



Creative Writing
Fiction
Group 5

New Tales of Judge Pao

Kiangsu – Chekiang College (International Section), Sin, Ling Lee – 16

The villagers of Zheng Zhou had heard the famous Pao Zheng was coming to town as the new appointed magistrate for the next 3 years. He had a reputation for bringing down corruption at all costs, in distant lands he had even earned the name Pao Qing Tian as he was the people's hope for better and brighter days ahead. Naturally there was an air of expectancy amongst the citizens, as palpable as the strongest liquor in their wine cellar.

They were ready for change and were sick of the old customs.

The villagers welcomed Pao with the most heated enthusiasm, they drank and sang and danced in their warm welcoming for Pao. He saw the shimmering hope in each of the villagers and standing there among the cheerful faces, he vowed to make a difference for them in the short 3 years he had.

The three years went by as swiftly as brush strokes on paper, though Pao was met with many hurdles he leaped across each time and earned the admiration of the villagers.

On a particular, seemingly ordinary day, Pao had been preparing manuscripts for a new case when he spotted documents of ink slabs. Pao was a lover of ink slabs and knowing that Zheng Zhou was the land of one of the Scholars' Four Treasures, he had once made a special visit to see its manufacturing process and there he saw the stones come alive with every stroke of the blade which made him more in awe of its artistry. Reading the files, Pao saw 36 ink slabs received by top officials yearly, when the legislation only allowed for a maximum of 8. It was nearly a fivefold jump and Pao couldn't fathom it so he asked the locals about the situation.

The locals told him that top officials threatened local ink slab workers to produce more, and they would use the ink slabs as gifts to curry favour with high officials. Pao's heart ached for the poor labourers, he thought of them waking up before even the sun awoke from its slumber, to make the journey up west for wood and heave it back down the hill. Their sore backs bent over to make each precise carve, with the fear of the officials' wrath if they didn't meet the quota. Their passion for the craft was dried out like an ink slab in a desert, for they were too tired to enjoy the process. Pao slammed his fists down and set into motion a plan of action immediately. He worked day in and day out to produce fliers, the daily necessities of sleeping and eating became an afterthought to him as he poured an ocean of determination into putting an end to the injustices. Soon fliers were plastered everywhere in the village, denouncing the top officials for their corrupt acts.

In his storm of anger he charged into the officials' office to confront them, when they saw him enter they scurried forward to bid him not to expose them, slyly offering the best of their ink slabs knowing that he had a passion for calligraphy. However, Pao was unswayed by the offer and felt even more insulted that they tried their shameful practices on him. In one swift motion he shattered the ink slab on the floor. It was at that moment that the officials realised Pao was the trunk of a tree that did not waver even in the strongest gusts of wind, they knew they shouldn't mess with him.

The story quickly spread of Pao's brutal rejection of the officials' ink slab. The village celebrated as the ink slab workers were finally free from the greedy claws of the top officials, and they praised Pao for his strong conviction in combating corruption.

On the day Pao was due to leave, the citizens ran along the shore to make their final farewells, their lively cheers for Pao could be heard even after a great distance as he sailed away on a boat. The people loved Pao because he was not a man of talk and no action, he followed through with the promise he made on the day he arrived; to make a change for the people. During the three years here, he had cracked down on the exploitation of ink slab workers, prosecuted petty thefts, provided food and shelter for the needy, and mediated conflicts in the community.

When the cheers faded until there was only the splish and splash of waters around, he silently sent a prayer of peace for the people. He stood there for a while then heard men on the boat shouting. He couldn't make out what they were saying but he could hear the fear in their voices. He looked around and saw dark clouds slowly starting to form above. Then quicker than expected, the sky transformed into a melting pot of thick grey swirls. With horror, Pao felt the sky and sea around him begin to rage, it was moving with the intensity of a mighty dragon. Why were the gods punishing them with this bad weather? Had they done something wrong?

He felt the boat tremor from the force of the waves and he knew they would capsize if this kept on. He turned around at the crewmen and shouted "Do you know why the gods are punishing us?". His eyebrows knitted together tightly, "Do say!" The shaken small scared faces looked back up, shaking their heads. Pao thrust his fan down in exasperation. Then a young man, who Pao knew was the personal affairs assistant, stood up with his head bowed and lifted his two hands, in it there was an expensive yellow fabric wrapping something. Pao looked questioningly then unwrapped the fabric and saw the familiar engravings on a dark wooden block. The assistant was now speaking so fast that each word seemed to come out before the last, Pao made out fragments of "Right before we left...The officials gave...I just took it...Just a simple ink slab...Could this be why?" Pao remained silent for a couple moments then tossed the ink slab into the waters. The young worker looked up in shock and weeped for forgiveness. Pao turned around to face the sea and as expected, the sky and air was starting to clear, the waves also fell back down in height to allow for smooth sailing ahead. The gods had forgiven them and he whispered a blessing to them.

Pao turned back to the young man and pulled him up gently, he said "It is over now, and I do not chide you since you did not know." The man and those around cried out loud in happiness and praised Pao for his kind heart. The crewsmen believed they would die on the sea when they saw the sea rising with animalistic anger, and they felt forever indebted to Pao for saving their lives.

Just as they were preparing to restart the journey, an otherworldly grumble came from the waters and shook the boat, the salesman frantically grabbed the oars to steer the boat away, while the others looked out to see what was happening. Then another tremor came from within the lake and they saw a mass of land mounting from where Pao had thrown the ink slab, like the head of a troll sluggishly moving up. Soon a trail of golden sand formed at the brim of the mass of land; the colour a relic of the yellow fabric that fell in along with the ink slab. The crewsmen beheld the sight of Pao's island forming right in front of them, gifted to Bao by the gods for his lack of greed and for the mercy of his workman. They looked at him in awe and appreciation, proud to serve such an extraordinary person.

Xiao

Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Ko, Ian – 16

Bit by bit, Arthur shoved past the dense crowd of weary workers. The train's ear-splitting screech reverberated around the terminal's scarlet walls; the deep rumble of the sleek, swift machine lightly quaked the ground. Like being crushed against the weight of a heavy blanket, the air in the congested hub was almost strangulating.

Eventually, Arthur managed to break through the horde of people. Free at last, he heaved a sigh of relief. An advertisement caught his eye as he continued trudging past the station hall. The poster announced a brand new opera performance taking place the next day, proudly displaying the date and time of the event in bolded letters beneath the face of the striking protagonist.

It was a figure Arthur could recognize anywhere. His face was as black as obsidian, a silvery crescent moon rested on his forehead, and the hallmark golden attire gave him a sense of regal magnificence. His silky smooth beard flowed like a calm river, current stable and unfluctuating as if reflecting his resolute sense of justice. His eyes were firm, unwavering, the steely gaze fixed on Arthur. Despite this, his arms were outstretched as if welcoming all interested to hear his tale.

The character was Judge Pao, globally hailed as the "Chinese Sherlock Holmes," known for his staunch adherence to Confucian values. Of all the characters in Chinese opera Arthur knew of, the one he knew best would be the revered judge. After all, it was his grandfather's favorite.

As an actor, Arthur's paternal grandfather was no stranger to the stories of old. He would narrate tales of Judge Pao's bravery and wit to young Arthur under the shade of the towering oak tree near their home. Wistful yearning flashed across Arthur's face as he remembered one such tale.

Suddenly, he was nine years old again. He sat in the verdant green park, shielded from the sunlight by the tree behind him and shielded from the harsh reality of adulthood by his grandfather beside him.

"How is school? Are you making friends?" his grandpa enquired.

"It's going great, but the teacher sends us to detention for the lamest things, like not handing in our homework for just a day!" Arthur whined, "it's not fair!"

"Is that so?" Arthur's grandfather mused, "well, this reminds me of a story. Want to hear it?"

"Yes, please," Arthur's eyes lit up, eager for his grandpa to launch into another immersive odyssey.

"Once upon a time," Arthur's grandpa began, "the sky turned gloomy gray. A disastrous typhoon hit China. Farmers hurriedly scrambled to protect their precious livestock from the ruthless tempest. Children desperately fled from the whirlwind's grasp to the safety of their homes. Fence posts were torn from the ground in a maleficent display of nature's wrath. Villages were flooded, farmland destroyed, houses leveled, and people killed.

In the midst of all this, the wealthy Zhang family hid in their mansion, an impenetrable stone fortress capable of defying the howling gales. There, they only had chess to pass the time, and the stunning mountain view was veiled by the mists of the storm.

The farmers broke into tears from their lost crops when the storm ended. They would not have enough to feed their families or pay taxes. As the Zhang family emerged from their secure abode, they also found their residence ravaged. Their tree, which had been with them for 20 years, had given into the winds.

The Zhang family was outraged. Upon closer inspection, they found that the tree had been chopped into two instead of uprooted. Furthermore, all the branches had snapped and mysteriously disappeared. Suspicious, Zhangxi, the head of the Zhang family, burst into their gardener's pathetically battered hut. He grabbed him by the arm and led him to the magistrate's office.

'Using the typhoon as an excuse, this peasant chopped down our prized tree and used the branches as firewood!' Zhangxi slammed on the clerk's desk.

'Excuse me, good sir,' the clerk timidly said, shrinking in intimidation, 'perhaps we can deal with this matter in a more civilized manner?'

'Fine,' Zhangxi crossed his arms and turned to the gardener, 'I'll see you in court.'

Over the next few days, the magistrate, Judge Pao, visits the Zhang residence personally to inspect the tree. Finally, it was time for the court hearing. Glaring at the farmer in disdain, Zhangxi explains the situation again to Judge Pao.

'If I am not mistaken, you claim Mr. Wangchen, the gardener, chopped down a tree during the typhoon for firewood to escape the cold?' Judge Pao clarified.

'Yes, your honor,' Zhangxi confirmed.

'Mr. Wangchen, how do you plead?' Judge Pao continued.

'I have been Master Zhangxi's loyal gardener for over 20 years. The tree in question was personally tended to by me, and I took no part in its destruction.' Wangchen bowed his head.

After pondering, Judge Pao came up with a solution. 'With your axe, duel my bodyguard, Zhanzhao. If you are triumphant, it signifies your innocence in the eyes of the gods, and you will be allowed to go free.'

Having no choice, Wangchen raised his axe to strike, but his form was poor, and his muscles were worn from old age. Despite the gardener's desperation, Zhanzhao sent Wangchen's axe flying with one swift blade flick. Seeing the quick victory of Zhanzhao, Zhangxi sneered.

Returning to the courtroom, Judge Pao prepared his verdict in front of Wangchen, whose head hung in shame.

'Wangchen's passionate strike was blocked by my bodyguard effortlessly. The tree Wangchen raised had such strong roots it was not ripped out by the full might of the hurricane. How could such a weak body chop down such a large tree? Instead, you have admitted to not providing your servants with adequate necessities in times of need. For your false accusation and lack of loyalty, your family shall be punished,' he addressed Zhangxi.

After the hearing, the Zhang family was lashed, and the gardener compensated."

"But what does this have to do with my teacher punishing us?" Arthur asked, breaking out of his immersion.

"Arthur, do you think the teacher suffers no consequences when you hand in your homework late? The teacher's schedule would have to be drastically shifted to meet your whimsical needs. Would that not be where the true unfairness lies?" Arthur's grandfather reasoned.

Understanding dawned on young Arthur. "I get it now, Gramps. Thanks!"

Escaping from the bittersweet memories of the past, Arthur mused about how much had happened in just a decade. His grandpa was long gone, succumbing to cancer when Arthur was 17. Life was no longer as carefree as before, and his burdens were no longer as trivial as detention.

Arthur's last remaining grandparent was his paternal grandmother. How long had it been since he last saw her? Arthur was too preoccupied with work to spend time with her. It wasn't his fault that the task list he dreaded to look at kept increasing in size. Yet, nowadays, like the incomplete moon on Judge Pao's forehead, Arthur felt something was missing. Dismissing his thoughts, Arthur jerked away from the gaze of Judge Pao and continued his walk home.

Before Arthur knew it, the sickle-shaped moon rose to its seat among the stars, reflecting on the serene ripples of the sea. Climbing into bed, he stared at the ceiling and contemplated his rediscovered memories.

For all these years, he had neglected his grandma. He cited his work as an excuse, but was it not his responsibility to manage work and life? For all these years, he never once considered himself in the wrong. But now, contrary to the tranquil ocean, his emotions hit him like a thrashing cyclone.

And just like in his grandfather's story, Arthur had to strengthen his roots to withstand the cyclone. Arthur had to reconcile with his grandma. He'd do it one day, he decided, but with piles of work on his plate, he didn't have the time for now. Pushing his thoughts away yet again, he drifted to sleep.

When Arthur woke up, instead of the comforting embrace of his bed, he was on his knees kneeling, with his hands tied awkwardly behind his back. The chilling feeling of metal touching his neck contrasted with the torrid heat of the room. Glancing to his side, Arthur found that the feel of metal came from two polearms locked around his neck. Holding the shafts were two muscular soldiers with human bodies. One had the head of an ox, and the other had the head of a horse.

Looking to his front, Arthur noticed that the room he was in mirrored the lavish throne rooms of the emperor shown in television shows. A panorama of a stunningly drawn mountainscape decorated the room, placed behind a golden throne and a wooden table covered by a royal red cloth.

His attention was quickly drawn to the man adorned in imperial robes sitting on the throne. The man wasn't human either. He had fiery red skin, a pointed beard that protruded from his face, and repulsive bulging eyes. Arthur would not have recognized the man without the crescent moon on his forehead.

"Judge Pao," Arthur breathed in surprise. He knew Judge Pao was thought to be Yama, the judge of the underworld, by many people. The two guards to his sides would be his assistants, Ox-Head and Horse-Face. But if he was in the underworld, it would mean...

"Here they call me Yama," Yama bellowed with a thunderous voice, "Sinner, do you know why you appear before me now?"

"Am I dead?" Arthur asked nervously.

"You are not yet deceased, but your behavior has sparked my attention and rage. Hence, I have brought you here to make you realize your shortcomings. Arthur Chan, you have demonstrated a severe lack of filial piety toward your elders for three years. At this rate, your accumulated karmic debt will surely lead to a painful afterlife. You should be deeply ashamed. Have you ever considered the grave consequences of your actions?" Yama demanded.

With Yama's pressing queries, Arthur had no time to be relieved about being alive. Sweat beads trickled down his forehead. "Y— yes, I realized just earlier. I'm extremely remorseful for my actions, I swear!" he stammered.

"Yet you do not seem to have taken action to repent," Yama noted.

Arthur hung his head in embarrassment. "I'm very sorry. I failed to realize the weight of my actions until today. I promise I will do better in the future," Arthur pleaded. In the condescending presence of Yama, Arthur's cheeks flushed in shame like a child caught stealing cookies.

Yama grunted in disapproval. "Come with me," he ordered, rising from his throne and walking towards the courtroom's exit. Before he could react, Yama's two guards dragged Arthur to his feet before escorting him toward the King of Hell.

They traversed the subterranean maze of Diyu, Chinese hell, for what seemed like an eternity. The torch held by Ox-Head gave the otherwise dark cave an eerie glow. Occasionally, Arthur could hear wails in the background. Other times, he swore he could make out whimpers.

The screams got louder and louder with every step they took. Eventually, Yama stopped walking. They had reached their destination, a large red gate decorated with golden cloud-like patterns. Pulling with all their strength, the two animal-faced guards towed open the doors, revealing a gruesome punishment chamber.

The ground was so hot it glowed bright red, and barefooted sinners ran around in agony, trying to navigate into one of the numerous straw huts for shelter. Whenever a person found brief consolation from the searing ground, the straw hut they entered would burst into flames. Crimson and blue ogres brandished whips with heated iron tips, lashing at anyone who dared stay in one place.

"Horse-Face, could you fetch Linxiao for me?" Yama requested.

Nodding in affirmation, Horse-Face entered the chamber and returned after a short while, dragging another man in tow. The man's state was terrible. His hair was shaggy, and his bare body was littered with scars. Though the look in his eyes was weak and weary, his expression still showed deep remorse.

"Linxiao, this is Arthur. He is not yet dead, but his transgressions are similar to yours. Tell him your story," Yama instructed.

Linxiao flashed a toothy grin of sympathy toward Arthur. "Is that so? I was just like you once, left home at the ripe young age of nineteen, I did. Went to become a doctor, and it took three long years, but I finally did it. I had completed my studies and could return home to earn my fortune. I was excited, I tell you, you couldn't even imagine how elated I was. Headed back to my village, ready to show my parents the result of my hard work. When I got back, they told me they were long gone."

Arthur swallowed his saliva in surprise, empathizing with the man. He thought of ways to show his compassion and questions to ask about his story, but in the end, the only word that escaped his mouth was a simple "why?"

"Starved of hunger in a drought, that's why. Soon, the guards apprehended me, and I was summoned to the magistrate's office. For failing to take care of my parents, Judge Pao, my judge, exiled me to the other side of the country. I remember his words like it was yesterday. 'In the relentless pursuit of your ambitions, you have forgotten what matters most. For the rest of your life, atone for your actions and regret your heinous crime.'"

"That's a bit harsh, isn't it?" Arthur commented.

"Nay, he was right. I ended up regretting my immature foolishness for the rest of my life. To be frank, being cursed to an eternity of torture is more like a grand reward. At least the pain distracts me from my eternal guilt,"

Linxiao grinned again as if trying to mask his self-pity, "say, Arthur, was it? How old are your relatives?"

"My grandma is 85," Arthur answered.

"Back in my day, 50 was considered ancient. Treasure your loved ones, young lad. True torture is the pain of knowing you failed them," Linxiao stated.

Deeming the conversation over, Yama nodded his head, and Linxiao was dragged back into the fiery field of punishment by Horse-Face.

The last thing Arthur heard before he lurched awake were Linxiao's shrieks of agony. It was just a dream, yet it stayed branded in his mind. His heart now throbbed in pain as if he had carried Diyu's flame to the real world.

Arthur recalled more of Judge Pao's epics, tales highlighting his admirable traits. He remembered that once, upon learning of a corrupted government official, Judge Pao campaigned for his removal from the role. However, the government official was the uncle of the king's favorite concubine and therefore escaped punishment. However, Judge Pao did not give up and wrote numerous referendums to the emperor until the corrupted official was finally removed from his post. Many other imperial censors had been punished for making such comments. Still, Judge Pao did not give up on upholding his moral ideals.

Judge Pao would risk his life for the sake of justice. Why am I unable to risk my dignity and reconcile with my grandmother? Arthur asked himself. Determined to take action, Arthur called his grandmother and asked if she could meet. After all, he knew just the place.

"Long time no see, Fok Yeung," Arthur's grandmother greeted him. Arthur hadn't heard his Chinese name used in a long time. Together, they entered the auditorium hall of the Hong Kong Cultural Center, eager to watch yet another new tale of Judge Pao.

New Tales of Judge Pao

Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Pang, Herman – 16

'Am I ill?', he pondered. "I feel no pain, no suffering." He looked left, then right. All he saw was a blur of colors. He sat up, his bedsheets unmoving as he shifted, feet soundlessly touching the ground.

Bao strode down the corridor, almost weightlessly. The house, he discovered, was empty. No wives, no adults or children, family or visitors – no one.

"Is there an event scheduled today?", he mulled as he continued his passage. Everything seemed too neat, too orderly, too empty. Why had all the life from the house vanished?

"Good morning!" he called. "Good afternoon?". Silence.

Vision still fuzzy, he stumbled through his house. What did he have for dinner? He could not remember. His hands felt nothing as he held onto chairs and tables that seemed sturdier than he was, as he ventured towards the wide-open door.

Outside the door stood a procession of people. A funeral, he realised. He tried stepping forward to pay his respects, but stumbled, as if an invisible force was pulling him back, and he retreated apologetically, murmuring prayers for the newly deceased all the same.

As the crowd, clad in traditional mourning colours of snow white, slowly moved away, he stepped back inside the confines of the house, shakily guiding himself towards the garden in an effort to stabilise himself.

He could not help but notice how everything – the sky, the blanket of snow, the cold – mirrored the outfits of the mourners. Even the garden, once vibrant with the chirping of birds and light gusts of wind, was now desolate and empty, something frozen in time. Making his way to the small pool, he noticed a stray leaf from a nearby tree. Slowly fluttering, descending, onto the water's surface.

Ever the perfectionist, Bao made his way to the pool to fish it out, and that was where he noticed it. The distinct lack of a reflection.

As the funeral gongs groaned in the background, now all the more noticeable, Bao Zheng began to come to terms with his untimely demise.

That day, the sky seemed just a touch too white for Bao.

As the days passed, Bao had a seemingly infinite amount of time to reflect.

Why was he here? What could he do here?

For all his intellectual prowess and decision-making ability, he could not decipher the case of his afterlife.

Ironic.

Perhaps this was some divine punishment befalling him, after sentencing so many people in his court. The most powerful judge in the Song dynasty, sentenced by a divine power that outranked him.

He thought back to times when he sentenced those in power, recalling instances of their corruption, of their abuse of power. The time he executed a high ranking scholar, Chen Shimei, for marrying a princess, while discarding a budding family, trying to bury the secret along with their bodies.

More scenes bloomed. He remembered countless battles against entitled government officials, magistrates, and the like; willingly slandering himself, only to turn the tables by highlighting the immorality of their actions.

His power had made China a fairer place, he hoped.

In retrospect, Bao considered, he had not felt much during lifetime anyway. Yes, there were fleeting moments of happiness, rage, pleasure, or regret, but it all was overshadowed by his determination for justice.

Even his own family was not immune to this burning passion. When his brother, Bao Mian, was accused of bribery, he was prepared to paint his ceremonial knives with the blood of his own until innocence was proven. In another case, an uncle, if Bao could even call him that, was cast under his judgement for a deserved whipping – corruption was corruption, and justice was blind.

The moniker of the "Iron-Faced Judge" had certainly not come lightly.

It was worth it, he reasoned. His judgement proved right from wrong, black from white. The weight of his words improved the lives of the innocent and the poor.

He believed.

He hoped.

But if his pursuit for justice was right, why was he here to endure this torture?

As Bao thought, the river of time flowed on. His physical body had long since decayed, but his mind, his spirit, fuzzy but intact, lived on.

Year after year, Bao's thoughts reverberated in the echo chamber of his conscious, increasingly vengeful, then frustrated. Why was he here? Why couldn't he pass on?

It was in one of these years where Bao finally gained momentary clarity. He heard a voice calling out, just as he thought the world had given up on him.

"Anyone," it called, "please help me."

Mindlessly, numbly, he pursued the voice. Perhaps it was the desire for a shred of validation for the first time in decades that pushed him. He thought, nihilistically, that maybe this voice would finally bring him an escape from the confines of his existence. Salvation. Caution mattered not if you were dead. This thought was ephemeral, and he banished it – for the first time in eternity, someone had sought him out.

He reached the individual, two silhouettes reaching for one another.

"Are...are you Judge Bao? Bao Qingtian? The one we learn about in stories?"

Pleasantly surprised at the recognition, Bao nodded. "Yes. What is your business with me? Who are you?"

"My name is Ming. I am just a humble peasant, your honor." He paused. "I came for advice."

Bao's tenure made Ming's tale a familiar one – the local authorities were over-taxing, unjustly taking away resources from farmers like Ming, depriving them of money to feed their families.

Families with elders working to the bone to keep their families alive, only withered away as the rich got richer. Adults who toiled tirelessly to keep the ship afloat soon came to the bitter realisation that

irreparable damage was caused by those in power. Children rotted away under a barrage of malnourishment and poverty, never actualising whatever potential they had.

Bao was infuriated. Greed that possessed people to take damaging amounts of what they wanted enraged him, regardless of how common this scenario was.

Had the world not changed? Was his quest for justice for naught?

"You should do something about it. Stand up to the authorities, do what is right! Gather your friends and learn from my stories – justice will always triumph. "

Ming was invigorated. He had come tentatively, but left with a steeled determination glinting in his eyes.

It did not take long for Ming to gather like-minded individuals – farmers, craftsmen, peasants, anyone slighted by the authorities soon flocked to him. It did not take long until his power exceeded that of the local authority.

Bao watched on approvingly, as Ming pointed out flaw after flaw in the government's actions. Finally, elders could rest, the adults were invigorated, and the children were given a chance to grow. All was well.

Though Bao had done little to guide Ming, pride was still felt. He may have passed on, but the future generations still upheld justice. He had never raised a protegee, but Ming was the closest he had to one.

For the first time since his passing, Bao felt satisfaction.

Ming slowly progressed more and more. He redistributed land, forced the authorities to grow their own food, and created hope. It was utopian.

However, Bao soon came to a realisation. An utopia was never eternal.

Not in this world.

In the dead of night, Ming was killed. The authorities begged another province for assistance. Ming was dragged, kicking and struggling, to a guillotine. The blades flashed silver, and his head fell with a dull thud.

As a judge, jury and executioner, Bao was no stranger to execution, but his heart dropped at the sight. Never once had he done it to someone he deemed as right. This wasn't a warning to adhere to justice, this was a warning to fall into line. By the end of the day, dark crimson stained the streets, washed away only by the tears of residents who mourned Ming, and the loss of their freedom.

The death of Ming was the death of justice in Bao's eyes. With that, he fell into despair.

What good was justice if it could be reversed so easily?

More time passed. Years, decades, centuries.

His world was restored through the destruction of his world-view. Ming's death had restored his clarity with the bindings of cynicism, with observations of the injustices of the world.

The Opium War. Human lives, gone not in a flash of blades, but in rattling bangs of gunshot. Swirls of pungent, intoxicating smoke swirled around the city – Bao could only stare in perfect sobriety as the British Empire milked China dry.

It was around this time a second voice called out to him. Without thought, he turned towards it, nostalgic for times when his name was feared, heralded with respect and admiration.

Then, he stopped himself. That was centuries ago. He was just an aberration, alive for some unknown, obscene, infuriating, cruel reason. Why should he get involved? He longed to return to hazier times where nothing had happened, when he could find solace in his fantasies of justice.

And so, Bao ignored the voice.

Another day, the voice came. Another day of pestering.

Try as he might, the voices called out to him like the dredges of a long-forgotten addiction. Finally, at his wit's end, he dignified the voice with a response. Masking his annoyance, he moved to the silhouette where the voice awaited him. Another child.

"What."

"Judge Bao! Honor's mine! You see—"

"Get to it."

"Yes!" The figure recounted another typical experience. Something about corruption, about unpaid work, about his family not having enough to survive.

Bao remembered when he had a family. He had cared for them. This boy, he needed help — this family needed help. Justice needed to be served.

And Bao remembered justice. He remembered Ming, he remembered happiness, fleeting but wonderful, adding colour to monochrome lives.

But Bao also remembered the cruelty of justice. The same blossoming happiness had disappeared in one fell swoop. It was impossible for the proud tree of justice to regrow on tainted soil razed by Ming's blood.

Bao had not wished to remember this. Now, he felt too much. No one should have to feel what he felt. It wouldn't be right.

"So, Judge Bao, how can I help my family?"

"Do nothing."

"But...but why? Why not make a stand for justice? You've taught us that change is what is needed to make things right!" An impassioned reply, one Bao was obliged to counter.

"Justice is weak. It is fragile. Against strong opposition, it collapses. It is unwise, no, foolish, to announce your intentions to the authorities. I urge you to drop this notion at once."

"But—"

"That is my verdict. I lived in a time where justice was possible. Times change. You should too."

The voice, lit by a spark of hope, was now left extinguished. With a stiff smile and glassy eyes, the child left with slow trudges, despondent and betrayed.

Bao reconsidered. Was it worth smothering the dreams of this child, clipping their wings before they could really take flight?

Once upon a time, he, too, was hopeful and idealistic. He advocated for freedom, but now he acknowledged that his experiences were legends of a freer time. The world had now denounced it. After all, legends were meant to be fiction.

Besides, what he thought was right had been proved wrong centuries ago.

Bao turned to leave.

Time went on, and the child grew to become a man. Inside the man, the child persisted miserably, wailing about how they should have done more. His family had passed on, working themselves to death's door, leaving imperceptibly.

Soon, only the man and the child were left. The child cried, kicking and screaming, inside the barren desert of the man's conscience. There was no drive, only fading embers of a will to live a silent life, to simply blend into the background just as he was told. Times had changed, and he would resign to live life like such, for he knew no better.

As years passed, the child's wailing gradually eroded the fabric of his sanity. And the man wondered –

“Why won't it stop?”

A once rich tapestry was brought to ruination, delicate threads snapping piece by piece. Brief moments of respite were shadowed by depression and the mourning of a life that could have been.

So the man hunted for a remedy. Anything that could muffle the noise. And so, he drank a glass that turned to a bottle, which turned into more. In his inebriation, his tears were forgotten.

But then the wailing reached a rapid crescendo that only more drinking could silence. Soon, he resorted to opium, anything he could salvage. His life became a blur, substance polluting the work he was once enraptured by.

Through all of this, the Judge observed, but never intervened, for it was justice that had let this man down, and he was powerless to stop its whims.

He kept on watching as the man collapsed. The pallor body was retrieved before being crammed into an unmarked grave – remembered by few, and mourned by fewer.

The man's pained expression pierced him. The wrinkled features contorted into an eternal snarl, closed eyes glaring at nothing but the shame of a wasted life. Had he done good? Bao did not know.

It was there when Bao wondered about what justice truly was.

Ponder as he might, the world refused to wait for Bao, forcing the new millennium upon him. As time went on, his stories reached new heights, passed on and retold by parents, dramatists and showrunners alike, all snared by the long–stretching roots of his tales. In came a new legion of curious devotees who were gripped by his virtues. Hence, it did not take long before Bao had to answer to another hopeful.

The voice was no different from those before them. Spritely, struggling, a mere sapling in the vast garden that was the real world. He was the gardener, with the power to nurture this life with the right guidance. But what was *right*? Grow too large, and the plants would be pruned. He could not snip the buds too soon either.

Bao could have chosen to turn away, but something was compelling him. His own hubris? His desire to make a positive change? To make his afterlife worthwhile?

"Hello, Bao. I'd like your help, please," the voice vaguely stated, clouded in childlike innocence.

He decided to play along. "How can I be of assistance? I am merely an old judge; you still remain amongst the living."

"That's not an issue. I just want your help with homework!"

Bao blinked, somewhat dumbfounded.

The work was finished in less than an hour, and the voice – the girl, he noted, bid him adieu. The girl came back, day after day, discussing a plethora of mundane tasks. Regardless of intention, these nightly meetings allowed Bao a distraction from himself. He warmed up to the girl, Mei, learning her name, who had little company to talk to, outcast by other children who could be so cruel. He shared his past with her, and the two hurt souls found solace with one another.

However, with Mei's inquisitive nature, it did not take long for Mei to bring up a dreg of the recent past. "Bao," she implored.

"What is it, child?"

Mei scowled. "The children at school are being mean again."

Bao offered gentle words of comfort.

"Thank you, Bao," she sniffled. He could almost hear the wiping of tears, bringing a pang to his heart for the first time in years.

"I wish I could help more, Mei. But as a spirit, I feel I've done all that I could," he said with an air of melancholy.

Another sniff came before her voice steadied. "Could you maybe answer one more question? Please?"

An instant reply. "Yes, of course."

"What happens if I want to stop these actions? What if I wanted to do what you did? To speak up?"

Bao stiffened as memories of a time long gone resurfaced. Memories of Ming, of the boy he instructed to do nothing. What could he tell her? His advice had backfired twice in the past, and for once, he was at a loss for words.

"Mei..."

"I'm sorry for asking—"

"Don't worry, I'll think of something. Goodnight for now."

What a dilemma he faced. How his old adversaries would have laughed – the famous Judge Bao stuck on a moral dilemma of all things.

Was it truly a dichotomy with only right and wrong? Mulling over it, Bao began to see the flaw in this ideology. What had doomed those he had advised was that all-or-nothing approach. For his sake, and more importantly, Mei's, he simply could not afford to make that mistake again.

The correct response took months to develop, and the topic was gently breached.

"Mei, do what you think is right. At the same time, remember you will never be completely correct. And that is fine. The world operates on a scale of moderates, and I hope you understand that sooner than I did."

"Show the world what you can do, Mei. Goodnight."

There was no chirpy response, only a determined nod before Mei's voice faded. Bao saw a distant future of Mei going on to great accomplishments, for her future was set. Bao felt comfort, finally comfortable enough to close his eyes.

The translucent vision plaguing his eyes for so long glossed over, turning an ethereal white – he was almost free, he realised. Bao felt nothing over this release despite the long pursuit, only a sense of serenity, over his child that would do great things. He could rest with no worries.

Somewhere, a leaf fell gracefully, twirling through the air as it came to rest on the azure plane of a running river. It rippled imperceptibly, shimmering – a reflection of a life. The leaf drifted away, and there was nothing.

The Legend of the Jinshimo

Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Yu, Justin – 16

“Tao Chun, my son, you have to take this exam. It is far too important to miss.”

“But I want to stay home and help at the farm during harvest season!”

“You will become an official and bring glory and wealth to the Tao family! You are already twenty-two and have spent six years preparing for the Jinshi. You must seize this opportunity before your youthful years are behind you.”

“Twenty-two is also when I am physically fittest! I need to help at the farm!” Tao Chun is not swayed. A higher-pitched voice chimes in, “Father, why can’t I go instead?”

“Tao Mei, you know only men are accepted into the imperial service. Your duty belongs at home. We could use the help,” her father replied. “Tao Chun, we have prepared a donkey for you. You will leave tonight.”

“Why do you forbid her from going but insist I leave? I don’t understand!” In a fit of momentary rage, Tao Chun hastily grabs a scroll from the dinner table and rushes out the door. He dashes to the edge of town, where he finds his comfort place — a farming equipment store.

“Oi, kid!” a raspy, gruff voice hollers, “If you don’t plan on purchasing anything, get out of my shop! Or else!” The storekeeper has always been hostile towards Tao Chun, but he ignores the storekeeper and continues to examine the rows of scythes and shovels. Eventually, Tao Chun wishes to continue his family legacy of providing the town with rice. It is unfortunate his dreams will never see the light of day; for the next morning, neither will he.

It is a hot summer’s day without a single cloud in the sky. Yet, sunlight is completely blocked by a dense forest concealing the small town of Hunju from the rest of the world. A humble wooden carriage weaves through the narrow cracks and crevices in the endless mass of trees. Legend has it that a yaoguai by the name of Jinshimo resides in the forest, snatching aspirational young men from their rides. They are sent to the mirror dimension, where they spend the rest of eternity doing manual labour on a farm for the demon of agriculture. In the past century, not a single young man from Hunju has been offered a position in the imperial court. Perhaps, by pure coincidence, the top scorer from Hunju’s local school vanishes come exam season every year. In the carriage sits Judge Pao, stopping by Hunju on a nationwide inspection. His sole objective in this town? To solve the case of the Jinshimo.

The carriage halts at the town courthouse and Judge Pao exits. His robes are flawlessly ironed, reflecting his upright moral code. Even under a magnifying glass, one cannot imagine finding even the smallest of creases. The doors slide apart to reveal a spacious interior with rows of seats leading up to a podium aligned precisely in the centre of the room. Down the aisle are the Tao family, the local school’s sole teacher, a detective and his assistant. The teacher is a man known as Li Xiansheng, whose wrinkles resemble the rings on the stumps of millennia-old trees. Nobody knows his age for sure, but he looks as though he has been teaching since Pangu separated heaven and earth. On the front row sits a seasoned detective sporting a beard as white as snow to accompany his years of investigative experience. He can be recognised as none other than Zheng Que, a travelling detective whose shining reputation is so widespread his merit is even recognised in Bianjing, the country’s capital. Beside him is a fresh-faced young adult who can be seen sorting loose leaves of paper into a navy blue folder. Drops of sweat coagulate on his forehead and subtle trembles run down his fingers. Perhaps, the nerves of his first case serving as Zheng’s assistant are reaching him. As Judge Pao’s foot steps onto the podium, the air freezes in silence and the courtroom springs up in unison.

“Sit,” Judge Pao’s deep, booming voice bellows. “Come,” his eyes lock onto the Tao couple, as if staring directly into their souls, “State your grievances.” Palms sweating and legs trembling, Mr Tao timidly walks up to the podium and begins to present his case,

“Ever since he attended school, my son has been top of the grade. He consistently obtains top scores and receives nothing but praise from his teacher, Li Xiansheng. For the past six years, he has been preparing for the Jinshi, which would finally grant him the opportunity to leave Hunju and reach his full potential in the imperial court. On his eighteenth birthday, my wife and I discussed with Li Xiansheng about possibly letting our son take the jinshi to become an official. He told us our son was not ready yet and to give it a couple more years. Over the next four years, Li Xiansheng has dedicated as much time and effort as possible to help our son prepare for the exams, even scheduling one-on-one sessions to ensure he is in perfect condition. Our son, however, had other thoughts.

“Our son was always keen on helping the family in whatever way he could. At this time of year, he would always offer to help cut the summer harvest or sow grains of rice for the autumn harvest. I tell him he should focus on his studies instead, but he is a stubborn soul and refuses to stand by and watch. After school, he tends to go to a farming equipment store bordering the forest. I suppose farming just intrigues him very much. When dinner was ready, my wife would run down to the shop to fetch him. Every time she did so, the storekeeper would shout at her for letting our son wander about. ‘Keep him at home or at school! Shouldn’t he be studying?’ he would yell. ‘If he’s not going to be a customer, I don’t want him here!’ My wife would reluctantly apologise and drag our son back home. What does a mere merchant know? Who is he to tell me how to raise my son?

“Anyway, years passed and Li Xiansheng insisted our son needed to continue studying. However, at the age of twenty-two, my wife and I decided this was the prime age for him to sit the exams. If he waits any longer, we fear he would lose his edge to younger scholars and sabotage his chances of entering—”

Mr Tao stops. His knees weaken and drop to the ground. Orbs of water collect at the edge of his eyes. The orbs grow heavier and heavier until they run down Mr Tao’s cheeks, leaving behind a silver streak of sorrow. Struggling, he continues,

“This leads to the conflict we had last night. Too tired to run after him, I sent my wife to look for him. She went down to his comfort spot, only to find complete darkness. No yelling could be heard, which could only mean the storekeeper had returned home for the day. In the darkness, our son was nowhere to be found. This could only be the doing of Jinshimo, the yaoguai that forbids our town’s brightest children from leading a better life!”

Mr Tao’s voice trembles, perhaps out of grief, perhaps out of fear. Half rising, he steps back from the stand and returns to his wife’s side. Detective Zheng’s assistant can be seen scribbling on notes while his superior pats Mr Tao on the back as consolation. The orotund, resonant voice bellows once more, “You, speak.” Judge Pao glares at Li Xiansheng. Li supports himself on the walls on his way to the podium, clears his throat, then raises his voice,

“I am deeply saddened by the tragic news presented to me this morning. My deepest condolences go out to the Tao family. Tao Chun was one of my favourite students and it is a shame that he is no longer with us and can never live up to his full potential as a high-achieving official in the imperial court. I shall provide my two cents to further this investigation in what ways I can.

“I, too, frequently visit the farming equipment store at the edge of town to converse with Tao Chun. He would share his aspirations to continue the family legacy of rice farming, and I would commend him for staying true to his family’s roots. He was aware of his filial duty and one can only imagine raising a son as righteous as the Taos. The storekeeper would comment in disapproval, telling Tao Chun continuing the family business is no way to make his family proud. A merchant’s business is not highly regarded, so it is no wonder he holds such a pessimistic point of view. Who knows what murky areas a merchant must tread to keep his business afloat. Of course, a father would also love a child who could bring wealth and glory to his rural town. I was raised in Hunju and have lived here my entire life. I would love to direct the spotlight to our often-neglected hamlet as well.

“I personally attempted to do so when I was in my youth, but to no avail. The jinshi is a tough nut to crack. Hence, I need to ensure my students are in perfect condition before they leave home to sit the exams. To further my studies, I am due up north in a few days on an annual trip to visit a teacher of mine who taught me all I know. Therefore, I was studying in my quarters and it is my deepest regret to say I was not at the scene to bear witness to the crime. Mayhap, the stories of a Jinshimo are true. We may never know. All I wish for is the best for Tao Chun, wherever he may be.”

Zheng’s assistant maintains a poker face. He vigorously scrawls lines upon lines of notes. The exhausted assistant, almost panting, slides his notes to Zheng. Without so much as glancing at the neatly bound pile before him, Zheng rises, making an appointment with Judge Pao to visit the farming equipment store at the edge of town at dusk.

As the sun sets on the quiet town of Hunju, the townspeople return home from a day of hard work, with the exception of two. Detective Zheng, aboard a maroon stallion, clip-clops down the street as his assistant follows on foot. The setting sun illuminates the horse’s mane, emitting a vibrant scarlet hue. A few minutes later, they arrive at the farming equipment store. The sun has completely set and the two men are surrounded only by darkness and silence. Zheng dismisses his assistant, claiming he has got it from here, and proceeds to wait for Judge Pao’s arrival.

Hours pass, and Judge Pao is still nowhere to be seen. Growing impatient, Zheng begins to examine the scene on his own. He pries the door to the store open and investigates its contents. He examines rows upon rows of hoes and ploughs and sickles, all of which can be perfect candidates for holding a young scholar hostage. What really caught his attention, however, was a hallway labelled “no entry”. Defying the instructions, Zheng treads carefully into the hallway to find barrels on top of each other, each large enough to store the entire town’s food supply over the winter, and definitely large enough to fit a person. Next to the barrels are bundles of rope tied tidily into large knots. Usually, such ropes would be used for securing ploughs to cows, but they are also perfect for keeping a person captive. Satisfied with his conclusion, Zheng brings one of each to his horse.

Grinning from ear to ear, Zheng exits the store with his head held high. , he hears a crumple beneath his feet as he treads onto the grassy terrain. Zheng puts down the barrel and rope to pick up a neatly folded parchment beneath his feet. On the upper surface of the folded parchment is a few specks of red, concentrated in the top right-hand corner of the parchment. Further confirming his suspicions, Zheng carefully slides the parchment into his robes and rides back into town.

The next morning, the town gathers in the courtroom to hear Judge Pao’s verdict. Chitter and chatter fill the air. Booming with confidence, Zheng steps up to the podium and presents his case, “Your excellency, I have identified the culprit!”

“Quiet!” Judge Pao’s mighty roar overpowers the audience. The room swiftly fades into silence.

“Very well,” continues Zheng, “After years of legends and stories, I can confidently conclude the person behind the Jinshimo is...” The doors to the courtroom part to reveal the farming equipment shop’s storekeeper in a cage. Bearing an uneasy expression, Zheng’s assistant wheels the storekeeper into the room. Zheng triumphantly resumes his speech,

“This man right here has always been hostile to our town’s brightest young men, howling unsolicited comments at them. Due to Hunju’s small clientele, his family business is dying and he must use alternative methods to earn money. Obviously, he resorts to the simplest way he knows how — through unethical means!

“Exhibit A; see the barrel and rope? They are the perfect instruments to keep a fine young scholar captive. As a scholar, you can expect minimal resistance, so a standard strong knot like the one displayed here would do wonders to keep a young scholar in place.

“Exhibit B; here is some parchment I found outside the shop yesterday. On it is blood splattering. This could very well be our scholarly friend asking for our assistance! But— I have a few questions,” Zheng turns around to face his audience, then points at the storekeeper, “How can money be your only concern? How dare you sacrifice your integrity and yield to your filthy merchant temptations? How dare you even show your face in this community!”

Nods of approval spread throughout the courtroom, and the towns folks begin to talk over each other once more. “Boo”s and “I knew it”s spontaneously flew across the room. The storekeeper’s jaw drops, but no sound ever comes out of his mouth, perhaps in shock.

“Enough!” Judge Pao hollers, “Zheng, read the note on the parchment aloud.”

Dear Li Xiansheng,

I am about to leave for Bianjing to sit the jinshi and would like to thank you for your guidance over the years you have taught me. I know you do not believe in my abilities yet, but I promise to make you proud.

Respectfully,

Tao Chun

Li falls to his knees and bursts into tears. The townspeople’s eyes widen and jaws drop, for they never expected to see the village elder give in to his emotions. Judge Pao reaches into his robes to retrieve a navy blue book in which he has written his verdict. He addresses Li and reads:

“You were once an aspiring young scholar who ranked top of the school. You sat the jinshi but came home empty-handed. You mentioned having an annual appointment with a significant teacher to you up north, but no scholars here ever landed a job in the imperial court. As you were completely raised in Hunju, there is no one in the capital for you to meet. Your annual appointment is not about meeting a teacher, you retake the jinshi every year in hopes of finally landing a position.

“In the years you have taught in the Hunju local school, you have encountered some bright students, including Tao Chun. Coincidentally, for as long as you have been teaching, these students have mysteriously vanished as exam seasons approached. Mayhap, you cannot bear the thought of your students surpassing you to become the first person in the town to become a government official. This is why you keep discouraging them from taking the exam.

“Of course, the storekeeper could have kidnapped the scholars, but why? It is currently the summer harvest season, meaning farmers need farming equipment to harvest their crops. If anything, business should be booming. If the limited clientele was a problem at all, this business would not have lasted generations. The note Zheng found on the ground was neatly folded, not crumpled, so it is unlikely Tao Chun threw it in a struggle. Instead, he handed it to someone else willingly. Who else other than the recipient of the card?

“Every year, when your students leave to sit the Jinshi, you murder them out of jealousy. However, because you are the town’s “wisest”, nobody, not even an experienced detective, is willing to question you. You understand the number of suspects in such a small town will always be limited, so you encourage supernatural legends of the Jinshimo in hopes of taking the suspicion of the crime off the people. When we finally started investigating the case, you jumped ship and raised suspicion about the local merchant instead.

“What scholar would you be, if you do not back up your words with your actions? What scholar would you be, to undermine your students’ efforts for your own glory? What scholar would you be to diminish another man’s profession as the ‘top’ class of society? What do you have to say for yourself?”

Li’s face flushes crimson as he looks at the ground. He collapses on all fours. With tears of guilt in his eyes, he pleads and begs Judge Pao for mercy. But Judge Pao never yields. Li is dragged out of the courtroom, where his neck is placed on a guillotine. Judge Pao leaves his seat and walks toward Detective Zheng, handing him his verdict. The cover reads: Detective Agency Internship Logbook.

The Phantom Flute

Shanghai High School International Division, Liao, David – 17

“Report! Report!”

A clear, ringing voice woke me from my nap. The table was littered with scrolls and paper with suspect faces printed in ink. I heaved a sigh, “Blasted people won’t give me a break.”

On cue, the doors parted to reveal two guards, a golden scroll held upon arms. I let out a grunt, “What’s it this time?”

One guard smiled, eyes winking, “Sir, this one’s directly from his majesty.”

I raised my eyebrows, “Indeed?” then opened the scroll, revealing the familiar script of the emperor.

Lord Pao, It has come to my attention that Lord Wang has not returned to Song. As you are probably aware of, he was sent on the mission with yearly offerings for the Khitan, a hundred truckloads of gold, a hundred truckloads of leather, and five hundred of our finest horses. But far more precious than these treasures, I was informed that Wang had brought along the trip his commander’s talisman, the Song amulet that summons forty thousand soldiers.

“Hmph...” I frowned. Shrugging, I straightened the scroll and read on.

Upon regular schedule, he should have arrived at the borders of Yan’s Gate by dawn two days prior. However, the guards of Yan have alerted me that, to their surprise, no Song man or horse has been sighted along the border in the last two days. I cannot mask my concern, for the magnitude of the situation is very critical. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the mission concerns the fate of Song. If Wang and his escort squad have indeed been abducted before they present offerings to the Khitan people, I fear restlessness in the Kingdom of Liao, as with Xia in the northwest and Dali in the south. If they manage to get a hold of the talisman, our forces will be heavily impaired. Find out what is behind all this. The fate of Song lies with you, Lord Pao.

I put down the scroll and scanned the guards, “As his majesty wishes, prepare my horse.”

It was a week until I arrived in the North.

The guards wore expressions of glee when I approached the walls of Yan. The head guard, Fang, a smart-faced man who sported an unctuous voice, grinned and pointed me towards the nearest barrack, “Lord Pao, we caught a Khitan skulking around the place Lord Wang was said to be last sighted.”

I nodded and swept past them into the barracks. A dim light threw shadows that flickered across the room. A man knelt in the middle, hands and legs tied. Face covered in darkness, his eyes slanted at me, then slowly moved up to the crescent-shaped birthmark on my forehead. A silence followed, then a low hiss escaped his mouth, “Pao.”

“It is I.” I replied calmly, “You have clues for me?”

The man sneered. His accent was exotic. “I have no words for you, dirty Han.”

Crack, his face contorted in pain as a whip struck his face.

Fang laughed out, “Dirty Khitan, speak up.”

The Khitan remained silent.

The guards had drawn their weapons, but I smiled, “What a shame, I could have helped you on the flute.”

At my satisfaction, I saw his face turning pale under the firelight, “What did you just say?” He asked in a trembling voice, “What flute?”

“That one” I pointed at his belt offhandedly. It seemed odd to me when I first entered the room, a Khitan warrior bearing a flute.

The Khitan's wrung his hands, even Fang's face whitened. I knew I'd hit something.

"A bad tune? An innovative torture. The cases I've cracked, this is definitely a first."

A low thump sounded as the Khitan banged his head against the ground, "It's torture, torture!"

"Indeed?" I asked through the noise, "Who?"

"I don't know!" wailed the Khitan, "It's been playing every night! I can't stop it."

I stood up and paced the room, the guards seemed to see it as their cue to protest.

"But he's ranting nonsense!"

"Cut the crap, where are you keeping Lord Wang?"

Fang stepped out and studied me carefully, "Lord Pao, the Khitan are our people's greatest enemy. Is it really wise to even consider the words from this beast?" He switched his fruity voice into a sneer, "I say we just butcher him."

"No one will touch this man." I called, the chatter died down. I turned to the Khitan "They say you were sighted at Wang's destination? Then bring me there."

I dragged the Khitan to the outside of the tent. Over my shoulder, I heard Fang's voice call out, "Lord Pao, anything you need. Just call on us."

The northern wind was cold. The harsh winter light pricked my skin as I cut down the ropes for him. A murderous gleam showed in his eyes for a moment as he flexed his biceps. I spoke before he could, "Bring me to your home, then maybe I can help you."

He nodded grudgingly and pointed at a cluster of houses inside the walls, "there."

"If you're a Khitan man, then why are you in Song?" I asked as we tread along the barren landscape.

He sighed, "I'm no longer one of them."

Then he turned back to me and clawed open his clothes. On his rough chest was a tattoo of a green wolf head, its fangs bared vividly. "Do you know what this is?" His voice was both proud and sad.

I stared at the wolf head, "No"

He grunted in satisfaction "I thought so, the Han are ignorant." His gray eyes met mine and he muttered, "My father was a Khitan warrior, he abandoned me as an infant because I was weak. He left me in the wilds, but my grandmother pitied me and raised me up in Song, away from my father's murderous temper."

I nodded, "Where and when did you get the flute?"

He looked down at his hands.

"Is it fate, or luck?" He murmured, "I found it lying around in the weapons store, about two days ago."

Two days, I noted, just when Wang arrived.

We arrived at the house soon, a tiny shack at the edge of the village, I learned that his name was Xiao.

The living room was a cramped, damp space. Xiao pointed at the edge of the room, where a wood mattress sat. "That's where I sleep." He pointed at the mattress, "I wake up in the flute noise every night and it just sits there, alone." A shadow of fear crossed his rugged face.

I imagined the flute sitting on the table. It would be impossible to break in, blow the flute, and slip out without anyone noticing unless there was something supernatural... I've heard rumors of Khitan warriors lifting oxes and murdering without a whiff in the wind.

"Hey!" I was jerked away from my thoughts by Xiao's voice, he was staring at me.

“Yes?” I said.

Xiao shifted uncomfortably “What’s your plan?”

I smiled “Today we won’t be sleeping.”

I told Xiao to stay in the shack, while I ambushed on the second floor of a nearby house. I paid a visit to the store where Xiao found the flute. It was a funny little store. There were no items on the racks, only a heavy layer of dust. As a matter of fact, all the stores had nothing, and the only person in the village was the owner of the shop, a vicious-looking man with a big beard. I was beginning to form a vague suspicion.

Soon, the pale sun dipped into the barren horizon, coldness seeped inside my clothes even more than they did in the day. Still, I did not breathe as much as a large inhale as the night elongated. My senses told me that it was hitting midnight when my ears caught a distant sound, a thin noise. A moment passed, then two. Then I heard the noise again. A sharp but sweet tune travelled into my ears. I recognized it. It was “Seeing Spring” by Han dynasty poet Cai, a romantic creation.

Before I’d realized, the noise waned and then disappeared. The night was as it had been seconds ago.

When I came back to the shack, Xiao had only just lit the candle. “Was there anyone?” He whispered.

“The warrior has decided to drop his manly manner?” I tilted my head at him, under the dim candlelight, his face reddened, “I may be weaker than the average Khitan, Pao, but killing you is an easy feat.”

I waved his warning away, “To answer your question, the music wasn’t from your flute, it came from the North.”

“The North?” he asked.

“The North.” I replied steadily, “That means the guards or, even, the Khitan.”

I saw the silhouette of him shudder, “Grandmother always said that Song would fall to Khitan.”

“I agree.” I said, “But I’m afraid we are on opposing sides, are we not?”

Xiao wrung his hands again. I was beginning to interpret that as a sign of hesitation. “Perhaps.” He said at last.

“Well, it wasn’t all for nothing, I do have some threads now.” I added, “For instance, what kind of person would blow a flute in the middle of the night? Not much of an audience, is there?”

Xiao looked confused, “I don’t know, probably a freak?”

I laughed, “Yes, maybe, but I guess he’s trying to do something that he can’t do in the day, right?”

I saw his eyebrows lock, then the expression cleared, “He’d be,be sending a signal!”

“Indeed” I smiled, “Now, if he were to be communicating, then he’d expect a response, which I presume will come from our grumpy friend at the weapons store.”

Xiao nodded.

“At the response, he would either choose to do or not do something.” I continued, “Now, we know the why, the when, and the where. Only the who is missing.”

Xiao scratched his head, “If you say so. I’m not a thinker.”

I reached out and pulled the flute from his belt, it felt light and springy in my hands. A clear note rang when I blew into it. I pocketed it and said, “We’ll try again, but this time, I’ll give them a message back.”

The second night I ambushed in the same place. Soon, the same, eerie tune passed through my ears. I waited for him to finish and raised the flute to my lips. Years in the palace sorting paperwork roughened my technique, but I managed to finish the song hastily. The air turned silent again, with the occasional rusting of wind against leaves, just like yesterday. I smiled to myself; everything was just as I expected.

“It’s about time this case ended.” I said casually when I entered the shack, “Make yourself comfortable.” I added.

“You’re putting me up, Pao.” Xiao looked annoyed, “Don’t toy with me.”

“I assure you, I’m not....”

But my voice faltered as my eyes fell on something on the edge of the wall. It was a golden linen tree with names tagged at every branching.

“That’s our Khitan family tree.” Xiao’s voice informed me, “Grandma said it was important to know your ancestry.”

It was a huge tree, a small name on the outermost branch read Xiao, and a few extensions I saw another name.

The light had been lit in my head, everything was clear as glass now.

I stood up, “We have a guest.”

A clear knock sounded and Xiao jumped. The door creaked open to reveal a cloaked figure in the rush of snow.

“Welcome, have a seat,” I said, gesturing towards the small stool.

“Thank you” replied the man, his voice was familiar. With a grunt, he sat on the stool and took his hood off.

Xiao gasped.

It was Fang.

I surveyed him out of the corner of my eye, he had a pale complexion, likely from the cold. But when I looked closer, I saw that his face was convulsing in excitement, cheeks starting to redden as if threatening to burst.

I spoke first, “Fang, what a pleasant surprise. What brings you here?”

Fang replied, though I noticed his eyes were averted “It’s been a few days since you left, Lord Pao, I was beginning to worry if that dirty Khitan had done anything to you. You should come back with me.”

“Indeed?” I said, “He has treated me very well.”

Fang eyed Xiao coldly “I warned you about him, Lord Pao.” Have you found any clues on where Lord Wang is?” He asked in a voice of concern.

“I have, in fact.” I said pleasantly, “I believe that man who hid him is among the three of us.”

I was looking at him closely as I spoke. His expression had frozen. “You know everything, don’t you.” The words came out slowly.

I smiled, “Maybe, maybe not.”

His features contorted. A malevolent, unearthly grin had twisted his handsome face. He stood up, limbs shaking. “Spare me of your bureaucrat manner, Pao. If you want to kill me, draw your knife!” He spat.

“I’m not sure what you are indicating.” I said pleasantly, “Though I must admit, you most definitely outmatched me in flute skill.”

A *shink* sounded. Xiao had drawn his knife.

Fang bared his teeth, "You disgusting Han, who told you? Was it the other guards? I knew I couldn't trust them."

I stared at him "You did, Fang. The tune came from the North of the village. At first, I thought it could be the Khitan, but they couldn't do anything even if anyone responded, with the walls blocking. So I moved my attention to the fort itself and its inhabitants."

"No ordinary burglar could ambush and subdue Wang's men precisely on the day that he arrived. So I thought who it was. Only you have that ability in the North. But why? I asked myself."

Fang curled his lips, "Why, Pao? Why?" He said softly.

"I never expected you to use your real name, but now I know." I traced my finger along the lines of the family tree and tapped on a name in golden embroidery : *Fang Bo*. "There is a Song 'Fang', but also a Khitan 'Fang'. No one would have noticed, I got lucky." I smiled at him and he gazed stonily back. "You are the Fang, genius warrior and tactician, greater even compared to Wang of Song. Emperor Ye Lu of Liao sent you to infiltrate Yan's Gate."

"You bribed the other guards with a portion of the offerings. I take it that the gold is in the forts and the cattle and steeds to Liao? Anyways, you abducted the diplomat and his offerings secretly before arrival at Liao, so as to blame Song for betrayal and start a war. Then, when all hell breaks loose, your army will be free to pass through the practically ghost fortifications of Yan and invade Song from the North. The emperor told me that the guards said no man or horse had passed Yan, but no one cast a doubt on who said so."

Fang snarled, "Lies, speculation."

"You massacred Wang's men, but kept Wang alive because he meant something to you." I continued, "The commander's talisman. He hid it somewhere before the attack. Your people interrogate him every day until he spits. But until then, you set up a flute communication so that you know if he relents, no answer means no talisman, and blowing back on flute means the other. Little did you expect someone else than your bearded companion would have the flute."

"You blanched and yelled to kill him, I remember, but for a different reason. I brought it to your attention that he had your flute. And you didn't want to kill him because he was of your opposing race, did you? You wanted to kill him because he ruined your communication network. Who knows how long he had the flute, what would have happened with the interrogation?"

Fang had little blood on his face.

I laughed "You would never expect that this was the crack in the floor, I used your suspicion against you. I knew that after I took Xiao away, the flute message was not to be relied on. You would not allow any mistakes in your ingenuity. So when you heard the other flute on this beautiful night, you had to check. "

His face remained emotionless. "You say that I'm a Khitan, prove it! Prove that I am that Fang Bo!"

I smiled "Still unwilling to relent? "Peel open your clothes, Now!" Xiao rested his blade on Fang's neck. Fang stared at me, then loosened his cloak, button by button. A green tattoo lay across his chest, a hideous snarling wolf.

I stared at him coldly, "You murdering bastard. Fang. You think only the guards are blinded? You suffer far more. Your arrogance has made you overlook the cracks in your 'Seamless' plan, and now you will pay."

A day later, Fang was executed at Yan's gate.

The guards followed his fate three days later.

Seven days later, Xiao was found hanging from the ceiling of his shack. Nothing had moved, except a tiny burn on the tips of the family tree.

"Lord Pao, why did you trust me? I was a khitan thief. " Xiao wore the questioning look he always had. We stood at the walls, overlooking the stretching horizon of white and gray.

I smiled, “Simple, I don’t think this is a thing you can make up.”

“Why?” he asked.

I frowned “Well, whoever is behind all this would be trying to start a war between Song and Liao. As I told Fang yesterday, the person would need the power to conquer Wang’s soldiers cleanly and subtly.” I chuckled “I believe all that surpasses the scope of a poor peasant’s abilities.”

“Haha.” Xiao looked goofy in his laughter, “Thank you, Lord Pao.”

The Grey Murder

Shanghai High School International Division, Liu, Ryan – 17

“Are you not going to defend yourself, Lin?” Judge Pao asked, staring at the man sitting in the far corner of the damp, tiny room. He had a face either confident by innocence or confident by arrogance, with his large eyebrows dancing across his face as he spoke. I stood beside Judge Pao, my eyes darting back and forth between them.

Lin said nothing. He hung his head low with his hands on his lap. Half of his face blended into the darkness, and, even then, his sharp aura shot a shiver down my spine.

“Answer my question,” Judge Pao demanded as he leaned against the door frame, holding a candle that gave barely enough light to track his dark face and thick beard that shook as he spoke.

“You found a new partner.” Lin glanced at me.

“I...” was all I could utter with my throat as dry and rough as an oven that hadn’t been washed for months.

“We know you killed Chang,” Judge Pao thundered, lunging at Lin.

“Speaking of crimes, you left a mark on me during my arrest, Judge Pao.” Lin caressed the vaguely visible scar on his forehead coated in candlelight. “Oh, but don’t worry, I forgive you,” he scoffed, as he brushed his damp, nest-like hair to the side and curled his lips into a vicious smile.

I stole a glance at Judge Pao staring at the suspect with the sharpness of an eagle.

“Oh, Judge Pao, don’t give me that look. Both you and I know that I shall be released.” The man paused for a second as he stretched and yawned. “No. That I *will* be released because you have no evidence.”

I gathered my courage and kept from quaking as I spoke. “We can lessen your punishment if you give yourself in right now.”

“Oh, your new partner trying to speak up and prove himself?” The man mocked.

I stayed silent.

Judge Pao heaved a sigh before he spoke. “Lin, tell me, what happened to you?”

“Pao, I thought you were cold-blooded! Your heart softened when you saw the change in me?” Lin sneered. “Just leave me alone.” Lin lowered his head again and started humming a tune to himself while tapping his feet rhythmically. “Oh, and remember! The hearing starts at tomorrow noon, and the case will be closed after the hearing. If you still haven’t found any evidence by then.” He grinned and mimicked a bird, flapping his arms up and down. “The bird will be set free.”

“I can’t wake a man who’s pretending to be asleep.” Judge Pao shook his head, turned, and strolled out of the room. I hurried and followed behind him, relieved that we were finally leaving. “If this is what you wish for, Lin, congratulations.”

★

“Where’re we going now?” I asked, trailing behind Judge Pao on the silent streets. The few leaves that hung on the branches whispered to each other as a gust of autumn wind rolled by. Judge-Pao’s pace quickened.

“Can I go home?”

“You are afraid of Lin.” Judge Pao slowed down.

His sudden statement surprised me. "I mean, he's different from any other murderers that I've seen. He's confident." I paused to glimpse Judge-Pao's reaction, "So confident that it kinda became intimidating..."

"We're here." Judge Pao interrupted, stopping in front of a huge mansion. "Lord Chang's mansion."

"Judge Pao!" A servant cried, embracing him as we stepped in. "Are you here to examine the evidence?"

"Bring me to the crime scene and tell your masters to come," Judge Pao demanded.

The servant led us to a bedroom on the second floor, then left to find the rest of Chang's family. Judge Pao and I entered the bedroom where I immediately noticed a man slumped in a chair facing a large window.

"There goes our victim." Judge Pao strode up to the man, knelt down, and examined both the wooden floor and the man himself.

"Judge Pao!" A woman in her forties and a young man in his twenties rushed into the room and cried, "Thank god you are here!"

"Chang's wife and son?" Judge Pao asked without looking up. "Talk to my assistant. I will first survey the room."

I nodded. "I'm his assistant," I replied, examining them. The woman was visibly emaciated, her hair tangled together, her clothes disheveled and unorganized. The man had a massive build and seemed more emotionally stable than the woman, yet his hoarse voice was accompanied by sadness when he spoke. "Tell me what happened."

The woman collapsed and buried her face in her hands, her body shaking as she sobbed.

"My mom had been like this since my father died." The young man forced a bitter smile. "I'll tell you what happened."

I nodded and motioned for him to continue.

"Lin came and had lunch with us," the young man began. "Then he left, and sometime later, we heard my father making some noise. He was dead by the time we rushed into his room."

"Is that all?" I was surprised by how short the story was. "Did you prepare all the food and drinks?"

Chang's son nodded.

"So that eliminates the possibility of poisoning." Judge Pao stood up and joined our conversation. "Chang was drunk and asleep after Lin left?"

"Yes, he fell asleep immediately after Lin left," Chang's wife stopped crying enough to interject, but still stumbled over her words with occasional sobs as she spoke.

"Chang was most likely strangled to death, as the rope around his neck suggests." Judge Pao pointed at a rope around Chang's neck. "And it was done as he was asleep, for there were no signs of fighting."

The three of us watched in silence as Judge Pao paced back and forth in the room while muttering to himself.

Judge Pao tapped the window and continued. "The windows can only be opened from the inside, and this is the second floor, so there can't possibly be any other way to get in without either breaking the window or being noticed by the guards that patrol the house."

"Could it have been one of the guards?!" I exclaimed as I heard Judge Pao's logic. "Lin couldn't have gotten back after he left, so it can't be him."

"It...was one of the guards?" Chang's wife looked up at me and questioned my hypothesis. "I...don't think the guards would...do something like this to Chang." She paused to sob again before continuing, "He pays them very handsomely, and the guards work in groups so that they can check each other."

"The servants?" I was disappointed that my hypothesis was immediately rejected.

Chang's son shook his head. "The servants were out with me and mother. It was Lin. No one else had been even near my father for the past few days."

Silence fell upon us as we considered the case. Judge Pao paced back and forth again, kneeling down to check a corner and peeking to see if he missed any evidence. He ran his hands along the wall and flipped through Chang's closet. The three of us watched and waited in silence as he searched the room.

"The rope had signs of being soaked in water," Judge Pao finally spoke again as he examined the rope around Chang's neck. "And the rope is not an ordinary rope."

I took a step forward. It was made of several colorful thin strings that tangled each other with no visible knots. "It looks like some sort of necklace," I commented at the sight of this strange rope.

"Why, it is the necklace that Lin gave to my father as a gift when he came! I told my father to not put it on!" Chang's son cried as he recognized the rope. "I knew it was Lin! Execute him!"

"But if the rope was given to him as a necklace, then, how..." The case became more and more mysterious as facts flooded in. "Chang wouldn't strangle himself to death as he puts the necklace on, right? It makes no sense that the necklace strangled him to death."

We all stared at Judge Pao as he pondered my question. But he didn't answer me and just continued to examine the rope.

"My husband was soaking wet when he came home, and told me that Lin accidentally tripped him into a pond when he was walking Lin out." Chang's wife mentioned. "Does that help?"

I tried to put the puzzles together. "But what does that have to do..."

"We are aware of the situation and have gathered enough information." Judge Pao rose and tapped my shoulder.

"Will you execute Lin!?" Chang's son grabbed Judge Pao's hand and looked up at him. "You will, right!?"

"I have my theory, and all I have to do is to conduct a test." Judge Pao motioned for me to leave. "Thank you, Chang's family. We invite you to the hearing."

★

The sky had already turned pink as we got back to the palace. We only had a few more hours before the hearing. Judge Pao locked himself in his room, presumably thinking about the case, and left me with the instruction to question Lin again.

I stood in the empty hall and hesitated for a few seconds. With a deep breath, I pushed open the door with my shaky hands and inched into the tiny room.

"Pao's little assistant is here all by himself?" Lin sat in the same corner, in the same position, as the first time I had seen him. His head hanging low in front of his chest; his hands laying on his lap.

"We found evidence." I tried to put up my tough voice to intimidate him.

"Lemme tell you a story." Lin slowly rose and offered in his raspy voice. "Would you like to hear it?"

"We know you killed Chang." I stumbled backward. "Don't you dare attempt to hurt me."

"I'll take that as a yes." He sat down again and grinned. "It's a story of a poor boy who lost his parents when they were killed during a robbery." He paused for a second, looking intently at me to see if I were interested. "You agree that the criminal shall receive his punishment, yes?"

"You will receive the punishment that you deserve." I knew what Lin was going to say. A sad background story of himself and how he became a criminal. I've heard from too many criminals to know everything by heart.

"And if the criminal shattered not just one family, not just two families, but thousands of families?" Lin lazily questioned, yet there seemed a ferocity behind it. "Don't tell me that you will punish him, because you won't. You all work for this criminal by never punishing him."

Lin's story began to interest me. "We work for a criminal? Nonsense."

Lin didn't say anything for a very long time. He just sat in the dark corner of the room, gazing at the wall opposite him. "Needless to say, it was my background story." He finally spoke again after an eternity of silence. "Did you know that I used to be a judge?"

I nodded and kept quiet, waiting for him to continue.

"Have you ever wondered how a judge became a criminal?"

"We won't lessen the punishment just because you were a judge."

Ding. Ding. Ding. The distant bell struck three times, interrupting Lin from finishing his story. Reluctantly, I pushed myself up and nodded at Lin, then took a deep breath and inched towards the door. "There goes our signal for the hearing. I guess you will have to finish the other half of the story then."

"Being a judge does not bring justice," Lin spoke calmly.

"Perhaps no," I answered without turning around. "But, I'm certain that killing another man brings no justice either."

★

"Murderer!" Chang's son cried out and spat at Lin as he was escorted into the palace by two guards.

"Judge Pao," the emperor thundered, sitting in his chair and staring at Judge Pao. "Do you have the evidence necessary to determine Lin as the murderer?"

The guards left Lin in the middle of the palace, where he stood in the center of lords who had gathered together to judge the case along with the emperor. Judge Pao took a step forward and stood beside Lin, then nodded and spoke, "I do. Lin is indeed the murderer."

"Kill him!" Chang's son cried out once again and raised his fist in the air. "Kill him!"

Lin sneered and tilted his head to the side. "And where exactly is your evidence, Judge Pao?"

"This." Judge Pao raised his hand and waved the necklace that Lin gave to Chang. "You killed Chang with this necklace that you gave him."

"Oh, but how can a necklace kill a man?! And, if it were the necklace that killed him, then it must be suicide by definition for it was surely Chang himself who chose to put the necklace on. You can't blame me for his death, can you?" Lin smirked and bowed at the emperor. "Surely you won't allow Judge Pao to blame me for the death of Chang?"

"You tripped him into a lake."

"And what does that have to do with Chang's death?"

"The necklace was very tight to start with," Judge Pao ignored Lin's question and continued with his explanation. "And is made of a special hemp rope. I have conducted a test on another hemp rope, and found out that the rope shrinks as it is dried under the sun."

Judge Pao paused and took a glance at Lin, who stared at Judge Pao with a mixed expression that I still couldn't identify. Was it fear? Anger? Or a mix of both?

Judge Pao continued. "So, lords and emperor, here's the story. Lin gave Chang the necklace as a gift, and out of respect, Chang would naturally put it on once he received the gift. Lin drank with Chang and made sure that he got drunk, and later tripped him into a lake. Just as Lin had planned, alcohol soon kicked in and Chang fell asleep on his chair. The sun was high when he fell asleep." He paused again and smiled at Lin. "Am I right so far?"

Lin kept his silence.

"The necklace shrunk in the blazing sun, and by the time Chang realized, it was already too late for him to get the necklace off himself. He made a few useless attempts and created some noise, and was then found dead by his family."

Judge Pao finished his explanation, and the lords soon began murmuring to each other, and the murmur grew louder and louder until it changed into applause from the lords mingled with cries of 'execute the murderer'. Lin looked at the ground and made no protest at Judge Pao's claims. All was clear, but one puzzle piece was still missing for me.

"Lin, I have a question for you." I stepped forward. The hum of conversation stopped and the lords locked their eyes on me. "Why did you kill Chang? What's your motivation?"

Lin glared at me and curled his lips into a vicious smile, just like the first time I had seen him. "I also have a question for you. Why do you think my parents were killed during a robbery?"

"Lord Chang's an honorable man and will not rob your family."

"No," he agreed. "But he steals money from the poor and turns them into criminals, forcing them to rob other families in order to survive."

"Nonsense!" Chang's wife shouted. "Liar! My husband is no thief!"

"Oh, but what about the taxes that he puts on poor peasants? What about his monopoly on several commodities? And what will the peasants do as they are crushed and can no longer make a living?" Lin's voice was surprisingly calm, as if devoid of emotions completely. "I'll tell you what they do. They commit crimes. And what have you done to punish the lords? Nothing. Not a single lord had been punished because they are the ones paying your salary."

A group of guards began marching Lin away. Lin followed them without any protest, as if he were following them to a feast rather than his death.

"It's not up to you to punish him." Judge Pao spoke with sorrowful determination. "I am truly sorry for what had become of you, Lin, but no crime shall go unpunished."

"There goes the last part of my story." Lin turned and stared at me. "Lesson of my story? Being a judge does not bring justice."

"Perhaps no," I answered with feigned determination, "but I am certain that killing another man brings no justice either."

★

Lin was executed right after the hearing, and he showed no signs of fear, even as the axe fell on his neck. Everyone soon left after the execution.

"Judge Pao!" I ran after Judge Pao as he was leaving. "May I talk to you for a few minutes?"

Judge Pao nodded.

“The thing that Lin said...is it true? Are lords as bad as he claims?” Judge Pao focused on me but didn’t say a word. “Does being a judge bring justice at all?” I raised my voice and felt a fierce fire burning in my chest. “What’s the point of all that we’ve done? Have you lied to me this whole time, knowing that we cannot bring justice no matter what we do? Lin had already killed Chang because we aren’t doing our job. How many more deaths will it take before you tell me the truth?”

“Lin was a good judge.”

“Answer my questions.” I trembled with frustration. I felt as if I’d been lied to.

Judge Pao sighed and turned away.

“Tell me!” I shouted. “Does being a judge bring any justice at all?”

“Perhaps no,” he said without turning around, “but I am certain that killing another man brings no justice either.”