s one of the more famous tales.” He continued.

“I’m curious what the other caves have to offer now,” Anzan said in a suggestive tone. “Let’s go then! The next cave isn’t too far away.” Tenpa replied.

“We have to be careful though,” Shenzu warned. “Visions can drain the human body.”

“Well there’s no harm in trying one more, right? Let’s go.”

Another cave, another torch, another picture.

A nine-coloured deer was pulling a drowning man out of a lake. Robert couldn’t take his eyes off the deer. It wasn’t like any deer he’d ever seen. He only knew brown deer. “The Ruru jataka,” Robert whispered. It’s one of the best known stories in Buddhism. Now he knew what was going to happen, he couldn’t help but feel excited. Watching was better than reading.

As expected, the man betrayed the deer and told the hunters where the deer was. Just for a reward from the king.

A sense of nostalgia seeped into Robert’s chest. This was one of the stories that got him into studying Buddhism.

However, the deer told the king about the man, and how it saved his life but is now trying to kill his saviour. The king was moved, but at the same time furious towards the man. Seeing that he couldn’t get his money, the man’s blood boiled and started to throw things at the deer, who deflected the random sticks and stones with his antlers, sending them flying in all directions. It damaged the extravagant pillars and tiles. As Robert was absorbed into the scene, a stray rock hit him right in the nose. He blacked out.

Was this just from reading the Eastern Corner in the newspaper?

“Ow!” The feeling of your glasses falling and hitting the bridge of your nose never fails to be annoying. When I opened my eyes, I wasn’t under the unforgiving heat, though. It’s just the warm sunshine shining through the coffee shop.

“Hey! Did something just happen? Something’s changed. Even the air smells different.”

“Nothing happened at all. You fell asleep while reading today’s paper! You definitely had one hell of a dream, didn’t you?” The same barista laughed.

“Yeah, that was one hell of a dream. You should have a look at the paper, though. Just the Eastern Corner.”

I smiled.

The Wind Full of Colors

St. Mary's Canossian College, Lau, Alicia – 16

I hold my hand steady, but it will not stop trembling. It could not, since the day I escaped. Not since the day arrived here, a silent, hidden place, grottoes, full of colourful paintings and murals. Not since last week, when I was handed a brush and ink for work.

Not now, when I sit down in my dark little cave, the walls thin and bare with nothing but shadows.

I will walk along the wind full of colours.

Colours. Where? There were none, not on this canvas. Not in anything I have ever drawn. After all, it's not that I could find any to draw with in the first place. Aunt's voice drifts, reverberating in my skull. I wish she were here to tell me.

I watched as the diluted blackness of liquid threatened to fall off the tip of the brush. It would stain the empty canvas, diffusing through, like tears would. I let it fall. It blooms through the paper, darkness spreading out.

Then I paint. I paint of my lost aunt, on her features a rare tilt of her crooked smile; the sister I had left behind, the rough calluses on her young hands; the wells of nothingness curling deep beneath my heart, coiling upwards to devour a little bit of me every day. I paint two monsters, monsters that look painstakingly like me. I feel them yanking on my hair and slapping me and kicking my ribs and shoving me into water and tearing my art and breaking my brushes and I hurt and hurt and hurt—

But no. My brush strokes halt. My chest heaves, and I clutch my brush so tight that it feels like it might break any moment. My right hand still trembles, and I drop the brush. "It's not real, I'm free, I survived," I whisper. My voice echoes from the dry walls of the sandy cave I am in.

Survive, survive, survive...

"I'm safe here. I survived them, I escaped marriage. I'm at the Mogao Grottoes, among monks and artists. I can live now." I say out loud, voice trembling and barely audible. Master Zhong said it would feel better like that. At least, I think that's what he said. I never managed to pay attention.

It doesn't, so I tear my art to pieces. Black shreds fall onto the sandy ground, and I don't bother to clean them up. The floor is filled with them, anyways.

They don't hurt when I step on the ground.

The floor is sandy and rocky and pricks my skin when we sit down cross legged. Alone I sit, among the shadows. Master Zhong is halfway through the class, but as usual, everything passes from my left ear to the right. My eyes stray to the walls of the cave we were in. It looks different from last week, somehow. I let my gaze wander, and I realise that it is the black swirls at the edge of the cave entrance that is new. I cannot see what exactly it is, but I can tell that the strokes are full of untold stories. They stretch out through the height of the cave, as tall as three people: Unfinished linings of clouds I have never fully glimpsed, silhouettes of people dancing in silks, light streaming onto clouds floating in the sky...

The more I look, the more familiar they seem. In those strokes, I see my own. So similar, yet at the same time so different. I think of the painting last night, black and bleak.

Before I can do anything, Master Zhong stands up, and I know that it is the end of the lesson. I slink away, lest the master catch me for another inspirational talk. I don't want to waste his time. But I cannot help but take one more glance at the painting.

Night again. At least, that is what the sky outside tells me. The darkness outside seems to seep into the cracks and crevices of my cave. It engulfs me, so that I am void both inside and outside. The great, shadowy thing in me, baring its teeth, clawing towards my soul.

But it is so quiet. I am still not used to the odd absence of a constant fear— of my parents, of the thing of a life I had. And every night, I still imagine the last day at “home”.

“Zhen! The study is unclean, and there is ink on the table. What is it you have been doing in the house? Huh? We give you food and a roof above your head and this is how you repay us? You useless girl!” Mother hisses. She is careful not to scream, lest she wake up any of her fourteen perfect sons. They have to train and study well to serve the country well, she prides.

“We’re offering you something. To get married with Aunt’s husband. Your aunt disappeared five months ago, and her husband requests we send a younger and prettier girl. Sick of that witch, he is too.” So that is why I have not seen her. Father appears next to Mother, smirking, yet a hint of desperation in his tone.

He needs to keep the alliance for the drugs, *but my mind is too sluggish to think straight.*

“No,” I plead. My voice breaks, and I go onto my knees, as I always have. I cannot. I’ve seen Aunt, the despair and vacancy in her eyes the day after she was married. The one I see every time after her marriage. Mother slaps me, as if it is what she is programmed to do whenever I kneel. “No,” I continue pleading and begging, but I know it is useless. They don’t even bother to hit me anymore.

I am left there kneeling, hair uncombed, face streaked with red hot tears. The wedding is tomorrow, they said. I don’t even get to live another day.

But the next day, they cannot find me. Someone showed up at my window, handing me a small strip of paper. ‘Follow me. I walk with the clouds, along the wind full of colours.’ It said. My heart had skipped a beat, because I know who that sentence came from.

“Aunt?” I whispered. But the figure did not reply, and I knew that the figure was too short to be her. So I had no choice but to follow her, through rivers and valleys, until we reached here. Then she disappeared. I never caught a glimpse of her face, obscured through weeks by her orange hood. But I knew that my aunt was part of it.

Something nags at my brain now. I think of the painting I saw on the cave walls, black and beautiful yet incomplete. I wanted to see it— I needed to see it. I think of the resemblance its technique holds with mine, the one which Aunt taught me.

I am sunken too deep into my own pits of darkness to bathe myself in another. But something takes hold of me, and I step out of the shadows of my cave. Silently, I glide along the corridor until I reach the cave where the artist is silhouetted against tiny candles. My heart drops when I realise that the silhouette is not thin and bony. No, it is not Aunt— foolish hopes. Yet disappointment is weakened and despair eliminated as my gaze drifts to what the artist is painting.

The brush strokes are no longer black. Rather than shadows, they act as frames for the beautiful images that lay on the cave walls.

That was what it seemed to be missing, I realised. Colours.

Then the artist shifts to the right, and her shadows part to reveal a splendid chroma.

My breath catches when I see it.

It was as if the clouds and winds were leaping out of the dreary cave walls: I could see the azure clouds lined with gold, as if the Sun glowed behind it; the mountains and hills lush and green; and though the artist outlined no wind, I could see the hues of red and blue and shining gold peering through the patterns of silk and cloud, and the women in them walking between. I could see tale weaving: that of a simple woman, draped in expensive silks and garments and vacancy in her eyes, in a world full of riches she does not belong.

But it is not the beauty of the life it describes that captures my attention. It is the similarity I see between it and my Aunt’s work. And I inhale when a piece of memory tugs at me— that of a tale of a woman that, through putting behind materialistic matter, discovered the way to ease suffering. To find more than survival in life, but life itself. *“She gave up riches and extravagance to walk among the clouds. She saw beyond it all— the pain and suffering, the endless loop of survival we put ourselves into. Where people feel nothing but the breeze and the shivers they bring when the wind blows, she sees the colors in the wind. She walks among the brilliant colors— among the wind full of*

colours.”, Aunt told me. I didn’t understand, I replied. She only smiled, and told me that I would, one day. Somehow, I knew that this painting would let me understand.

Clank. The artist puts her brush into her tin can. She turns, and I dart to the side of the cave. I cannot get caught. I need to be hidden, even if there is no reason for me to be. In a split second decision, I scurry back along the path. I try to quench the whisper in me.

I will be back.

The next night, I cannot sleep, as a mixture of my usual darkness and a strange new combination of hues fill my head. I try to pick up my paper and ink, to paint out the monster in me. But it growls less today, and I do not feel like splashing ink again. Instead, I look out to the sky. A few more stars speckle it today. Before I know it, I am again at the entrance of the cave.

More is painted today. The woman is now complete, and her features are worry, pain, desperation. Next to it, another figure is painted. Another version of her, in another time, I think, finding her path. More serene. Next to her are no longer sparkling gold beads and bracelets, rather, her accessories diminished, silk wraps more simple. And the artist, looking the same as yesterday, works her magic, weaving my Aunt’s tale.

I don’t know how long I stood there, just that I did the same for five more days. And on the fifth day, when I sat down to draw in my own tiny room, I realised that I could not face the endless black mirroring my soul. I would not let the monster take hold..In my head are images of colour and life, and before me a wall of a dark, empty cave.

Winds full of colours. I needed to paint that, like my Aunt had always wanted to teach me to.

So this time, I glide to the caves, then into it. The artist is humming, as she had been whenever she draws. Like I do always, I keep my steps light, bowing my head as I go, my body curved inwards. Trying to keep to the shadows, until I reached the pots of brilliant vibrancy just within a few feet’s reach. So close—

Clank.

I kept to the shadows, but the shadows would not keep to me. At the sound of my foot hitting a stone pot of paint, the artist turns. Her eyes widen at first, her lips parting in surprise. I could see her features clearly. I don’t know her, but somehow, I feel like I do. My fingers curl into a fist, and I clench my teeth. Curving my body inwards, I prepare for whatever repercussion I have for whatever wrong thing I have done.

Yet to my surprise, she grins. And laughs. *Laughs.*
How long have I not heard laughter?

“So you’re the one who’s been creeping around lately!” She chuckles. “Just come in and say hi! I’ve always wanted some company. It gets boring, sometimes, you know. I mean, look at these drab walls. The air— so suffocating! And no greenery! Not animals! Not counting insects, of course. So many bugs! How do you all even stand it?” Then she catches a glance of me, disheveled and eyes wide. Should I open my mouth? Am I supposed to talk? Maybe I should run. But before I can, she grabs me by the arm, leaning close to inspect the black marks. Ink.

“Woah! You’re an artist too! Do you want to paint? Is that why you’ve been lurking around?” Her face is alight and her eyes sparkle eagerly. I open my mouth and close it. I try to think of a meaningful reply, something that would not end up offensive or rude.

“I’m Zhen,” I croak, my voice raw and cracked from disuse. My hands wave frantically, gesturing to the general direction of the pot of brushes in front of my feet. “I— Can I— May I—?”

The girl laughs.

“Okay, Zhen,” she smiles, and hands me a brush.

Paint drips from its tip, onto my steady hand. I don’t wait for it to fall before splashing it onto the canvas.

For a few weeks, every night, when I am free from lessons and work, I come to the cave. The girl is still there. Hired to paint the caves, she said. “Originally looked for my *Shifu*. Couldn’t come, though. She sent me instead.” She told me. I nodded along, preoccupied with the pots of paint that lay around me.

Every night, the girl, Sheng, talks to me. I sit by and listen as she paints, occasionally taking a brush and sneaking in a few strokes on the wall. She tells me of her journeys across mountains and valleys, evergreen trees and the shafts of sunlight through its canopy; of rivers and something called the ‘ocean’, vast and blue and boundless; of animals and critters and exotic things I have never seen. She tells me of myths and stories her *Shifu* tells her, of the archer who shot nine sons, the goddess who created the world, the woman who sought peace. I had never heard any of it. All of this— so beautiful, so brilliant, so full of life and colours. Every day my breath is taken away by not only the art she paints, but the stories she tells me. So different from the dark and musty shop I was trapped in all my life. A slave, a survivor, a girl with darkness, void of colour. I had never heard things so enthralling, seen things so alluring.

One day, I take a few brushes and paint to my own cave. I could feel my pulsating as I ran towards my cave, forcing back the blackness reaching for it. When I reach my cave, I dip my brush into the paint, first blue, then red and yellow.

I will walk with the clouds, along the wind full of colours.

Something doesn’t feel right.

My mind is vibrant and my heartbeat roaring in my ears. In front of me, I see black obscured by patches of red, yellow, blue, gold.

But only patches.

I did not see anything, I could not see anything. Shapes, colours, but how could I, when I have never seen anything? Hiding and hoping to survive all my life, bathed in darkness, inside and out. I had never seen the world; not the mountains as tall as the sky, not the birds trilling a song, not myths and stories of magical things; not people.

I had survived. I did not live.

I drop my brush. The sky is peppered with so many stars tonight. I sprint towards the cave, one last time. *I need to live.*

“I’m leaving with you.” I yell to Sheng, who is working on her finishing touches of her cave painting. “I have to get out. I want to see colours, real colours,” I tell her. I will find my aunt. I will save my sister. *I will live.*

Sheng grins. “I knew it,” she exclaimed. “You can’t possibly be a monk. Not yet, at least You have so much to see, so much to offer.” I laugh. A carefree, heartened laugh.

And so I leave a note on the floor of the cave. I take one last glance at Sheng’s cave painting. Then I turn away, striding out. I will do this, someday, I tell myself. After I see. After I live.

I have nothing to take as I follow Sheng out the next morning. I have nothing, but I will have everything. I do not turn back, because there is so much in front of me. The colours overwhelm my sight, no longer dimmed and darkened by the shadows in me. They are there, lurking. But I will fight them, harder than I did. I will not only survive.

When I go out of the Grottoes, I see someone. *Shifu*, I hear Sheng cry. But the wind whistles in my ear, singing a tune of colour all too familiar. I blink at the thin and bony silhouette. I think of the figure that led me to the Grottoes, her voice oh so similar to that of Sheng’s. I think of Aunt’s five-month disappearance. I think of Sheng’s *Shifu*.

I see the rare tilt of her smile and thin crescent eyes.

The thin silhouette steps out of the shadows, and her features lay bare to me, as clear as the day. Her lips part, and somehow, I hear her over the wind. *Do you see now?*

We walk along the wind full of colours.

Punarjanman

St. Mary's Canossian College, Lee, Hailey – 16

Mogao Grottoes, 10th century AD

The Buddhists believe in rebirth. Saṃsāra, the endless cycle of repeated birth, pointless existence, then death. When the nuns teach them this, they look at each other across the cramped cave, and Rong rolls her eyes in boredom. Ning turns around and smiles, as she always does at Rong's antics. Her braided hair swings, and Rong finds herself entranced with the motion. 'Pay attention.' Ning mouths, the humour in Rong's eyes reflecting in her own.

That night, Ning sneaks into Rong's cot, silent amongst all the other girls studying in the temple. Rong pulls out a thin leather notebook, lit only by the flickering light of the candle nearby.

'Remember that rebirth thing the nuns taught us this morning?'

'Saṃsāra.' Ning recites, laying her head on Rong's shoulder. 'The painful, endless cycle that ultimately leads to nirvana.' Rong snuggles in closer to bury her face in Ning's untied hair, smiling at her 'serious student' voice.

'I found something better than that,' Rong announces, voice low. 'Look at this. Punarjanman.'

Ning peers at the few lines of text scribbled in Rong's messy handwriting.

'Punarjanman, a Sanskrit term derived from punar meaning "again" and janman, "birth". A cycle of reincarnation all beings undergo, indicating a move into a higher consciousness.' she glances up at Rong, who is looking at her expectantly. 'That's not a lot of information.'

Rong flops down, lying onto the bed. 'Yeah, that's the point. It leaves much more space for us to think about what it means, you know? Not what some random monk thought about it eons ago – that life has to be painfully unsatisfying just because. This one,' she jabs the word on the book, 'just suggests that there is reincarnation, and through it we eventually become better.'

Ning lies next to her, silent, pondering. Scenes of two emperors marching out with thousands of soldiers cover the ceiling. The girls had painted them for months, and Ning still remembers her wrist aching for weeks afterwards. She also remembers how Rong would teasingly kiss it better, playfulness twinkling in her eyes as she whispered do you feel better now, Ning?

'Do you think I will make you better?' she asks Rong instead. 'If we passed onto the next life, would I have made you a better person in this life?'

Rong flips over and takes her hand, a smile tugging at her lips and eyes aglow with affection, just as bright as the pigments of the murals above them. 'You're a far better influence on me than I am on you,' she murmurs, the voice tumbling out of her throat like she's confessing a secret. But really it's no secret, just simply unspoken between the two — that Ning, the obedient one, will probably achieve more than Rong ever could.

'Maybe in the next life I'll be the bad one,' Ning whispers back, 'and you'll be the one to pull me away from my wicked ways.'

Rong pulls her in closer, nose tickling the back of her neck with every breath. 'Ning?' she says, in the way that she does—soft and breathy, as though her very name is something to be in awe of.

'Yeah?' Ning replies, brushing her fingers over Rong's arm.

'If there's a next life, promise me you'll come find me again? Promise that no matter what happens we'll find each other.'

The request is solemn and serious, and Ning understands what Rong is asking of her. Inside the walls of the temple, where the courts and laws hold no power, they can be free to be whatever they like. But the moment they are of age and leave this place, they will be thrown into the mess of marriage. And their relationship — whatever it is — will surely get them heavily punished if not killed. The only thing they hope for, clutching each other in the dark, is that someday the world would be a better place and they would be able to find each other again, picking up where they last left off. That whatever they have will be able to pass through to the next life, and the next, until someday no one will scorn them, and they are free to love each other.

'I love you,' Ning says, in lieu of a reply. It is the first time she has said it out loud. She has thought it many times, of course. Far too many to count them all. But this is the first time she has spoken the actual words — quiet, with a hint of shyness. 'I will always find you, Rong', she promises. 'No matter what life we may go to next, I promise I will find you.'

Rong smiles at that—brilliant, just as her name suggests, and kisses Ning's temple. 'I love you too.'

Years later, Rong's marriage to a minister prevents any more night talks cuddled up together, and the most the two can get are yearly visits where they have to be careful with their every move. One night, Rong receives a letter telling her that Ning has died of the plague sweeping through China.

I'm coming for you too, my love, she thinks, when the ceiling of her room is too empty and bland, lacking in colourful murals her lover painted, and whispers maybe next life we will have a better chance at this.

It takes them a few tries, as all things do.

Dunhuang, 12th century AD

'Did you hear?' Rong's little brother bounces with delight at the dinner table. 'The royal couple is coming to the city next week. I can't wait—they say the empress literally glows. My classmate described her as the "first beam of sunlight hitting the ocean surface". What does that mean?'

'Eat your dinner,' Rong snapped. Hearing people talk about the empress with such awe always left a sour taste in her mouth, though she never understood why. 'You and your classmates have fun. I want no part of it.'

'You're going to need to help serve them too, when they come. Chief said so.'

Rong sighed in defeat. She was going to have to deal with these people whether she wanted to or not.

It had been years since she last stepped into the caves. Back then, she was still a child, holding onto her mother's hand as they wiped down years of dust from the walls. They were just as vibrant now with colourful murals and delicate statues as she remembered, but she couldn't help but feel there was something missing. She vaguely remembered having slept in a cave filled with drawings of an impending war. She even remembered having helped paint some. If she closed her eyes and dug deep in her head, she could almost visualise a scene—

You've got paint all over your hands, she teased.

And? Are you going to do something about it? replied a mystery voice, warm and affectionate. Rong could never quite remember who it belonged to, only that she loved its owner very, very much.

Would you want me to? Rong would ask, as she reached out towards them.

Then the memory would always fizzle out, and she would be left wondering just who she had loved so much.

Sometimes she would ask the nuns if there had ever been such a room, but they would always shake their heads. 'Why'd you want to know?', one of them asked.

You see, there's a vision that I keep having about a girl painting murals in a cave that doesn't exist, apparently.

'My mother told me of such a cave before she passed,' she muttered, deliberately not meeting his eyes and staring at the wall instead.

'Maybe it was one of the old ones that were destroyed,' he said. 'Perhaps someone in your family line helped make it and told their children the story of it, and your mother passed it on to you.'

Rong thanked the master, and left with more questions than answers.

'Empress Ning will be using these rooms tomorrow', the nun frowned at them. 'Rong, you are to see that she is taken care of.'

She walked off into another room, leaving Rong to handle the details.

Empress Ning was not what Rong expected at all. She didn't speak much, nor glow, but she did smile with a sweet serenity that reminded Rong of a warm, heavy blanket in the winter. She asked questions without being rude, inquiring about Rong's life and her family with genuine curiosity. At night, Rong would brush her hair, untangling all the knots that came from the complicated styles she kept her hair in,

Conversation flowed smoothly between the two. Somehow, Rong felt like she had known her long before they had met.

One night, Ning looked at her as she bathed and asked,

'Do you know of a cave here with a war painting? It had two emperors marching out to attack each other with their armies.'

Rong looked up in surprise. 'No,' she says carefully, slowly folding the clothes laid by the bath. 'Why do you ask?'

Ning frowns. 'It's nothing,' she replies sharply.

Rong shut her mouth. Clearly, she has forgotten her place—she is still a servant, and the empress royalty, and it does not matter that she feels closer to her than she has ever felt with her friends in the village.

'I keep...I keep thinking, seeing, this cave in my dreams,' she mumbled, eyes downcast, staring into the murky water of the bath. 'But I can't ever find it. I'd hoped that maybe...some of the locals here would have better luck, seeing as you've been here all your life.'

Rong put down the clothes she'd been holding. 'Maybe it's one of the old ones that were destroyed,' she replies, echoing what the master told her half-heartedly.

Had she known that Ning would not be willing to drop the topic easily, Rong would have tried harder to convince her that there was no such cave. But Ning was determined to get to the bottom of it, and even more adamant to drag Rong along in her little detective's trip. Unsatisfied with Rong's flimsy answer, Ning had all but ran out of the room wrapped in a robe, dripping water down the hallway.

'Your highness, this is a very bad idea,' Rong hissed under her breath, running after the empress. 'If the master catches us...', she trails off.

'Don't get caught, then,' Ning hissed back, fiddling with the lock of the library.

The door opened with a painfully loud screech, and Rong's heart skipped a beat. Ning pulled her inside, locking the door behind her. 'Start searching,' she ordered, her usual kind tone replaced by icy resolution. A shiver ran down Rong's back, and for a second she thought, that's not how Ning is, before the thought disappeared into the wind.

'You are a terrible influence on me.' Rong grumbled under her breath. She started looking into the boxes of scrolls that the masters have kept so meticulously, and stuck a hand into one, beginning to ransack the place.

Ning lit a lantern and placed it on the table, the glow painting them in soft yellow hues. The two poured over the ancient scrolls on the table, their hands bumping into each other.

'There,' Ning said, pointing at the wrinkled paper. 'I think it's that one.' Her voice wavered, but she glared at the paper as though it had personally offended her.

Rong peered over her shoulder and was met with the cave from her visions, the colours vibrant and the memory finally clear. 'The dormitory for students studying in the temples two hundred years ago,' the caption read.

When she looked up, Ning stared back like she'd seen a ghost. 'I was there,' she muttered, face pale. 'I...I painted those...and.' she turned to Rong, 'You!' there's pained, uncertain realisation in her face.

'You were there too-why were you there?'

Rong stared back, confused. It's as though the puzzle has been laid out in front of her already, and there was simply one last piece to fall into place, but it is missing and she doesn't understand.

'I-'

Ning grabbed her by the arms, eyes flashing with fury and pain and many more emotions Rong can't put her finger on.

'You were there,' she repeated, 'and we-'

Rong was still confused, but memories she is sure she has never experienced have started to rush into her head, overwhelming, leaving her defenceless and paralysed against its urgent force, and she starts to remember. The next thing she is aware of, is how Ning has crashed her lips onto her own, with an almost mad desperation. The hands on her arms have tightened their grip, and Rong is sure that there will probably be a bruise tomorrow, something to prove that this is not a fevered dream her mind had conjured up. Rong leaned in, trying to chase this high, but it was already dwindling before she could leap in. Ning has pulled away, eyes welled up with tears threatening to fall. The grip on her arms is gone. Rong reaches out, craving the frantic force behind it.

'I-I-I cannot,' Ning breathed out, painfully stuttering out every word. 'Not..not now. Not this time. My duty...it is not this. It cannot be this.'

She leaves in a flurry, extinguishing the candle in the room. Rong stands in the darkness, the memory of a love she cannot seem to grasp fresh on her mind.

Walled City, 15th century AD

In this life, they barely even know each other. One lives in the palace with the rest of the emperor's concubines, and the other slaves away in the farms. They go to their graves yearning for something they've never even known in this life.

Shanghai, 18th Century AD

When Rong sees the lithe woman dressed smartly in a qipao boarding the ship to Britain, she already knows in her heart that her lover has slipped away from her yet again. Perhaps it is destiny that is kind to their struggles, or

simply because their souls have been apart for so long, that they will know each other with just a second glance. By catching only a glimpse of the well-dressed woman walking away from her, Rong feels in her heart that this is still not the time for them. She lets Ning leave, lingering on her back, hair tied in that intricate, somewhat familiar style that stands out against the other travellers in the sea of people. She can — and she must wait. She has waited for so long already, after all.

Dunhuang Museum, 20th Century AD

In hindsight, this was probably a bad decision, to run off to nowhere at such short notice. But in spite of Ning's impulsiveness leading her here, she is calm. It's like she was meant to be here.

The museum is small and quite cramped, but she doesn't find that unpleasant. There's a small pamphlet in the corner of the room advertising paid tours later in the afternoon, and Ning signs up for one. She's made it this far, after all, it wouldn't hurt to spend a bit more to get a better experience.

She's got a private guided tour later in the afternoon, that will supposedly introduce her to the few caves that are open to the public and also give more detailed explanations about the antiques displayed in the museum. The lady at the concierge smiles at her, warm and welcoming, telling her about the guide, a university student working here as part of her project. 'Lovely girl,' she says, taking a slow sip of her tea. 'Bit wild, but so creative and clever. History major.'

She's intrigued. Maybe it's just the fact that she's not really dated anyone since leaving high school, or it's the fact that this mysterious person seems to balance smarts and chaos in equal parts, something she's never been able to resist. Or maybe it's just part of the pull she felt towards this place.

The museum starts to get crowded with visitors, so Ning stands at the back next to an exhibition of ancient notes, and looks out at the endless waves of people. From the corner of her eye, she catches sight of someone walking towards her, a tall woman with eyes twinkling with impish spirit,

Ning knows her name before the woman even opens her mouth. There is no doubt — she knows her the same way trees know the ground and birds know the sky, the same way monarchs know their kingdoms and handmaidens know their ladies. She would know her through time and space, she knows her now, and she runs.

'Rong!'

Her face is different from the one Ning knows. She is taller, her hair shorter, eyes thinner and skin darker.

But she knows in her soul that it is her, her lover that she has spent centuries reaching out to but never managing to grasp, finally here to embrace her once more. This is the moment that they have long been waiting for, and now that it is here, she has no plan of ever letting go.

Rong's eyes shine with gentle amusement, and she smiles, 'Ning.'

They hold each other like their lives depend on it (and maybe it does). The final piece of the puzzle is in its place, and they know, deep in their bones, that they are home.

Behind them, the exhibition reads:

student's leather notebook, discovered in the dormitory
translation of written text:

1st line: a Sanskrit term derived from punar meaning "again" and janman, "birth". a cycle of reincarnation all beings undergo, indicating a move into a higher consciousness.

2nd line: i will always find you, my glorious sun

The Eye of the Dunhuang Dancer

St. Paul's Co-educational College, Tsik, Yan Tung Denise – 16

Walking into the Mogao Grottoes, I was immediately transported back to my highschool years, the mesmerising wall carvings just as impressive as I had remembered. With my gaze fixated on the dancer's watch on the Dunhuang paintings, I carefully took pictures of each breathtaking detail of the cave and the brand new displays inside, finally upholding my end of the promise...

"This is so boring," Morgan grunted as we walked into the caves, "Who cares about these crusty old caves anyway?" I let out a heaved sigh as the pair of us followed our batch of weary students into the caves. "Wasn't this trip supposed to be a treat?" somebody else grumbled as the teacher tried her best to arouse our interest in the caves.

"Guys, these caves were first dug out in AD 366 and showcase some of the most beautiful pieces of history we have left of Ancient China," the teacher explained, "Aren't these wall carvings impressive?" We glanced at the walls warily and made some nonchalant grunts as the teacher began to grow impatient with our indifferent attitudes.

The Mogao Grottoes were of great historical importance, that we all knew, but as I stood within the caves in the flesh, I couldn't help but feel cheated and let down. The caves seemed bare and barren, with nothing much of interest apart from the muted paintings and carvings on the walls. A few paintings were also hung up but that was about it, and as a teenager used to quick paced media and attention-grabbing entertainment, it was only natural that we grew restless and dissatisfied.

Discouraged by our apathy, the teacher began to explain the background of the grottoes half-heartedly and paid little attention to what we were doing. Gesturing toward the different paintings in a lethargic manner, even he seemed bored by the caves, and looked as though he was enjoying this field trip as much as us students. Not long after, he announced that we could look around the caves ourselves before moving on to the next part of the trip as a troop, and walked away from the group, shaking his head.

Walking over to one of the Dunhuang paintings, my mind wandered off to what fun I could be having back at home if I had not participated in this exchange programme in the first place, rolling my eyes at the thought of my brother having all the fun back in Hong Kong while I was stuck here looking at some boring caves. Suddenly, a distinct sparkle caught my eye and I walked closer to the wall to inspect it. The shimmer was coming from the eye of a Dunhuang dancer and as I turned around to point it out to Morgan, I came to the realization that I was all alone...

Nervously peering around to find any trace of where my troop could have gone off to, I jumped in surprise as I felt someone press their palm on my shoulder. I spun around indignantly and was face-to-face with the Dunhuang dancer, who was smiling sweetly at me. Letting out a yelp, I stumbled backwards and rubbed my eyes in confirmation that I was not hallucinating. The dancer giggled at my embarrassing display and reassured me, "There is no need to be afraid, Michelle," my eyes widened at the mention of my name. "My name is Hua," she continued, "and it is time for you to reconnect with your roots." She held out her hand in invitation and said "Come with me, let me show you the glory behind these caves that you seem so unamused by..."

Taking her hand with a hint of hesitation, Hua led me to the backside of the cave before pulling me into the wall and out the other side. I had my eyes squeezed shut in anticipation of slamming my face into the jagged rocks, but was pleasantly surprised when we came out the other side unscathed. The scent of dried herbs and sounds of a bustling marketplace engulfed me before I gingerly opened my eyes, "This is Ancient China," Hua explained with pride, and sauntered over to one of the market stalls.

I gazed around in awe, taking in the scene of the lively village as I ran over to join Hua. She was carefully picking out different herbs when I realised that we were at a stall featuring Chinese herbal remedies and medicines. Taking note of each basket, I recognised a few ingredients such as Ginseng and Birdnest, but was taken aback by the variety of dried flowers and fungi they had laying on the table. The salesperson was speaking confidently to Hua about the different remedies and gave me a small smile before responding to Hua's haggling with a firm declination. Hua made a swift purchase of a handful of herbs before gesturing for us to move along, approaching a stall featuring various silks and fabrics.

A bubbly woman was busily showing off her array of different patterned cloths to potential buyers, pointing out the intricate thread detailing and smooth finish. Under her animated presentation, a crowd had formed in front of the stall as villagers clamoured to ask for details on her wares. Entranced by her words, I absentmindedly wandered toward the stall just as Hua pulled me back, "Don't get any closer if you don't intend on buying," she glanced at the

saleswoman and sighed “She’s a hustler and before you know it, you’ll be spending your entire dowry on a section of her fabric, trust me” and steered us ahead.

We then visited stalls selling dried meats, handmade jewellery, rare gemstones, and various snacks such as tanghulu, all of them equally vibrant and colourful, and I felt as if I was being featured in a movie set in Ancient China, only everything was more authentic and warm than anything I had ever seen on television. Modern media could never dream of even scratching the surface of the liveliness of this scene and the feeling of homeliness that the marketplace gives off. Each and every one of the villagers interacted with ease with one another and conversations among them flowed in the fashion of a harmonious pantomime.

Just as I was panoramically viewing the entire marketplace, Hua whispered that we had to go and I felt myself being transported away from the village. When I opened my eyes which I hadn’t even realised that I had squeezed shut, I gasped in awe at the scene I was beholding. I seemed to have been brought to the Emperor’s court and I watched in admiration as Hua joined the line of dancers in the middle of the room.

The court was meticulously decorated with gold detailing framing each piece of wooden furniture, each carved with patterns of dragons and other mythical creatures. Murals ran along the walls with intricate designs that seem so real that they could jump out of their confinements on the walls at any given moment. The ceilings were arched and adorned with even more golden trim and supported by thick pillars that featured murals of their own. Even the floor tiles featured intricate carvings and patterns in various colours which made the room even more complete in its vibrant glory.

In the middle of the room, gowned in the most extravagant Chinese dresses adorned with golden headpieces and jade necklaces, the dancers were draped in sheer shawls as they began to perform a routine accompanied by a lively song played live on the erhu and guzheng. The group of dancers performed complicated moves seamlessly and never missed a beat as they took turns showcasing their talents before finishing off their performance with a synchronised dance.

The Emperor looked vaguely amused as the dancers excused themselves from the room and did not even notice my out-of-place presence as I followed suit, gaping in pure astonishment as the memory of their performance became the single occupant of my mind. “What did you think?” Hua enquired when we were out of earshot of the others, and smiled when I was at a loss of words, “That was only the tip of the iceberg in the fascinating and intricate art of Chinese dance, it’s a shame that your generation no longer appreciate these traditional art forms and stray away from your roots...”

Before I could respond, Hua had already begun to pull us into another world. Greeted by the melodic sounds of a rushing river and the pitter-patter of woodland creatures, I cried in delight at the natural beauty I was beholding. The sky was an uncontaminated pure azure blue, rows of elms and willow trees stood together in a coincidental yet methodological manner as I spied bunnies and squirrels mingling amongst themselves on the branches. Up ahead, a river flowed with an enthusiastic spirit and gushed into an oval lake. On the surface, lily pads floated idyllically as turtles and frogs lounged about without a care in the world, forming a picture-perfect scene fit for a fairytale.

“Isn’t this breathtaking,” Hua breathed, “Our country is home to so many natural sanctuaries and landscapes where visitors are nudged into reflection, the human life so fickle and insignificant in contrast to the vast expanse of our world itself...” She smiled melancholically before noting, “Too bad people of your time no longer pause long enough to appreciate the wonders of nature that are present around you, I’m sure most of this beauty has long been forgotten by your generation,” she lamented.

I reached out and ran my fingers along the meticulous stones that embellished the river bed and was pleasantly surprised by a fish leaping out of the water surface before diving in, splashing water onto my face. The freshness of the water felt cold to the touch as I reminisced the last time I had such an intimate interaction with nature. I could not recall a single memory. Hua placed her palm on the small of my back and suggested that we leave for our final destination.

I was met with the sounds of dripping water, and an air of dampness as we arrived at the mysterious location. It was too dark for me to make out where we were until the sizzle of a candle being lit made me realise that we were in some sort of cave. Hua grimaced, “This is what happens when people no longer appreciate the history and traditions of their own people,” and turned towards an old man, beholder of the candle. I gazed around inquisitively and realised that we were at the Mogao Grottoes, only it was full of cargo boxes stocked with yellowed scrolls and fragile goods. The old man was seen to be counting some silver shillings, as teams of foreigners loaded the cargo crates onto their vehicles.

“Wait, what’s happening?” I asked as the foreigners began to drive off with the priceless artifacts. Hua sighed and explained “This man is Wang Yuanlu, a taoist who was the self-proclaimed protector of the Mogao Grottoes,” Hua crossed her eyes in annoyance and said “Some protector he was, selling off our country’s priceless treasures and artifacts to foreign archaeologists for a fraction of their worth just for his selfish personal gains!” I peered at the emptied out caves as Hua continued, “Your generation never had the chance to see these caves in their full glory, with so many pieces of literature and artifacts that belong here still residing in museums all over the world, those lost pieces of our country’s history unable to find their way home”, she let out a wistful sigh.

Moved by her passion and longing to reclaim our country’s artifacts, I boldly stated “I’ll get them back, I promise!” Just as Hua opened her mouth to respond to my heartfelt declaration, I could hear somebody calling my name from afar...

“Michelle, Michelle...Michelle!” I snapped back into reality to find Morgan shaking me vigorously, “Ouch, okay! What!” I responded. “Dude,” Morgan rolled her eyes, “You didn’t actually fall asleep in the middle of a field trip did you?” I blushed when I noticed that everybody in our troop was snickering at me as the teacher gave me a terrifying glare and proceeded to murmur my apologies. Turning toward the Dunhuang painting, I wondered how much of what just happened was a dream, but couldn’t help seeing a sparkle in the dancer’s eye.

“Where should we put these, Miss?” one of the moving men enquired, “Over there in the ancient scrolls section” I replied. Gazing at the Mogao Grottoes now, I couldn’t help but smile at the progress I had made over the last few years. I had managed to set up various exhibits in the grottoes featuring ancient paintings, historic artifacts such as vases and decorations as well as many ancient scrolls.

After obtaining my masters degree in art history and becoming a historical conservationist, it had become my sole goal to restore the Mogao Grottoes to its former glory. Evidently, the task was much more complicated than I had anticipated during that trip in high school, but it was still heartwarming to see numerous pieces of Chinese history being returned to where they belong and displayed in a fashion that honoured their significance. Snapping another shot of the new exhibitions for documentation, I peered at the photograph and smiled to myself as I took note of the cave wall in the background, and the gleam in the eye of the Dunhuang dancer.

Beauty Beyond The Art

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

They held a secret for 1656 years, waiting to be discovered.

It was a long wait. And a long story.

Part I: The Spirit

1900 A.D.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We found the reason here.

The gateway was gone.

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

Cave 16.

I hesitated, wondering whether I should intervene.

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

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

We should never have come to the Mogao Grottoes.

Part II: The Mogao Caves

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

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

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

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

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

You did not.

We started collapsing.

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

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

1600 A.D.

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

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

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

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

Chang Jia examined the murals carefully.

The images were moving.

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

The ground opened up beneath him.

-

Spirits of the dead.

Humans of greed.

We will not forgive. Any of you.

Part III: Wang Yuanlu

1900 A.D.

Come to us, Wang.

The Mogao Grottoes.

I could hear them.

They called to me.

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

Something snapped in me and I fell unconscious.

The spirits of the dead blared at me-

Help us reincarnate!-

Find the gateway!-

Restore the caves!-

Help us!-

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

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

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

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

A dream.

I turned to leave.

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

The cave was moving?...

‘Calm down!’ I shouted.

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

Restore us! The Caves demanded.

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

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

The Caves did not speak.

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

Part IV: Narrator

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

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

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

Dunhuang.

Peerless place. And what to do there?

Build the Mogaoku.

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

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

And the gateway slipped free of the Mogao Grottoes.

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

He was just the second.

The third had to be better.

Part V: Ka Han

2022, London

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

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

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

I melted into the dark and flew with the wind.

The cycle of reincarnation has stopped for too long.

I couldn't let them wait any longer.

-

1035 A.D.

'The Tanguts are coming!'

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

'But the manuscripts! And the Sutra! What if the Tanguts destroy them with the caves! And the gateway! If the caves are destroyed the gateway will be free!'

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

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

To find the gateway you had to follow the murals.

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

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

The Sutra.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Gasping in panic, I leaped forward just in time.

The blade cut my throat.

Part VI: Ka Han

2020, The Motto Grottoes

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

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

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

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

Outrageous!

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

Don't - mention - the word!

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

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

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

For survival-

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

The gateway is still missing!

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

Reincarnation-

‘For whom?’

The Caves fell silent.

They understood.

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

How are the Sutra and the gateway related?

‘They both cut through the world.’

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

I had one more surprise for the Caves.

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

What are you playing at!

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

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

I had thought of that before.

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

It had to be me.

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

Why are you doing all this, Ka Han?

For the greater good.

Epilogue: Narrator

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

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

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

-

The Caves had one more secret.

Their greatest secret of all.

The gateway did not just lead to reincarnation.

It led to one more place, hidden to all but those worthy.

Nirvana.

Ka Han.

Speak to us.

Moksha

St. Paul's Convent School, Tsang, Nga Yi Agatha – 16

“This symbol on the painting, means ‘emancipation’...”

The guide’s description reverberated across the hollow chamber, amplified voice clashing with previous sentences, all coalescing into a jumbled cacophony.

Ensnared amongst the drove of tourists, he briefly pondered how the sight before his eyes appeared centuries prior; how the sun-bleached hues of murals overhead, the once defined features of sculptures, and the refined architecture had presented themselves in their prime.

Though it failed to mollify the turbulence within, he begrudgingly admitted that the view offered an ephemeral sense of serenity. Temporary, but it did provide him respite.

I suppose that’s all that matters, isn’t it? Living in the moment, not being bound by the manacles of the past nor the concerns for the future...

That was her core philosophy, but we were opposites. I chided her recklessness; she mocked my ‘excessive caution’.

But a father’s love for their daughter knows no bounds.

Repeatedly I warned her that decisions came with consequences, but she paid no heed to that.

She thought of me as overbearing, yet I couldn’t afford to lose even her.

*What life had savagely seized from me, it returned in the form of my own flesh and blood.
Fate had a proclivity for gallows’ humour--she was a carbon copy of her mother.*

It even sentenced her to an identically grim destiny.

The odour of chloroform, the frigid quality of the morgue all came careening back from the abyss of his memories, drowning him with a glacial deluge of misery, a sensation he had tried in vain to evade for the past months.

Amidst grief’s asphyxiating chokehold, was the indelible image of her bruised, pallid expression; a mere caricature of the little girl he brought up, drained of spirit and soul.

“You coming?” A stranger snapped him out of his stupor, grounding him back to the scorching embrace of the Gansu summer.

He nodded, and quickly merged into the horde of bodies migrating towards another direction.

Once for my wife and twice for her daughter. Both times the culprits weren’t even aware of what transpired, spewing gibberish as law enforcement launched a barrage of questions towards them.

The unyielding ray of the sun forcefully pummelled through him as he deserted the shadings.

They never have the gall to apologise afterwards.

As the crowds dispersed, he found himself isolated, straying further and further away. Aimless, he wandered adrift.

His feet moved on their own accord, with no location in mind. Not realising how far he’d meandered, he halted by a set of bronzed railings as he reached the end of an offbeat trail winding up the mountainside.

In the Sun’s blinding radiance, he made out the unmistakable outline of a cliff.

Feeling unbearably desiccated, he reached into his rucksack for his waterskin, only to find it emptied. Weariness; both from physical exertion and the trials life had put him through; gnawed at his bones. Over the fencing an abandoned canyon stared at him, adorned with scattered rocks and sporadic outbreaks of shrubbery.

All of this, for what? Why bother?

A feeble chirp brought him out of his daze, disrupting his train of thoughts. Besides him lay a tuff of misshaped feathers, squeaking in pain. Glancing upwards, he spotted a nest jammed between two boulders, slightly beyond the barrier.

Wryly, he scooped up the injured bird.

Inching past the barricade, he propped up the creature and ambled forwards.

The ground beneath him crumbled.

He plummeted.

“..but really, you shouldn’t have done that.”

A splitting migraine pummelled through his temple mercilessly, threatening to cloud his hazy line of vision.

“Ah, you’re awake. Drink this, it’ll help.”

A pair of hands crisscrossed with veins extended towards him, a steaming mug nestled in between. Wincing, he nodded in thanks and hungrily gulped down the infusion. Tendrils of warmth spreading from his core to his extremities, dissipating the pervasive ache that plagued every inch of his frame.

Rejuvenated, he sat up, groggy eyes observing the unfamiliar set of surroundings.

An intricate tapestry of greenery dangled leisurely above him, clusters of vibrantly tinted flowers garnishing the viridescent awning. Upon closer inspection, he noted that several critters had made themselves home within the verdant blanket, adding an aura of liveliness to the cluttered chamber. The buzz of critters hummed in the background, infusing the atmosphere with youthful exuberance: It was a menagerie from a distant galaxy.

Wait, am I alive? Bewildered, his gaze fell onto the recently displaced cup for answers, only to find it clutched within the paws of an inquisitive monkey. Nimbly, it leapt onto the welcoming shoulders of an elderly lady, returning the utensil to its owner. Petting its head, she withdrew a nut from her pocket and tossed it into the air, leading the pet to scamper off.

With a grace uncommon of her age, the woman took a seat. Warily, his eyes darted past the oddities to greet this person. In an instant, he was transfixed.

Those eyes, he mused, speak of... infinite lives.

Noticing this, the woman grinned, crow’s feet etched above her hollow cheeks.

“Before you say so, no need to thank me.”

She gestured towards a faraway corner overtaken by leaves and branches. As if on cue, an animated chirp sounded out. “I’m only returning a favour. If it weren’t for you, I wouldn’t have known that the he had tripped!”

Oh, right. The bird.

"I must thank you deeply for that, but that was a nasty fall that you took. Even with the drink it'll take you a while to heal."

Shuffling over to the ginkgo worktable, she reached for a teapot. The aroma of autumn spilled into the expanse, intensifying as a refilled cup of tea was delivered to him.

"I'm sorry but who are you? What are you doing here? In this a ravine--" Unable to contain his confusion, a litany of questions erupted from him, only to be hushed moments later.

"Well, we've got time to kill," A mischievous glint shimmered in those depthless irises. "I'll tell you the full story then."

"It begins with a young man, and his journey..."

He knew it would be soon. Just not this soon.

"I don't know how to say this but..."

The sentence trailed off, as if the mere mention of it would bring it into existence. Sparing a furtive glance for the patient, the elder shook his head.

Head bowed, the adolescent sniffled, shoulders violently jerking with each veiled sob.

"Wha—what about the Golden Lotus?" He jolted upright at the suggestion, bloodshot eyes widened to an unnerving degree.

"Young man—"

Words tumbled out of his mouth, bordering on incoherent rambling "Legend has it that it cures all ailments, yes? It's near impossible to find, but—"

"Young man, listen to me. Whatever you've heard are simply old wives' tales—there is no cure." The mellow but firm cadence of the physician cemented the finality of the situation, confirming his worse fears.

Dejected, he sank back into his original position. Offering his final condolences, the doctor excused himself from the hut, lamenting as he went.

Eyes bloodshot and rimmed with dried tears, he directed his attention to his bedridden father.

I barely recognize you now. Though reality assured him that, this was indeed his father; this anaemic mask that feebly smiled at him now resembled nothing of the same man who he owed his life to.

The very man, who chose to provide a loving home for an orphan under the scrutiny of his fellow neighbours.

It was time that he repaid the act of kindness. Even if it was a thread of hope as elusive as the Golden Lotus—he would go to the ends of the earth for his father.

I'm going to find it, he vowed. I'm not giving up, father.

With a new purpose in mind, he pawned off his belongings, and set off into the Gansu wilderness with a senior in tow, on a quest to reignite the spark of life within his father's withering body.

Grassy green plains blended into mountainous paths; breaks would become more frequent as even his trusted mule grew weary of the treacherous terrain. Oftentimes in those brief intervals of tranquillity seeds of doubt would

germinate: Would he have time to catch the transient blooming of the revered crop? Would he know if it was the right herb?

Did it even exist, or was it merely a figment of imagination?

No. He was uncertain of numerous things, but he knew that the Golden Lotus was real.

I've seen it with my own eyes.

Being ostracised as a child granted him a peculiar set of pastimes, one of which included scaling heights and camping out in nearby forests. The very affection that his environment deprived him of, he sought within the company of mute trees. He wasn't always alone though, for the enigmatic canopies of the woods was a safe haven for those wishing to elude the public's eyes.

The memory was blurry, yet his mind stubbornly refused to let go. It was the first time he'd seen imperial guards, regal stallions weaving between the maze of trees, plumes of leaves flushing up with each stride.

It was approaching dusk, and soon their hooves slowed into a trot as the soldiers passed under him. He could still recall exhaling in relief, believing he'd be able to return home soon.

However as luck would have it, the legion chose to set up their encampment directly underneath him. Petrified, he flattened himself against the branches of a bushy pine, hoping to avoid any unwarranted trouble. Eavesdropping throughout the night, he gleaned from the conversations that the emperor's son was on the brink of death, and that 'it' was a last ditch effort to save him.

Curious, he awaited for the campfire to be reduced to glowing embers. Cloaked in darkness, he descended onto the lower echelons of the pine, wanting to take a look at this alleged panacea.

It lay within a cushioned box, a flower with petals painted a brilliant hue of white, luminescent against the tenebrous surroundings.

It wasn't simply a myth. Yet that offered little reassurance, as then he'd need to procure it before his father worsened

Determination now fuelled by urgency, it propelled him forwards.

As he traversed up the Yellow River though, he couldn't shake off the feeling that he was being followed. Not by any malicious entity, but rather an eagle. It always tailed behind him, lightly signalling its presence with the rustling of leaves. Sometimes he'd throw leftover fruits in its direction, feeling oddly enamoured of the creature over time.

The many tributaries of Huang He burst with life; on a particular stretch he noticed that fish frequented the pristine waters too, flitting in and out of sight.

Content with the distance he'd travelled for the day, he decided to spend the night there and to replenish his stores. Rolling up his sleeves, he strode into the creek confidently, certain that he'd be having fish for dinner.

Oh, how completely wrong he was.

An hour later he stepped out of the river, red-faced and empty handed. In his periphery, he saw a girl giggling at him. Infuriated, he yelled out, "Well you try then, it's near impossible!"

Arms crossed, the girl came to the rocky shore, smirk remaining.

"They aren't willing to be caught, and brute force won't get you anywhere either."

Incredulous, he replied, "Of course it won't willingly swim into your hands, what else do you suggest then?" Pride stung he resumed his activities, this time hoping to prove the girl wrong. Deliberately discarding her advice he clung onto any fish that would swim past him.

His early attempts were in vain, yet agitation became his motivation. Eventually, he managed to cling onto a particularly large specimen. Letting out a celebratory yelp he wrenched the unfortunate soul out of the lake, wrestling against a seizing mass of scales and fins.

Then it bit him. Hard.

A bloodcurdling shriek reverberated across the waterside. His arms flailed, struggling to release himself from the iron-clad clamp of the fish's jaw. Sanguine rivulets streaked his forearm.

Understanding the gravity of the situation, the girl rushed over, screaming out, "See I told you, you can't force things! Sometimes you just have to let go!"

The world devolved into an amalgamation of pained cries, splashing water and specks of blood.

Suddenly an eagle, resplendently lit against the setting sun, divebombed the pair. Bracing for impact he shielded his head, only to find his wounded hand finally free.

Grimacing, he straggled back to the encampment; where the fish lay, motionless.

The eagle stood atop of its corpse, proud of its work.

"Oi, how did you manage to tame him?" An interrogative voice rang out behind him.

Exasperated, he put up his hands in defeat.

"Let's cook this bastard up, and we'll talk, alright?"

Throughout supper he'd explained his mission to the girl, though she was too focused on her plate to give a proper response.

This isn't worth a injured appendage, he thought between gulps, *but it's close to that*.

She wolfed down the last of her portion in taciturn agreement, flinging off scraps to the eagle.

Readjusting his bandages, he turned away from the bonfire to tend to his father, ensuring that he had enough clothing on for the chilly night.

Several weeks ago it seemed as if his father's condition had improved, and at some point they even began making conversation; but as summer bled into autumn everything took a turn for the worse.

It was these moments, that made him contemplate if he was truly doing the right thing.

"That eagle over there; he's one my grandma's hatchlings. No one's been able to domesticate him so far...I don't know how you did that, but he's yours now." She said, joining him.

"To be honest, I really admire what you're doing. And I know you have a big heart. My grandma would be honoured to meet someone like you."

Together they stood in solidarity, soaking in the silence.

"This may sound sudden, but do you want to join us? Our people are westbound too, and well, there's always strength in numbers. Bandits loiter as you go further up, so you might want to consider that."

"Besides, Granny's been looking everywhere for him. I can't go back without him, y'know?"

The girl he met--Ling Mei--was the tribe leader's grandchild; granting him a warm welcome into the community. Over the past few weeks he'd assimilated amongst the nomads, picking up new skills for survival.

More importantly, he got closer to his destination.

“You weren’t lying when you said that these regions were dangerous.” He remarked, flinging his rucksack by the tent entrance.

“You haven’t seen real danger yet.” The elderly matriarch scoffed, sharpening a dagger. “Just you wait.”

Almost prophetically, a storm of hooves thundered in the distance, paired with haunting battle cries of a foreign dialect.

The elder sprang into action, mouthing the dreaded word.
Raiders.

As he hurriedly gathered his belongings, he noted the absence of his eagle.

Horrified, he sprinted outside; it was pure pandemonium within the quarters. Ducking a downpour of arrows and pushing against the panicked mob, he reached the cages.

That’s when he saw it.

A mutilated cadaver, blood spurting out from the arrow jutting from its torso.

Mere seconds later, Ling Mei found him kneeling on the ground. With no time to spare, she grabbed him by the collar and hoisted him onto a horse. Burying his head into the mare’s mane, his tears evaporated against the rushing wind, cries replaced by the howling gales.

It took them a day to regroup. The air of despair was palpable amongst the refugees, their fate unknown.

For him, the damage was irreversible. He’d escaped without his father, unknowingly abandoning him in his devastation.

The death of a beloved sidekick and the disappearance of his father broke him.

It was there that he noticed a secluded entrance to a monastery.

And the unmistakable sheen of the Golden Lotus, glimmering behind its walls.

“And so our story ends.”

“But his father died, right? So what’s the point?” He enquired.

“He did in fact achieve immortality” she added. “But not the type you’d expect.”

“To live is to suffer; I think you know that already. There are certain things in life that are just out of our control, for example death.”

“Everybody dies twice, first physically and then as their name is uttered for the last time. The legacy of their actions survives, a continuation of their lives. Although his father may have passed away, his kindred spirit lives on within him.”

“So what did he do with the plant? He didn’t need it anymore, right?”

“Witnessing the destruction inflicted upon his people, he distributed it amongst the infirmed, leaving none for himself. Touched by the goodwill of the monks, he dedicated his life to the construction of external temples, culminating in the grottoes today.” Gesturing towards the windows, she concluded, “And so the fruits of his labour survive till this day.”

He inhaled, unsure what to make of the situation. Throughout the day, the soreness subsided into a dull throb and now felt like the right time to leave.

“Thank you so much, I’m feeling much better now.” Standing up, he gathered his possessions, poised to leave. “It’s best if I don’t bother you any longer.”

As he stepped out of the doorway, though, the lady gave a departing comment:

“She may be gone, but don’t let her memory fade away. Do good in her name, and live your life to the fullest. It’s what she would’ve wanted.”

For once in what felt like an eternity, he felt at peace. Poised to bide farewell to her, he suddenly realised that he never asked for her name.

“I’m Wen Chang, what’s your name?”

“Just call me Ling Mei.”

Beyond Faith

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

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

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

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

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

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

What fate shall befall me? I awaited an answer.

...

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

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

...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We walked through the meandering pathways and I could feel his curiosity and excitement as he looked in awe at the intricately designed statues and paintings kept hidden inside the belly of the beast. I remembered feeling that way once too, but somehow my guilt still riddled my body.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes, I know that Ming Jing. But did you know about the horrendous things that I've done?"

There was a pause, heavy with my anxiety.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

...

Epilogue

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

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

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

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

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

"I don't understand, Master. Where is Ming Jing?" Master Wang looked puzzled.

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

The Cursed Painting

The British International School Shanghai, Puxi Campus, Fong, Wingyin Clara – 14

On the verge of begging for air, Hua Yin crawled her way into another sandstorm shelter embedded into the hillside. It was lined with wood, splattered with a hue of dark red, giving her an eerie feeling as she looked down at the ground, painted with the pigment shed from her deep wound. Gazing up, she spotted horizontal lines and cracks within the rock, making it look questionably unstable. She wondered how it managed to support it.

Noises like sandpaper could be heard as her knees scraped the dusty ground, making her way inside the cave. What Hua Yin had imagined to be a simple cave, now gave her an impression of a maze, as smaller caves within the hole dug out from the rock led to one another, creating a community of caves. They were filled with intricate drawings that trapped the rusty golden artifacts and floor within them. The statues that appeared made it clear to her that she stumbled upon a multitude of temples. The cavern depths haven't been swept for a week or so, inclining her to question the reliability of the caretakers. After all, a place filled with valuable items should be carefully taken care of.

Aimlessly, Hua Yin sojourned in the next cave she found, hoping that her split abdomen would be able to recover in a few days. She prayed to the statue of the Buddha that was at the entrance that her enemies wouldn't find her, nor would any monks question her sudden intrusion in the temples.

She looked around the cavern. She settled in one that was covered head to toe in drawings. They depicted bloody scenes of battles from the recent past. Soldiers covered in armor on horses marched in a formation, some carrying flags of their homeland, asserting superiority. At the same time, others led the troops, equipped with sharp, metal spears that could easily slice even the oldest of trees. Every detail was drawn with care, successfully making the paintings radiate with emotion from the time of the events. Sorrow, regret, anger, vengeance, it was as if the souls of the dead lingered on earth, waiting to be satisfied so that they could rest in peace.

Her eyes landed on the war where her parents were mercilessly killed by the king of Zhao 10 years ago. At the time, there weren't enough people who were willing to join the Imperial army; however, they were short of people, so the Emperor forcibly took civilians over the age of 13 and listed them in the military. Due to the inexperience many people had and the short amount of time they had to train, millions died in vain. At the time, Hua Yin was only 8; thus, she didn't fit the requirements to get listed in the army. To prevent any escapees or rebellion, the government officials made an official statement to the public that they were taking people away, as they were granted a chance to develop their businesses nationwide. Looking at the circumstances, it was apparent this was not going to be the case. Be that as it may, the public trusted their government too much. As a result, they only ended up getting used.

She mentally wrote a message:

Mom, Dad. I saw Lian Yin. Unexpectedly, he's the leader of the gang that wants me dead. He still blames me for not preventing the guards who took you to join the army. I don't blame him for that, though. I agree. However, I wish I could do something; he's become aggressive and short-tempered. I worry for his future.

She sighed and stared at the light brown cover above her head. It was a well-known fact that Hua Yin desperately needed someone she could talk to, someone with whom she could release all her thoughts and feelings she had bottled up during the last ten years.

Lian Yin was her younger brother, born just three years after Hua Yin. He always admired and looked up to her. They had a great connection. They would do everything together, support each other, and be there for each other. During their childhood, many of the kids in the neighborhood regarded Hua Yin as weak. She would frequently be bullied. From punching her to stealing her toys, they would do all kinds of things to make her suffer. But, Lian Yin had always been tall, which made him look formidable to many people. He would always scare them off and protect her. They were close to the point whenever the townspeople would see them together, they would comment: "They're practically inseparable!" And it was true. Nonetheless, when their parents were killed, he blamed her for

everything. Just like that, in an instant, their connection, trust, the bond that accumulated over the years of being siblings shattered into a thousand pieces, never to be repaired again. Now, he even resorted to killing her.

All this thinking was giving her a migraine. One of her bad habits was to overthink a lot of things. Hua Yin thinks a lot, but she kept them to herself. Perhaps this was one of the reasons why she's ordinarily quiet among others? As each second passed, she could feel a blanket of black slowly covering her vision...

In one smooth swoop, the edged blade was inserted into his throat. Cutting into his flesh and choking him at the same time was a pain only a monster could cause, and no average human would be able to endure it. To make someone suffer to the very last second of their life, to make that their last memory, indeed was a brutal way to end someone's life.

His thirst for blood was overflowing. Though he had no pupils, what made up his eyes was a wall of white with red cracks circulating it, he momentarily looked around for his next target. His posture was that of a tiger, ready to pounce and hunt. A black, smoky aura emitted from him...

"Oi, wake up."

She opened her eyes to see a man who looked like he was in his 50s staring at her in confusion. He had a shiny bald head and wore grey robes. He was the epitome of a typical monk, hair, robes, and everything.

"Why are you sleeping in the sacred temple of the Buddha? Don't you know how disrespectful that is?" He rambled.

He looked down at her and saw her blood-soaked tunic, his eyes widened but quickly changed back to his stern look.

"I can partly understand your situation right now. You may rest here, however, if I find you stealing any of these valued artifacts, I will hunt you down personally."

Hua Yin nodded, and he left the cave.

She sat up and rested her head on the painted-hard, cold wall of the cave. She silently whispered an apology for the disrespectfulness of her action.

That dream... she wondered. Although it's only been a few minutes, she could recall that dream of hers vividly as if she's personally experiencing that scene now. Hua Yin had experienced many nightmares throughout her life, partly due to many traumas in her life, sometimes, it was so severe that she would wake up drenched in the saltiness of her sweat. However, this one, this one was different. An internal feeling of hers insisted that this was something more than just another nightmare. She couldn't pinpoint what was off though.

The monk stormed in and harshly set a food tray down on the floor.

"Here, this is your breakfast," he stated firmly.

She hesitated to touch the tray, it didn't feel right for her to eat food from another person's lodgings, not to mention she intruded in, uninvited.

"I took the liberty of making food for you, so eat it. In this temple, we have a lot of food to spare, so don't worry about it."

"Thank you." It was all she could muster out. She felt that he had a sense of arrogance.

"You may be confused, so let me fill you in on some stuff," he started to explain, "First off, this place you're in right now is one of the many caves that make up this grand temple, dedicated to the highly respected Buddha. We're in cave number four. Visitors usually avoid this cave as, you know, number four. It's an unlucky number. But I assure you, there aren't any curses here or anything here."

"I see..." Hua Yin murmured.

"Also, it's best not to go out right now. I don't know if you heard, but in a nearby village, a man has been going around killing anyone he sees, it's like he's possessed! His eyes were white and everything! Even some cultivators weren't able to defeat him."

Hua Yin felt a sense of familiarity, some aspects of this situation fit perfectly into her dream like a puzzle! She felt disturbed. Was it a coincidence, a vision, or a foreshadowing? No matter how she wrapped her head around this mystery, she could not come to a reasonable conclusion. In the end, she dismissed it as just a coincidence.

"Oh really? That isn't comforting. I hope we'll be able to find out the origin of this sudden outburst of strange activity." She carefully commented.

"Well, of course. If we don't, I have a bad feeling that we will be in big trouble. I mean, who knows if anyone else would end up being like that too?"

She couldn't agree more and nodded her head. Up down, there was a steady rhythm.

"You can stop nodding now. I'm going to do my errands now, hurry up and eat." He ordered her and quietly made his way out of the cave. His steps were light and quiet. Completely contrasting his passive-aggressive personality.

In that instant, she could feel a wavering pressure from behind her, suffocating her. It felt like she was being choked yet no one else was in the cave. A sinister force was pulling her back, into the wall, like it was sucking her in. Dusty, black air dispersed around her, blinding her from everything around her.

"H-"

Although she tried her best to scream for help, nothing came out of her mouth. Her attempt was rendered useless.

Abruptly, she was released. Hua Yin had a coughing fit as she held her throat, recovering from struggling for air. The smoke vanished from her sight. She gazed at the painting on the wall behind her. She was in a state of senile and paranoia. What happened was beyond Hua Yin's ability to understand. But her train of thought was that since she can't do anything about it, she'll ignore it. She was always one to decide to be ignorant to any abnormalities. Thus, she settled down and devoured her breakfast, which consisted of pork and duck accompanied with spring onions and turnips.

Another day has gone down the drain. Hua Yin's activities today were humming, dozing off, and slicing off a piece of bamboo to play as a flute. After all, she couldn't do anything physically draining as her abdomen had yet to recover.

She heard a series of footsteps and found that the bald Monk returned to deliver her another meal.

"Here's your dinner. On today's menu are duck, yam, and soya beans. Help yourself."

"Thank you."

Hua Yin genuinely appreciated the food, she hasn't gotten proper nutrition in a couple of months, to the point where she got used to the starvation and cravings.

"You're welcome," the monk replied, "as I went to the market to get some groceries, there was news that the crazy man was killed, however, another man from the village went into the same state as him after. I guess it really can spread," he expressed. "It is a scary thought."

Hua Yin felt a chill down her back. Was it just nothing? Something told her that she shouldn't ignore what happened earlier this morning.

"The painting choked me."

"Hah?"

"The painting, it was pulling me in, there was black smoke too."

"You do realize you're talking about a painting right?"

"Yeah but--"

"If you're going to make up fantasies couldn't you have at least done it on something less sacred as the paintings in his holy temple? This is blasphemy."

"I didn't mean it that way..."

"Yeah whatever, just eat your dinner," he commented as he walked out.

She sat in silence, her food untouched, contemplating.

Decisively, she turned around and faced the painting, staring at the chroma splashed across it, soaked into the delicately woven fabric. She decided to face this enigma head-on.

Her pale, dirt-covered hand reached out. The moment her fingertips and the fabric met, images flashed through her mind, giving her memories she never experienced in her whole life and was enlightened to the oracles of the ominous black aura.

First, it latches onto the people with the weakest spiritual core. The Spiritual core powers our soul, our body, our minds. It is the foundation of oneself. The core has a defensive mechanism, it battles with the interfering object and destroys it, however, if it doesn't defeat this curse quick enough, the curse will kill you, though it certainly will damage it. In the process, you become zombie-like as your core slowly gets eaten away.

Second, though the curse is afflicted onto someone, its spiritual core remains at its origin, in this case, the painting. The soul is what travels around, feeding itself. If one was to be within its radius for a duration of time, its core will bite at you, trying to get rid of its threat, while if one was to harm it, its soul will travel back, become one with the core again, and annihilate you.

The second point was precisely what Hua Yin had hoped.

The aura that resembled darkness dispersed again, extending its legs and arms to each corner of the room. As the internal battle commenced, she felt a sudden pain, both cores devouring each other away.

It's a known fact that anyone who has received ample training has a stronger core. When people endure the agony they suffer from, they conjointly get used to it.

And Hua Yin was a cultivator.

Hua Yin could feel an invisible skintight force around her neck, almost wringing her like a towel, a feeling overcame her, the same feeling if her organs were being squeezed out. She could feel her feet slowly leaving the cement ground that had traces of faint cracks across it.

She wrapped her hands around her neck, trying to resist. She gasped desperately for air. If she wasn't dying, how did she wish to at this moment.

Death was not bad of a punishment. It's the unbearable torture prior to it.

Her veins burned in her body. They were being dyed in a void of darkness, spreading throughout her body. Starting from her chest, stretching to her fingertips, it ached everywhere. As if her skin was bathed in acid. Bloodshot through her eyes and her pupils slowly disappeared.

"Man, it really is unfortunate," the civilian working on a statue said.

The statue was of a beautiful girl with an expression like a warrior's planted on her. She wore clothes of a cultivator with two long black braids resting behind her back.

Very subtly, what seemed like smoke was beaming from it. Though one would only notice if looking for it specifically.

The monk standing behind him observing his work nodded.

"Did you know her well?" the man asked with a curious glance.

He inhaled.

"Not really."

The Fate of the Mogao Grottoes

Yew Chung International Secondary School, Ding, Seemon – 14

Chapter 1: First illusion

“Where is it?”

“It must be left in the grottoes, I told you already, Li.

“I will give you a torch, go back to the grottoes and find it. I will be right there after a while. I am still writing a report to our agency about the history of the grottoes.”

A young man took over a torch handed over by an old professor who concentrated on his report. His hand trembled when he held the torch, as he felt it was heavy like a falling iron piece in the heart. He lost his bracelet, gifted by his family. His name was Li Yuan Min.

Li was a lone historian, who left his hometown, nestled in the Central east of China. He traveled thousands of miles, walked millions of roads, and finally arrived at this place, Mogao grottoes. Since he was a kid, he had been dreaming about discovering the histories of Mogao grottoes. He was born in Yan an, Shaanxi. Because of the similarity of the natural environments of Yan An and Mogao grottoes, Li did not feel much dissatisfaction when he arrived here for the first few months. If there was anything that tortured him, it must be the loneliness. Every night before sleep, he gazed at his bracelet. The bracelet was crafted by nature, made of creamy white jade, so elegantly translucent that it sipped the moonlight.

There were some minerals inside the jade, often shining when Li gazed at it under the milky moonlight. At that moment, the bracelet was like the galaxy; minerals inside were like stars, winking at him.

“Titap”, a few water droplets fell from the ceiling of the Mogao grottoes. Li was taking an unpleasant independent adventure, wandering in the dark alley. The alley was dark, his torch beamed, but the alley was so dark that he could only see five meters afar. So he tried to put his attention aside, such as the wall paintings aside. The wall paintings were mostly about the life of civilians, the existence of god, and the thriving of dynasties. However, the wall paintings were already eroded, implying that the old dynasties have passed, the thriving in the past seemed so far away, evoking in him a sense of surrealness and isolation.

Suddenly, a whisper of cold wind kissed his ears. A spine-chilling sensation overwhelmed his heart. Considering that he was inside a grotto, and the structure was complicated as a maze, how could a wind strike him? Li stared straight at the darkness of the alley. Although the wind was cold and unexpected, it cleared Li’s anxious mind. It encouraged him to go deeper into Mogao grottoes.

“81”, he counted in his head. He had walked 81 steps deeper into the grottoes, and finally reached a large living room. The room was surrounded by wall paintings and statues. There, in the middle of the living room, he found his bracelet placed on a pedestal, shining in the dark.

The bracelet was a white water lily, blossoming magnificently, emanating silver and serene light inside the room. Hesitating to approach the light, Li, however, extended his hand to pluck the water lily. It was a shock. He fainted away and collapsed. At this moment, the wall paintings and statues glowed in golden light, mapping a fantasy of the past.

Chapter 2: Illusion of sand

“Squids, squids, squids” Li whispered, he felt squids were forcefully stuffed into his brain. Since the space in the brain was limited, the squids were oppressing his brain, he felt his brain was swelling, but also extruding.

It’s so weird for him, he thought his throat and lips were thirsty like hell, but he never felt so humid on his skin. He felt he fell onto a little fishnet, but his back was heavy and inflexible as a piece of iron.

Li was suffering in this illusion until a few drops of water tapped on his lips. Li hardly opened his eyes and a monk appeared in his view. "Thank you, master" Li hardly spoke these words out of his mouth. Surprisingly, the water of the monk was like a potion, ceasing the illusion of Li, the headache and the thirstiness had been obliterated.

"It's my fate to meet you, younger. I have been walking in this desert for months, struggling to survive." The monk gratefully said to Li.

"I was nearly killed by the sand storm. But when I collapsed into the flaming sand, thousands of Buddha appeared as a flash of gold light and rescued me from this flaming hell." The monk continued. Li felt energetic, that few drops of water made him feel much fresh, even better than before.

"I promised to the Buddhas, I will build a palace, a grotto for them. Younger, I feel my fate is intertwined with you, would you like to be a kind man, construct a grotto with me?" The monk asked. Li was suspicious, but due to his curiosity, he became the partner of the monk.

They worked together day by day, yet with no sleep, no rest. Seemingly, Li felt his tiredness was exploited somehow. In a few days, the grotto was finished, and buddhas had been sculptured. After Li finished the grotto with the monk, he realised that the grotto was seemingly familiar to him.

"The grotto was built on a high ground of the desert, absorbing the direct nutrition of the sun, born of the coolness inside the cave." The master was thinking about philosophy.

"Born in flame, but stored with coolness. It's a profound philosophy, even a man who stood at the top cannot observe this easily." The master continued, yet Li felt his head was paining again.

"We will name it, "Mogao grotto"." These few words were slowly and heavily spoken out of the monk's mouth. Li felt strong dizziness. He impotently fell on the flaming sand.

Chapter 3:

"It's the dream again!" Li cried from the depth of his heart, but the terrible squids did not remain in his brain for too long.

A flying silk lifted his mind back from his hazy dream about the monk and the grottos. He opened his eyes, and he was in a resplendent hall, on one of the chancellor's seats. The palace was a sea of gold; the walls beside him had a vivid gold dragon sculpture, seemingly thrusting into the sky; the column beside him was painted with gold and vibrant red; the costumes of chancellors were arrays of color.

He saw the emperor sitting on the dragon chair, and chancellors cheering, congratulating the thriving of this dynasty. Female dancers spun and spun as if they were spinning tops.

"For our emperor, for our motherland, for our hope. Long live the sacred Tang!" All chancellors sang. At this moment, Li had finally figured out that he was in the ancient dynasty "Tang".

"Am I traversed? Must be a dream in a dream!" Li thought, but soon his worry was blown off by aromatic smells of delicacies. The emperor had started a cuisine, food and wine were like the ocean, unlimited, being sent by servers. Cups were emptied and refilled like a cycle of desires. Yet, spices and sauces cast magic to the delicacies, dancing on Li Yuan Min's tongue, followed by the fresh meat juices. If it was a dream, Li hoped he would never wake up.

While he was eating, a group of female dancers appeared in the middle of the palace. In a harmonious rhythm created by drums, chimes, lute, and guzheng, dancers elegantly spun, rose, and swung their hands.

"Yuan Fang, watch that dance. I am impressed with that speed of spinning!" an unknown chancellor beside Li flapped him who was currently wolfing the food and wines. Yuan Min glanced at the female dancers and closed his rapacious mouth. He had two suspicions that needed to be answered. Firstly, his name was Li Yuan Min - then why was he called Yuan Fang? Secondly, this dance looked familiar.

"What's the name of this dance again?" the man muttered. Yuan Min had finally figured out the name of this dance - the Sogdian whirl.

"Sogdian whirl! Dancers spun faster and faster, so fast that their shadows were torn by the space. Dancers spun in different directions, smoothly transiting their direction from clockwise to anticlockwise. While Li was watching the anti clockwise twisting, a theory of time had appeared upon his head.

Fireworks burgeoned in the sky as Li was intoxicated by the dance, the sound of explosion rumbled and echoed in his ears and activated his mind somehow but it was not pleasant. The palace was in a sea of joy, the chancellors continuing their carnivals of cuisines, dances, and activities. The world outside the palace was in joy. People drove the fire dragons that thrust into the sky, launched from the ground originally. But, Li weakly closed his eyes and fell on his dining table, memories intertwined and blurred.

Chapter 4: The end of fate

Li fell into an abyss of memories, he's in a dark space where familiar images relentlessly converged. He felt he was falling into an end, and he was again pulled by a force which brought him far to the imagery of cuisines, delicacies, mogao grottoes. He felt like a hamster, he's in a wheel. The wheel was spinning automatically, forcefully, and eternally. Since he did not want to collapse, he walked on the wheel. He walked so long that eventually he had no strength left, soft on the ground. When he touched the ground, he felt a familiar sense of smoothness. His spirit and body were sucked into the bracelet and became part of that wheel. Merged into the wheel, he finally realised that the wheel was the milky-white jade bracelet he lost. Eventually, he possessed the bracelet, and he felt bizarre since he could see in the perspective of a bracelet.

He saw men wearing armours, drinking wines and crying. The scene was settled in a ruined palace, walls fell apart and smoke of war was threatening the palace. The golden walls, the thrusting dragons, the laugh and cheers of the chancellors had all ended, the dynasty had mapped its fall.

"Generals and soldiers are all my brothers. Today, our body will fade away in the Anxi frontier, in this city, in this hell of sand. But, we die for our country, we die for our people, we are the most honourable glory of our Tang. We have defended here for 60 years! Without support! Without God's favor! Even if today we collapse in sand, we will stand for history!" A man wearing the bracelet said, Li felt dizzy as the man tragically brandished his hand. The man was a general. Li thought as he noticed the man's speech.

"General! A monk is here to see you!" A soldier ran into the palace, with an arrow on his helmet, he miracley survived. Later, a leisure shadow appeared on the floor of the listless palace.

"General Yuan Fang, a destiny of meeting you." A familiar, active, peaceful voice stood out of the lifeless atmosphere.

"Pleasure to meet you, master." Replied by the general.

"Please my master, tell my family that I am sorry that I will see them under the night spring. But I cannot care for my individual, I payed my life to the sharpness of my sword." The general replied, and took his bracelet off. Li had saw the real identity of that familiar voice, it was the monk at the beginning of his dream.

"I understand, good luck to you." The monk replied, and holded the bracelet given by the general.

"I have nothing left to my offspring, please give this to my family. Thank you my master, I will never forget the moment that you shared with me your water. If there's an after life, I will repay your kindness." The general's voice was shaking like thunder, but every word he stated was considerate and clear.

"Amitabha." The monk replied, he put the bracelet into his pocket, carefully packed it with silky fabric. At the moment he stepped out of the palace, storms of arrows thrust from the palace to the outside. The arrow had accurately shot every tibet soldier who was trying to siege the city. The monk leisurely rode on horses, secretly left the city in a hidden path, and speeded to the east, toward Yan An.

Right after he left the city, the Tang army charged out of the city. Man cried, horse screamed, swords and spears collided intensively. The Tang army had their final war with the Tibet army who had great advantages in the number of soldiers. The general's sword had incisively cut many men, his sword was desiring blood. Every soldier of the Tang army was letting of their brutality, some of them had been shot with arrows, but still killing their enemy as if they did not feel their pain. The general drew a bow, and shoot arrows of hard wood high and low. He bends the string and hit the targets at left, and at destroying that at right he's deft. He's army was painted to red by blood, the silver of the army no longer shined.

Despite the Tang army resisted forcefully, but they could not defy the wheel of history, the direction of their fate. In the end, all soldiers of the Tang army died, none of them surrounded.

The monk had passed many rivers, and those rivers were flow from the west. He saw blood on many rivers. "There must be an evil war." He signed, and at this moment Li had overwhelmed by sorrow. But it did not stay long, he felt his world was twisting again, as the clock of history had finally brought him into the right time. As he opened his eye again, he realised that he was lying on the floor of the Mogao grottoes. He looked around, saw the vivid dances and the thriving of the Tang, in a moment his mood was complicated.

He stood up and saw his bracelet, the bracelet was on the pedestal. The bracelet looked innocent, as everything that Li had just experienced was never caused by the bracelet.

Li carefully holded the bracelet, and saw a list of small words written in the internal of the bracelet.

"General, Li Yuan Fang" He read naturally, he felt this name was so familiar. And he finally realised it, the name he had just spoken, was his ancestor.

Banana Bread

Yew Chung International Secondary School, Huang, Nicole – 14

Nobody knows how this happens, or why this happens every time a life is lost.

Sat between two mountains, gazing over the horizon was a grotto. Its decaying brick-red paint suffered in torment under the wrath of the cankerous heat. With an assertive gaze along the vast and desolate landscape, it remained in its sturdy posture despite the shabby walls and an insalubrious roof that was barely intact.

Though the grotto stands phlegmatic and sullen, it was accompanied by statues—rows and rows of statues. Nobody knew where they came from, or how the numbers continued to increase over the years. Some were frozen in shock or in agony, others in tranquillity or euphoria. Nevertheless, they all stood in unified rows, unique yet indifferent to the other. The wind whispered their tales, but nobody listened closely enough to hear what they had to say.

In the distance, a girl limped and climbed up the stairs. Despite her young age, her face was wrinkled like a piece of parchment, her youth and innocence was faded and stolen, and her eyes were sombre and lugubrious as if nebulous clouds of woe sucked the life out of her. With her pale and feeble body, she wore torn rags that had started to deteriorate and come apart. Yet, she shouted a name spontaneously with her raspy voice, quavering with her every breath. Accompanied with a piece of bread and a single flaming candle, the gloomy atmosphere was ignited

Stopping in front of a young boy and a woman, she smiled wistfully. “Mom, Az, it’s Anita. I’m home.”

—

Anita never had a doll, nor did she ever have a piece of jewellery, or a dress. All she had were her broken rags. She lived in an eroded attic with her mother and brother along with scabrous walls, blemished floors and dishevelled visitors that squeaked as they passed by. Despite the intolerable living conditions, soft crackles of laughter could be heard from the attic each night.

Stomach grumbling for nourishment, Anita lay on the floor, minimizing her movements. As a pernicious gust of wind embraced her out of malice, she shivered and continued to look out the only gateway of escape: the window. Luckily, light cascaded through the small gap. Shifting her position, Anita made sure to let her body come in contact with all warmth. Her ephemeral pleasure was shortly ruined by another gust of wind. This time, it welcomed her tumultuously with specks of snow, leaving her in gnawing numbness.

“We’re back! And, we have a piece of banana bread!” Azriel chirped in ecstasy. He jumped while embracing Anita in a hug. His beam of glee ignited a spark, curing her of her numbness. Receiving a loaf of banana bread was a rare treat—an irresistible jewel. Instantly, Anita’s eyes were drawn to the scintillating treasure. It had her mouth watering, stomach more peevish than ever. As they all sat down, her mother carefully cut the bread...into two pieces. “It’s alright darling, I’m not hungry. You both need it more than I do. Yes, sweetie, don’t worry. I had plenty to eat last Tuesday...” Her mother assured them again and again, with loving touches. Creasing her eyebrows in concern, Anita looked at her mother’s face. Frail and cadaverous, her cheekbones were prominent and her wrinkles showed through her shrivelled skin. The only convincing part was her weary eyes, reassuring Anita that it was going to be alright.

They were going to get through this winter.

They had to.

Quivering, Anita and her brother cuddled together to create body warmth. Both with teeth chattering, eyes weary with fatigue, they played their favourite game: make-believe. Clasp her hands together, Anita exclaimed, “I wish to be a wealthy lady. That way, we can get all the bread we want!” As if sniffing the aroma of freshly baked bread,

she took a deep breath and exhaled, closing her eyes in divine satisfaction. "We can build mom a castle, and ride dinosaurs to school!" Azriel suggested, imitating a dinosaur, stomping loudly and grunting, shaping his hands like claws. Looking at each other, they both fumbled and fell backwards in laughter. As the game went on, her mother had to calm the children down before getting them into bed. Wrapping them with the only blanket they owned, she kissed them both on the forehead and lay cuddling next to them.

Tossing and turning, Anita could not fall asleep. Desperate for attention, she faced her brother and poked his cheeks. When he turned the opposite way as a reply, she turned towards her mother and poked her back repeatedly.

"Mom?"

There was no movement, other than the tranquil sways of the branches outside.

"Mom?"

There was no sound, other than the howling of the vexatious wind.

"Mom?"

Pushing her slightly to the side, Anita was finally able to face her mother.

"Mom?"

She was greeted by a stone-cold face, pale and drained.

"Mom? Can you hear me? Mom? Wake up!" Anita shouted in alarm. Trembling in fear, her hands shook uncontrollably as she vigorously tried to wake her up. Slowly, the colour from her mother's face was stolen away; her shuttering and haltered breaths were coming to an end with her eyes fluttering as she looked aimlessly at the ceiling. Struggling to part her mouth, she spoke her last words "I love you both, to the moon and back." Embracing her mother, she squeezed her eyelids shut.

She had to be strong, for Azriel.

Still, distraught tears streamed down her face, syncing with her tempestuous breathing.

—

Hearing clicking footsteps, her head shot up in a snap. This is the one. Her heartbeat thumping in sync with his steps, she waited for him to stop. With a pleading gaze, she begged and urged for him to take a look. Without a single glance, the man walked away in disregard. Sighs of distress left her mouth as she watched another flicker of hope being blown out. As she shifted her weight, she reached down into her pockets. Empty.

It had only been a few days since her mother left, but it felt like months. Ever since, she had been trembling in the cold, waiting for someone to buy her matches, hoping for enough to feed herself and her brother. Staring at her boxes full of matches, she knew she had to go back home empty-handed. Again.

Rubbing her palms, she quietly opened the door. Suppressing her disappointment, she put on a smile and called for Azriel. Running towards her with open arms, he engulfed her in a warm hug. In moments like these, she forgot about her hardships. She loved seeing him smile, how his dimple was displayed only on one cheek, how his eyes squinted slightly with the corners of his lips turning upwards. Rambling on about his day, his voice rose and fell with every detail. Today, he patched up the hole in the roof but was later approached by an unwelcome abominable rat, which he kindly escorted out of the house. Listening fondly, Alina nodded and laughed, soon finding herself in hysterics.

The two of them sat by the window sill and stared into the darkness. Brick by brick, reality began to take shape again, and she was reminded of her burdens. Overwhelmed with guilt, she was lost for words. Squeezing their intertwined fingers, as if he had understood, Azriel muttered, "It's alright, I'm not hungry." As if calling to her, the stars shone as bright as a beacon, as if encouraging her to keep going. Yearning for her mother's comforting words, she leaned onto Azriel's shoulder and fell into a deep slumber.

Awakened by the break of dawn, the sun reminded her of her duties. Scrambling to carry her matches, she ran headed down the street. After hours of watching feet move past her, she strenuously tried to stay awake. She felt as though her waiting lasted an eternity. Yet just as she was about to get up and head back home, a hand reached out to her.

"A box of matches please?"

Before the man could say anything else, she handed him a box of matches. In return, she received a ten-dollar bill.

Ten whole dollars.

Staring at it in astonishment, she was flabbergasted. Barely concealing her happiness, she ran to the bread store, her feet hardly touching the floor. Minutes after she arrived, the baker handed her a fresh piece of banana bread, which glowed in her grasp.

Anita couldn't help but smile all the way back, face blooming as she thought about how they wouldn't have to go hungry anymore. They could live.

For once, she was thankful for the cold.

From a distance, she saw a body laying on the floor. Azriel. It had to be him. He looks at the stars outside sometimes. Waving and calling out for him, she waited for a response.

There was none.

Quickening her pace, she wondered if he fell asleep. Dark, red stains were stained on the concrete floor. Her breath caught her throat. Dropping the bread with a loose grasp, she felt a spiralling tornado swallow her whole. Eying the broken wheel lying next to him, she immediately ran to embrace him.

His brown rags which he'd worn since birth were now red. "Come on, don't close your eyes. Azriel, it's me, Anita. I got the bread, look it's right here..." Slightly opening his eyes, Azriel caught a glimpse of Anita's face. Smiling for the last time, he closed his eyes. Stuttering, she repeated his name over and over, as if calling him would bring him closer to her, and away from his end.

He was gone.

She couldn't take it.

Her world. Her best friend. Her brother. He was gone.

Sobbing, she held him through the night. Cries turned into whimpers of agony then, into pure silence. Feeling a piercing pain down her skull, her sight slowly became blurry. Kneeling down and leaning against her wall, her eyes heavy, she decided to give in to exhaustion, just this once, and wilted and ebbed into unconsciousness before she hit the cold floor.

—

"Did you know? When one passes away, they show up as a statue."

"Really?"

"At the Mogao Grottoes"

With many walking up the steps to the grotto, they examined their faces, complimenting the delicacy of the craftsmanship. In the front row were three statues. A woman, a girl and a boy. The woman held a motherly gaze, looking at the girl and boy with affection. The boy held an adorable smile, eyes squinting in bliss. The girl had a nonchalant expression as if she'd left all her worries behind, her shoulders were relaxed and her hands were by her side. They stood, united at last. In front of them, lay a piece of mouldy banana bread.

No one noticed it.

Nor did they bother to pick it up.

The General and the Grottoes

Yew Chung International Secondary School, Liu, On Chi – 14

I

A bright orb, burning like fire, rose slowly over the barren wasteland below. Miles and miles of golden dust stretched in every direction. Below, a magnificent palace of marble stood proudly behind an oasis, its spires and towers stretching into the sky.

Inside a spacious room, a commanding voice called out; “The day has come; we have to build these grottoes. The Tang are looking for land too; we must not forget that.”. The King, nodding his head in acknowledgement, dismissed the conference with a short wave. Chatting heartily amongst themselves, the room was slowly emptied of the advisors. Except one.

“I want you to protect them at all costs, dead or alive”, ordered the King, as the general looked back with a hint of shock in his solemn face. *Heroic, handsome, hardened, the only man I can trust, the King quietly thought to himself.* “Yes Sir!”, the reply echoed, a metallic clinking accompanying the general as he left the room.

Sighing heavily, the King stared off to the distance, transfixed by the large map hanging from the wall. The Tang had surely been an aggressive bunch of barbarians in his reign, he mused. The fate of the neighbouring kingdom of Sandarkhan weighed on his shoulders; after a brief conquest, the royal family was murdered brutally by the invading soldiers, the capital burnt to the ground. This had to succeed; this kingdom was their next target.

In a hidden corner not far away, a dimly-lit chamber was filled with officials murmuring in whispers. “There are riches beyond value there; we have to seize it!”, one voice called from across the room. Everyone whispered in agreement, their faces lit by a smug grin. Some were wearing armor, gathered closely in the center as they plotted secretly among themselves.

II

A month later, the convoy was assembled. The line of wagons, felt-adorned and sparkling with jewelry, extended for miles in either direction, standing out starkly against an aqua canvas. Slowly, the camels and their iron-plated handlers lead the formation forwards, the clinking and calling echoing throughout the dry air.

The days were brutally hot, followed by freezing temperatures that sent the soldiers shivering in their makeshift tents of animal skin. Many were dizzy and collapsed in the heat, unable to distinguish between mirage and reality; others were nicked off in their exhaustion by the cool night wind. The sand sneaked its way into every faucet, leaving them itching and scratching, as well as forming freakish sandstorms that engulfed the entire caravan in a screen of dust.

The makeshift desk was littered with paperwork, scout reports mixed with family letters and other documents, many cascading off the side. The general read attentively through his report, just as a soldier burst into the tent and shouted, “General! Private Duk Phan from the 5th Regiment has been missing for many hours now!”. Somewhat irate, the general raised his head and asked for further details. *Strange*, he thought to himself; *how could he have been missing? There are no bandits on this road, as far as I’m concerned.*

Not far away, the private struggled as the last gasps of breath were choked out of his chest, his eyes widened in shock and horror. “You won’t find a single thing” was the last he heard as he fell to the ground, those around him laughing mockingly amongst themselves.....

After many more days and nights, the disheveled soldiers finally saw the yellow-gold flag of the Tang flying bravely above the mountain ridges. After some initial confusion, the soldiers escorted their cargo to the camp in the distance. The local commander greeted Vaushard with a sumptuous banquet, the long table buckling under the weight of various delicacies from all corners of the empire. An atmosphere of happiness prevailed, the men drinking and conversing comradely in their dining tables.

Slowly, the soldiers adapted to the comfort of their accommodation, their survival instincts dying down. Although they were somewhat similar, the everyday misunderstandings still made for lively banter amongst their squads;

yet they found themselves with a common passion for drinking, staying awake into the dawn listening to the lively and spirited stories of the others. All seemed to be well.

III

Many months later, the general was invited to observe the newly-finished grottoes towards the mountainside. Bits of blue, gold, and crimson adorned the massive carvings of the Buddhas, their towering presence evoking grandeur and power. Sternly, they stare at the falling circle of fire fading into the distance. He had to admit, the workmanship was brilliant in these hostile conditions. A small smile is seen on the General's face, content at his success in the mission.

At the labyrinthine pathways into the rock, the bright light of the candle illuminated the richly-decorated tapestries that color the bare rock. The guide pointed on energetically, evidently fascinated by this rare spectacle of wealth and elegance. Transfixed, the general marveled captivately at the sight, his eyes widening as he traveled deeper and deeper into a sandy maze, a perpetual darkness surrounding the two men and their bodyguard. Gently, the night breeze blew in from outside, cooling the tunnel considerably. Shhht! A mysterious sound echoed softly, the general turning to find his guide captivated in a mix of horror and shock.

General Vaushard bared his sabre, just as a soldier rushed forward with a spear. His features and body armor indicate that he is one from the convoy. *What?! Who are these traitors? How have I not been able to find them out?!* At death's edge, the general thrust his blade deep into the soldier's flesh, a sickening scream bouncing off the concave walls. Rapidly, his escorts leapt into action, surrounding the guide and general in a defensive circle. The fighting is intense and confused, the soldiers unable to distinguish between friend and foe. Loud cries of pain mingled with hasty commands, blending into an impressive cacophony of noise that blankets the atmosphere. Although their bravery is extraordinary, the general is soon left standing alone, as two pikemen rush towards him, their weapons firmly in their grip, their eyes burning with determination. *I have failed you, my most honorable king.....*

Suddenly, a ghoulish light knocked one to the ground, moaning in pain as he joined the pile of corpses strewn haphazardly in the small path. Many more spirits join in from the surrounding artwork, the frenzied stabbing of the men simply passing through their supernatural bodies. Instantly, the once victorious and confident expressions of the attackers turned into undisguised dread and fear, standing helplessly the diverse gods and mythical characters orderly formed into ranks. Descending from all directions, the attackers are all defeated in short order.

Only shock and awe is shown as the spirits grouped in front of him. Bowing courteously, the Spirits advised him; "This not your own greed, but one close to whom rules". Grateful for their assistance, the general reaches into his scabbard and offers them his gilded sabre, the Spirits fading back into their colorful prints. Somewhat dazed, he walked silently into the darkness, heading towards the fires gleaming against the pitch black, the smoke rising in wisps that were faded by the winds.

Bursting into his tent, he collapsed forcefully onto his bed. Before he could close his eyelids, his deputy rushed in, an unexpected look of concern shown on his otherwise orderly face. Rapidly, he reported that "The 5th has disappeared. Would you like to send a search party?". Masking his anger, the general hurriedly thanked him. *So was the bravery of the Private, if only I knew then!*

V

The king hugged Vaushard tightly as the men behind him looked on in silent confusion and horror. *How has he survived?*, the nearby official pondered; *how could he have survived the ambush?* The grip around his dagger tightens. Abruptly, as he is released from the king's warm embrace, the General turns around, his cape whipping against his boots as he pulls out an tattered parchment. The words come out clearly and sharply:

"These are the traitors of the kingdom. They have ordered a covert operation to seize the Buddhas for their own wealth. I call on the king to order their arrest. Let that be a warning to those who are tempted by greed or riches."

The officials are dragged away by the armed guards as they protest their arrest, but the king orders it nonetheless. As the King happily praised Vaushard's actions, Vaushard stated, "No; for I have fulfilled my duty by living out my character".

VI

The artifacts and sites of old always fascinate many, in particular the young historian now walking briskly through the rocky cave. Dazzling in their luminance, the intricate art depicts scenes of wealth and prosperity. He goes on, stepping softly on the rough rockface below. Something catches his eye. *Strange*, he thought, *how could the soldier have defeated them all by himself?* The glint of a sabre flashes brightly not far away. *The art is moving! What.....*

Doused in Monochrome

Yew Chung International Secondary School, Wong, On Yui – 14

I knew the time had come, yet an imploring part of me refused to accept reality.

My hands trembled as if I had just been shocked by a woodblock automaton. All that was left of them faltered; a melancholy memory. Yellowed from age and fraying at the edges, the will fell from my loosened grasp. Reality began gnawing ravenously at my heels, tearing my sanity into distorted shreds.

First, my sister. Now my parents. All dead.

I stared at the monochromatic photographs of my mother caressing my shoulders, my father's hand intertwined in hers. Whimpers of agony almost escaped from my lips as I tenderly brushed away specks of dust on the tattered film. Envisioning them as lifeless rag dolls limply sprawled in ebony coffins lined with blood-red satin was enough to send my mind spiralling. I felt my chest tighten. Choking sobs trapped inside my throat, I summoned every ounce of my willpower to sound escaping from my lips.

The news was a staggering pile of bricks, mercilessly thrust onto my back without warning.

And I was the man struggling to find my footing.

3 years ago, sweet Jamila's life was ended by a fatal overdose. My sister had spent her whole life battling depression. Shortly after her 14th birthday, she sauntered out of her bedroom announcing the most delightful news.

My sister was cured.

Reminiscing back to this warm moment, I vividly recall my mother crushing Jamila into a massive bear hug. Papa had been grinning ear to ear and good-naturedly ruffled her auburn locks. "You did it, baby girl! That's the strong woman I'm mighty proud of and raised right out of your mother's womb." My eyes were watering with emotion as Jamila embraced me.

Jamila's laughter fizzled with excitement. "You haven't had a night out in so long, sweetheart. Go celebrate with your friends!" Papa chortled with pride. Mama nodded enthusiastically.

Then madness broke out.

Semester grades were released, and I knew I hadn't done flawlessly.

Apprehensively, I turned to my parents. I couldn't bear to disappoint them after they were so jubilant with my sister's news. But I had to. The only two things my parents hated more than ugly grades were dishonesty and not being home on time.

The words tumbled out of my mouth like a pleading, gushing waterfall. At first, Mama and Papa's expressions were still, as they scrutinised my test papers. Their eyes flitted with a sort of emotion I could not distinguish.

Stony gazes settled on their faces in unison.

Papa was the first to speak. His eyes were fiery pupils. "The family's legacy lies in your hands Jem! Your grades matter. And you have the audacity to bring home failing marks? Your mother and I believed in you. But you failed us. You failed the family. And failure calls for consequences."

I hung my head in shame.

Mama shook her head incredulously. "You know perfectly well how much we depend on your academic performance."

"You're grounded for five months. Sometimes I'm embarrassed you're my son." Papa turned his back on me.

My stomach wrenched at the last sentence, but I was flooded with relief and surprise.

It wasn't everyday that I had been let off with such a light punishment.

It almost felt unnatural walking out of a scolding without jagged bruises across my thigh. They must have been in an awfully good mood with my sister to not have reached for the object forged from hell. I fervently counted my blessings and flopped onto my bed, thrilled for Jamila. She deserved this more than anything.

Numbers ticked on my enamelled clock, each second more daunting than the next. My fingers developed a mind of their own as I grew restless. They crept towards my duvet and started mindlessly picking apart wisps of lace. It had only been what felt like hours...

Hours. Since Jamila left.

My pulse skyrocketed. I knew Papa wouldn't be so lenient this time. Frighteningly on cue, I heard the startling crash of a chair being thrown across the living room. Instinctively, I pressed my ear against the wall and listened.

"Where is the girl? What if something happened to her?" Papa was yelling in frustration.

"I'm sure Jamila's on her way home, my love. Her whole life, she's been living in endless sorrow. It's her big day - let her have her fun." Mama reassured him. I imagined her eyebrows creasing like they did when she was worried.

"If she's not home any minute now, I'll show her endless sorrow." Papa huffed.

"Mama! Papa! I know I'm home way past curfew, but there was this altercation at the temple-" Jamila stumbled into the living room, out of breath.

A sharp slap rang across the room. Jamila screamed.

"Husband, there's no need for violence - she's sorry!" Mama shouted in alarm.

Papa took no notice. His Italian flats clattered across the room. I heard the clasp of the bamboo strip unbuckle. My nerves were off the roof. I heard it come in contact with skin a total of eight times.

Jamila howled and howled and howled. I bitterly buried my head into my pillow.

I heard my sister flee to her bedroom in despairing sobs. Thankfully, Papa regained some sense and didn't go after her. That night, I cried myself to sleep.

Not a sound came from Jamila's room.

The next morning, I woke up to a grief-stricken Mama and Papa. I followed their aghast eyes which led to my sister. Jamila's eyes were bloodshot and unblinking. Her mouth was wide open, gaping and gormless. In her hand clutched an empty canister of opium.

My sister had succumbed to the tantalising cacophony of voices. Something inside her broke.

There was a deafening silence. The pillars of emotion within me collapsed, and I wailed.

I wailed and wailed and wailed. Cradling Jamila's head, I desperately felt for her pulse, only to find none. Glistening tears rolled down my parents' faces, as they watched me bellow in lamentation to the ceiling.

To life. To the universe. It simply wasn't fair.

When my sister's life was taken, all light in my life was lost. Hope, gratitude, prosperity, each and every one surreptitiously swept away under the mantelpiece like trails of ash. Feelings, emotions...those were all strangers to me now.

I didn't even know if life was worth living anymore.

At this point, a scarily steadfast force had become my steering wheel. My mindset was wired to acknowledge that after going through not one but two tragedies, that it became meaningless to break down and noisily mourn over losses with wet snivels.

It was my fault. I drove Mama and Papa over the edge.

I was the only one left able to repent my family's sins. With that, I fled to the Mogao Grottoes, a majestic compilation of fortresses, preserving thousands of years of history and enchanting secrets. Days passed as I trudged through scorching deserts and murky grasslands; my fate depended on three jugs of water and several pouches of barley. It was only when dryness clawed desperately at my throat and warned me of my remaining time of survival, that the meandering Dachuan River sympathetically greeted me with a heavy gush of ripples across its surface. Tucked cosily in the cliffs above the azure snake, the most richly endowed and longest used treasure house of Buddhist art in the world had been officially bestowed to me. Except now the treasure was accompanied by my shame and dread.

But deep down, I knew it was my calling. My cravings longed for a fresh start.

And from that day on, I became a monk. Bound by a lifelong vow of silence.

THE PRESENT:

Unlike any other mourning process mankind had ever developed, mine became art. Painting was my dialogue, my language, to share with the world my unconditional longing, admiration and heartache for my family.

Which is why I began my life at the sacred Mogao Grottoes lovingly crafting murals all depicting a memory I shared with them.

The three people I care for the most.

10 YEARS LATER...

"Dating from before the early 1000s, the silk textiles of the Mogao Grottoes are the finest you will ever feast your eyes upon..." The tour guide announced, gesturing to the manuscripts. I glanced at the intricate engravings with wavering interest when another masterpiece caught my eye. It depicted four people: a father, mother, daughter, and son.

The mother's eyes were fixated on the daughter, overflowing with love and adoration. The father was grinning ear to ear and good-naturedly ruffling the daughter's hair. The son's eyes were glassy, with a wide smile stretching into the youthful crinkles of his eyes. In his arms fondled the sister, who seemed to be having the time of her life.

I was overridden with unexplainable empathy.

Then I noticed a 3 dimensional detail on the edge of the metallic frame. Something transparent and tiny, globular and tapered to a point at the top.

"It's a teardrop." I wondered aloud.

Ancient Memories

Ying Wa College, Cheung, Ka Yui – 15

27-09-1337 23:51

The flaming moon hung over the silent sands.

"I dreamt of the blood moon rising..."

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

"Calling from the netherworld..."

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

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

"Softly the vespers cascade to me..."

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

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

"Come dance, come take --"

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

"Sister?"

"I'm fine -- you used to love this piece -- remember --"

"You used to sing it when I was younger..."

"When you couldn't sleep," she finished, gasping for breath. "Do -- Do you still like it?"

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

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

"Where're you--"

"I'll be right back."

The door offered a mournful creak.

Yet Jian-Mei passed away in the same night due to what would later be known as the Black Death, which would then spread along the silk road to the western world, killing two-thirds of the European population in the 14th Century. Jian-Qing could not even bury her, for the pus from ruptured lymph nodes in the final stages would be sure to infect him. In the coming centuries her body would become little more than a collection of bones, forever forgotten amid the dusty ruins of the Mogao Grottoes.

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

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

28-09-1337 03:14

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

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

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

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

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

Jian-Qing stood still.

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

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

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

“Who are you?” Jian-Qing whispered.

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

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

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

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

The cackling storm of energy and flame struck down, smiting the barren desert from across the horizon, bathing it in a torrent of dazzling, blinding light. It was a brilliant longsword stronger than the toughest steel. Smoke

erupted from the multiple craters, dense and black and rising like giant mushrooms. Within seconds one had grown doubly as tall as the tallest mountain Jian-Qing had ever seen, and doubly as monstrous. From the heavy opaque greyness spit the pungent smell of burning and wicked chunks of quartz and stone, screaming at the velocity of a longbow shaft, rocketing into dense clusters of human bodies in a deadly hail.

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

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

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

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

Jian-Qing followed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Yes, Master.”

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

“What is that?”

“Master?”

“The purple line.”

The boy did not reply. They were standing before a set of monitors arranged in a neat semicircle on a large desk, each of the screens displaying a similar image of underground tunnels. There were chairs, a dozen of them and all vacant, but both of them chose to stand. Apart from these there were no furnishings of any sort save several computers and simple stationary. Everything from the monitors to the walls were white, a brilliant white, polished and flawless to a fault. Had there not been a complete lack of windows, or had the only illumination not been a series of fluorescent tubes on the ceiling, the white might have been elegant; now ‘static’ and ‘artificial’ would be better adjectives.

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

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

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

“Quite a number. Honestly cannot tell for sure.”

“You know that’s not the right answer.”

Jian-Qing grimaced.

“Thank you for the reminder, *Robot*. I’m aware.”

“Then give me the right answer. *Human*.”

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

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

“Then why ‘cannot tell for sure’ just now?”

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

“Human, where do your loyalties lie?”

“To the Federation of Artificial Intelligence, now and forever.”

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

He wanted to throw up.

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

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

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