



Creative Writing  
**Fiction**  
Group 4

# The Quarter Moon Disappearance

CCC Ming Yin College, Choy, Siu Long – 16

## *Another Day, Another Case*

“Lord Pao,” I said, “the suspect has been taken in.” He rested his pen on the inkstone, a familiar stern look on the man’s face. Lord Pao is a brilliant judge, enacting justice equal for all. For all his efforts cleansing the world of evil, the luxuries rightfully deserved, he sought none of it –except the truths behind the people’s actions, and the ends they deserved. The man about to be judged was a murderer –accused for the death of a farmer. Those who take the lives of others reap what they sow, and without a shadow of doubt he is the culprit. He deserves a quick exec –“We will hear what he has to say,” Pao said calmly, as if he peered into my soul, “take him in.” “Understood!” the guards swiftly left.

A young man in rags was brought in, his appearance a poor one. “It was not me! It was not me! I did not kill him! I would not kill– ”

“Silence.”

It wasn’t loud, yet his voice rang like thunder. The sheer authority stopped the man’s words.

“There is no rush. You shall speak. If it is what you say, what is your story?”

The hearing had been fruitless. For one, the man, Zi, couldn’t answer where he had been at the time of murder, and hesitantly claimed to be at the market, when it would’ve been closed then. Exhausting most options, Pao declared, “we shall hear more from you tomorrow. For the time being, you will be taken away. Should you be innocent, tell me the truth, and the eyes of heaven will bring justice.” As the guards take him to the cell, Zi stopped for a moment, before reluctantly leaving the court.

That night, layers of clouds masked the sky. Nevertheless, fragments of the moon shone brightly, and a resolve was murmured that only the heavens heard. *I can’t be arrested, not yet.*

## *Searching Fortune Market*

“The man, Zi –he escaped!” A guard shouted the moment he rushed into the court, gasping for air. I stood up baffled, “What?” “He’s not in his cell! The door was broken!” Not even the brawniest of soldiers could break the frame without trouble, so how? “Search for him,” Pao ordered the guard. He turned to me and said, “This case is peculiar. Let us head to the market Zi claimed to be at when the farmer perished.” “...Right!” I followed as Pao headed out.

Fortune Market was a place booming with people buying produce for the day. Merchants of different sorts had placed stalls at every corner. Lord Pao wore with much more mediocrity to avoid gathering attention of the public. “Fruits! Vegetables! Everything you’ll need! Fruits! Vegetables...” I approached the loud seller and asked, “Three of these, please. Have you heard of any things that happened here recently?” The man replied absent-mindedly, “What’d you want me to say? There was a guy selling exotic fruit, someone wanted one, and when he went for his wallet the rich man bought out all the fruits! Lucky bastard, wish it had been me.” “Who’s so charitable?” “Landlord of the farmers around here, the Jin’s. Lucky streak for them recently, a farmer died and the land was given to them. No one knew if he had family.” *That’s a hit!* “Anything about the farmer?” “He gives me produce, and I pay him. Not my biggest source, but we’d have a chat or two. He had been under the weather for a while, before not showing up one day. He died!” “Who would do such a thing?” “Like I’d know,” he shrugs, shoving the produce to me, “here. Cherish them. Some hooligan has been stealing produce since god-knows-when, with the farmer dead, these are the last stock. *What do you need?*” The seller looks away to serve another person.

Pao overheard the conversation and commented, “Interesting individual, knows a lot about the market. Zi is a customer of the market, but not one with much attention, unlike the Jin Family. We shall have to question the family of Zi.”

## *One Piece of the Puzzle*

Leaving the bustling market, we headed towards to Sheng Estate. From Zi’s appearance, it was no surprise that he came from a poorer family. “Makes Sheng Zi all the more suspicious. Who else would kill if not the man with nothing to lose? For food, no less.” I formulated. Lord Pao says firmly, “Without any evidence, just as baseless as any claim. We will see in due time. First and foremost, Zi’s whereabouts.”

We arrive at what looks like primitive walls from another dynasty, and rural houses in between – Sheng Estate could hardly be called an “Estate”. “But the family inside is living proof this land is still their own,” Pao said, “for what reason would Zi resort to murder, to taint their name forever?” An old man came out and greeted us, “Welcome to Sheng Estate. There’s not much here, but please be comfortable. What brings you here?” “We would like to ask you about Sheng Zi.” In a moment, the old man’s peaceful face changed to one of desperation. “Please help him!” he pleaded, grabbing Pao’s sleeve. My hand reached out to take hold of the man, but Pao stopped me and let him continue. “He’s innocent! He wouldn’t do such a thing!” “We understand. How can we believe you?” The old man spoke through tears, “Zi is a caring father! He works earnestly to feed his wife and son! Zi is a respectable and knowing man, he considers the estate’s well-being! We wouldn’t be here if Zi didn’t preserve our land!” Listening to the emotional old man, I could hear his sadness, and of his trust. Lord Pao put his hand on the old man, and said, “We are here to find the truth. If you believe in Zi, tell no lies; and if you believe in us, speak the truth.” When the old man calmed down, I spoke. “When had Zi been that day?” “He was tending to his farm, like usual. Nothing out of the ordinary happened! He went out to the market, and came back like normal!” “Does he have any quarrel with the farmer?” “We are neighbours, but he rarely is there, so we don’t talk much. He is always out to settle disputes, I hear.” Pao thanks the man, and says, “One more thing. Have Zi come by since his arrest?”

“All of Sheng believes in Zi,” the old man says.

“Thank you for your cooperation.” Pao leaves fulfilled, signing me to leave.

The road back to Fortune Market was a long one – there was much to talk about, yet the trip seemed endless. “I cannot believe the Sheng’s have to travel this... ‘path’ weekly.” “It says a lot about their character,” Pao said, “which further makes Zi’s case unbelievable. The fact is that Zi is avoiding trial, we will see to it. But there is a family I would like to visit.”

“The family that has influence over the city”

“the family that took over the farmer’s land”

“the family that bought out the market once”

The Jin’s.

### *Detour*

Walking past Fortune Alley, into another main district, we reached the building towering the other houses. “Jin Rong Tower. Some say the place is grander than palace residences,” Pao stands before the tower, and soon a man comes out. The burly man says, “what business do you have here?” “Palace Officials,” I interjected, showing a red Crest, and asked for the land owner. The man’s face became more annoyed, and with a changed tone, scowled, “in.”

The burly man sits us at the audience chamber and leaves, saying the man we were looking for will come once he has prepared. The door closes and I finally relax, sighing, “I have to say, Jing guards are intimidating.” “Be wary. Wealth is a mind killer, it clouds one’s vision. The Jin’s could very well be related to the case.” Then, a loud noise pierces the room as the door open. A man wearing blue luxury clothes sits opposite to us, his neck a silver jewel chain rests. “I am Jin Chen. What may you be interested in?” “We are deeply sorry for the recent loss.” Seeing Chen’s confused face, I continued, “the death of the farmer at your border. In this age of prosperity, we cannot believe a murder would happen.” Chen lays back and says, “oh, him. It’s alright, happens all the time. Who but the Song can keep the lands at peace for eternity?” “You sing our praises. We would like to give peace to the farmer. For that, we would like your assistance.”

Pao stated our business, and Chen didn’t seem to mind. “That man was a good man. Worked for me faithfully, and I shared my riches with them. A shame he passed, but it can’t be helped.” *This man didn’t even recall his death, yet he could be sorry for him?* “We have a suspect. One ‘Sheng Zi’. Do you know of the Sheng Family?” “Of course!” Chen replied without hesitation, “they always call trouble at my border. If you’re officials, deal with them!” “The Sheng is an earnest family. Why do you say?” “Evil people, I tell you! They have a grudge against the successful. I bet they are behind the murder.” Before I could interject, Pao rises from his seat, “we shall look into your complaints. Now then, we shall take our leave.” Before he leaves, the judge added, “Chen, I hope these luxuries will not steer you away from the straight true path.”

*Light beneath the eyes*

As soon as the gates of Jin Rong Tower closed behind us, I muttered, “The nerve of that man! The lands are always at risk of danger, and Chen is unaware of any of it! Delusional!” Lord Pao wasn’t listening. His eyes were focused, deep in thought. I waited patiently –Judge Pao is working his magic, his Mind’s Eye. Pao said, “From when Zi was arrested to now I have heard much more info. It is without a doubt that Zi returned to his family at least once after escaping, the old man told me that, for what reason I cannot say, Still, I can harbor a guess. To escape arrest is a grave crime, punishable by death. Knowing the Sheng Family bond, Zi could be on the run to help his family, possibly one last time...”

“If that is the case...”

“Hurry, to the murder scene!”

The sky was night, the moon barely visible beneath the dark shadows. Night gale cuts through the streets of Fortune Market like blades, but we couldn’t stop. When we arrived, the fields of corn swayed in the gust, brushing one another. Silence. I tread into the fields and advanced into the familiar spot, where we first found the farmer. On the floor lay the deceased, just like when the investigators and I first came. Yet the farmer’s body has already been buried after the initial investigation,

“Zi...”

The rags of cloth was stained with blood, coloring the scene with a darker and sinister tone. I put my hands on the body, contorted into a ball, like an infant. Cold, but *not ice cold*. This had been recent, and couldn’t have been earlier than 2 hours. Pao reaches down and opens Zi’s hands. A piece of lapis lazuli, a luxury even among the wealthy. Pao gets up and says, “The Sheng truly have a heart of gold. To think one would taint themselves to let their kin prosper, that is noble.”

“Chen wore a silver necklace, the design is different than his robes. Have that investigated, he will see justice.”

He Who Illuminates, Crescent Moon

When Chen was arrested, he tried to leave, threatening the guards. However, when Lord Pao in his formal attire made his appearance, Chen could not move. After investigation, and questioning the Sheng Estate, as well as their neighbors, Jin Chen had been trying to take over the farmer’s land for months to expand their business. When Chen had enough, he ordered the death of the farmer, and despising the Sheng’s righteousness, put the blame on them. Zi had been at the market at the time, but we found out that Zi had long since lost his job due to pressure from the Jin’s. Perhaps at that time, Zi had been stealing at the Market, but the truth will not be known. Nonetheless, Zi was the scapegoat for being at the wrong place at the wrong time. After the trail of condemning Jin Chen, Lord Pao rested on the palace gardens. I sat next to them, talking of the case. “Sheng Zi –A man who stained himself for his family. Yet no one will ever hear from him again. His family will be waiting for him forever. In the end, Justice was enacted, and peace has returned. How many more times, until such turmoil ends?”

The quarter moon has faded, and the clouds no more. The Crescent moon shone in the sky, its light basking the city below and the heavens above, shining.

# The Moon Rules the Night

*G.T. (Ellen Yeung) College, Ma, Jesse – 17*

The crowd chants in absolute satisfaction and joy, as they all lay their eyes bare to witness what's perhaps the most glorious moment in their lives; the gory execution of who was once the golden boy of the Song Dynasty; the beheading of who was once a high-profile magistrate, feared equally among by commoners and aristocrats alike. Chen Doe was once called "The Mighty Defender for Justice" – as he had always fought for those who faced unjust circumstances. Those who were pointed the finger at, those blamed for baseless accusations; he protects them all from the darkness of his era. Nothing stops him, and his passion to defend and even challenge the law itself – is his drive to continuously strive for fair treatment among every citizen and governor. But fate had other plans for Chen Doe.

Bao Zheng, a fellow magistrate, was following in Chen's footsteps into becoming a protector of the law and defender for the populace of his country. Bao had just returned to the government office, and landed his first government job after fulfilling his filial piety, after bidding his parents one last farewell, after their unexpected deaths.

Their corpses reeked of the smell of peaches. Oddly sweet peaches, which were only available back at the imperial palace. Bao was then recollected of this memory while he only served as a mere official before deciding to go with his filial piety to take utmost care of his parents, after he involuntarily sniffed the scent of the peaches. For the first week after their passing, that smell was unbearably irritating, as if Bao himself was drowning to death while being surrounded by air. But as time flew by and after he landed his job at the palace, the seemingly drug-related scent became much more tolerable for Bao.

A new life now has been awaiting for his arrival ever since his parents moved on, to the other side. Bao's journey was only beginning.

After months of his hard work, Bao was promoted into a magistrate, and his government allocated the urban legend Chen Dou to be his mentor during his first few years of duty, ensuring Bao Zheng receives the proper guidance to nurture a fully-fledged guardian of law and justice. The process was tough; but Bao made it all through. Now, his journey has only just begun. One day, as both Bao and Chen were taking a stroll in the palace's garden, a fellow magistrate hastily dashes towards Bao, and hands him a stack of heavy files, which usually indicate that the documents this thick are required to be used as evidence in court sessions. As Bao skims through the contents, he is utterly confused by the sudden chain of events – and rushes to ask the magistrate:

"Zhou! What happened? Why this sudden intrusion to transfer a case's worth of evidence to me?"

"This is an emergency. A protocol has been initiated, and I must join the inspection team to conduct an investigation on a high-profile aristocrat in their room. I do not have much time – the court hearing session will start soon. Please take care of this case for me – I am certain you will be able to solve it, with the help of your mentor."

With that rushed conversation, Zhou rushes out of the palace, as his shadow gets more and more shallow by the second. Zhou was a man who never disclosed his middle name to anyone, even to Bao. Chen calmly assures Bao:

"Do not fret, Bao. Perhaps fate has signalled this to be your first session. To defend those innocent, until proven guilty. I will guide you through your first turbulent trial in this case. Stay steady and strong."

Bao's first case concerns a peasant boy, who is accused of theft and murder. That disgruntled old hoot of a father figure stood menacingly towards Bao as he displayed himself, barely covered in a petty, dusty brown vest with visible punctured holes throughout his body, with a large, turquoise ragged cloth wrapped around his waist, with the cloth's length reaching to his toes. He yapped at Bao as he spewed distasteful mockery with the shallow vocabulary that he possessed:

“You filthy-looking cretin. I’ll show you who’s boss in court!” as he cackles and storms into the courtroom in a carefree manner, seemingly unfazed by the presence of the legendary Chen Dou, who was standing beside Bao Zheng during their unpleasant commute.

“An uneducated commoner’s remarks are emptier than his own meaningless life. We must put this lowlife in his proper place, before he harms anyone else with his filthy hands.”

Such strong words, Bao thought.

“I shall return soon with the right resources to evict this lowly swine. Be still, and swing your sword firmly with precision. I am sure there is evidence here that will assist you in court.”

As his shadow cuts deeper into the abyss, Bao uneasily walks into the courtroom. The court proceedings begin. As the time went on longer for the trial, the more unsettled Bao felt. Why were there more than five witnesses towards the boy? The boy seemed restless and tense with his duffle bags under his eyes, and witnesses accounts were all extremely vivid and meticulously detailed, it started to strike an unethically eerie feeling of desperation. The lingering feeling of doubt starts to swarm into Bao. Did the boy really try to steal that old man’s cloth? Did the adolescent truly commit an unethical act of robbing the old man’s wife? All of this information seemed too much for the new magistrate, who was vested with the power to judge whether the boy in front of him is guilty, or innocent.

Just as Bao was about to present a set of clues that could stall the trial’s time, the judge of the court expressed his dissatisfaction and impatience with where the court’s direction was going. “I’ve heard enough. Such vile actions are not condoned here, young man. If the defence has no more objections, I shall order an immediate execution for this young lad.”

Fate toys with us all, Bao thought. The eleventh hour has commenced; the boy’s life was in imminent danger, and both Bao and Chen could face penalties for defending a criminal if they failed to plead a non-guilty verdict for the youngster, or in the worst-case scenario, they share the same fate.

Amidst the chaos spiralling down in Bao’s mind, Chen pats Bao on the shoulder, and says:

“The process does not matter, Bao.”

Bao looked towards Chen, walking in, looking oddly relaxed while possessing dark bags under his eyes. Bao was confused as he did not understand what he just meant.

“What do you mean, Mister Chen?”

Chen replied: “The end always justifies the means. In this world, no matter how well-constructed your fabricated proof is... a single piece of real evidence causes their entire argument to collapse.”

As he finishes his sentence, he yells towards the judge: “Your honour! I have two pieces of evidence here that can put all these people in jail.”

The judge smirked, seemingly unimpressed with the assumption that Chen’s confidence was no more than a bluff.

“Is that so? Well then, good riddance. Present these two pieces of evidence then, we shall put this trial to an end now.”

With that, he indeed pulls out two damning pieces of evidence that debunks literally everything the witnesses and the old man’s provided testimony; the autopsy for the deceased wife, and the old man’s receipt for purchasing lethal drugs. As the judge’s jaw dropped in amusement and the old man screeched in fear, while denying the evidence that Chen provided, the judge delivers a non-guilty verdict for the boy, and immediately addresses a brand new trial for the now-suspicious old man.

“That piece of paper is fake! He made it out of thin air! Damn you, Chen! First my son and wife, now this? You scornful troglodyte! You are a disgrace to our family name... see you on the other side. I’ll be waiting.” After delivering his spine-chilling message towards Chen, both Chen and Bao witnessed his beheading. The entire floorboard was splattered with blood, as the surrounding area received a brand new shade of red as the old yellow’s replacement. Bao felt uneasy. Was the evidence actually faked? Did Chen really fabricate evidence just to spin this entire dilemma towards the old man instead? Did the boy really commit those terrible crimes? What did the old man mean when he said ‘our family name’? Isn’t Chen the only firstborn child? Many unanswered questions lingered in Bao’s mind, as Chen reassures him with his calming voice: “Everything has been performed ethically with no strings attached. No gimmicks nor tricks. Just a sour old man who received death instead of an extra load of capital for his nugatory spendings. Do not fret, young one. You have my word for that.” With that, Chen silently walks away from the flung-open doors of the courtroom, filled with absolute hollowness, as his echoing steps were getting coarser in sound. His suffocating stench of sweet peach fills the entire room. Something is wrong. Horribly wrong, Bao thought. But he couldn’t raise a point of the ‘why’.

Even after Chen’s supposedly convincing comment, on the night after the trial, Bao couldn’t sleep. There were too many discrepancies in the trial proceedings. It’s almost impossible to hire five witnesses just to blatantly lie in face of the law, is it? So were they all telling the truth? If so, why would the son even murder his own mother? And how was Chen even able to produce such condemning evidence on such short notice? As Bao reaches the conclusion that Chen used fake evidence to fit his bidding, he feels dread. No wonder he always wins trial cases, he thought. Because he just showed me how he would deliver a scoring victory even if the evidence is faked! “So you found out just now too, didn’t you, Bao?” A muffled voice echoes into Bao’s left ear.

Bao turns his head to see his friend Zhou sitting down, hands down to his kneecaps, fingers interlocking each other with his head bowed down, seemingly as equally stressed as Bao himself. The moon glooms as bright as the sun itself in the dead of night, as its’ ascension reaches the deep dark sky, triumphing over Zhou’s head. What a resounding spectacle, he thought. Zhou sighed as he raised his head and informed him of the situation. “Remember that emergency protocol where my team and I needed to inspect an important person’s room? Well, that room was Chen’s.” Bao suddenly understood Zhou’s urgency to escort himself out of their sights back then. As Bao tried to process what had unfolded for the past few hours, Zhou continued to unravel his unexpected bombshell: “ I couldn’t tell you, my friend. Otherwise, us commoners shall also be cooked up and served in court by that monster. We are no heroes. But together we can take down his tyrannical and unholy rule if we play our cards right. The time is now.” As Zhou pulled out a tiny sheet engraved with words of rich ink, Bao was mortified upon reading its contents. The exact same kind of evidence Chen has used that afternoon up his sleeve to forcefully halt the course for the boy to be executed.

A simplified receipt for purchasing drugs. And this time, there were two purchases visible in the official record, not one. And those two purchases were also coincidentally the exact same drug correlated to what Bao’s parents reeked of upon their passing. “I also snuck into his room for the wife’s autopsy report; she died due to intoxication, but that peachy scent’s harmless for us at the young age, you know? Chen bluffed his way to victory with two completely different receipts. That’s complete slander to our justice system. He HAS to be punished for what he has done.”

There was a phrase in between the lines of what Zhou just said that made Bao completely uncomfortable. But Bao didn’t know exactly what. But what Bao knows is that in order to incriminate Chen, that simplified sheet must be paired up with the original receipt in order to be represented in court, which bears the name of the purchaser for the drug, as well as the time and date of purchase. So that was exactly what Bao had proposed to Chen in hopes to put Chen behind bars for his actions. But this is where things start to go awry.

“Bao, my friend: there’s no time to collect the original receipt. Chen at this rate has probably already picked up on what we’re on about. Tomorrow, he will sue us, and when we get dumped in court, he will use all of his willpower to try and overturn this case on the top of its head. This sheet is more than

enough to prove his guilt. If even THAT doesn't work, then I'll have my trump card ready." Bao felt uneasy, and in an attempt to sway his "friend", Zhou slipped up, and uttered: "He killed your parents, Bao Zheng! Won't you take revenge against your killer who robbed the lives of your loved ones? They should've died a naturally peaceful death, and yet off they went to the afterlife by the scent of peaches!"

This time, Bao knew exactly what was wrong.

How did Zhou even know of Bao's parents passing, when Bao himself has not uttered half a word to a single soul about his tragedy? The peachy stench that emitted from Chen, and from his own parents, and the eerie fact that Zhou knew everything, as if he had orchestrated this entire circus show from the very beginning... Now he knows the gist of the situation. That peach drug was splattered towards Chen, and towards Bao's father. He was in his 80s, while Chen was a promising young adult in his 20s. The reason for his death now becomes apparent.

Two pairs of intensely fixated eyes gape and stare towards each other as the sound of crickets and owls accompany their silence realizations as instruments. Both of them now knew the truth. Bao knows that Zhou has rigid plans for himself, and Zhou knows that Bao is dangerously in pace with the dire situation at hand. But unfortunately, Zhou had the upper hand, and splashed a cool liquid on Bao's face, which immediately transformed into a damning sea cesspool.

Bao couldn't breathe. Desperately gasping for air, yet to no avail. This suffocating sensation parallels those having one of their legs chained on the bottom of the ocean. They both share the same fate in the end, and the process is insufferably painful.

Zhou taunts Bao and cackles. "What's the matter, friend? Can't breathe? Look around you, why not scream for help? Oh right, you can't even speak..." As Zhou gives out a cold grin and a silent laugh, he leaves Bao's room, and as Bao watches his silhouette get smaller and smaller, he starts to feel his body shaking.

"This is it – I understand the situation now, but my body is about to rot..." As his final thoughts rushed into Bao's mind, he fell into a deep slumber.

A large volume of noise could be heard. Muffled, but still too loud. Bao groaned as he pulled himself up from a pool of dried blood from his mouth on the ground. Where am I? Why am I here, Bao thought. Suddenly, the noise was sharply raised, prompting Bao to collapse once more from the sudden intrusion of sound. The noise originated from a crowd, whom from the reactions given, Bao deduced that the crowd was full of satisfactory and joyful feelings, as if a glorious moment had just unfolded. Chen was beheaded.

Bao could not do anything, nor mumble a single word, as he stared with his blank, sober eyes towards what was considered his most traumatic sight from hell. He was mortified. What time is it? Am I having a fever dream? Why is the crowd chanting for the execution of such a respected figure? Suddenly, Bao remembers all that had happened before he fell unconscious.

"Zhou, and the original receipts! If I can rush into his room and find the evidence before he returns...!" Bao instinctively dashes out of his room, and goes directly to Zhou's dorm. When he arrived, Bao started his own protocol and scrambled through Zhou's room like a mad man. Because there is no time. Zhou probably still doesn't realize it yet, but that peach drug he used on Bao's parents, allowed Bao to develop an immune system to the peach drug, as well as the toxin Zhou splashed onto Bao, resulting in his unprecedented survival.

The moon rules the night. As its silver crescent shines over a fatigued Bao hovering back to his room, he spots Zhou, sitting on a balcony beneath Bao's floor, casually sipping a cup of tea as he observes the aftermath of Chen's execution coated in complete darkness, his silhouette being barely visible for the naked eye. The very darkness Chen swore to protect against got the better of him. But now, the sun will rise again and triumph over the darkness. As Bao privately hands in the two receipts to the judge that accompanied him through his first trial amidst the chanting crowd, both sombrely stare at each other as



they realize that the true killer had outplayed them with the cost of Chen's life. But now, they shall exact revenge for Chen, and put in a fitting end for Bao's parents' deaths as well.

The receipts show the purchasing of a total of four containers, two of which are peach-scented drugs and two toxins, both bought by a man Bao once considered a friend: Zhou Fate, two days before the first trial for the toxins, and a week before his parents' supposedly "natural passing" to the other side.

## Bao Zheng's First Case

*G.T. (Ellen Yeung) College, Ng, Tiana – 15*

In 1028, Bao Zheng became qualified as a Jinshi and was appointed as magistrate. However, he didn't take up office, and returned to his hometown to take good care of his parents and to accompany them. Bao was grateful that he still had the opportunity of being with his old parents.

He heard some strange news just after he was arriving to his hometown. Here had been a murder, Bao went to the court curiously watched the trial. To his surprise, he saw his mother kneeling in the center of the court, the judge was going to list out her crime. Then, the judge announced "This evil woman has been suspected of murdering Madam Cheung, all the evidence found pointed that Madam Bao was the murderer. Are you going to plead guilty? Give this crime confession to her to sign!" Madam Bao cried helplessly "No, I am innocent! I am innocent! I am innocent!" The judge furiously hit the table hard, stood up and shouted "Soldiers! Come and give this evil woman punishment, until she confesses to the crime!" The Soldiers came with a long wooden stick and hit the woman with it powerfully.

Bao worried about his mother, rushed towards the center of the court, hugged his fainted mother and shouted "Stop it! Stop hitting my mother!" The soldiers saw that, they stopped their action and returned to their position. Bao then asked loudly, "My master, what had happened? Why do you do this to my mother? She must be innocent!" The judge was livid, his assistant calmed him down and said "Mr Bao, don't you know what happened? Madam Bao is suspected of murdering Madam Cheung who is our master's mother. Yesterday afternoon, Madam Bao and Madam Cheung argued loudly on the street, almost everyone in town could hear it. Later, Madam Bao went to visit Madam Cheung with a basket of food at night. Then, the body of Madam Cheung was found in her room, and Madam Bao fainted just next to Madam Cheung. After the forensic examination, it is determined that Madam Cheung died due to suffocation, and nuts are found only in Madam Cheung's bowl. Everyone of Madam Cheung's friends knows that she is allergic to nuts. Putting nuts in Madam Cheung's bowl is murdering her. The maid of Madam Cheung gives the strongest evidence. She said that no one has touched those food, except Madam Bao. This proves that Madam Bao wants to kill Madam Cheung due to an argument that happened yesterday afternoon and used nuts to kill her. Don't you agree?" Bao heard and stated immediately, "No! My mother wouldn't do that as she is a kind-hearted person, she doesn't even kill insects which are biting her. Moreover, she is also allergic to nuts!" The sudden discussion appeared among the onlookers, the judge heard that and shouted "Quiet!" Bao continued "My master, I wish you can give me three days for the further investigation of this case. I will make sure that everything will be investigated clearly!" The judge thought thoroughly and said "I give permission to you to investigate the case. After 2 days, if no new evidence is found to prove the murderer isn't Madam Bao, I will announce that she is guilty and she will be executed at noon! Soldiers, now send her back to jail!" Bao replied "Thank you, my master!"

Bao then went to the jail and found his mother with some scrumptious food, and asked "How are you? Trust me, I will save you out as soon as possible! Tell me what happened that night and spare no details, so that I can find more evidence!" His mother answered "I am fine, my dear son. I remember that night, I brought a basket of soup to Madam Cheung's home, her maid came out, opened the cover of the basket and asked me the purpose of visiting. I answered that I was coming to apologize, then she said she would take two bowls and spoons into Madam Cheung's room. I entered her room after knocking, she came out, hugged me and apologized to me. After I apologized to her, we went back to her room and enjoyed the soup made of pork and chestnuts only, with those spoons and bowls. After drinking, Madam Cheung and I fainted. When I woke up, only her body could be seen..." Madam Bao started crying miserably, Bao hugged and comforted her with a serious face while his heart was shivering and trembling.

At night, Bao went to the crime scene where all the things had not moved and started his investigation. He was watching the soup made by his mother, he found some pieces are floating on the surface, he took some and sampled them. He murmured "Why would there be other nuts in chestnut soup? Oh, mother

and Madam Cheung drank the soup added with nuts, so they fainted ! But, why would a little nuts cause suffocation of Madam Cheung, but cause my mother to faint only?” Abruptly, a strong wind blew off the candle light, the doors opened, and a woman with long black hair, wearing white dress appeared. Bao pretended to be calm and asked bravely with his mouth trembling “ Who... who are you ?” The woman answered “ You don’t need to know...” Bao asked again “ Why are you here, you are not supposed to be here, here is blocked by the court, only the investigators can come in !” The creepy woman replied “ Obviously, I have my method to come in. I can only tell you to check all the things in the room, including the things that were given by me and my maid. “ Bao realized that it might be the ghost of Madam Cheung, when he was going to ask another question, the woman vanished. Then, the doors were closed and candles relighted.

After seeing the woman in white, Bao immediately checked the furniture in the room, but nothing was found. Then, he remembered that the white-dressed woman told him to check everything in the room. He realized that the bowls and spoons were not checked, he checked both bowls and spoons. The only thing he found was some oily thing was found on Madam Cheung’s bowl. He took some as the sample and the pieces found on the soup surface back home and took good care of his father without telling this tragedy to him.

The second day, Bao went to the nuts shop in his home town and asked “ Good morning, could you please tell me what are present in this mixture ?” The owner of the nuts shop replied “ Good morning, let me see. Hmm...” Bao was waiting anxiously about the result, the owner said “ They look similar, but I can still identify them. They are chestnuts and nuts !” Bao noted down his words and answered “Thank you so much !” The owner added “ But, this kind of nut is really rare and a bit poisonous when added with chestnuts, this nut can only be found in our shop !” Bao inquired “ I am now investigating a case, could you show me the purchasing record of these nuts ? “ The owner quickly took out the record and found its record, the buyer of these peanuts was the maid of Madam Cheung. Bao thanked the owner and went to another shop.

Later he went to the oil shop and asked about the oily substance he had found . “ Good evening, could you please tell me what this oily substance is ?” The owner replied unwillingly “ We are closed now. Come earlier tomorrow! Come earlier tomorrow!” Bao was disappointed and afraid that his mother would be executed tomorrow if he still couldn’t find any evidence. It was already night after this investigation, all the shops closed and he went home with a heavy head. He told his father the truth due to his father pressed Bao to reveal more information. His father was depressed and Bao promised that he would save mother out.

The third morning, he went there and waited for the owner. The owner saw him and asked “ What happened ? Why do you find me so nervous ?” Bao explained briefly and asked about the oily substance, the owner replied proudly “ It was our iconic nut oil, it can only be bought in our shop ! It was limited in stock, and strangely a person bought all our peanut oil this year, so I am sorry that you can not buy it as it is now out of stock !” Bao said “ I am investigating a case, could you show me the buying record of this nut oil ? “ The owner took out his ledge and found its record, the buyer of this nut oil was the maid of Madam Cheung only again. Bao thanked the owner and went to save his mother immediately.

Fortunately, the criminal carriage transporting his mother was only on the way to execution, Bao suddenly jumped out and stopped that carriage using his body, the carriage stopped. Bao then kneeled down and said “ My master, I have found the evidence to prove my mother is innocent !” All the people were shocked, including his crying mother.

They returned to the court and started the judging. Bao started “ My master, I have found that Madam Cheung’s soup and bowl had nuts and nut oil added. As mother’s bowl doesn’t have nut oil added to intensify her symptoms caused by allergy and a bit of poison, so she only fainted. However, the bowl of

Madam Cheung had nut oil added which intensified her allergy and poison from nuts and chestnuts, causing suffocation. Moreover, she could have been saved with someone awake beside her. Unfortunately, my mother fainted due to her allergy, no one saved her, causing her tragic death. “ The judge shouted “ Oh, if I had not been asleep in the evening, I would have saved her.” The judge cried with sorrow and continued” Bao, then who did this horrible thing to my mother ?” Bao answered” According to the buying record, only she can murder Madam Cheung.” Pointing at the maid of Madam Cheung. The judge asked unbelievably” Why did you murder my mother ? My mother was nice to you and she always paid you well and gave gifts to you, why did you murder her?” The maid laughed scarily “Haha! I can’t believe that you can find the truth ! Yes, I was the person who put nuts in soup and nut oil in Madam Cheung’s bowl !” The judge shouted “ Shut up, you lunatic woman ! Why did you do that?” The maid said “ Of course, Madam Cheung is nice to me and having a successful son ! I am just jealous that she has such a lovely family, why can’t I have one ? Why do I have a terrible son and poverty ? Also, my son died in a tragedy, I can supposedly save him, but I cannot as I need to take care of your mother that day! I am just too jealous, so I decided to destroy it. Ah, I supposed that Madam Bao would be my scapegoat. But, never mind, I finished my mission and made this happy family to become a miserable one! Haha...” The judge was furious and announced” The maid was the real murderer, she would be executed soon. And Madam Bao would be free now. Case closed !”

Finally, Bao’s mother was free, she was touched by her son’s action. She hugged her son and said “ Thank you, my dearest son ! I love you !” Bao answered “ I love you too ! “ At this moment, his father arrived at the court and hugged his wife and son, said “Darling, you are safe! My dear son, I am so proud of you ! Now we cannot be separated anymore, we are now together ! Let’s go back home !” Then, they went back home together and lived happily ever after !

# The Moon and Her Flowers

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It was an idle day at the office in Kaifeng. Bao Zheng – the legendary justice – had his legs slung over his table, documents covering his face as he leaned back on his chair. It had been weeks since his last interesting case, and although he genuinely wished for the peace of the country, he also wished for a change from this stalemate. Just as Bao Zheng was wallowing in his mindless mumble, a soft knock sounded from the door.

“A messenger from His Majesty the emperor came. He has requested your presence.”

Bao Zheng perked up from his slumped state almost immediately. “I’ll go right this instance, you’re dismissed.”

Bao Zheng soon arrived at the palace. He was escorted by a state slave to the Emperor’s room. He noticed how he did not flinch at his loud voice nor give any greetings, thus he concluded that he was deaf and mute. Bao Zheng steeled himself as he realized that this meeting might not be a simple one, seeing as it was held in the emperor’s own chambers, attended by a person who had no way of exchanging information. The heavy wooden doors closed with a soft ‘thud’ behind him, and Bao Zheng dropped to his knees in the presence of Emperor Renzong.

“Rise,” said Emperor Renzong with a pale face and shaky voice. “I’ve called you for a special reason.”

Bao Zheng listened silently as Emperor Renzong recalled his tale with his head in his hands. It turned out that Emperor Renzong’s favourite consort Ying Yue, had died in her room, alone, without any signs of illness or injuries. It was quite the headache for the medical officer, so they marked it as a natural death. However, Emperor Renzong wasn’t convinced at all, and went to demand the exact cause of her death to no avail. “I want you to investigate the details of her passing. I’m almost certain it wasn’t natural. I know her! She would never do this to herself! Why would heaven take her for no good reason?” The heartbroken emperor, from his formerly composed state, was now on the verge of tears. Bao Zheng’s curiosity and interest had now been piqued. “I’ll have the truth unveiled within three days your majesty. Please grant me permission to investigate the Southern Palace.”

Back when the Song Dynasty had a visit from foreign envoys, a particular young princess – Ying Yue, reflection of the moon – had caught his eye. She wasn’t extravagantly dressed in fancy garments like her sisters, nor was she the life of the party. No, it was her quiet, unassuming disposition, and eyes that were so clear and shining as if she could stare right into your very soul. The alluring gaze of the princess left His Majesty lusting for more.

Bao Zheng follows a maid into Consort Ying Yue’s room, a faint scent of sweet citruses greeting him. He lightly bows to the maid in thanks, then leisurely scans the room. It was quite the simple room for someone of her status, with copious watercolour paintings of flowers and plants decorating the wall and a filled bookshelf in the corner. Just as the emperor said, the room had no signs of disturbance or struggle, and the room was well kept even though there wasn’t a mistress. It was truly mind-boggling considering suicide wasn’t an option with the lack of weapons or drugs. He muttered a slight pardon under his breath, and began to poke around for any potential clues. Bao Zheng did not find anything particularly of interest or help, except a journal on botany with a brown brass key threaded through the green leather spine. A map to a greenhouse was slipped into the first pages of the leather journal, and Bao Zheng made a mental note to visit it later. For now, the interesting properties of different plants and herbs captivated his full attention.

In no time, Ying Yue became the favourite consort of Emperor Renzong. He visited her often during mealtime, to watch her dance and play music, the occasional night visits, and listen to her ramble on about all sorts of topics.

“Did you know? I had a huge glass dome back in my hometown with a wonderful sea view, where I tended to all sorts of flowers. I’ll bring you to see it one day, it’s my pride and joy!”

Renzong chuckles at her uncharacteristic burst of enthusiasm.

“Do you miss it? I can gift you as many glass domes as you like, one, two, or even a thousand. I can just use the treasury funds, no one can ever defy it if I say the word.”

Ying Yue’s face was a mix of happiness and guilt. “It’s the country’s funds. I cannot be as selfish as to use it for my own personal pleasure.”

“Hah! I’m the most powerful man in this country! What’s there to worry about? I’ll have it arranged by tomorrow morning.”

Bao Zheng took the key in his hand and inserted it into the lock of the glass dome. The lock sprang open with a little click, and the dusty door creaked open. He walked into the gleaming greenhouse, shining and refracting numerous light rays from the sun. The smell of lemons, citrus, and wood wafted by gently as he slowly took in the scene. Many colourful flowers of orange, pinks, and reds hung upside down from rows of the green leafy trees in the shape of a bell, with their skirts swaying merrily in the wind. As if possessed, he lost control of himself, the musky yet refreshing scent guiding him further and further into the maze of blooms. He walked along a small canopied path past rows and rows of trees, until he reached the end. At the end of the road, was a huge, oval-shaped pool, with the sound of water flowing in through a small stream somewhere. Occasionally a koi fish or two would leap out the water, scales glimmering in the sunlight. Bao Zheng sat on the edge of the pool for a while, enjoying the mesmerizing scenery and sunlight, lulling him to sleep.

The glass dome finished construction around a week later. It truly was grand, with sunlight filtering through the glass panels then fracturing into light rays, bathing the interior in an ethereal sheen. Ying Yue and Renzong sat on the edge of the pool enjoying the warmth. “I’d like to grow so many flowers and hang lanterns, so when they get reflected in the waters, it looks like a portal to heaven.” Ying Yue’s smile lit up her face like a delicate pale moon, happiness radiating into the air around her.

Bao Zheng woke up with a start, head pounding and dizzy. He was in an unfamiliar place, shocked by the sight he saw in front of him. The entire garden was glowing, as if tens of thousands of tiny lanterns were hung up on the trees. The sweet scent was also much heavier, the air could practically drip with perfume to the point it was sickening. After covering his face with a handkerchief to block out the smell, he stumbled out the greenhouse. He sat down and guzzled water until he felt his mind cleared for a bit. All of a sudden, something started to piece together in his mind. There were no sorts of lanterns nor candles when he strolled the garden, but when he woke up, it was like the Mid-autumn festival. An image flashed through in that second, spurring Bao Zheng’s hypothesis on this whole case. Hurriedly, he covered his nose and mouth with a cloth and went back in the glass dome. A closer look at the ‘lanterns’ proved his suspicions. The bell-like flowers had bloomed, and were lighting up from inside their little skirts, giving off a ghostly appearance. In that split second, the mystery had clicked together and solved itself for Bao Zheng.

However, these precious golden days didn’t last long. Country affairs tied Renzong down, and visits and meetings decreased then ceased. It hurt, being forgotten by the likes of him, a person she had humiliateingly devoted her youth to. It was half a life gone and wasted. Ying Yue, who had no more visits to look forward to, endorsed herself in her glass dome of flowers, whose blooming buds were the only thing reciprocating her love in a cold hell.

The following night, Bao Zheng and Emperor Renzong stood before the glass dome. “Your Majesty, I’ve discovered the cause of Lady Ying Yue’s death.”

“I knew it! I knew it wasn’t natural causes! Who is to be punished for taking away my beloved consort?” exclaimed the emperor, who was thrumming with both anticipation and anger. “I will explain

it all in a moment. Please cover your nose and mouth before we enter the garden.” Said Bao, handing him a piece of cloth. The door of the glass dome clicked once more, and the two men stepped in. “This place... is extremely deadly. This species of flower you see here, is known as the Angel’s Trumpet. A very potent poison and hallucinogen that I’ve only read about in Lady Ying Yue’s botany journal yesterday. If you inhale the scent of the flower too much, you can die.” Said Bao Zheng, gesturing to the blooms hanging innocently on their branches. “The flowers are the most potent at night-time, when the scent is the heaviest to attract moths for pollination. However, the Angel’s Trumpet contains the highest concentration of alkaloids, which give it its lethal and hallucinogenic properties. According to Lady Ying Yue’s journal, she has been knowingly cultivating this species for quite a while, and the toxins accumulated in her body over time, causing her death.”

“She did it knowingly...? But why? I gifted her this glass dome myself, she loved flowers too, why would she kill herself with it?” Emperor Renzong looked at Bao Zheng with a pleading expression.

“That I cannot answer your Majesty, a young lady’s mind is extremely complex. Whatever I have in mind cannot be further from the truth. Only Lady Ying Yue herself will know the exact reason.” Bao Zheng leaves the glass dome successfully closing a case, leaving the emperor to his own devices.

When the snows melt away, camellias of red, yellow and white bloomed throughout the garden. The bright splashes of colour displaying their owner’s longing and love, waiting indefinitely. Soon, hydrangeas of pink, purple and blue took over, their beautiful blossoms perky with pride. However, the round bouquets withered after a short while, and were replaced by white egret flowers. The peculiar petals lingered in both her thoughts and dreams, no matter how she tried to forget about it, she couldn’t in the end. To shut down the evasion of thoughts, she planted belladonnas, the silence and serenity finally putting a stop to the mental tug of war. Carnations and roses were attempted, yet they never came to fruition. She picks up a handful of seeds and scatters them around, planting the final flowers she saved for last.

Emperor Renzong looks over at the sea of angels, dancing silently with their glowing trumpets, carrying the ghost of a beautiful memory. He wonders if things could’ve turned out differently, a life where carnations and roses had a chance to bloom, a life where the pure, sweet reflection of the lovely moon he cherished did not cloud and dull.

The Angel’s Trumpets were growing beautifully. The flower body was long and slim, blending out into a vibrant gradient at the bottom. Yet, no matter how elegant or colourful they were, they simply weren’t alive. Ying Yue was in her deepest pits of despair. She knew it was time to give up and let go, but she also didn’t want to die a quick death. All this time, she waited for him, chances were given, and he still didn’t come back to her. It was meaningless to live life alone with regrets. She gladly gave up her remaining days to her precious flower garden, and smiled contentedly as she saw her blood and tears glow with life.

# New Tales of Judge Bao

*HKMA David Li Kwok Po College, Wong, Chun Sum Sam – 15*

## Chapter 1: The Judge of Bianjing

On a balmy and bright morning, crisp air whipped through the open window of Bao's bedroom. Bao had already slid off the bed and donned his august uniform before listening to the routine cackle of his beloved chicken which had always served as his alarm clock. This day was of the uttermost importance for Bao as he would start to carry forward his father's work and become the ultimate arbiter of destiny.

After having a porridge on an ornate table with words that had stuck in his mind since his childhood, he strode alongside the garden in a breeze scented with an amalgam of jasmine blossoms, peonies— "king of flowers" and lotus which calmed his concerns. The main door swung outward at his approach, but nobody had visibly opened it. Perhaps it was merely an eddy of strong wind. Then, for his very first step out of the door, he beheld the limitless sky with fluffy clouds drifting across and bathed in the sunshine soaking the vast land. However, people opening their shops signified to him that he didn't have much time left so he immediately angled north and trotted quickly.

When he arrived there, the throng was already pushing its way to get a good position for the inaugural ceremony. Suddenly, somebody patted him on his back. He felt an aura of menace surrounding him, so he swung himself back and took the dagger out of his right sleeve. Whipping around, he saw a tall woman with ebony eyes and dark hair tied back in a bun. 'Don't you remember who I am?' she asked. Bao stowed the dagger back and pored over her face for a moment, and it soon dawned on him that she was his best friend in his first school as a child. His mouth therefore curved into a smile. 'Zhang! You have really grown up a lot. Now, you are a head taller than me. We have not seen each other since you moved away from Luzhou. Why are you here?' said Bao with a tinge of wonder. 'You have become quite mature and taller compared to the last time we met. This is my first day to be the guard of the judge of Bianjing.' said Zhang to Bao. Bao was completely thunderstruck. 'I am afraid that I am the one who you will be protecting,' said Bao with embarrassment. 'Unbelievable!!!' answered Zhang. They both erupted in laughter. 'I can't get to the court right now, is there another way to go there?' said Bao. Zhang then roared over the hubub, 'Go away brats! The passage of the judge of Bianjing is blocked because of you nasty beasts.' A mixture of fear and shock gripped the crowd at the sight of her unusual height and massive body. The mob parted and silence fell as they proceeded towards the court.

Seeing the sole vine wood table positioned at a small platform, he climbed up the hardwood stairs from the side and pounded the polished table with heavy fist. Everybody near the court was staring at him with expectation. He announced that he was the judge of Bianjing started from that day and swore that he would uphold the laws, protect his county, serve the citizens and oppose corruption at all times in order to fulfill his duty, obligation and responsibility as an official in Song. People who listened to his declaration applauded enthusiastically. His sincere claim was also trumpeted across the whole of Bianjing, heard by the emperor living there.

## Chapter 2: The Paralysis of Li Chun

Renzong, the king of Song, was burning the midnight oil by examining the policies he had implemented in recent days. Nevertheless, he could not repress his hunger because his stomach was voicing its discontent. Realizing that he wouldn't have sufficient energy to read on, he dashed to his chef— Li Chun's accommodation while pressing his belly with his icy hands.

At the oaken door, he rapped hard. Somebody slightly opened the door and a pair of dark eyes peered out and the question of who disturbed the night was gruffly muttered. 'I am terribly sorry!' said the king apologetically. In a flash, Chun wrenched open the door. His face was abashed while bowing to say sorry several times. 'I am starving right now. Could you cook some lamb for me please?' asked the king. Accepting his request without hesitation, though mutton did not usually appear in the larder, Chun ran to seek the sought—after sheep meat.

Unexpectedly, he saw a slew of mutton which was quite exceptional in that it was gigantic and whitish on the surface. He carried the lamb with both of his hands to the kitchen. After slicing it into pieces, he



decided to deep fry it with oil and to mix it with different sauces that he had invented in the course of his cooking career. When he put a few slices of mutton on the pan, his master, who was standing near him, called a halt to his endeavors since he deemed that the leftover would be wastage if he did not finish it all. Although his eyes were riveted on the mutton while leaving, he did not change his mind. However, from Chun's perspective, the mutton he had just cooked would be a waste if someone did not eat it. For this reason, Chun carefully moved the few pieces of mutton to the king's plate. He poured the sauces on the surface of the mutton that smelled like rose. Relishing the opportunity to enjoy a king's dish, he feasted on the mutton.

Few minutes later, he suddenly felt that the air was quivering, his energy was draining away, a snake was crawling over his skin, blood was throbbing in his veins and a knife was eviscerating his throat. Slowly, he sank lower and lower in his chair and collapsed on the marbled floor with a bump. His face was twisted, drenched in wet, shockingly scarlet blood. He was still breathing and unable to move and speak, paralyzed!

### Chapter 3: The victim's brother

A day later, lying on the floor with earth and pebbles everywhere, he suffered from a never-ending ordeal of mutism and immobility. The chef responsible for different members of the royal family who entered the kitchen, cringed when his body was seen. Every one of them fidgeted and fought a trepidation that it might cause innumerable problems. In no time, news of his affliction spread throughout the entire palace.

The king was dumbfounded that his chef was rendered disabled because he had served him for a long time and his brother was the judge of a large province. Meanwhile, the said brother Li Yun received the news regarding his brother's disability. Sitting on a teakwood chair carved into a recliner, he looked completely pale and drawn. The darkness seemed to be rippling around him. He pondered with his two fingers stroking his beard. Suddenly, he told his servants to prepare his carriage to visit his best friend Judge Bao.

Arriving at Bao's court, he darted through the giant archway neglecting to acknowledge the presence of the doorkeeper between it. While Bao was immersed in a pile of work, the abrupt intrusion of his friend alerted him. Instantaneously, Yun's worrying face straightened him up. 'I have to discuss an urgent issue with you about my brother,' said Yiu with a distraught face. 'I have already been alerted to the tragedy, my friend. The king has commanded me to investigate this horrific incident thoroughly,' said Bao in a pacifying tone. Even though the continued interrogation was irksome, Bao was overcome with compassion for his friend. When asked who his personal guard was, Bao hailed Zhang and Zhang showed up. Unfortunately, Yiu, pallid with anger and shock, asked suspiciously whether Zhang, a woman, was well fitted to the job. At his question, Bao's face turned red as a beet. 'Please trust my guard as well if you trust me. I believe although she is a woman, she is more competent than any men. Do not underestimate her abilities,' said Bao with dogged determination. 'Forgive my lady,' said Yiu. 'Please endeavor to find the culprits.'

### Chapter 4: The investigation

Bao was called for a meeting with the king before starting his probe in the palace. The court of the king was built two hundred feet above the city. Trekking slowly up to the court, at every five minutes, Bao had to sit on the stairs to rest. After half an hour, Bao had reached there. The gold-hued façade was decorated with the drawings of different colours and sizes of dragons. As he advanced, someone opened the door for him. Then, he saw the king lying on a diamond encrusted bed 100 meters in front of him. Inside, the hall was constructed in vermilion marble to be compatible with the aureate column supporting the house. A low baritone voice echoed in the room. 'You are the most venerated judge among all the provinces. My esteemed father often mentioned your father's name during my childhood in recognition of his dedication to the national justice. I hope his wisdom lives on and you have inherited his commitment and acumen so you can find out the culprit in this tragic incident,' said the king. 'Yes, my majesty,' said Bao kneeling down.

After the meeting, Bao galloped on his horse toward the kitchens where Chun had been poisoned. He met Zhang there and they entered together. Based on the information on the royal decree sent by the king, Chun had cooked mutton in that night. Therefore, they searched the pantries comprehensively to look for any mutton there. After a half hour, Bao and Zhang looked at each other and shrugged. Bao told Zhang that he scented a peculiar smell that was quite faint but an irritant to his nose. Zhang smelled nothing. They trampled out of the larder and reached the kitchen.

However, due to the enormous number of helpers and chefs, it was difficult for them to commence an investigation. 'Could you please vacate the kitchen for the convenience of our investigation?' asked Bao politely and softly. Unexpectedly, nobody in the kitchen answered his question. Zhang was infuriated so she gripped tightly the handle of her sword and lunged forward. In the blink of an eye, she halved the tree near the doorway. The crash of the falling tree broke their resentful silence. They stared at Bao and Zhang in unison, eyes laced with fear. They fled from the kitchen, heads nodding with new-found respect. Zhang gave a quiet laugh.

As they proceeded, their acute eyes seemed to take in every detail in the kitchen meticulously. Bao suddenly jolted to a stop at the sight of the counter right beside the knife block. He again scented the exact same smell he had detected in the larder. He scanned the counter fastidiously on which he saw a little white powder sprinkled in the corner of the worktop. Zhang followed him to see that white powder. She whispered to Bao that she had found that same white powder spread out on the dining table in the kitchen with a bowl of sauce that hadn't been removed yet. Bao moved with her to the dining table. He detected an unfamiliar feeling on the ground. Within a second, it occurred to him that the ground was not flat. There must have been something pounded on the floor that made it sink slightly. A scene was flashing in his mind in which he felt absolute confidence. 'Put some white powder and some sauce in a bag separately. We are going to perform an experiment.' said Bao. Zhang could not understand what Bao was saying but she still followed his words without asking further. After Zhang had finished her work while Bao was waiting outside of the kitchen, they swung themselves into the saddle. They reined their horses and their horses shot towards Bao's court.

#### Chapter 5: The evidence

The target of their experiment was the identification of a notorious villain, Hao, who had killed more than a hundred people in Bianjing. That murderer lived in a dungeon of Bao's court. Bao first put a modicum of sauce into a cup of water in his lunch meal. After drinking the cup of water, there was nothing special happened to him. In his night meal, he put an ounce of white powder into a cup of water. That killer drunk it without hesitation although Bao did not usually provide different colours of water with him for every meal. Fifteen minutes later, he moaned in excruciating pain with ruby blood spilt from his mouth. 'What a wonderful poison from my country!' gasped Hao patriotically as the last sentence of his life. Though he would still be alive, he would never move again. Bao ruminated on what he had said, looking at the starry sky. He realized the culprits must correlate with diplomatic and royal fields. As a result, he sent a letter to the king to ask whether he could investigate further or not.

In the morning, he received permission from the king, so he continued his inquiries. Since Hao was from Tangut, an opponent of Song, located in the northwest, they decided to spy the Tangut poison's seller out in the Tangut street commonly renowned for the legions of Tangut's spooks but because of the insufficient evidence to show that they were the spies of Tangut and massive arresting might set a war between Song and Tangut, temporarily, the Song government did not dare to take any action.

On that day, Bao wore narrow sleeves gowns. Similarly, Zhang wore embroidered narrow-sleeved gowns made of coarse cloth, fine wool, and animal hides. It varied from the Song costumes because Song people usually wore silk-lined robes. They sneaked into that boisterous street with people speaking Tangutish that they didn't understand. On occasions, they witnessed Song people with Song costumes pushed or hit. They stayed there for three days while acting normally like Tangut residents and being vigilant constantly.

On a thunderous day with rain bucketing down the floor, they were having some vegetarian food in a restaurant with men and women staging a singing performance. Among all of them, two men were quite

unique because they spoke in Song language without being attacked or discriminated against. Their presence alerted Bao and Zhang so they stalked the two men. In a desolate lane, one of the men with scarf coiling around his skull spoke to the other man. He took out a bag with white powder from the scarf. 'My boss is hopping mad. If you cannot succeed in killing him, your family and your friend's families will be massacred,' said the man. 'Sorry. Last time, it was his luck. He won't survive again.' said the man with an aura of confidence but his legs trembling. It took Zhang all of two seconds to knock down the two men. The men were screaming and calling for help. Nonetheless, their meeting place was so secret that nobody would ever be nearby. Zhang's daggers were against their necks, asking who their bosses were. 'Our boss will not let you go if you kill me,' stuttered the man with a scarf, sweating buckets. In a second, they spoke the words "Liu" and "King Lee" in chorus as the daggers came nearer and nearer to their necks.

#### Chapter 6: The denouement

After flying the Tangut coop, Bao was deliberating whether he should bring Liu to a trial, sitting near the ornate table at his home. This was a case that was dangerous to his career because Liu's mother was the former queen who had refused to abdicate after the death of her husband. The current king could accede to her throne in the event of her death. Liu, as her daughter, held a powerful clout in the government where many officials followed her command.

The words on the table struck him ... "Administering justice in spite of difficulties, no matter who the criminals are." carved on the table by his father on his first day to be the judge. He thought that if he did not arrest the culprits, nobody would be responsible for the paralysis of Chun. His life wouldn't have ended in this way if somebody hadn't been so malicious. At sunrise, the wind was blowing in gusts and citizens had stopped their work. However, Bao made his final decision that he was determined to deal with this case.

Zhang forcefully took Liu from the aristocratic residence to the court, in spite of his defiance. Arriving at the court, she whispered in his ear. 'You have no choice. You can't escape your criminal responsibility. We have already subpoenaed your servants. They are willing to be witnesses to your crime.' Two men, handcuffed, looked down at the floor while trotting slowly to the court.

'You dare to betray me without considering the consequences.' said Liu malevolently.

'Our wives and families have been caught already. We have no choice but to help the judge,' muttered one of the men.

'Do you have any evidence to prove that you were not involved in this crime?' asked Bao.

'Do you believe that I haven't prepared anything before you send me to the court?' Liu asked with a cunning smile.

In a flash, Liu's allies, some of them, stood in front of the court. Soldiers with bows and swords appeared out of nowhere. At this moment, Bao did not change his expression. Suddenly, every one of them heard hundreds of horses galloping towards them.

'You cannot escape. The king knows well what you have done.' said Bao.

As the horsemen in the unmistakable uniform of the king's guard rode into the courtyard, the rebels dropped their weapons.

'The king of Tangut will have his revenge!' hissed Liu.

Bao turned away silently.



# Judge Pao and the Case of the Nine-Tailed Fox

*Shanghai Community International School, Ng, Kai-Ying – 14*

As she adjusted her freshly given royal-blue janitor's uniform, Delia reviewed the facts that she was given.

Fact number one: her school set all the grade twelves to find a job to work as a service for the community during the summer.

Fact number two: her aunt was the owner of a museum, and she needed employees on the weeknight cleaning shift.

Fact number three: there was a rumor that almost once a week, a janitor was found dead while on night duty. No one knew who the culprit was. No one wanted the night shift because they feared being found dead the next morning.

Since Delia needed a job and didn't scare easily, she and her aunt reached a deal that Delia work as a night janitor at her aunt's museum.

She walked out of the changing room to meet her aunt and another janitor who was just outside waiting for her. Her aunt, Ms. Reng, nodded in approval.

"This is Mr. Zhang," she announced, and she used her left hand to gesture to the man beside her. Mr. Zhang was an old man in his sixties, with streaks of silver in his well-groomed hair. He had an enormous key ring with dozens of dozens of keys strung upon it.

"He is one of longest working janitors in this museum. He shall give you a tour of our new exhibit, The Road of Time: The Silk Road. After the tour he shall assign you a spot to sweep for the night. Remember, I allow you to work here under light circumstances because your school required it. One false move and you will be fired. I hope we are clear."

After the brief orders, Delia's aunt left, and Mr. Zhang lead Delia around the museum. Mr. Zhang was a very pleasant person. They walked past rows of artifacts: rolls of faded silk, Yu bracelets from China, remains of glass, and even a statue of Kronos from Greece. When Delia had questions, Mr. Zhang pleasantly answered. Delia learned that Mr. Zhang was her aunt's most trusted janitor, and he wasn't afraid of a thing. He even had every key to every room in the museum.

Finally, Mr. Zhang stopped at their final exhibition. It was in a locked glass room. Inside was an exquisite golden robe with finely stitched dragons and clouds swimming along the sleeves. Around the neck was a layer of puffy white fur from some unknown animal. Next to the robe were papers with handwritten words in old Chinese characters. Mr. Zhang pointed at the robe.

"This is the star of the whole museum: Emperor Feng's kasuki tail robe. In the past, there was an evil, shapeshifting, female fox called a kasuki who had eight tails. She wanted to murder the emperor for his liver and power. When a kasuki eats more livers from humans, their powers grow stronger, and they will grow extra tails. Once a kasuki gets its ninth and last tail, they become unstoppable." Then he pointed at the papers.

"The emperor's best detective, Judge Pao, was able to track the kasuki. Those papers were letters to the emperor telling him about the dangers. The emperor read them and sent his nephew, Feng Rong, to hunt the kasuki down with the detective."

"Those were really the letters? How could they even survive that long?!" Delia exclaimed. Mr. Zhang slyly smiled and continued his presentation.

"Judge Pao is also known as the judge of the afterlife. He takes the souls of evil and banishes them back to hell. He gave Feng Rong a sword that could cut down evil and eliminate it from the world. Once they cornered the kasuki, the kasuki was about to receive its ninth tail. Feng Rong, who knew this, acted quickly, and cut her last tail off. The kasuki fled. The tail was later presented to the emperor, who had it stitched onto his robe to protect himself from evil. Certainly, the emperor and the nephew must have died and reincarnated to who knows where, but even to this day, the kasuki hunts for her last tail and her revenge on the emperor, the nephew, and Judge Pao."

Delia blinked and stared blankly while the information sank in.

"What about the sword? What happened to the sword?"

"Ah! The sword... After Feng Rong defeated the kasuki the sword disappeared into history, into the hands of time himself. Ok, you will go to the west wing, near the statue of Kronos. I will be at the east, near this emperor's robe." He stared straight at Delia's eyes. "Also, whatever you do, don't come to find me until ten fifty."

After Mr. Zhang ushered Delia far away, he stood staring at the robe behind the glass.

“Come out now. I know you are there. I know what you want,” Mr. Zhang challenged, as a stranger appeared from the shadows.

“You’re certainly not an ordinary old man, are you?” The stranger hissed.

“I will keep it short. You won’t get what you want.”

“You are a nuisance. I plan on killing you anyway.”

At precisely ten fifty, Delia came to find Mr. Zhang. Her footsteps echoed through the long and empty halls. The lights were off. There was nobody around. Only the janitors’ flashlight lit her way. Shadows danced on walls as she moved.

“Mr. Zhang?” Delia echoed. There was a splash and a quick sound of footsteps fading away. Delia rushed forward. To her shock, she found Mr. Zhang near an over-turned bucket and mop, lying sprawled on the floor unconscious.

“MR. ZHANG!” Delia screamed. She rushed to help him up, only find the body limp. She put her fingers against his wrist and felt nothing. Not even a heartbeat. She grabbed her phone and called her aunt.

The next day, crowds of police and news reporters gathered left and right. Delia panicked as she reviewed the new facts.

Fact number one: last night before ten fifty, Mr. Zhang died. Doctors said they assumed the death was most likely from a heart attack because there were no cuts or injuries on the body.

Fact number two: the doctors said that Mr. Zhang’s heart attack couldn’t have possibly come from nowhere. Judging from the over-turned bucket and fallen mop, the police believed that something must have happened to him that shocked the life out of him. But when the police looked through the security camaras, they saw nothing.

Fact number three: when the police retrieved Mr. Zhang’s uniform for inspection, his keys were nowhere to be found.

As Delia was drowned by the endless possibilities of what might have killed Mr. Zhang, a disruption came from the other side of the room.

“What do you mean by *supernatural*? What are you even? Where did you graduate from, hmmm?” Ms. Reng glared at a stranger in a scarlet velvet suite.

The stranger in scarlet only smirked. “What is this? The third degree? Shouldn’t I be the person questioning you?”

“Well, off with you, we already have the police,” her aunt scoffed. Then she left the man on the spot with a glare. She turned to another person, and both walked toward Delia. The person was a tall woman. Tied around her waist was a large coat that reached to her ankles. She had a palm-sized bandage on the right side of her cheek and tiny scars on her arms and face, as if she had been wrestling her whole life.

“Delia, this is Ms. Kai, a security guard in our museum. She will take over to guard this spot in the east. You on the other hand will go west. Hopefully, there will be no further disturbances. We will end the job at seven today and leave exactly at seven. Report anything suspicious or out of place.” Ms. Reng sighed and returned to work with the police. Delia turned towards her new coworker. Ms. Kai seemed serious but friendly at the same time. She turned her head to look at Delia and gave a soft smile.

“It was hard for you to witness last night, wasn’t it?” She asked.

Delia nodded. “Mr. Zhang seemed so kind. When I heard of his ...departure...I,” she paused and turned away, and rubbing her eyes slightly.

“Anyway, no need to mop today.”

“Why?” Delia wondered.

“Ms. Reng said the water system broke down suddenly.” Ms. Kai sighed. “Oh well, see you. Rest a bit. You had a rough night,” Ms. Kai declared as she went away.

As Delia slowly paced to her cleaning spot, her attention and movement were suddenly stopped by a loud crash coming from the window. She turned to watch the same stranger in scarlet struggle to flip himself over the window ledge.

“Some woman Emperor Feng has reincarnated into. Humph! See if she could stop me from climbing through a window!” As the stranger landed with both of his feet, he spun and met the eyes of a shocked Delia.

“Ah! Little Feng! What are you doing, standing there doing nothing? Did your old man teach you wrong? Never mind, we have business to do. Get your sword and come on!”

Delia was just too shocked to do anything. She blinked hard and screamed, “Who the hell are you?! What do you want?!”

“Keep it down, Little Feng. I am your old friend! I am Judge Pao. Now get your sword! Evil doesn’t wait!”

“Hold up! You’re Judge Pao? From the stories? Also, I am not Little Feng! I am Delia Reng! And what sword? What evil? Are you sure you have the right person? I could report you for breaking and entering, Pao!”

Judge Pao sighed. “Listen here. First, I am *Judge* Pao, not Pao. Show some respect! Second, I came here to investigate how our beloved Mr. Zhang died. It is no ordinary case, so I need your help. Third, whoever you are now, you once were my spirit hunter apprentice: Feng Rong. I always called you ‘little Feng.’ But no matter who you are, you have a duty to do, which is to kill whichever spirit killed Mr. Zhang!”

As Delia let that information sink into her soul, an image of her hand gripping a jade sword and facing a purely terrifying monster flashed in her mind. She was stunned to silence.

Breaking the silence, Judge Pao said, “Spirits are like human beings. Some are good and some are evil. But unlike human beings, the evil spirits feast on humans. The more humans they execute, the more their magic strengthens. Like the spirit that killed Mr. Zhang—”

“How do you know a spirit killed him? Neither a leg nor an arm went missing from Mr. Zhang! There wasn’t even blood since there were no cuts on his—”

“His liver went missing. When the body was taken for inspection, they didn’t find his liver. The fact that no cuts or wounds were on him makes it even more mysterious—”

“WHAT?! Why go through all that trouble for a man’s liver?”

“Because humans are the only sources to make a spirit stronger. Each spirit is different and this one requires liver. Now show me to the crime scene if you please and I will continue to humor that low IQ of yours.”

Soon after, Delia found herself becoming more of a Watson than a janitor. When she led Pao to the scene, it was already dark outside. She had to use her flashlight. Still, the scene of crime was shadowy. She glanced at Pao who was on all fours, crawling about the floor like a bloodhound on a scent trail.

“Here!” he exclaimed. She shone some light on the spot he indicated. On the floor were some strange markings.

“Take six steps back.” He ordered. As she did, what came into view was a faint semi-circle with curious patterns inside it. The other half was washed away by the water that was spilt from the bucket.

“What does this tell you?” he questioned.

“In the myths, this is a hexing circle. Used to cast spells. Since this is the spot Mr. Zhang died, I suppose whoever made this used it to remove Mr. Zhang’s liver without a trace?”

“Yes, and?”

“Whoever made this is no human.”

“So, we need to slay it! Now get your sword and let’s find this foul thing!”

“But I don’t have the sword!”

“What! Don’t you have a key to it?”

“No! Mr. Zhang said the sword disappeared into history, in the hands of time. Plus, the police inspected his clothing. All the keys he had went missing.”

“All the keys?”

“Yes!”

Judge Pao looked back at the floor again and traced his fingers on it. Then he mumbled and looked at the bucket and mop. Then he stared back at the floor again.

“Do you have any water?” he asked.

“No. Ms. Kai told me that the water system shut down. She is working to fix it right now.”

“Then what are you standing around for?” He bellowed as he shot straight up.

“What?”

“Fetch her! We need some water!” he ordered. Delia scrambled to search for Ms. Kai. Soon enough, she found Ms. Kai in waterproof overalls with the same coat tied around her waist.

“Ms. Kai! We need you quickly!” Delia exclaimed. In a hurry, Delia explained to Ms. Kai about detective Pao and how he needed water.

“You’re quite a storyteller,” laughed Ms. Kai, shaking her head in disbelief.

“Come with me then!” Delia tugged Ms. Kai along to the crime scene.

Once both reached Judge Pao, they were greeted not with open arms but a splash of cold water. Judge Pao was holding a fire hose. Delia, who wasn’t in a waterproof suite, was drenched. Ms. Kai, however, seemed to have no reaction.

“It appears that the water systems haven’t been broken!” announced Pao. Delia turned to Ms. Kai in shock. “You lied. Why?”

“I should have shut that down earlier,” replied Ms. Kai. “Don’t block my way, Delia. Where is the key?”

“What key?”

“She doesn’t have it,” said Pao. “The night when Mr. Zhang died, one thing was missing: the keys to every door in the museum. Oh, and his liver. Clearly someone enjoys liver. There was also half a hexing circle burnt to the floor, the other washed away by water. The killer’s magic is weak to water. You, however lied about the water system so you could shut it down. It also gave you a chance to snoop around to look for a key. The key that you need to open the door to your last tail...” Just as the words left his mouth, Delia froze with the truth before her.

“You’re the kasuki?”

“Kasukis feed on liver. They usually shapeshift into young women. They hate water since it is their weakness. She attempted to shut the water system down because she feared water. The victim’s liver was gone because it was eaten. All the facts and evidence point to her.”

Ms. Kai hissed. “Prove it, Pao.”

“In your files it said you started working two months ago. The same time when the deaths started. You killed them all just to have Mr. Zhang, the last janitor, work the nightshift so you could get his keys...assuming the one you wanted was there. You had a battle with him, he poured water on your spell and on you. No wonder your face looks beaten up. If you were human, we would see your fight on the camera. Alas, you weren’t there because you are a spirit. They claim that you wear that jacket around your waist all day...to hide your tail, I bet. Go on, take it off to prove I am wrong,” he provoked.

Ms. Kai turned from Pao to Delia. When Delia glanced at her eyes, for the first time she noticed how similar they were to fire. So full of fury and lashing embers.

Ms. Kai chuckled. “The cat’s out of the bag.” She shifted. She now no longer resembled anything human, but a ten-foot furred beast with eight flaming tails.

“Catch!” Pao yelled as he tossed a key to Delia. Once Delia gripped the key, it morphed into a jade sword. Delia, blade in hand, spun to face a petrifying set of claws.

Before Delia became dinner, she swung her sword. Claws and sword clashed with the sound of thunder and metal gongs from the heavens. *CLANGK!* The fight was ferocious. It looked like six claws and three swords instead of a pair of claws and a sword. Delia charged. The kasuki leaped away. The kasuki swiped. Delia rolled over, avoiding the claws that were an inch above her head and stabbed it in the side. The kasuki howled, but Delia continued to push the blade in deeper until she saw the tip appear on the other side. The kasuki suddenly burst into flames and disintegrated in a hurl of smoke and ash.

“I suppose you earned that sword.” Nodded Pao approvingly.

“Where did you find it? Didn’t it get lost in the hands of time?”

“Not lost in the hands of time. Mr. Zhang said ‘in the hands of time *himself*.’ It appears that there was a statue of Kronos here...know what that means?”

“Of course! Kronos is the Titan of time. So, the key was in his hands?”

“Hm, you can almost be called clever. Now that I see you have your brain back...I will be leaving.”

“Wait, WHAT? Where are you going?!”

“Don’t be stupid.” A burst of flame surrounded him. His scarlet suite turned into a Chinese robe. “Since I am not a mortal, I can go where I choose. Because we had a connection in your previous life, I can find you when you are in the midst of danger. Live peacefully, Delia.”

With that, Delia caught a small smile on Judge Pao’s face as he disappeared in a puff of smoke.



# Purple Hyacinth

*Shanghai High School International Division, Dai, Bella – 16*

"The first day I met him, Bryce Loski, I flipped. It was those eyes, something in those dazzling eyes." This quote is from the beginning of my favorite movie, *Flipped*.

I never thought this line would fit so snugly into my own life, not until I met him. David. David Lucas: a gentleman of all manners, my neighbor, my dream. He had stolen all my attention ever since I first met him.

One mundane summer day, I moved here for the convenience of my job. He appeared, with a smile, and asked me if I needed help. His white shirt, charming grin, and delightful voice sent butterflies through my stomach. When I looked into his eyes, I have the exactly same feeling as Juli Baker. I flipped.

Since that morning, I couldn't get my mind off him. I lie down on my sofa, woolgathering, yet my mind is filled only with his deep eyes and enchanting smile. Will he be my Bryce Loski? I don't know. All I want is to get closer to him, know more about him, stay with him, and be a part of his life.

## II

I've run into him a lot recently. Sometimes I see him coming back from downtown in his blue sedan, sometimes trimming his lawn at the yard gate, and sometimes helping the neighborhood kids with the kites on the trees. He was quite popular—after moving here I've heard much praise about him, with neighbors vouching for his kindness and helpfulness.

Seeing that I was new here, he took good care of me. Every evening, he would take me on a stroll around the town, to see the frescoes on the walls of the splendid churches, eat hearty street food, or visit the huge library and spend all day there.

Every time we meet, he greets me with a smile. Jesus Christ! His smile, his angelic smile, spins me round and round like a carousel. When I hold his hand, the soft touch of his rough hands leaves me dreaming and dazed for the rest of the day.

Once my light bulb broke and I don't know anyone I can call, so I ask him for help. He was quick and fixed it in no time. Seeing the sweat on his forehead, I feel warm in my heart. Now I'm sure he is my Bryce Loski.

I swear I will let him be mine.

## III

The ground was carpeted by a crisp layer of colorful leaves; each step we took gave a satisfying *crunch* that reminded us it was autumn. Maple leaves brushed around by the wind flew by and past, settling like flakes of snow onto the pavement. Strolling along with these leaves, David admired the scenery, and I admired David. Playfully, like a child, I jumped into a carefully-swept pile of leaves, scattering them everywhere. Then I hear David calling my name, and I turn around, gazing into the eyes I yearn for day and night.

"Alice. I think it's obvious, but I want to say it anyway."

"What?"

"I love you."

No response. My ears were filled with loud echoes and couldn't hear a sound.

"Please be my girlfriend."

My heart was beating so fast that it felt like it could pop. After a long and probably awkward silence, I manage only to squeeze out a faint "yes."

#### IV

David invited me to have dinner tonight. To be completely honest, I'm quite nervous, as it would be the first time I visit his house as his girlfriend. I pick out an elegant wine-colored velvet from my closet, wear my delicate pearl earrings, and sit in front of the mirror to comb my hair. Perfect. Checking my outfit one last time, I leave on my way to his house.

He looked absolutely dashing, as always. I found him cutting the steak in the kitchen. Taking off his gloves, he remarks that "anatomy is a profound and interesting subject: to get the perfect cut of steak, you have to know every muscle fiber, every single piece of fat, every tendon of the meat. It is an art." I respond somewhat dismissively, as I had little interest in the sciences. He seemed to observe my disinterest, so he asks me to dine.

After dinner, he showed me his well-kept yard. He recounted his unhappy childhood: trauma, oppression, and the stress caused by bullying and family troubles. I cannot help but feel sorry for him. It felt strange to feel sorry for him, such a strong, tough, resilient man. I shook my head with all the thoughts.

"It's not too late to go back to being acquaintances if you want", he said.

"No", I replied firmly.

He smiles but does not speak, his eyes gazing into some empty or unknown void.

"Good night."

"Good night."

#### V

It's April now. The snow had melted, and previously barren branches are blooming flowers now. David had promised to take me somewhere romantic. As a surprise, he put a blindfold on me and walked me somewhere. As the spring breeze caressed my face, he stops and takes the blindfold off.

All that came into view was a vast field of purple flowers. It felt surreal, being surrounded by these beautiful, picturesque flowers, with a beautiful sunset behind it all. The color purple alone felt soft and velvety as if the field came straight from a Monet painting.

"You like it? This is my favorite flower, purple hyacinth."

"Yea. So beautiful."

We all lie down to enjoy the beauty of spring.

"You know what it symbolizes?" he gazes into the sunset.

"No."

"Just take a guess."

"Love?"

"Nope."

"Happiness?"

"Guess again."

"I don't know, just tell me."

"Not gonna tell you." He has a sly smile.

"I will figure it out someday." I look at him, pretending to be angry.

"ha-ha, sure."

After a while of us just gazing at the beautiful scenery and the magnificent flowers, I whispered, "Do you love me?"

"Yes, my darling."

"For how long?"

"Till the end of time."

"You mean, forever?"

"Yes, forever... What about you?"

"What?"

"Will you stay with me forever?"

"I guess so."

His brows furrowed in what seemed like worry. "I hope we can always be this happy."

Before I say something, I notice the melancholy in his eyes, so I shut my mouth and didn't reply. Who knows what the future holds?

## VI

A week later as I was just strolling around town on my own, I saw David talking vivaciously to a girl. All my good temper disappeared. Does he not remember that I'm his girlfriend?

I have to admit that the girl is pretty. She wore suspenders and looks quite attractive with her blonde hair and blue eyes. Her hand rested on his shoulder, and her mirthful laughter could be heard in the distance. Now and then, she gives him a tender look. What does she think she is doing? Who does she think she is talking to?

I felt envy and hate bubbling up in me like magma from a volcano. I was ready to erupt. I sprint up to them and push her away. "Hey!!! HE IS MINE!!!!"

The girl put down her hands as soon as possible.

"Sorry, I don't..."

"JUST LEAVE US ALONE!"

"Yes, yes. I'm sorry..." She said as she left.

Now I realized David is standing next to me and see the whole story, so I feel a little guilty.

"David..."

He just smiles, as he always does.

"Are you jealous?"

"NO. OF COURSE NOT." I said angrily.

"Darling. Be confident. How can I love anyone else when a perfect person stands beside me?"

"You are a smooth talker, for god's sake."

He shrugs his shoulders, "I said the truth."

So, the matter passed. But I realized I had to hurry up to win him over completely.

## VII

I'm having dinner with him today. I take out the necklace that I keep in the safe, and give it a good wipe. The sapphires set in the silver chains sparkle, like my eyes whenever I see him. I had also bought a nice watch to give him, a token for the months of our relationship.

During dinner, I take out the watch and present it to him. He gave a smile and murmured a word of thanks, and put it away. I tell him I need to go to the bathroom. He caught me in a hug and looked down at my neck, saying slowly, "You have to do this?"

"What are you talking about? I ..." I began to feel drowsy, and soon lost consciousness.

...

When I woke up again, it was dark and silent. It took me a while to get used to the darkness.

"Awake?"

I can't see, but I can tell that it's David.

"What are you..."

Instruments of torture, large and small, lay on tables around the room. The only sources of light in the room were David's twinkling eyes and a dim candle. My hair stood on end. "You..."

"Hush. I warned you before. Many times. You insist to choose me. Poor girl."

I sat silent.

"I quite liked your present. It pairs well with my shirts. And this..." he gestured around the room, "is my gift to you. I think you'll like it too".

I look around. The door was locked. He didn't tie me up, but I knew resistance was futile. Furthermore, my body was still weak from whatever drug he gave me. I knew I couldn't get out of there.

"Kill me," I said.

"What?"

"Kill me. As you wish. Mr. psycho killer."

"Wait, I think you..."

"If you don't do it, I will do it myself." I struggled to stand up, but picked up a knife from a nearby table. "I'd rather die now than suffer in your hands."

He rushed up and tried to take my knife, and amidst the chaos, I lost track of the knife.

...

There was a sudden silence. All left is a faint sound speaking—"Have you ever loved me, even one second?"

The only response was a blood-stained wall and a frightened face.

## VIII

"The man behind the serial killings five years ago has finally been found. After the efforts of the police, the cold case was finally solved. There's one lady in particular to thank, she helped the police find key clues and evidence, also..."

She turned off the TV, got dressed, and left. At one point, she stopped at a grassy patch and gazed into the void, like he used to.

Before she left, she put something on the ground and muttered.

"I can't."

The purple hyacinth lay quietly on the tombstone, harmonious and aesthetic.

## IX

*I was born to a wealthy family, yet exiled in struggle and intrigue. So, I went to an orphanage. The children outside the orphanage yelled at me, shouted that I was an unwanted bastard, threw rocks at my head, and forced me to crawl on the ground like a dog. Wherever I went, I was a pariah. My childhood was riddled with disgrace, humiliation, and pain.*

*Then my parents found me. Their terrified and humble apologies, fawning cowardice, shameless faces, amused me. See? This is humanity. Ever since I became "David Lucas", no one's ever called me a son of a bitch. No one dared. They always smiled at me and expressed their admiration, telling me how they love me. Love? Ridiculous. I'd like to meet those bullies now, and send them to heaven one by one.*

*My name, my countenance, created a halo of honesty and sanctity for me. If I did anything bad, no one would suspect me. No one. I've seen enough of this fake world, these fake people. I like to see their reverence, their fear for me. I like to see them die in desperation. I am a pervert.*

*The first time I met her, I knew she came for me. She looked so much like her sister, especially those chocolate eyes. She came for revenge.*

*The only reason I do nothing is that I am so bored. Isn't it interesting to see someone trying to act like she loves me but actually hates me? It's like watching a show; I can lie back and watch her performance. I'm not worried about the shred of evidence she can find on me; I hide it very deep inside.*

*She thought there was no trace of her contrived encounters, but that I was merely pushing the boat along. Everything is under control, except for one thing. A fatal mistake.*

*I'm in love with her.*

*I don't know why, maybe it's just because she was holding me while I ranted about my childhood trauma. Her patience, her gentleness, her caring, even if I knew it was fake, it was enough to make people fall for her. For the first time, I want to be with someone, for the rest of my life.*

*But I know I don't deserve it. I killed her sister. That woman – one of the people who forced me to bark like a dog, who stripped me of my childhood, my sanity, my humanity. Even death would not expiate all her crimes.*

*I always lie to myself. What if she loves me, too? What if she doesn't know about anything I did to her sister?*

*So, once I allowed a woman to hold my hand to see if she loved me. She rushed up and pushed the lady away, acting angry. I'd be happy if I didn't see the worry in her eyes. She's afraid I'm gonna kill that innocent girl? Is that what she thinks of me?*

*Ha. I deserve all this. All.*

*I took her to see my favorite flower purple hyacinth. There, she told me that we will be together forever, and I just can't be happy. I can smell her lie. In a way, it pains me. I'm torn between two polar opposite emotions. The meaning of purple hyacinth is regret. Perhaps, in the end, all we have left is regret.*

*I'd like to give it one last try.*

*Today is my birthday. My real birthday, not the one written on the identity card. I invited her to have dinner. I'm going to give her a surprise today. She had a nice necklace around her neck today, if I didn't know there was a camera in it. Since she went into my house, she was looking around, desperately searching for something. When I went to the kitchen, she put something in my glass. I smiled bitterly to myself.*

*A strong feeling of helplessness overtook me when I saw that; now truly all that's left is regret. The facade she had been creating, my hopes and dreams, had all fallen apart from that one act.*

*I swapped our glasses and pretended to be oblivious. And then, sure enough, she fainted, so I took her to my secret base. This is all evidence of my crime. I know this is what she wants.*

*She woke up and pleaded with me to kill her. What was she thinking? What did she think I was going to do? When I saw her pull the knife on herself, my heart nearly stopped. I rushed up to try and take the knife.*

*The knife slit my wrist open. There was a sudden, eerie silence, I felt my life draining from my body. Using my last ounce of strength, I asked her a question to which I long knew the answer.*

*"Have you ever loved me, even one second?"*

*She said nothing. All I could see was her frantically wounding a cloth around my wound.*

*I smiled. Looks like she's not indifferent either.*

*I clutched my proposal ring in my other hand and closed my eyes.*

*Regret.*

*Not really.*

*Regret.*

# Judge Pao's Journey Through Hong Kong

*SKH Tang Shiu Kin Secondary School, Woo, Chung Shun – 15*

Judge Bao, commonly known as Bao Zheng or Bao Gong, was a government official in the Northern Song Dynasty famous for his honesty and pursuit for justice. Having grown up among the commoners of society, Bao understood their hardships and sympathised with them greatly. The government at the time was ineffective and weak due to the corrupt officials working within it. Almost every politician worked for their own selfish desires, not for the people they were meant to serve.

Fortunately, Bao Zheng was unlike his peers and strived to achieve justice for all. Throughout his twenty-five years of serving the government, he had never received any sort of bribe in any way or form, nor had he ever once bowed his head in surrender to evil-doers in the government. Because of this, Bao Zheng is known as the man he is today, the symbol of justice and equity in Chinese culture and society.

One morning shortly after breakfast, Bao Zheng sat in his favourite chair, and reflected on his life on what's happened so far. He knew that he had accomplished a great deal in the fight against corruption and injustice, but he worried that the things he had done were insignificant in the grand scheme of things. After all, Bao was just one measly politician in the entire Northern Song Dynasty, he couldn't change how the world worked all by himself. As he worried about the future, Bao slowly dozed off and fell sound asleep.

'Hey what's that guy doing there?' said a voice nearby in English. Bao tried to stand up from his seat, pretending he was never asleep, only to find that he wasn't sitting on his chair anymore, but instead was lying on a mound of dirt.

Shocked at the sudden change of environment, Bao quickly glimpsed around his newfound surroundings and held his back against the mound of dirt in a defensive stance, in fear of an assassination attempt. He did anger a lot of powerful people throughout his career after all.

In front of Bao stood a tall European-looking man and another not-so-tall man that looked Chinese. Bao asked, 'Who are you and where am I?' in Chinese. Looking puzzled, the two men exchanged glances and the Chinese looking one told the other, 'Umm, sir I think he's an actor,' 'Well he does dress like one for sure,' replied the European man in English.

Bao vaguely understood what the Chinese words meant, but not the English ones. Still confused and terrified of the situation, he asked again in Chinese, 'Who sent you? Where have you taken me to?' Fortunately, the Chinese man was also a literature student and could interpret Bao Zheng's words with decent accuracy and managed to persuade Bao that he was safe through a lengthy exchange.

'So this is?' asked Bao, 'Hong Kong. He's governor MacLehose and I'm his translator Leung,' replied the man. 'I'm Bao Zheng, the guy who impeaches people for their wrongdoings in Song Dynasty, you probably know me, don't you?' said Bao.

MacLehose and his translator were confused upon hearing Bao Zheng's weird, ancient-sounding words, so they just accepted him as an actor who loved playing his character. Of course they had heard of the legendary Judge Bao, but no one would think that they'd meet him in person one day, mostly because he was someone from the twelfth century and probably dead by now.

Bao Zheng on the other hand, had no idea what was happening. He was just dozing off in his mansion a minute ago and now he's in a forest somewhere in 'Hong Kong'. Intrigued, Bao asked about the Song Dynasty, to which Leung replied 'Wasn't that a millennium ago? Everyone knows that.'

Millions of thoughts ran through Bao's head, trying to make sense of the situation at hand. He did note that the two men were wearing some rather unusual clothing, and that one of them spoke a strange version of Chinese. 'Have I really travelled a thousand years into the future?' thought Bao. He wasn't sure how to return to his own time, if he could at all, so he tried to make the best of his current situation.

'Is there a place I can stay for the night?' Bao asked Leung. The translator was now even more confused, 'Is this man some illegal immigrant from the mainland? He acts like he's someone from ancient China, but is that even possible?' thought Leung.

Suddenly, the governor told Leung to invite Bao over for lunch, saying he appreciated the effort he put into the character. The two started talking about their experiences and whatever people from a thousand years ago talked about. They got along pretty well and that is how Leung and Bao Zheng formed the first friendship between a thousand-year gap.

Leung invited Bao to stay over at his house, where he got along with Leung's family pretty well. Soon after, they all came to accept that the 'Bao Zheng' they're seeing was actually the Bao Zheng from the Song Dynasty, and Bao also learned a lot about modern society, especially Hong Kong.

Bao Zheng got a job as a cashier at a convenience store and things started to stabilize for now. Eventually, Bao learned Cantonese and even a bit of English from Leung's son's school textbooks. You couldn't tell that he was a time traveller from how much he had adapted in his new lifestyle. Leung even introduced Bao to smoking but he never really got the gist of it.

Things were going well, but if you knew anything about Hong Kong in the 1970s, you'd know how terribly weak and corrupt the government was. Gangs ruled the streets, drugs and illegal substances everywhere, and there wasn't a civil servant who didn't accept bribes every once in a while. Remind you of something? Well, it did remind Bao Zheng of something, and he didn't like it.

Bao Zheng asked Leung to explain the situation to governor MacLehose, hoping that he'd solve the issues to some degree, but that idea got immediately shot down. Apparently, a good chunk of the law enforcement was also corrupt and received bribes occasionally, so that made arresting all the corrupt officials rather unfeasible. He also tried to tackle the problem with all the gangsters roaming around, but that's also very difficult with a sizable portion of the law enforcement on their side.

Nevertheless, Bao Zheng didn't give up so easily, and tried to think outside the box for this one. He met up with MacLehose through Leung and the two of them started discussing the current situation of Hong Kong.

'As you know, Hong Kong has a serious corruption problem and that really affects a lot of the people living here. Is there anything at all to fight it?' asked Bao. 'Of course, we've had something, I recall there was a branch in the police department fighting against corruption but that didn't work out well. They started taking bribes too and were just like everyone else,' replied MacLehose. 'Anyhow, we can't trust anyone from the current government departments to do their job. Corruption is everywhere now.'

Bao tried to recall what he did before and what led to his success back in the Song Dynasty. One of the reasons why Bao could accomplish as much as he did was because he had the support of the emperor, and that he himself also had a significant amount of power at the time. 'Wait,' said Bao, 'Aren't you the governor? I thought you had absolute power over the government here, what's stopping you from building everything from scratch?'

'That's not going to work. We don't have the money for such an extensive change to our governmental structure and it'll take a long time anyways, I can't be spending my entire term working on this.' replied MacLehose.

The two of them went back and forth with ideas, such as establishing a new anti corruption branch in the police department, or suing the more well-known corrupt officials to deter the rest. None of these ideas seemed effective in the long term, but they did decide to finally establish a new organization to combat corruption here in Hong Kong, one that did more than just arresting people. 'An independent agency that answers only to you and you only, sounds like a very solid idea,' said Bao. 'Let's hope it finally ends the mess that's been here since the 1900s'



Since the addition of this new agency, corruption among civil servants, especially police officers, had gradually disappeared. Thanks to Bao and governor MacLehose, the streets of Hong Kong were finally free of the gangs that once ruled them, the government officials now dedicated their work to protecting and serving the people, and not their own selfish desires.

Years later, MacLehose's term as governor finally ended and he returned to England. But before that, he, Bao and Leung went on one last hike to the 'forest' they found Bao in, which is now part of the MacLehose Trail in the New Territories.

'Hey that's the spot I woke up in!' said Bao once they reached the area. As they walked over to the spot they'd once met up, almost a decade ago, Bao Zheng tripped over a branch and fell on his behind. 'Ouch, that hurt!'

Standing up, Bao realised he was sitting on the floor of his old room back in the Song capital. Looking around him, he saw that Leung and MacLehose were both nowhere in sight, and that everything in his room was exactly the same as he left it. Outside the windows, the sun shone brightly, indicating that it was near noon.

He wondered if all that was just a dream, but everything he experienced throughout those ten years felt so realistic and genuine that he wasn't convinced it was all in his head.

Anyhow, Bao Zheng, being the busy politician that he was, went straight back to work, cracking another case of a corrupt official. He quickly went back to his old self and never told anyone about the things he'd seen in his 'dream'.

He did occasionally wonder about the place he'd travelled to, the strange yet familiar land of Hong Kong. Unanswered mysteries rested on his mind. Did he and MacLehose finally solve the problem of corruption? Did the new organization do what it was created to?

I think we all have the answer to that question, don't we?