



Fiction

Group 3

The Ship

Diocesan Girls' School, Chui, Cheuk Ying Kylie – 14

There will be long winds and waves sometimes, and the sails will be hung straight to help the sea.

He places his brush down and contemplates the Chinese calligraphy he has composed. *If I am the ship*, he ponders, *I must be still sailing across a sea unbeknownst to me, where the shore appears to be nowhere near in sight.*

Knitting his eyebrows in frustration, he heaves a sigh and jerks away from his work of calligraphy, and grasps tightly the medical papers that were once intact, though now slowly being crumpled up. His body cannot help but shake: *why, why now?*

Multiple thoughts and memories flow across his mind, but he cannot be bothered now – he has bigger fish to fry. He has to finish off everything, finish off everything his ancestors asseverated. He needs to make them proud. But alas, time and tide wait for no man, and he feels lost. Very lost.

He wishes to be the seagull that flew past his ship, drifting endlessly and freely across the oceans without feeling angst from many problems, but he cannot.

Pao Yue-kong was not the best son in his early days, after all. He can still vaguely remember the first time he decided to step into this sea freight industry, his parents forcefully opposed it, and his relatives were skeptical of his ability. “It’s a dog-eat-dog world in that industry,” they said, “And you are merely an outsider. Why spend the time torturing yourself?”

Despite the ramblings of Pao Yue-kong's elders, he still plucked up his courage to insist on following his dreams by resigning from his old quiescent job and becoming a self-made man.

But he is now struggling to keep his courage after that happened.

That happened only a year ago when Pao strolled through the streets of his beloved hometown – Ningpo and decided to check out an ancient library nearby. As he wandered across the mysterious place, the staff courteously handed him a book about the history of the Pao family, especially for him. Burning with curiosity, Pao flipped through the pages one by one. As he flicked through the work, familiar names appeared, catching his eye. But he could not quite put a finger on it.

Wait, is it...? A sudden click in his head caused ripples of excitement to flow up his mind. He ran his trembling fingers across the words on the tattered pages as gently as he could, trying to weave the venations of his family together.

Pao...Pao...Judge Pao.

He froze.

He, Pao Yue-kong, is Judge Pao's 29th-generation descendant.

Pao stared blankly at the book and shook his head. *It couldn't be.* He blinked his eyes thrice to make sure that he was fully awake, while his mind was in a state of euphoria and incredulity. The momentary lapse of uncovering the history of his ancestors was unforgettable, and he can now still recall the moment of truth held before his very own eyes. It seems so idyllic, so miraculous, like a dream.

Alas, dreams do not last long. The bubble of the great news of him being Judge Pao's descendant burst soon after. He knew quite well in his heart that being Judge Pao's descendant was not easy. Not only was Judge Pao stringent towards himself, but he was very strict with his family too, and under his influence, his children and descendants were also frugal. Judge Pao was very much devoted to education too and fought for youngsters' rights.

He who shares not my values is not my descendant.

Don't leave your descendants with only embarrassment!

Pao Yue-kong dwells upon these famous words spoken by his ancestor Judge Pao.

Do I share Judge Pao's values? These questions have been nagging him a lot recently. Have I finished what Judge Pao hoped for us to do? How and what can I do better to make my ancestors proud with such a limited amount of time, where my days are already numbered? Why, why did I learn about this so late?

These questions keep circling in his mind but are left unanswered.

He breathes a long withered sigh as he trudges across the room, still very much confused by the labyrinth of life.

Knock-knock-knock.

"Come in." Pao instantaneously shoves the medical papers of him having confirmed a case of cancer into his drawer as a middle-aged man hurriedly rushes in.

"Father—"

Pao interrupts Sohmen and waves his hand, gesturing to him to take a seat.

Sohmen sits, "Father, you— you defeated Khoo Teck Puat! We made a killing! ..."

Pao fixes his gaze on his son-in-law as he goes on speaking about the matter in effervescence. Sohmen's voice is etched with fatigue, but that does not seem to stop him from expressing his wild dreams and imaginations to Pao. Pao has little interest in knowing about this news for now though; instead, sudden memories overtake him.

So-h-men. His name, like himself, shows his diligence to strive in the shipping industry.

Sohmen was first like a diamond in the rough in this industry—just like himself. He knew nothing much about ships, but he tried very hard to do everything well—just like himself. He even gave up his law career simply to help Pao strive for even more in the industry. He always keeps his head down and dares not do anything risky—just like himself. Now, he has spread his wings—he shall be the future hope of this industry.

And Pao took everything Sohmen had done into his heart.

Pao Yue-kong can see himself in Sohmen. When he stepped into this sea freight industry, he also had a lot of dreams and imaginations. He is a self-made man, so the challenges he faced were undoubtedly hard, but he took pleasure and eventually got a grip on them. He made his utmost effort in the hope to make his father proud in the meanwhile, well aware that he had let his father down at first, not doing a job but instead going to another industry with a lot of unknowns. But Pao succeeded. He even built a restaurant in his hometown, naming it after his father. He knows very well that his father has always desired to leave a mark, even if it is a very small mark, in history. And Pao has fulfilled it.

Pao Yue-kong can see himself, endeavoring to help the younger generation receive a better education. He can vividly picture the days he sought books about the shipping industry, and was so absorbed in them that he neglected his sleep. That was why he succeeded. He was conscious that education is very crucial to everyone, especially young learners. That was the main reason he put in a such massive amount of effort and money simply to build a school in Ningpo.

Pao Yue-kong can see himself, first time stepping into Hong Kong, knowing that this would be a good place where he could stay and work. And now, Hong Kong, which has been placed in quite a high ranking for its national security law and judicial independence globally for consecutive years, doubtlessly holds one of the best legal systems in the world.

And these had already been done long before he knew that he was Judge Pao's 29th-generation descendant.

Pao Yue-kong has achieved what Judge Pao hoped his ancestors to do—to share his values. He adores and is devoted to his country, he has contributed a lot in providing education for the youngsters, lending a helping hand for them to become stars of the future, and honors his family. And he is more than sure that his children and future generations will also be able to attain Judge Pao's standards.

It has not been the denouement of Judge Pao yet, and will not be for the nonce.

“The moon today is abnormally bright,” Pao notes as he heads toward the windowsill.

Sohmen, intrigued by Pao’s words, moves next to Pao and looks up.

A crescent moon hangs up high, glowing tenderly but brightly like a chatoyant gem in the very dark sky. It shines in the darkness, sharing comfort and bringing hope to everyone.

Just like Judge Pao.

Pao Yue-Kong smiles.

If I am the ship, he ponders, then I am going to reach the terminal soon, reunited with Judge Pao. But there are still many ships sailing in the middle of the sea, fighting defiantly against the challenges to reach the terminal, leaving marks amid the vast sea.

Judge Pao would be proud. Very proud.

The Case of the Dumplings

ESF Island School, Chan, Ella – 13

The streets bustled with the shouts of vendors and the sound of collision between the cobblestones and the wheels of rickshaws, as the imperial gongs from the Song Palace ringed synchronously.

Chen-Hua finished taking the order from table six, when the wizened old lady, a regular, shambled to a table right next to the door – one of her habits. She called for Chen-Hua, smiling, showing creases at the end of her eyes. The corners of Chen-Hua's lips tilted upwards in return as she strolled to the old lady's table and began chatting off.

Gong! Gong! Gong! The Imperial gong reverberates through the Pao Court of Appeal, as Judge Pao himself sits down on the elongated wooden carved armchair, with his elaborate black gauze futou intact and his golden-black robes brushing the floor. Next to his side stood his loyal advisors, Wang-Chao and Ma-Han, who assists Pao in his deductive reasoning. Just then, a guard rushes into the court, kneeling down on the velvet carpet extended from the armchair. The guard then stood up and with both hands, handed a yellowing scroll to one of the advisors, and bowed once more before taking his leave hurriedly.

With a sweeping motion, Judge Pao opens the scroll, only to gasp in shock. The blood red words wrote:

Ying-Li, widow with child, age of twenty-two, has gone missing for 10 days.
It is believed that she was murdered.

Pao recalls the day before, when a young child dressed in rags was tugging on his sleeve, with tears as large as crystals streaming down his face, begging him to find his mother, who has yet to return home from work.

Pao frowns as he sets the scroll on the wooden table before him and with shaking fists, orders his advisors to notify the guard that he would officially accept this petition.

Edging closer to the night, it was raining violently with streaks of lightning and thunder, causing the candlelight to flicker. Preparing to shut the front doors, Chen-Hua bided her farewells to the last customers, and made her way out the store. That was when a man, burly and broad shouldered, forced his way into the closing doors. Chen-Hua and her Father attempted to explain that the opening hours of the tea house had elapsed. Completely antithetical to their well-mannered explanations, the man's face grew a bright, scarlet red, as he edged towards Chen-Hua's Father. Feeling alarmed, Chen-Hua's Father gestured for her to go to the kitchen. Precariously drawing one step at a time, Chen-Hua reluctantly followed, aware of the worrying look on her father's face, yet unable to help.

Not long after, her Father ended the dispute with the man and acted in accordance with the man's order. Telling Chen-Hua to prepare six dumplings, she complied with a scrutinising look towards the man. Just then, Chen-Hua heard something that made her stop in her tracks.

"What did you get your dumpling filling from?" The man asked, churlishly pointing his chopsticks towards Hua's Father.

"Why, just that meat shop down the street." Her Father replied, maintaining his calm posture with strenuous effort. The rest of the night ended without further dispute. The next day, Chen-Hua went by the meat shop, and encountered the man again. As she approached the store, the man addressed her with a solid stare. Ten silent, deadly seconds passed, as he turned his gaze back to the wooden worktable. He resumed his work, scooping meat bits into the sack. After the sack was full, he slammed the sack onto the stained table – Wham! Chills ran down Chen-Hua's spine. She picked up the sack from the table and shook off her memory of the man, and scurried to work.

Weeks flew by, harmonious and tranquil. Until one spring morning.

The day started with sunshine and warmth. As Chen-Hua walked out of the kitchen, she came to a stop, fixating on the scene at hand – her Father was being held by the collar by a customer, whose frown was so deep that it is plausible to assume that it is deeper than the Mariana Trench. Judge Pao, who happened to be having a meal with fellow court officials, stood up and turned his attention to where the customer's finger was pointing. At first sight there seems to be nothing out of the ordinary, after all it's just a regular dumpling.

No, something is most definitely out of place. Pushing away from other bystanders, Judge Pao bent down to examine the dumpling, and froze. To his astonishment, there was a fingernail. Yellowed and grisly, it was one that clearly belonged to a human. It perched in the middle of the meat filling. How could this happen?

The quarrel was only solved, thanks to the proficient repartee of the regular, the wizened, old lady. Upon her departure, she commented, in a low voice only audible to Pao,

“It is simply absurd that this happened all coincidentally.”

Judge Pao answered “Yes, Indeed. Thank you for looking out for others, it was rather difficult to get a hand with a situation like that.” The old lady simply smiled, and disappeared into the street.

Throughout the following days, Judge Pao sent Wang–Chao and Ma–Han to retrieve information from civilians door to door on the unfortunate victim who was made into meat paste for dumpling filling. While his loyal advisers interviewed civilians, Pao spent tireless hours in the court constructing his theory by stringing events and clues found at the tea house together. In the end, he decided to pay an unannounced visit to the meat shop down the road, a dutiful endeavour that must be executed. Trodding silently past the iridescent glow radiating from the lanterns, Judge Pao headed to the meat shop, with the mission to unearth evidence to support his hypothesis. The heavy metal door opens with an “eek” as an unsettling feeling threatens to wash over Pao. Ignoring the tugging nudge at the back of his head, Pao took one last breath and stepped in, into the hands of the devil.

Judge Pao pinched the bridge of his nose, as the stench of raw meat engulfs his sense of smell. The omniscient gleam from the knives hanging by the counters warn Pao, as if instructing him to leave right away. Cautiously manoeuvring through the unfamiliar terrain, Judge Pao finds myself treading on a substance, similar to the texture of gelatin. He looked down, too stunned to speak. A pool of blood spreaded across the floor tiles, painting them the colour of stale red. Just as Pao looked back up, the wooden doors rattled. Swiftly, Pao swept his head towards the doors, only rattling with more and more vigour. With no choice, Pao scrambled to the nearest cabinet, just in time to shut the cabinet door before the doors opened with the same “eek”, and in came the behemoth of a man, confirming the sinister, inkling mood Judge Pao felt earlier.

Silence is not Judge Pao’s forte. Pao moved to the slit in the cabinet doors to observe the man’s movements.

Suddenly, there was a “Clunk!” next to him. He hurriedly lowered his gaze, as something landed in front of him. A pair of eyes stared back at Pao – blank, with black hair strands poking out, along with the human features of a face. Pao barely managed to stifle his gasp as he pushed the head deep into the cabinet. This movement was unfortunately heard by the man, whose face Pao can see right in front of the slit.

Judge Pao, having experienced countless dangers, took to his astute reflexes.

With a rushed plan afoot, he kicked open the cabinet doors, slamming it into the man’s nose. Making use of the time, Pao sprinted out of the meat shop with his racing heartbeat in sync. As the man followed in pursuit, Pao squeezed into the narrow alleyways, lush vines grappling him in the thin breadths of the in–betweens of buildings – rat and mouse would be the right way to describe this. Still heavily huffing from the close shave, Judge Pao closed the doors of his court, as Wang–Chao and Ma–Han listened to Judge Pao’s exhilarating experience in retrospective.

In the next few days, a lot happened. The butcher was, of course, beheaded by Judge Pao, and justice was at last returned to the unfortunate widow, but that was old news. From time to time Pao pondered – he constructed a logical evaluation of the murder case, however he couldn’t seem to explain the timely disappearance of the old, wizened lady, especially how she simply vanished down the street. Judge Pao thought she looked quite similar to the orphaned child he met before the murder case.

Repaying Good with Evil

ESF Island School, Lung, Vincy – 12

I will always remember the note my ancestor, Judge Pao, left me— a prophecy that raised the hair on my arms, no matter how many times I read it: “When the crystal ball turns red, there will be a tsunami. Build a boat to save yourself.”

I have been checking the prophecy every day since I can remember. The prophecy was the famous crystal ball, a family heirloom Judge Pao passed down to us. I tried to warn the villagers that there would be a tsunami coming at a very young age, but no one believed me. To the villagers, I was just a child who could barely count to ten. Every day, my family and I worked on the boat and kept adding elements that we thought we needed, knowing how dangerous and destructive tsunamis could be.

One stormy afternoon, I came back from a walk in the garden and saw something peculiar happen—a splash of blood red colour was diffusing in the crystal ball. *Oh, no!* I panicked. *A tsunami is coming!* I quickly gathered and moved all the livestock and food we had onto the boat. Just as I moved the last bit of my belongings onto the boat, I collapsed from exhaustion, hands shaking and clammy.

Just as I suspected, after a few minutes, the river flowing through our village flooded its bank, and a splash of waves hit my boat. The boat, after bobbing back and forth a few times, floated on water, to my great relief. Just then, I heard a voice screaming, “Help!”

I looked around and saw a person in the water, splashing the water violently with his arms and struggling to stay afloat. The waves washed over him like a hungry beast devouring a tiny, powerless lamb. Just when he emerged from the water to take a breath, a series of extremely long waves pulled at him like a thousand arms, dragging him down to the deep blue abyss.

I squinted hard to see through the rain and waves, and finally I realized that the person was Ming, the villager who always teased me for believing a tsunami would hit. Ming almost drowned, but fortunately my boat was quick enough to catch him. I threw down a thick rope to Ming, and using every ounce of energy I had left, I pulled Ming out of the water. I gave him a towel to dry off and let him stay on my boat, but he did not bother to utter one word of gratitude. He sat there silently, looking cross with his brows knitted into a knot.

The second day, I saw him holding a sheet of paper in his hand, but I did not think much of it as I was busy steering the boat.

After some days, the tsunami calmed down, and we stayed in the boat for a while until the village was finished rebuilding.

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A few days later, I went to my house to check if it was still in good condition. The house looked as good as new but there was a peculiar sign on the front door. I walked closer and saw it was a “for rent” sign that Ming had put. I saw someone in the house living with her family and was confused.

“Hello, I am not sure I know you. What are you doing here?” I asked

“Hi, I just moved in and I heard you sold the house to your neighbour Ming. And he is renting this to me!” The woman answered.

She confidently presented the mortgage deed along with the company chop to me. I was in awe, and finally realised, the paper Ming stole was my company's chop and made a new deed.

Ming became rich and arrogant after the tsunami occurred. He started renting lands and became rich. He always demanded the villagers to help him do his housework or cook his meals. Ming moved out of this village and into a bigger house that he lives comfortably in. I couldn't believe he forgot the day I saved him in the tsunami. He took all that for granted and he forgot the person that saved his life. He even rented my land to other people. Right when I was telling the family to leave my house, I ran into Ming.

“Look who decided to come back because he had nowhere else to live!” Ming sneered.

“Who was the one that illegally rented my house? You forgot that I helped you!” I cried.

I strolled to the graveyard of Judge Pao and started crying, “If only you were here ancestor Pao, you could help me justify that you claimed the land thousands of years ago. You could help me overcome the obstacle. This person tried to kick the ladder away.”

Suddenly, a faded figure appeared. I could recognize that it was Judge Pao based on the facial features I saw on a painting of him.

“Judge Pao, you came at just the right time! I need you to save my house, our house!”

Judge Pao followed me to meet Ming to help me get my house back. He went up to Ming’s house and I told Judge Pao the story. Ming was embarrassed to be the villain of the story, so he gave Judge Pao some wine as a greeting. But instead of drinking the wine, Judge Pao served himself some water from the kettle.

Ming looked at him in disbelief and said, “Judge Pao, I am a rich and successful business man. How dare you throw away my precious wine and reject my round cheers! Are you trying to belittle me?”

Judge Pao smiled coldly and calmly replied, “How ungrate you are Ming. You drank tons of polluted water in the tsunami this year, but today this cup of water is forbidden to be drunk? Surely you think that if you become wealthy, you can forget whatever good deed a person has done to you in the past.”

After Judge Pao said that, Ming was irrefutable. He just hung his head low with the guilt of renting my house to other people. Ming was arrested for stealing and also imitating my signature and the mortgage deed.

New Tales of Judge Pao

ESF Island School, Yoon, Seung June – 12

This case was a hard one. No witnesses, no evidence, nothing to point to a culprit. But Pao Bao Zheng would do everything in his power to bring the truth to light. He smirked a knowing smile. After all, he had never failed once. Shielding his eyes from the harsh sun, he breathed in the musty odor rising from the ground below him. Excited greetings from the townspeople were met by a wry smile and a nod. It was always like this when he was in Bianjing. As he slipped into the welcoming shade of an alleyway, a sudden wave of nausea hit Pao. Bright colors flashed before his eyes as he struggled to maintain his balance.

Darkness.

Pao opened his eyes. Ashen ground stretched out into the horizon, soft beds of blood-red Bi An flowers forming a narrow clearing. Through the light fog, Pao saw the blurry figure of a man with a large head and shoulders as thin as reed. As he approached him, Pao could make out an oblivious smile that betrayed his white hair and stooped back.

“Come, we shall walk,” the man said. His smile hardened into a purse, wrinkles forming on his forehead. The transformation was so abrupt, so unnatural, that Pao understood at once that this “man” was not a man. Still, not knowing where else to turn, he followed.

The man turned to face him. “I am your guide in this realm,” he said. “And you shall follow me. We must hurry.”

Pao was not satisfied. “Where am I?” he demanded.

The man burrowed his thick eyebrows in a disappointed frown. “Were you not taught from young? Do you not know about Diyu?”

Pao was eleven again. He was alone in his room, a look of intense concentration on his small face. A single opened scroll lay on his wooden table. Sunlight bled through the linen curtains, tinting his world a soft yellow.

Diyu is the realm of the dead, where sinners suffer for their deeds and are reborn.

The strange world flashed before Pao’s eyes as waves of emotion pulsed through him. Fear, confusion, anger. As the two came to a stop, Pao assessed his surroundings. In front of him lay a grand door laden with exotic gems, embedded in a massive stone wall. The guide’s gray palm gently touched the surface. A dim light poured out from the corners, the secrets within yearning to escape. With a mighty creak, the doors slid open.

“Pao Bao Zheng is hereby sentenced to eternal rebirth for false accusation! This cycle will not be broken until enlightenment is reached. Guards, take him to the Room of Rebirth!” The judge’s voice resonated throughout the chamber.

Pao collapsed onto the ground, cold sweat dripping down his back. With a trembling voice, he begged for mercy, but the judge promptly turned his back. With an almighty groan, the walls of the room ground into a winding passageway.

As he walked past lantern after lantern in the underground passageway, his thoughts began to stray. He had never done anything wrong in his life—on the contrary, he was quite proud of his accomplishments. Magistrate at twenty-five, the king’s most trusted official at thirty, a national symbol of justice by sixty. Why was he here? Why was he surrounded by cold-eyed guards, treated as a common criminal?

Soon, he was in front of yet another old, bearded man. The room was dimly lit, the only object in it a wooden table. Two men stood defiantly beside the judge, one firmly holding a yellowed scroll.

“Pao Bao Zheng, your next life will be of suffering. You must learn the pain of the victims of your arrogance,” the Judge said. The scroll was quickly opened. “Coal miner,” it said. There was only a moment of dread before the darkness settled in.

Cold sweat dripped onto Pao's back. The magistrate descended upon him, his looming figure towering over Pao. Loud shouts of accusation came from his left. Three townspeople stood nearby with beady eyes, their bony fingers pointing at him. Fear swept over Pao, muffling the voices. Just minutes ago, he had poked his head out of his house at the loud commotion outside. Now, everyone had turned to look at him, exchanging silent whispers.

The cold, unbending gaze of the magistrate pierced through Pao. “Are you the man who's been leaching from the town storeroom for the last few weeks?” Pao opened his mouth to protest, but he could muster only coarse gibberish, the tang of metal in his mouth making him nauseous.

“Are you sure it was this man?” the magistrate turned backwards as he asked the apparent witnesses.

“Of course,” they replied with certainty. “The thief wore a gray shirt and long white pants, like him. Same hair, same height, too.”

Pao gasped. He remembered that earlier in the day, his son had raced towards him, pointing to the faraway fields. “Dad, I just saw someone that looked just like you!” he exclaimed, gasping for breath. “Even his clothes were the same!”

“It wasn't me!” he screeched as the guards swiftly pulled him away by his arms.

The guide stood silently, gazing at Pao. He motioned for Pao to follow him.

“It is a burden to be responsible for the fate of another. Your intent may be righteous, but your decision may not pass the test of time. No matter how hard you try, you can never know everything. Pao, you need to acknowledge that you cannot always be right. Learn from your mistakes,” said the guide.

The guide led him straight to the Room of Rebirth, where the Judge was waiting for him. “This is your chance to redeem yourself,” he said. Once again, the same official showed the same scroll. “Government official,” it read. Pao breathed in deeply.

Mayor Pao was certain. The circumstantial evidence alone was enough to condemn this murderer to death. Everything tied back to him. He had even confessed under interrogation. But as he opened his mouth, a sliver of doubt poked at his heart. What if he was wrong? There would always be new evidence, new opinions—all of which would do a dead man nothing.

Pao hesitated. Reconsidered. At last, he delivered the verdict. “I hereby sentence Huang Zidong to a life sentence! However, this case will remain open to further inspection upon the discovery of new evidence.”

The guide gave a slow nod of approval. “Come, follow me,” he said. “Well done.” They walked across a long drawbridge, Pao still reeling from his sudden return to Diyu. “You are a fast learner.” Pao remained silent, unsure of how to respond.

The two entered a maze-like passageway towards the Room of Rebirth, their feet clacking against the stone floor.

“In your past lives you have never received nor given true love. You must learn to love with your heart, not your head, whatever the circumstance,” the guide said.

As they neared the end of the passageway, cool air tickled Pao's chin. A look around showed a familiar room. Slowly, deliberately, the magistrate unraveled the scroll. "Dog," it said. Before Pao could cry out, his world turned black.

There was no food today. The pointed gravel sunk into Pao's paws, as he flinched with pain. He should have moved to the city. There were more scraps there—he might even find an owner.

As he turned a corner, he locked eyes with a human. The beggar greedily munched on a small piece of rice cake, the moon-white crumbs landing on his dust-caked rags. Pao bared his rotten teeth and prepared to fight for what would be his only meal of the week. Instead, the beggar reached out, handing him the last bite. Hunger taking over his confusion, Pao lunged at the rice cake and fled as fast as he could.

As he neared the miserable excuse of a home, a cascade of high, whimpering voices erupted in his ear. As he turned to face the source, he saw another dog. A squirming mess of living bodies lay under her. A mother. The pups' whines of hunger were left unanswered, as the mother gazed aimlessly into the distance. Pao relaxed his clenched jaw and watched as the hunk of rice cake slowly rolled towards the mother and her pups.

That night he was not hungry.

Light embraced Pao, a strange silence filling the air. Warm air brushed against his cheeks, gently lifting him upwards. Pao remembered. He remembered everything. Bone-aching hunger. The cruelty of the world. The understanding that he, Pao Bao Zheng, could be wrong.

"Pao Bao Zheng is hereby relieved of his punishment," came a deep voice.

A wave of energy pulsed through the space, jolting Pao back to consciousness. He was seated behind an elegantly carved wooden desk. A silky orange robe replaced his plain tunic. Fine gold lettering lined the edge of what was now his desk. "Pao Bao Zheng, 11th Magistrate of Diyu," it read.

It Began with a Cat

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Ho, Vanessa – 13

My cat took one last shuddering breath and stilled: she was dead. It was a crisp Autumn morning, turning the tip of my nose crimson like the leaves on the trees. They dangled on the fingers of the branches. One little tug on the leaves and they would go plummeting down, then be swallowed by the other forlorn leaves – trapped. I was a leaf. My cat was too. And I was closer to letting go of the branch.

"Mei–mei, get ready for work and stop gazing out the window. If they catch you like this, it'll be the end of you!" My brother chuckled but staring into his hazelnut eyes – I could only see one thing: pure panic.

"Stop worrying. I've been doing this for eight years. Have more faith in me, ge–ge." Maybe I said that more to reassure myself.

"And every day, my hair grows whiter, and a chunk falls out." I tried to laugh at his attempt at a joke, but it didn't feel like the right time. Not when I was going to put myself in danger yet again. And my cat died.

I left the room shortly after and deftly pinned my locks of ink–black hair into a bun. It refused to behave today. Maybe I was less patient compared to the previous days. After losing the battle against my hair, I shoved my zhanjiao futou hat onto my head frustratedly, then deftly drew two dark swirls above my upper lip: a moustache. Then I hurried to work, feeling more weighed down than excited. I would usually be exhilarated to go to court. I could mock all the self–righteous airheads who had the nerve to call themselves my co–workers and keep my family from starvation so that we could live a life without worry. "Killing two birds with one stone!" I'd always say.

They heard the swish of my blood–stained silk robe skimming the marbled tiling and the soft thud of my shoes that were two sizes too big before they saw me. Not exactly me. I was not mei–mei anymore. Nor was I a leaf.

"Judge Pao has entered!" A flourish of movement greeted me; people stood up respectfully. I strode to the front of the room and plopped into my seat unceremoniously.

"My lord! Thank you for taking up this case!"

"You may address me as 'Your Honor'. I was irritated: disguised as a male, knowing they would not appreciate me like this if I came as a woman. I knew this. I always had. But for some reason, it bothered me more today.

"Opening statements." I intoned, pitching my voice an octave lower. They started rambling; their voices were drowned in desperateness, twisted with lies. I counted the time tick by, stretching and pulling at my already worn–out patience. This was useless. As if I was in a trance, I stood up and floated towards the entrance. I left. It was as if I froze time. I saw the surprise sneak up on them, wrapping their legs and arms to their chairs, leaving them unable to move. I ran with wings unfurled and an unruly grin splotted on my face. But, as fast as my escape was, chaos chased me faster.

"Judge Pao!" Many people called after me, finally snapping out of their confusion. Hurried footsteps thundered in my wake. My absence was against the court rules. It was seen to be close to treason, especially with the honour of being a judge held. Someone voiced my thoughts. "Judge Pao, you have gone against the law. You will be a judge no longer. You've already had two strikes!" Someone yelled. And just like that, the weight of my actions crashed down onto me, the horror of what I had done giving me an icy punch back to reality. I turned back and fled to the courtroom.

The desperation that was once in the eyes of the attorneys pleading their case was now mirrored in mine. My eyes were bulging. Fear choked me. It grabbed at me, clawed at me, strangled me. It left me bare, stripping me off all my disguises, all my protection until I was not a leaf, nor Judge Pao, or mei–mei. I was just me – plain, old me. I saw the anger in their eyes, hungry and devouring as they chased after me. I saw the dawning realization wash over them. I was not a man. Judge Pao was not a man. They ran after me. They ran with passion. They ran with defiance. Thump. Thump. Thump. Trepidation suffocated me like waves pulling boats under the murky depths of the unknown. But I could swim. I was not going to be their rabbit to their predator. I was not going to be weak or defenceless. I wanted to carve out those smug smirks tattooed onto their faces after seeing me – the real, candid me. I wanted to rip out their hair and show them I was not a damsel in distress. I wanted to bring them the suffering,

burning, festering hunger those of the lower class and middle class felt. Like my family felt. Like how my cat felt. My cat. My sweet, doe-eyed cat who died at the hands of famine. She died at the hands of the court for giving not giving me enough to provide for my family. And she died at the hands of me. I cracked. Guilt shot me like an arrow. I crumpled to the floor like porcelain—fragile and thin. The blood—red silk of my robe pooled around me like a blood bath as if I hurt myself. In a way, I did. I remained there closing my red-rimmed eyes and hugging myself. My cat. I needed revenge. I would take them down with me. "Kill them. Kill them. Kill them." Voices chanted around me, repeating it as if it was a mantra. Their voices rose to a crescendo and pounded my eardrums, dragging their hoarse voices down the nape of my neck. "Kill them," they said once more.

So, I did. Or that was what I thought. I was too consumed by rage and hatred to know what was happening. Was the room spinning? Was it silent, or were there wails for help? I did not know. My only wish was to kill them. But all I could see was black. And then the floor melted beneath me. I fell.

I was falling like a leaf. I felt the air scrape against my face. My hair, now wild, snaked around my unprotected face, twisting and curling around me, bringing tears to my clouded eyes. "Hello, Judge Pao." A man appeared. No, not a man. The devil himself. He had horns that towered over his bed of ruddy hair with eyes that were a contrasting white. Flecks of gold were splattered on the lids of his pupilless eyes, making him look supernatural. There was a plethora of scars scattered on his face that was etched so deep many needed stitches to close the gaping wounds. Emotionlessly, he enunciated, "You are in hell." I cackled. What kind of dream was this? I was feral. I was completely and utterly mad. I belched out another depressing laugh. He simply looked at me with disdain and carried on speaking. "Judge Pao, you have sinned greatly. Be thankful you aren't tortured with the others." As if on cue, the pleas for mercy rang out from the darkness around me. I cackled some more, voice hoarse. "You have two choices," He spoke over my laughter, "One: to suffer in the pits of fire like them, or two: to become bound to hell for eternity but bring justice to those in hell to repent for your sins." He grinned as if he had given me the best deal of the century.

"No one would follow a female judge. I would rather suffer in the pits than disguise myself again." I asserted, rolling my eyes in the process.

"Make them respect you. Those in hell do not have a choice whether to follow you. This offer is scarce—do not dismiss it so quickly."

I sighed. "I will choose—"

It is a crisp Autumn morning. I can feel the chill in the air, yet everything still looks the same dreadful red. No brother is here to coddle me this time. I get ready. I twist my locks of ink—black hair into two braids with an expert hand. I place my zhanjiao futou hat onto my head with carefulness and deftly paint my cheeks rouge. Then I leave for work.

They hear the swish of my snowy silk robe skimming the blood—infused concrete and the soft drumbeat of my cat's feet following my swift strides before they see me. Not exactly me. I am not mei—mei anymore. Nor am I a leaf.

"Hell's most renowned judge has blessed us with her presence. The Supernatural Judge Pao and her cat has entered!" I smirk.

The Dragon's Witness

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Huang, Ziyang – 14

“... And it ran. Sprinting, clawing, lurching forward into the abysmal darkness like an unruly animal. Nothing more than a nightmarish pretence of a dream, the helpless reality of a human's pathetic repentance was ultimately the catalyst of its own demise. Scrambling for a material substance, it mangled desperately in the blank space, drowning in the inky silence. Devoid of any breath, a soundless scream imploded through its bones, hands reaching for its throat – before crumbling into nothing more than a pallid pile of ashen detritus.

My blood seemed to freeze within my veins, the shock of such a monstrosity paralysing me. The reflexive urge to look away seized my mind, yet my sights refused to shift, eyes peeled against my own will. A glimpse of a shadow suddenly rose above the crippled corpse that lay on the barren ground. Dancing between vision and reality, the figure flickered like that of something otherworldly, the muffled flapping of their cape-like hood smattering violently in the wind. Bathed in the opaline moonlight, glints of gold scintillated in the shape of the imperial dragon, embroidered in golden thread under their black robe.

Was it a vision birthed from hysteria? Or simply a trick of the light? It seemed the thought had only just crossed my mind before the figure dissipated into the obscurity of the twilight, never to –”

The rickety will of the wooden table seemed to crumble as a cacophony of battered, calloused hands slammed against the surface like a shower of meteors falling toward the earth – accompanied by the boisterous, drunken laughter that escaped their mouths in unison. “Oh Fenhua, your stories never fail to lift my spirits. Certainly impressive!” Lingyun said, exasperated from the almost ceaseless laughter as he wiped away the last dribbles of white liquor with the back of his hand. The rest of the crowd seemed to feast on Fenhua's rising bewilderment written all over his face, faltering at his companions' truly genuine disbelief. Perhaps it was the sheer horror of witnessing such a scene, or the scarring, visceral reality he had thought to have perceived, that it failed to occur to him the mere outlandishness of his tale.

The mocking sneers and cackles of the listeners drowned out his desperate stammers of truth as he only wallowed deeper and deeper into the depths below.

The humid, redolent smell of the bland, soup-like substance seemed to have only brushed against the thin lines of comprehension before he heard the subtle pitter-patter of footsteps. Like raindrops, drumming in their soft, rhythmic dance before slicing through the air like bullets, pounding, beating, unleashed with nature's fury. More and more people seemed to appear out of nowhere, the crowd growing from a stream to flooding every inch and stone of the muddy village roads. The stampede rushed forward, pushing and shoving as if they had been restrained for time out of mind, the sheer thought of something to fill their acrid, empty stomachs, their wide eyes crazed with hunger and desperation.

The arrogant, the pompous, the sick, the weak, never had such a diversity of a community stood together so closely. Hand in hand, shoulder to shoulder, shackled together by one thing: starvation.

The other soldiers struggled to keep the situation under control, but their efforts were nothing more than trying to fence water with spears and sticks. In the commander's own words: “Humans without food were nothing more than stray dogs begging for scraps. Wild, beastly, and vicious” – the people surged, throwing their bodies forward, dozens more falling like meagre playing cards, one after the other, staggering as others trampled over them without a moment's hesitation.

The violence ensued. Shrieks for help began to echo through the mass, those left behind either bloodied and bruised or crushed from the impact of the falling bodies. But the pack paid no attention to the weak, setting its sights on the target ahead of them. They sprawled through the streets, surrounded their prey, ferociously gnashing their teeth and lunged violently towards it, claws outreached to scoop just a drop of this heavenly elixir –

BAM!

The metal bowl toppled to the ground, flung from its seat on the dilapidated stool and collided with none other than another devout follower of survival in its low trajectory – taking both their hollow, pale stick-of-a-body and their splintered consciousness down together. The bowl’s cloudy, watery contents splattered all over the barren, hard-baked earth. Any remnants of the fragile, tenuous threads that held this catastrophe from descending into the depth of unreturnable calamity seemed to tear in that very instant.

It was undoubtedly a person that now lay as ‘dead as a doornail’ beneath the bowl, pulverised by its crushing weight and impact – yet the corpse that lay sprawled on the ground was spared nothing more than a fleeting glance nor second thought. Hundreds more swarmed around the scene like bees to a hive, scooping their cracked, dry hands through the lukewarm puddles of what was left from the ground – as if the porridge would evaporate within seconds. Scrambling for every last, tantalising drop, impetuously ignoring the granules of dirt and ash that swirled in streaks of black and grey, agonised at even the smallest particle slip through the narrow gaps between each ragged, bony finger.

“P–Please, help me!” she shrieked, the very last syllables of her words faltering as they morphed into a shattering cry of pure anguish. She screamed with all the fortitude her lungs and mouth could muster, tearing vigorously at the last wretched strands of her heart, only to produce a mangled sound no words could ever describe. Every inch of her body felt ablaze, scorching with the fervent heat seemed to run within her veins, scathing, torching, burning her alive. A liquid fire that seemed to disintegrate every muscle and cell that still remained remotely intact, paralysing as her body began to seize uncontrollably – possessed by the excruciating pain.

Tortured wails echoed through the night, a scream of the soul as each cry rippled through the air like knives, stabbing at his consciousness. He could feel a debilitating prick as pearls of tears began to pool at the corners of his eyes, their sheen and brightness glistening under the cold lustre of the moonlight. Preparatory to even let a vestige of speech susurrate through, he desolately attempted to cease the bitter onslaught of tears and sobs that racked soundlessly in his chest, holding his breath in rigid silence as he constrained the vigorous flood of emotions behind a concrete dam of tenacious will, unbending and unwavering resolve. Brick by brick, stone by stone, time and time again – firmer and stronger than ever before, lest even the slightest cracks even form.

The dragon commanded the divine will and imperial power, a creature that even the heavens submissively kneeled before. Revered above all else, hailed as the ‘epitome of auspiciousness’, an empyrean beacon which graced the mortal realm with the wisdom of the celestials, bestowing the gift of ethereal brilliance that illuminated even the most delinquent of alleyways, exposing the most nefarious of sins. Yet “*with every light, there hath shadow*”, and the blinding eminence that bathed the ones below only exacerbated the harsh barriers that divided those that savoured the glory of justice and triumph, and the inevitable delinquents that still remained undetected – but not for much longer.

Ebony blotches of ink seemed to swallow him up as they encircled his thoughts in a bewitching dance. Each stroke and flick seemed to leap across the endless plains of crinkled, burnished paper, pages inscribed with a palpable brush and ink – yet seemed to detail a story beyond imagination. The very idea of it astounded him, such world like those which belonged to man so demented they could no longer differentiate between dreams and reality. Yet the prickling stare emanating from Judge Pao’s unnervingly still gaze seemed to drag those painstaking seconds into eternity, eating away at his consciousness with both dilatory pace and icy hostility.

He fidgeted with the stained and blemished apron that he wore and the belt, aligned with the most versatile range of medical apparatus and practical medical herbs, pills, and chemicals, all fastened so closely at the waist. The doctor inquired, his voice haunted by a fearful undertone:

“I don’t understand. How is this possible? An entire village, mass starvation, citizens going missing, how did such a situation escalate like this...?”

Judge Pao's voice rang with a subtle fury, reminiscent of the quiet qualms of thunder that warned the world of an impending storm:

“Those arrogant fools who call themselves ‘governors’ and their blatant disregard for the common folk must be responsible, yet their pride and selfishness is only useless in the face of resolving this. That’s why I must take matters into my own hands.”

“B—but what else could have really caused all this?”

Silence, followed by the whispers of an exasperated sigh.

“Poison.”

The Case of the Absent Murderer

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Lau, Levia – 13

Sunday, June 28th

7:00 pm

Mrs. Laurent was a stately woman, in all but height. Nonetheless it still felt like she towered over you, the glare from her eyes and the jewels she wore had a tendency to make you feel impossibly small. That night, even more diamonds were added to the arsenal of riches she displayed on her neck. They rattled and clinked as she strode to the doors, punctuated by her heels on the marble floor. Today, Mrs. Laurent has insisted on receiving every guest to the party herself, an honour reserved for her famously affluent parties.

Exhaling sharply and straightening her dress, she swung open the mahogany doors. She began her welcome speech about how grateful she was that they could attend and where to hang their coats when the faces of her visitors registered and she stopped abruptly. Silence, except the sound of a single wine glass scattered across the floor.

“Hello, mother.”

8:54 pm

A man trudged down the pavement, the streetlamps beside him barely kept the shadows at bay. He walked for a while, muttering to himself about the time and how he must hurry to return home, when something caught his eye. Just a few blocks in the distance, blue and red lights flashed, temporarily illuminating frantic figures rushing around. He caught a glimpse of police and paramedics. The man quickened his pace; his insistence about arriving home soon forgotten.

Nearing the scene, a police chief noticed his arrival, greeting him hastily: “Bao, you could not have come at a better time.” He guided Bao towards the house with a solemn nod.

Bao’s smile faded into a grimace: “Is everything all right? Has there been a break-in of some sort?”

The chief stopped, and turned to face him, his brow knitted with worry.

“Worse. There was a murder.”

9:18 pm

It was obvious they were in the middle of a luxurious party. Flutes of half-finished champagne, a table stacked with the finest delicacies. A few accessories discarded here and there, but otherwise no sign of incriminating evidence. The guests and staff all stood nervously in a group outside the house.

“Detective— Sir!” A young man rushed out from the crowd, running after Bao.

A butler, Bao thought, how unusual! Most of them would opt out of this mess for the sake of their jobs.

The butler caught up to Bao, took a few seconds to recover from the exertion before managing a few words. “I was the one that found the um... the body,” the butler stammered, “Mrs. Laurent, she said something to me, when I found her. She...she said ‘look behind the pictures’. At least, that’s what I think she said.”

Bao was about to reply, when the chief appeared from the crowd. “The main suspects are back at the station, ready for questioning.” He motioned for Bao to follow him to his car, and for the next ten minutes they drove in strained silence to the station.

Halfway there, Bao blurted out: “Hey Kenzie, tough night?” He winced at his attempt.

“Well, crimes like these are rare but I’ve seen my share of them.” The chief sighed, fatigue creasing his eyes as he kept them on the road. “How was your night, Bao?”

“I was having dinner just a few minutes earlier with this guy—Daniel—and it didn’t end well.” Bao said. “He received a call about a party. It was pretty bad because he practically sprinted out of the restaurant.”

“What a night for both of us, huh.”

The police car turned into the station and the two men headed inside. The steady humming of the ventilation in the police station grounded him, something he’d gotten used to in his years of working as a detective. Bao exhaled sharply, pushing his thoughts aside, leaving an empty workspace for the interrogation, the way he always handled it.

9:37 pm

“There must be some kind of mistake! I told you I wasn’t there!”

Bao opened the door and heard a strained voice, meaning that the person’s insistence had gone on for quite a while. Yet there was also something else about his voice. Something vaguely familiar.

Bao Zheng turned to face the suspect, even when the sinking feeling in his heart told him he already knew who it was.

“What on *earth* is going on, Daniel?”

12:03 pm

Back in his apartment, Bao sank into a well-worn armchair. He held his notepad—bursting with alibis and statements from the hours of questioning earlier—but stared at his ceiling. Apparently Daniel was Mrs. Laurent’s eldest son; a fact he managed to keep secret. Bao shut his eyes and recalled the past events of the interrogation.

Claire Laurent, the daughter: A quiet and unassuming girl, her head was lowered to her hands for most of the session. Despite this, Bao could not help but notice an air of agitation. Her hands picked apart her nails almost involuntarily, her words spoken close to a whisper. Claire mentioned how Daniel and Mother bickered often, but she couldn’t bring herself to say anything more. When Bao asked if Daniel had been seen at the party, she only said that she had seen him across the room talking to the other guests.

Bao sighed and rubbed his temples. Daniel was definitely at dinner with him, and it was impossible for Daniel to cover the distance between his house and the restaurant during the time of the murder.

Flynn Laurent, the brother: he entered the room and it was obvious he was Daniel’s brother. They looked almost identical, except for the chipped tooth that revealed itself whenever Flynn smiled. Flynn told the detective that Dan has been distant lately. However, he made no effort in hiding how much it pleased him. “Tired of being the ignored brother I suppose,” he said, half-joking.

Bao switched on the TV in defeat, and fished out some photos that were taken at the party. The photographer, who had insisted on being called Delilah, had pointed out the fabric of a suit in the background, which was confirmed as Daniel’s suit by some guests. If it wasn’t Daniel...then who was wearing it?

Eventually, Bao gave in to the heaviness of his eyelids and reluctantly went to bed.

This case was going to be a lot more complicated than I thought.

10:16 pm

“Look behind the picture.”

The following day, Bao sipped his morning coffee while he fiddled with an old camera. *What a load of gibberish, he thought. Mrs Laurent must’ve been in a lot of shock.* He held the camera up to his face, watching his faint reflection on the black screen. Sunken eyes stared back at him, the rest of his face drained with the same exhaustion, but it was smiling. *Maybe Mrs. Laurent was crazier than I thought.* Bao laughed with unfiltered excitement as he fumbled for his phone and dialled for the chief.

1:24 pm

The interrogation room was always colder than the rest of the station, but the murderer’s glare lowered the temperature by a few more degrees. Bao was almost sure that they committed the crime; if only he knew why.

“Why’d you do it?” Bao asked bluntly. Silence. The murder stared at him from across the table, their lips still stubbornly shut.

“I’ll tell you what I know. Someone alerted Daniel with the bad news before the police did, so he would appear at the house right before them. Someone also knew Mrs Laurent and the people at the party, enough not to cause suspicion. Someone wore Daniel’s suit during the party. Who fits the description perfectly? Flynn.”

Bao leaned forward but the murderer barely flinched.

“But no, Flynn wasn’t the killer.” Bao started again. “Him wearing the suit was just brotherly jealousy. The killer took advantage of this. *Look behind the picture*, were Mrs Laurent’s last words. And what is behind every single picture without fail? The photographer. Delilah Johnson. Or should I say, *Delilah Laurent?*”

She shuffled in her seat, but finally, Delilah spoke: “Allow me to explain my side of things. My mother wasn’t the magazine-perfect person the journalists write about constantly, she was anything but. By the time I could walk, there were locks on all our bedroom doors. She made Claire spend more time with makeup than books; Flynn had modelling classes all day; and I— never mind. All of us—” she glanced at the floor, “suffered under her tyranny. Only I was brave enough to do anything about it.

“Just a few years later, my father suddenly fell ill. It was... incurable. My mother took control of everything, and everyone. I had to leave. Days later, my name was removed from everything, like I never existed. I simply came here to claim what is rightfully mine, but things...” Delilah stopped when the emotion in her voice rose out of control.

“But no. I didn’t kill my mother, because I never had one.”

Suppressed Void

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Lui, Michelle – 14

Over a soothing cup of tea, he blew, watching as thin wisps of smoke vanished into the air. A wry smile crept across his face as the cup was brought to his lips, a burst of flavour filling his mouth like a sprouting seedling. The many folds of his crimson robe closely resembled his own face – wrinkled, fragile, peachy in colour. Judge Pao was always reminded of his triumphant past every time the taste of tea met his tongue. Tentatively, the judge began to lift the cup again, but the calming silence of the room was shattered by a knock on the door. His anthracite eyes glanced at the sliding door, which was thrust open by a soldier.

“Judge Pao, we’re planning on heading out soon. Captain wants you to be ready in five minutes.”

The judge smiled warmly. “Thank you.”

He patiently waited until the *click* of the sliding door indicated that he was alone in the room once more. A sigh escaped his mouth as his papery hands clasped the teacup tight, and he steals a stare at his reflection upon whatever slither of tea was left at the bottom of the cup.

But the face that gazed back into his soul didn’t belong to him.

Rather, it was the innocent face of a smiling young man, long before the burdens of old age took over.

Despite lacking in money, Judge Pao’s main goal wasn’t to secure a large sum of it. Time to him was the most precious thing, and he wanted to fill every last drop with unforgettable moments, whether it was seeing the giddy faces of children as he helped them scavenge for their lost possessions, or whether it was just spending time with his simple family.

The judge in his youth found himself admiring the scenery in a rural area, observing the faraway mountains under a cloudless sky. A rumbling of wheels and horse hooves approached from behind him, revealing themselves to be a fleet of traveling soldiers transporting a cart piled to the top with goods. Everything was in order.

But something didn’t sit quite right. The ringing silence didn’t come off as awkward immediately; the sounds of men chattering had masked the absence of Mother Nature’s own noises.

The cart stopped. Any laughter instantly died out. Horses stood still, shifting their hooves uncomfortably. Pao watched from a distance, sensing someone or something stirring within the shrubbery.

“Leave... *Leave!!*” Pao called out.

The men sprang into action, yanking the reins of the horses and driving them and the cart of resources backwards. Yet their attempt was unsuccessful.

Shadows leapt from their hiding places. Metal clashed against metal, wooden planks crumbled and all chaos ensued. Like a dying firework, the commotion ended, and the frenzied tango of black fabric was over. Whoever or whatever it was, they had pilfered the cart, and left not even a crumb behind to spare. The dazed men, including Pao, required several moments to process what had happened in the past ten seconds, sitting down and staring wide-eyed into the distance.

“Is this... Is this a normal occurrence?” Pao asked, his voice shaky.

One of the soldiers groggily pulled himself up, rummaging around among the broken planks to search for even a trace of the stolen possessions, before replying, “It’s been happening more frequently.”

Pao steadily came to his feet, indignant, grabbing his hands into fists. Whatever being chose to ambush the cart already revealed several things about their behaviour: lazy, indifferent and selfish. People like them didn’t belong in their wholesome community.

The young judge helped any soldiers who hadn’t the energy to sit themselves up to stand. To think that there were people who didn’t need these resources as much as Pao did, who had more money in their pockets than he did in his own house, who wielded blades for the purpose of ransacking peaceful transport teams, it only made Pao’s face redder by the second.

“Sir, are you alright? Please, don’t be worried by the situation! We will have all this under control!” The lead soldier laughed awkwardly, patting Pao’s back so as to comfort him.

Pao sighed. “Quit the act. You are all nervous wrecks.”

Silence.

“These people have no right to take from us. If they want something, they need to earn it. So, soldiers, what do you think about putting an end to their wicked schemes?”

★★★★

Piles of unread documents sat like towers upon Judge Pao's desk, looming above him as if they were secretly saying, 'stop sleeping and start reading me!'. A night of restlessness had left him completely befuddled and unable to complete work without his mind wandering off.

Judge Pao's loyal assistant, Zhang, lightly tapped him on the shoulder, giving him quite the awful shock.

"We have attack reports from the West, Judge. All victims described the situation similar to a blackout, and that one moment they were traveling with either resource-rich containers or simply a bag, and the next, all their belongings were gone."

Pao's eyes widened. The energy that he had been deprived of was returning to him. It had been years since he decided to become a judge, and also years since the first and last attack he had ever witnessed from who they nicknamed the 'Suppressed Void'.

"I know them. Zhang, round up all the soldiers. We may be able to find clues in the area."

Zhang scrunched up his face and walked away in a huff.

"Tsk, tsk, tsk. He may be obedient, but he's a real piece of work when it comes to attitude, don't you think?"

The lead soldier, Jin, who followed Judge Pao the many years ago peeked out from behind the mountain of documents. Jin was always wary of Zhang, finding as many ways as he could to convince Pao that he needed to leave. The judge waved him off every time – as long as he had someone to help him lift his massive workload off his shoulders, their support would be accepted gratefully.

"You would've been sent away long ago if I cared about attitude," Pao murmured.

The little wandering troupe made their way to the sites of the attacks, asking locals questions as they went. Judge Pao glanced at Assistant Zhang, who was humming a gleeful tune. He fidgeted with his fingers. *There is a pattern occurring here, and I don't like it*, Pao thought.

He pulled Jin aside to a quieter corner. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

Jin broke character, his smile wavering and eventually falling to a grave frown. "The timing and location of these attacks are too coincidental. Have you ever wondered why you've never been able to catch them, old friend?"

"When I was investigating in the South, they were in the North. When I was investigating in the East, I get a report about one from here. Someone must know about my plans."

They say, 'two heads are better than one', except Judge Pao's and Jin's brains combined couldn't come up with a potential suspect.

Judge Pao's ears perked up. An elderly woman appeared to be showing Zhang a half-empty bottle of what appeared to be alcohol found at the attack site. A fiery glint flashed in Jin's eyes. Perhaps they might have a new lead.

They arrived back to the village with slouching shoulders and weak knees, and Jin took the alcohol for testing the moment his feet were set on familiar soil.

Pao sat with a ringing headache far into the night, cycling through everyone he was close with. Nobody seemed likely to leave a knife in his back.

Jin returned, a smirk written upon his face, running with such vigour that one wouldn't have known it was three in the morning.

"Hear me out, Judge. Hear me out!" He pleaded.

Judge Pao sluggishly turned towards the soldier.

"The alcohol? It's just white wine," Jin panted like a mad dog. "But I'm sure you know what that means."

"Zhang's favourite wine," Judge Pao said, nodding his head slowly.

The two of them stayed still for a while, the absence of noise causing their ears to hear a high-pitched ringing.

"Search for him. Zhang needs to be guarded until proven innocent."

From outside the window, a series of footsteps drew away into the darkness of the village.

They chased the culprit into the bushes, hearing their heavy panting and swatting of leaves. Twigs snapped. Small mammals scampered away. No matter how fast they ran, they couldn't cover the fact that they were well and truly damned.

"Zhang," Pao growled.

The words dug into his skin, and Zhang was gripped by a strong hand.
Pao may never forget the hurt or betrayal that he expressed without words.

“Judge Pao.”

The old judge lifted his head, tidying up his tea. Five minutes was up. The feeling of the suppressed void within him remained strong.

“Are you alright?” The soldier asked, noticing Pao’s solemn face.

“I am fine. Let’s go.”

New Tales of Judge Pao

Heep Yunn School, Hui, Yau Kiu Isis – 14

The lavishly decorated bedroom, its floors polished ebony, its windows draped in silk curtains, was marred by pools of darkly crimson blood. And right in front of us was the corpse; the handsome man's palms were brutally pierced with daggers, pinning him to the wall. His neck was slashed upwards almost savagely.

Luo slid closer to me. 'Third murder this turn of the moon,' he whispered, 'wonder what he's going to do.'

I shrugged and tugged softly on my shift. 'You know who the victim is,' he continued; Luo was extraordinarily gossipy: a crime lord. He was never caught for his crimes, but there are rumors in the people about him. How he beats up women and children, even his wife. That one's a piece of work, all right.'

I tried to ignore him and watched Pao's figure as he darted here and there. Whenever he turned I saw his weathered, tanned face, his aquiline nose, and the outward jut of his chin. He knelt and scraped a tiny mound of powder off a wall onto a cloth. Then he gathered up the small bundles of specimens in his arms, shouldered his pack, and walked down the stairs briskly.

'Job's finished,' Pao said as we strode down the street. 'You know who the murderer is,' Luo said somewhat excitedly. I sighed inwardly. This enthusiasm was rather tiring, considering that I had been putting up with it for centuries.

Pao hesitated. 'Perhaps; I have but an inkling,' he said finally. 'But either way, this is not a case for our... mortal court.'

Luo whistled, and I sighed again. We both knew what that meant.

The three of us headed to the market. For the first time in some hundred years I felt curious; what could be found there? Yet Pao walked with a contagious surety, and I followed him.

We stopped at a stall; a familiar one at that. A smiling face looked up at us.

'Want some pork for dinner tonight, huh?' Lin said, her rouged lips curling up in a charming grin. She took out her knife and sharpened it almost intuitively without looking down. We had known her for some time, ever since we moved here, and she was good company.

Pao looked back at her, scanning her up and down. 'Yes,' he said smoothly, 'one serving, please. Minced.' Lin whistled as she worked, the strokes of her knife amazingly precise, her hands sure and strong. We settled into an awkward silence.

'So,' she began brightly, 'I trust that you are investigating the murder down the street. News of the town, that is.' She chuckled to herself. 'People are placing bets on who the murderer is. But we all know you are going to find that out pretty soon, Judge. Aren't you?'

'Wonder if a serial killer is a culprit.' Lin pulled out a larger knife and started dicing the meat into clumps. Her slender fingers were agile, fantastically so. 'Three murders in a month! And all of those rich men, too, were murdered in the most terrifying ways.

'First one wrapped in a curtain with shards of glass. The second one is bound to a cauldron filled with boiling water. The third one was pinned to a wall with knives. Terrible.' Lin smiled again.

Pao shifted. Lin was packing up the meat, wrapping the fine paste into brownish paper. He seemed uncomfortable, I realized, talking about the case with Lin. Rather uncharacteristic indeed. Pao was never flustered. Never.

He reached out to get the pack of meat and handed a handful of coins to Lin, who winked at him. Suddenly, he lashed out at the young woman, his tanned hand stark against Lin's snowy skin. I watched in horror, in disgust, as his nails scraped across her face, leaving red marks.

Lin cried out and clutched her face. Pao hid his hand in a pocket and caught her with the other. 'I'm sorry,' he said, 'saw a fly on your face.'

Lin smiled weakly and dusted herself off. 'It's fine,' she said, 'it's okay.'

As we walked away, I felt my blood freeze, and a shiver crawled up my spine.

There was no fly there.

I looked at Pao and Luo grimaced, disgusted. We walked home silently, burdened with our thoughts. Pao worked in his study immediately, and moments later he threw open the door and ran out triumphantly. I jumped to my feet—it wasn't every day that you see this calm, steadfast man with his face so flushed.

Pao took my arm and smiled at me wolfishly.

'I found the evidence—we are going to hell.'

Diyu was the same as I had remembered it to be. Dark caverns stacked on top of each other, with stalactites hanging down from the ceilings like huge fangs. The three of us entered Pao's domain at once, and I shuddered as my muscular yet clumsy mortal form melted away and revealed my true body.

Pao sauntered forward, proud and somewhat hideous, his skin a crimson shade, his dark hair, falling to his waist, wreathed in fiery horns. He now stood more than a head taller than both Luo and me, and he strode to the throne at the end of the cavern.

He settled into the thorny chair as if it was coated with velvet instead of nails. 'Bring in the accused,' he boomed.

Luo and I took our places next to his throne. My companion had ditched his slender, handsome mortal form for his real one: a strong man with the head of a black stallion, his glossy mane flowing freely. He smiled.

The weight of my horns made me grow weary; too much time spent in the mortal realm, with my soft, squishy body, had made me unaccustomed to my true form—the form with the head of a mighty bull. My neck ached and I tried to focus. Two wraiths were bringing in the murderer.

I had to stifle a gasp. Beside me, I heard Luo choke.

The murderer was female.

Between the shadowy forms of the wraiths, the girl swayed, her face covered with a veil, her long arms, and legs, snowy white and unblemished, uncovered. I could see that she was beautiful, even with that veil on; her hair, the colour of raven wings, was oddly familiar.

She fell to her knees as the wraiths shoved her down, landing with a brutal crack. Her head was pressed onto the ground. Luo moaned pity.

No wonder Pao could not judge her in a mortal court. Women— Chinese women, with their soft, white hands, with their controlling husbands and strict household rules, committing such brutal murders?

I could still see how deep the knives were embedded in the wall. That took strength. The strength that I didn't believe a girl like this would have.

This case would shake the foundation of the mortals' strict society.

I glanced up at Pao. He was rigid, strangely so. But he couldn't be wrong, I thought, he has never been wrong. Suddenly, I realized that I wanted him to be. I didn't want this little girl condemned to the torture of hell.

Despite what she may have done, I wanted her to go away free.

Pao cleared his throat. 'The accused is Li Yuelin. You have committed murders, the brutal, almost bestial killing of three men. Thus I sentence you to a thousand years on the mountain of knives.'

Li Yuelin. The name struck a chord, and I glanced at Luo. He was stepping back, shaking his head, his brown eyes filled with disbelief.

Li Yuelin. Lin.

I remembered why that hair seemed familiar. We had just seen it, at the stall. On the head of a bright, young woman, talented with the knife and brimming with life and vigor.

The murderer was Lin.

I stared at the form on the floor, my mind blank. No. It could not be.

That pretty girl, brimming with life and joy. It could not be.

Pao stared at her and suddenly I hated him; did he have to expose her? Did he have to?

My mind flashed almost instantly to an image of Lin's fresh, pretty face marred by slashes of knives and bloodied, haggard by exhaustion and pain—like those ugly ghouls that were, even then, climbing their never-ending mountains.

Lin lifted her head; it seemed like she still hadn't lost her pride, her bravery. She ripped the veil off and threw it onto the ground; Luo shuddered very visibly. Beneath the cloth her face was already bruised, her lips stained with blood.

'Do whatever you want,' she spat, 'I have no regrets. The men I executed were demons and devils. I saved countless lives with theirs.' Her obsidian eyes blazed with a terrible fire; I thought that I had seen it before, that unearthly light.

Pao cocked his head at her, like a cat speculating on his prey. 'You should have waited,' he said gently, 'we are always watching. We would have handled those people. But by rashly killing them you have instead condemned yourself to hell.'

Lin took a deep breath, her cheeks colored. 'That was what I was supposed to do as I watched my friends, my neighbors die,' she said savagely, 'to wait for divine judgment.' She laughed, and Pao watched impassively.

'Where were you my whole life?' Lin asked, 'where were you when my sister was killed by one of these gangsters? Where were you when my friend's children were found mutilated under a bridge, their faces growing paler and paler as they nearly bled to death? I've seen enough and I've heard enough.' She took a deep breath and glared at Pao.

Suddenly something seemed to deflate inside her and her eyes welled with tears. 'I know it's not right,' she said brokenly, 'but are they any better than me?'

Pao looked at her, his eyes notably softer. 'I cannot change the Law,' he said sadly, 'you should not have broken it.'

'How did you find out that I'm the culprit, anyway,' she asked, 'I was careful. Extraordinarily careful.'

Pao smiled thinly. 'I saw how you killed that last man. A slash to the throat that started at the base of his neck but extended upwards; is clear evidence that the assailant is much shorter than the victim. Handy with a knife, too; how else would you have killed that man so precisely, so quickly?' He crossed his legs and stared down at Lin. 'But the one thing that exposed you was your scent and your makeup. Careful you were; it was very hard to stop the powder on your face from smudging onto the wall when you grapple with your victim, though. Hence that slap today to collect a sample.' Pao grimaced and gave an apologetic nod to Lin, who shrugged. 'It matched with the fine, pale powder on the wall. Most importantly the scent remaining in the room was familiar to me; took me some time to recognize, though.'

Lin grinned through her tears. 'A stroke of luck got me here,' she said, 'if I hadn't been so close to you all I would have never been caught.' I couldn't miss that sting; how could Pao do this to his— our— friend? And it hurt. A bit more than I realized it would.

'A stroke of luck got you here,' Pao echoed sympathetically. 'But still, it is time for your punishment.'

The wraiths took Lin by the arms again, yanking her to her feet. She offered no resistance, only stood up limply. My heart pounded with a pain that shook my body, but I had to keep up the façade.

As the wraiths dragged her away to her terrible, terrible fate, Lin spat on the floor. 'This is for you, my lord,' she hissed. Then she was gone, and I dreaded hearing her agonized scream amongst thousands of others.

I had never questioned Judge Pao. I was his servant, and it was not my place to judge my master. But as I looked at Lin, at her noble and beautiful motives, against the terrible souls of her supposed victims, I felt a hollowness opening up in my chest.

A pity that the Law takes everybody.

Judge Pao: Stolen Case in the Future

Heep Yunn School, Wong, Ching Yin – 13

“Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to the M+ Museum!” The host’s voice reverberated around the museum. A massive crowd of people gathered around the stage where a vast object covered by a piece of red cloth was displayed. “Today is the opening ceremony of the exhibition of –” He flicked away the cloth. “The one and only ‘*Yan Ming Gong Zheng*’ wooden sign written by Judge Pao himself,” he announced proudly.

The host continued, “We have specially invited the descendant of Judge Pao, Mr. Jeffrey Pao, to participate in the ceremony as he has generously donated it to the museum.” Mr. Pao rose from his seat and waved politely at the crowd. People broke into rapturous applause immediately.

All of a sudden, the lights flickered and the whole museum was instantly plunged into darkness. Screams and shouts could be heard and as a police officer, I calmed everyone down but suddenly the lights went back on again. However, gasps and murmurs could be heard. As I looked at the stage, I couldn’t believe my eyes. The sign had disappeared without a trace.

Soon after, I walked onto the stage and inspected it intently. There was an openable roof at the top so the sign could have been lifted through the window and transported away. However, I was unable to locate any evidence. Finally, with no luck, I decided to speak to Mr. Pao hoping to get some clues.

Nevertheless, as I left the crime scene, a statue nearby caught my attention. It was just a plain stone statue of Judge Pao but somehow, I felt peculiarly familiar with it and there was an urge to touch the crescent moon mark on his forehead. A voice rang in my head.

“Touch it. Touch it.”

Unconsciously, my hand reached for the mark and the moment we connected, an ancient work office appeared in front of me. There was a quill and a piece of yellow paper on the desk next to me. It was so real that I seemed to be able to touch it. When I tried to walk towards it, my feet, however, wouldn’t budge.

Suddenly, a bright light flashed across my eyes and I was back in the museum, sitting on the floor. *What on earth just happened? I widened my eyes and ran my fingers through my hair. Whose office was that? Why did it look so old? Did I travel to another place?*

A thousand questions were running through my head. Besides, there was a tingling sensation on my elbow where my birthmark, similarly shaped like a crescent moon, was located. The feeling began to disperse as I rubbed it gently. *Could it be the birthmark or ... was I just imagining things?* I shook my head. *Never mind, perhaps it was just an illusion.* I cast my thoughts aside and headed toward Mr. Pao.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Pao. I am Officer Wong. Do you mind if I ask you a few questions about the stolen wooden sign?”

“Definitely, please go ahead.” He sat up straight and his black eyes were filled with sorrow and devastation.

“Do you suspect anyone?” I inquired.

“I believe it's Mr. P, the billionaire who is notorious for his arrogance and greediness.” He answered. “He once saw the sign displayed in my home and bid me money to buy it but I rejected his offer. He was furious and hurled insults at me.”

“Oh wait — there was also an odd man who always waited at my house claiming to be writing a biography of Judge Pao. He always asked me whether there were any relics left by Judge Pao so I told him about the wooden sign which would be displayed on this day.” He furrowed his eyebrows.

“What did he look like and did he tell you his name?” I asked.

“He was bronzed with his hair fully covered by a hat, a bowler hat to be precise and he wore a camel coat and blue jeans. And if I am not mistaken, he did not tell me his name.” He replied.

“I see. Thank you for your cooperation.” We exchanged small smiles as we shook hands.

That night, I sat on my leather armchair looking at an online version of the wooden plank. *There were two suspects, Mr. P, and the odd man. The former had a slighter suspicion as he was currently in London attending a noble ball whereas the latter was fishier as he was always asking about artifacts that Mr. Pao had left. Hmm...* I narrowed my eyes and pursed my lips into a thin line. *But, the thief was extremely careful and didn't leave any trace of evidence at all, so how can I find him?* When I was lost in thought, without warning, a “pop” sounded next to me, bringing me back to reality and I jumped up from my seat. The moment I saw who it was, I was at a loss for words and blinked multiple times. *Oh. My. God.*

“J—Judge Pao?” I stammered.

He was wearing his iconic court clothes: a gown with broad sleeves made of black silk embellished with a vivid shade of golden and red embroidery. They have shaped like traditional Chinese patterns and the most striking part of his clothes was the majestic, golden-scale dragon in front of his chest twisting and swishing its barbed tail. A belt was fastened around his waist and a “Futou” was seated on top of his head. His mouth was slightly open and a frown creased his face.

“Hello? May I know where I am and why are you wearing such bizarre clothes?” He asked with his forehead crunched up.

Calm down. Taking a deep breath and regaining my composure, I told him about my encounter, the birthmark, and finally the wooden sign. After hearing my frustration, Judge Pao stroked his beard slowly and chuckled, “So, Officer Wong, you mentioned that there was no evidence at the crime scene but there are two suspects. How about...” He pointed at his clothes and I widened my eyes, the smile on my face stretched as he elaborated further on his idea.

The next day, it was announced by Mr. Pao that there was another valuable piece of relic left by Judge Pao: his court clothes. It would be placed in the museum tonight. Everything was going according to plan and it was time to see whether the thief would swallow the bait.

At last, when the clock struck twelve, a dark shadow moved on the screen in the van. I leaned forward from my seat as it moved quietly and swiftly toward the clothes. Once it was visible, I noticed that the person was dressed in black and his face was covered securely with a mask. He edged closer and closer to the clothes and as fast as a bullet, he snatched them triumphantly and bolted out of the museum. However, little did he know that a tiny sensor was hidden almost imperceptibly underneath the clothes. Soon, the police barged into his house and encircled him with their guns pointed at him. Before he could even react, I handcuffed him promptly. Looking straight at him in the eye, I smirked, “Gotcha.”

The next morning, I turned on the television to the news channel. The host announced, “... A suspect was caught in his house last midnight. Not long after, the “*Yan Ming Gong Zheng*” wooden sign was found at his place. After some thorough research, it is discovered that the thief is mentally ill and is Judge Pao's biggest fan. He adored him tremendously that he thought that he was Judge Pao and had a mission to get all the relics that Judge Pao had left. He's now receiving medical care in Castle Peak Psychiatric Hospital and is sentenced to jail for five years...” As I was watching, Judge Pao entered the living room wearing his court clothes, holding a plastic cup filled with water.

I stood up and said, “Thank you for helping me solve the case – oh, and lending your clothes as well. I must say it was a brilliant idea to lure the thief out with your clothes.”

“I am flattered. Besides, the reason I made this sign was hoping that people could understand the meaning of my words so that society could be more fair and just. Hence, I wouldn't want it to be lost.”

“Right – wait, how are you going to return to your world? You have already been here for three days.”

“I have no idea, but I hope it will be soon.” He sighed.

“Meanwhile, when you are still here, how about we — oh”

The place where Judge Pao had stood a second ago was left with only the plastic cup. I picked it up and shrugged, “That was fast. Have a safe trip!”

Whistling a joyful tune, I snuggled up happily against my armchair and wondered if anything like this would occur again.

What is Justice?

Singapore International School (Hong Kong), Leung, Junyi Beverley – 12

It is a cool spring day, scented with the perfume of peach blossoms. But I am too nervous to notice; sweat trickles down my neck into my heavy robes.

Guan, my mentor, strolls into the courtroom. He looks at ease in his zhanjiao hat, the tassels swinging rhythmically back and forth. “So, Pao, today, the Council will decide your ability to be a judge and judge fairly and wisely for the Emperor! Don’t mess this up.”

I look at Guan, who has always been a father to me. “I’ll try,” I reply shakily, but tendrils of self-doubt were already creeping into my voice. I rub tears of nervousness out of my eyes, worried they will be interpreted as a weakness.

Guan sighs. “Pao, you have potential. Remember, when you give a verdict, be ruthless. Better to give a sentence too harsh than too lenient.” He winks at me, then the expression on his face intensifies and his voice lowers to a clandestine whisper. “Pao. You always give such easy sentences when we practise. Don’t do it this time. Just this one time. Okay?”

I nod, too nervous to do anything else. But even in this action of agreement, I know: I don’t trust myself to give a harsh sentence. But I have to. I must. I set my teeth and walk into the courtroom.

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I perch uncomfortably in an elaborate, high-backed chair with ornate carven designs, my eyes set straight ahead, yet looking at nothing. Suddenly, a roar of cruel laughter rises from the crowd. Beads of sweat pop out on my forehead, before I realise that the defendant had already entered, and had tripped on the floor, prompting the taunting cry from the viewers.

The guards force the man to kneel, barking in husky tones, “Remove your hood!”

The man grasps his hood and pulls it up. Long, ragged, matted hair tumbles out, slightly covering almond-shaped brown eyes set perfectly in a face of chapped skin. The whole courtroom gasps. The defendant is a girl.

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Gathering my nerves, I stand. “Are there any witnesses in this house who will identify and accuse the defendant of a crime?”

A rotund man from the crowd, dressed in embroidered robes, rises. “Your Honour, this girl disguised herself as a boy and stole a sack of millet from my storehouse!” The crowd begins booing and heckling, making disparaging remarks. It is clear that the girl’s fate has already been sealed, that I’m only performing a useless ceremony here, just for show.

I turn to the complainant. “Ahh, landlord Sai. And who is this person?”

The landlord’s brow crinkles. “Your Honour, this... dog worked in my warehouse for two weeks, dressed as a boy. I don’t know her name, but I know her face.”

I glance at the defendant. “What is your name?”

Her chin tilts at a proud, haughty angle. “My name is Kui.”

“Kui, do you admit to stealing a sack of millet from this landlord’s storeroom?”

Her tone is still relentless, unbroken, her voice strong. “Yes.”

This girl stole. She’s a worthless thief. How can she still be so proud? I ask myself. Temporarily lost, I turn to find Guan in the audience for guidance. The victim usually does not plead guilty so soon. The crowd is aware of this, too, judging from the harsh sound of whispers filling the room.

Since it is clear that the crowd is against her, I desperately rack my brains for a question to ask which will make Kui look bad. “Have you been in trouble with the law before?”

She nods slowly. “Yes, Your Honour.” The words leave her lips with reluctance, and, looking at her, I see a person who knows there is little hope for herself.

“For what?”

She swallows. “Stealing rice, sentenced to two year of imprisonment, Your Honour.”

Shock fills my soul, squeezing the breath out of my lungs. Such a harsh sentence, just for stealing rice! Flustered, I say the first sentence which comes to mind, from my heart, not my papers. “Um, Kui, why did you do this?”

The murmuring stops abruptly. It was then that I realise no judge has probably ever asked this question before. I was supposed to be harsh and final. What have I done?

Kui is obviously shocked as well, but she gathers her thoughts quickly. “I... I stole to feed my family. I worked in a cookhouse, and I took the food that was thrown out to my brothers and sisters.”

“Your Honour, please, I beg you. Don’t sentence me to jail or execute me. My siblings depend on the money I earn for survival. They will die if I am not there to provide for them.” Her face is desperate.

The crowd murmurs disgustedly. “A girl, the breadwinner of her family?” “She should just have died with her parents.” First in a multitude of voices, then as a chant, the roar began. “GUILTY! GUILTY! GUILTY!”

I took a deep breath, then hit the table with my stick. Silence spreads like ripples in a pond throughout the ocean of people. “Court adjourned. I— I need some time to reach a sentence.”

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I walk into the courtyard, my thoughts in a turmoil. This girl clearly did not deserve to die as the crowd thought. I couldn’t do this to her. Suddenly, Guan’s words sound in my ears. “Better to give a sentence too harsh than too lenient.”

I am training to be a judge. Someone who brought justice to courtrooms, who judged fairly. But it had been a 'judge' who gave Kui her unfair sentence. Suddenly, I realise; what I heard – that was not justice. Then it hits me. And I cannot do something like this. I am not right for this job. I could never do this, call myself Judge Pao when I had done this to be a judge, with the blood of innocents on my hands, knowing that I had killed a girl, ruined her brothers and sisters. I look at my robes, which seemed so fresh and white, but my eyes have already painted a pattern of crimson across them.

The birds were chirping, their song mingling with the scent of peach blossoms. I stare at the peach tree. How could its blossoms continue to bloom when such an injustice had been done?



A chant breaks the songbird's chorus, indiscernible to my ears at this distance. But I can hear the malice and sadism in the roar of voices. Alarm bells sound in my head. What could be happening?

It was the laughter that shocks me, the sprinkling of cheering voices in the midst of the uproar that truly alarms me. I turn and run, more frightened than I had ever been.

Guan met me halfway through the courtyard. "Pao! They've killed Kui."

The news took a few seconds to sink in. "Killed her," I repeat, dazedly. "They... they – the crowd killed her!" The realisation is like someone is suffocating me, choking me, preventing me from breathing.

My mentor lays a friendly hand on my arm. "Pao, you should have sentenced her earlier, you know. Then this whole fiasco would never have happened." His voice is relaxed, but I hear a shred of remonstrance in it.

I turn to him. "Did you not hear? The girl was starving! Her family depended on her! She was just trying to keep her siblings alive!" My voice rings off the walls of the courtyard. Tears trickle down my face, and this time, I don't try to wipe them away.

Guan looks at me oddly, as if alarmed at something in my words. "Pao, I know the judge who sentenced Kui. It was a just sentence; she was actually really lucky to have been let off so easily."

I am simmering with rage, and my anger scares me, like it is a beast about to consume my soul. But – this is no justice. Guan was not speaking the truth when he said that was justice. But if that isn't justice, what is?

I bite my tongue and walk away, tempted to shake Guan. He follows me rapidly. "Pao! Pao! What is wrong with you today?"

I turn and look at the man who had lied to me, telling me that it was better to be harsh than lenient, that this girl was 'lucky' to have been sentenced to a year for simply stealing millet. I grit my teeth. How can he stand there saying that was justice?



In the cool solace of my room, I sink into my bed, listless. Deep down, I know I have to do something about what I just saw. I have to rise above these wrongdoings and change the everyday lives of the poor. I



have to ensure Kui's story never happens again. I have to bring justice to China. I get out of bed and put on my robes and hat, and go out in the world to make a difference.

# The Library of Spirits

*Singapore International School (Hong Kong), Leung, Sze Wai Serene – 13*

The boy's face lit up with awe. He marveled at the show playing on his TV screen, immersed in every scene, every word spoken. *Justice Pao* told a story like no other. The legendary tale of a righteous man punishing the corrupt, Judge Pao defended the powerless against injustice, persecuted the immoral and gave commoners a fighting chance. He was an arbiter of justice. A hero.

"Xi, turn the TV off," his mother called. "It's late."

But his eyes remain glued to the screen.

"I want to be like Judge Pao," Xi said dreamily, a wide grin spreading across his face as he imagined himself standing in court, the centerpiece in the battle of good against evil.

His mother laughed, stroking his hair. "You can do *anything* you set your mind to."

★ ★ ★

Xi was exhausted.

The past decades have been more than he could handle. When his mother was diagnosed with terminal lung cancer, he wasn't given much of a choice. In order to support her medical bills, he gave up his education in law school to juggle two jobs. Apparently, his efforts were futile, because she passed away months after.

*Gone. Just like that, everything had changed.*

He gazes into his teacup, his trembling reflection grim and weary. *He's older now*, he thinks to himself, sighing.

A teardrop fell off Xi's cheek and into the teacup. Years of hard work and late night studying have led him here. Every turning of a page, every papercut from a manuscript, every blister on his hand from constantly writing and writing. All for what? Becoming a hero? He certainly didn't *feel* like one.

Xi leaves the room, making his way to the building's fire escape. Fresh air. He needed to breathe. He shoved the window open and climbs onto the ledge, and he grips its cold metal bars to steady himself. Xi feels the wind blow on his face and push his hair back, and he feels like a child again, playing in the autumnal breeze amongst leaves of red and gold. The moon was beautiful that night. It was a lighthouse in the dark sea of the skyline, as if it were calling out, guiding lost spirits to a safe place.

Staring at the sky, he wondered how it would feel to be at peace again.

Heart pounding in his chest, Xi stepped off the ledge and jumped.

★ ★ ★

The haze was so pervasive that all Xi could see was a blur of gray, until slowly, his surroundings increased in clarity. He was standing on a path, and in front of him were red pillars the color of a dragon's scales. The vapor cleared, like ghosts being purged, and a lone pagoda emerged.

*What the heck was going on?*

He noticed something he hadn't spotted before. Standing by the entrance were three guillotines, each carved in the macabre form of an animal's head: a dragon, a tiger, and a dog. Xi had seen and read of these guillotines enough times to know what they were. Allegedly, Judge Pao himself had beheaded the powerful and corrupt with those very swords.

Somehow, this place was related to his childhood hero.

Maybe the interior would offer some semblance of an answer, Xi decides, as he walks in to the entrance. The place was library, a labyrinth of bookshelves that extended endlessly towards the sky that there was no way Xi was on Earth. No, he was in some pocket department of the afterlife.

Instead of books, books adorned the shelves, their covers all in reds of varying shades. They ranged from bright poppy to sangria to the color of spilt crimson blood. A chill crawled down Xi's spine.

He reached for a book on the nearest shelf. The leatherback cover was worn and mottled. As he began to flip the first page, he heard a voice from behind.

"Stop. Right this instant."

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The source of the voice was a man. He donned an archaic form of attire that would grant him looks on the street – a *fitou* hat, their wooden supports jutting out like antlers, and silk black robes, their intricate details crafted in gold. His eyes were piercing, like a glass fragment, reflecting back at Xi and showing him his motives, his flaws, his morals, some of which he didn't want to face.

He was so unmistakable, Xi recognized him instinctively.

"Judge Pao." He stares at the face of his childhood, eyes wide in a motion he can't identify. Happiness? Disbelief? Shame, that he never became the person he wanted to be?

Judge Pao smiled. "I've been anticipating your arrival for some time now."

Xi's gut wrenches. He tries to speak, but a strange feeling wells in his throat that prevents him from doing so, and he simply pauses to recollect himself.

"Where am I?"

The judge simply grins again. "You're in the afterlife, of course. A special department of the afterlife, in fact."

Xi frowned. "I don't – I don't understand – "

"I'm sure you're familiar with the Infernal Bureaucracy. This is a special library that only I and a few others have access to."

"Why?"

"Because of the contents of these books. They document the lives of every single individual ever lived."

Xi's eyes widened. "The myths are true. You are an immortal."

To his surprise, Judge Pao *laughed*, shattering Xi's perception of him as an austere and rigid man. "Yes, but that's not why we're here. Upon your arrival, I knew your case was special. So the Bureaucracy granted me the agency to settle this myself."

Xi glanced at the shelves. They were never-ending skyscrapers, shooting up to the sky like a beanstalk reaching for sunlight, constantly expanding to support the bringing of new spirits into the world. And every decision in his life, everything he'd done for this world, all amounted to a speck of dust in a raging sandstorm.

"I don't understand," he admitted. "There's so many people who are far more deserving of this opportunity than me." He pauses, a spasm of pain suddenly stabbing at his chest. "I... I'm basically a failure."

But Judge Pao shook his head.

"Quite the contrary. In you, I see opportunity."

He reached for a book, feeling the ridges of the page as he spoke. "Life is similar to writing a book. You can go back and reread the old chapters, but the story will never progress. You have the choice between writing something mediocre and writing a life you aspire to, a future you desire."

"Even if you think it's too late to change," he continued, "there are still pages left. And I want you to keep writing. Because there is still time."

When Xi thought about his life, he only thought about who he wasn't, what he never achieved, how he was no hero. In his eyes, he was worse than immoral. He was a coward. And no matter what he did, he was bound to that life.

But seeing the face of someone he'd admired for years for the first time in reality was so absurd that he wondered if everything was possible.

"Human lives are like sparks, just as fleeting and ephemeral. But they're promising, aren't they? They can either disappear just as fast or burst into raging flames. And as the Yama of the afterlife, I rule for you to return to the land of the living."

And with that, a flickering flame in Xi rekindles and erupts into a blazing fire.

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"Grandpa, was Judge Pao really real?"

A child looks at Xi, his eyes sparkling at his grandfather who sat across him, a children's storybook he'd written himself open on his lap.

"Yes, my boy." A doleful smile makes its way across Xi's face. The lines on his face indicate many, many stories, of a life well-lived. In the last decade of his life, Xi had retired from his position as the head of his law firm and passed it on to a younger subordinate who reminded him of his child self – hopeful, ambitious, undeterred. He'd written countless manuscripts on law and philosophy, answering fundamental questions about life and morality, garnering the attention of many illustrious scholars.

Xi stares longingly out of the window. A pale white moon illuminates the night sky, bathing in its ghostly glow. The last specks of sand would soon fall in the hourglass. He didn't have much time left.

But out of all the lives he could have lived, he decides this is his favorite.

Gazing at the moon, he would soon find himself in the Infernal Bureaucracy once more.



Creative Writing

# Fiction

Group 3

# Blazing Fire

*Hong Kong Adventist Academy, Kang, Xiao Xuan David – 14*

The summer moon tonight was incredibly, eerily silent. On other nights it was filled with the noises of crows and the rattling of leaves, but tonight it felt like there was not a single living soul. A few minutes before midnight, before the guards were about to switch shifts, three men dressed in thin, white cloaks approached the walls of the Imperial Palace. They asked some strange questions. Then, one of them pulled out a silver blade with the words “Death will come soon” engraved on it. The sword was made with fine silver and a hilt of bronze, glistening under the silvery moonlight. They were going to fight.

The panic amongst the guards finally broke the silence. “Everyone, arm yourselves and go!” came the general’s commanding voice. The soldiers rushed to the gates, attempting to catch the unwanted visitors. They marched through the palace gates, aiming to surround the men. However, they were already gone. Tired and empty-handed, the soldiers returned to the palace, sweat trickling down their necks. However, soon, they would realize this was the least of their worries. You see, the danger was never coming from outside; it came from within. For a very brief period of time, the castle had been left unguarded. This allowed the fourth man to slip under the radar.

Jiang’s heart began to beat rapidly. He glanced around the palace corridors, his narrow eyes locked around his surroundings. “Time is limited,” he stressed as he opted to burn her palace down. He set a box of matches on fire, methodically kindling firewood as the fire danced around the inside of the walls. With the walls now set ablaze and the flames crackling, he swiftly left the scene, becoming one with the shadow.

The fire was first noticed by the unusual smoke that came from the Empress’ Palace. Messengers reported the incident to the Emperor while the guards attempted to slow the fire with buckets of water.

The fire, hungry for oxygen, started devouring the fragile wood. It swept across the ceilings and overwhelmed the walls. Desperate attempts were made to slow the spread of the fire. After a long and hard-fought battle, the fire disappeared, bringing down most of the palace and leaving ashes in its place. This was not a welcome sight to the emperor, who immediately summoned Judge Pao to the scene.

The sounds of the chariots signified that Judge Pao was here. Judge Pao slowly examined the surroundings, often kneeling to study the ashes left behind by the fire. He slowly looked around, leaving every stone turned and performing regular searches around the crime scene. His eagle-like eyes were tense and focused, and he seemed deep in thought, questioning the guards and looking for contradictions. “Someone must have intentionally plotted to burn the palace down. The only way a fire can spread so quickly is if the culprit used things like firewood or oil in addition to the fire,” he concluded.

“We must ensure that such an event never happens again.” Turning to the servant, he said: “Go and summon all the architects in the city and tell them to rebuild the palace again. Add more soldiers to guard the imperial palace as well.” The Empress was permitted to live with the emperor for now.

The following day, Judge Pao gained permission from the emperor to send a decree out to everyone within the palaces, ordering them to evacuate their palaces immediately. Soldiers were sent into the palaces, looking for any evidence. Another group of soldiers started investigating and interrogating the servants.

Judge Pao paced back and forth in his room. Things felt unusual: If someone wanted to harm the Queen, why would they use fire? Wouldn’t the Queen just be able to escape?

What was the motivation behind this?

After a few weeks of investigation, it seemed like the evidence would never come up. As the Emperor pondered this, the head guard came up to him and said: “Your majesty, we have some information on the case.” Upon hearing this, the emperor’s eyes lit up. “Go ahead, say it.” The guard explained how he had been interrogating Concubine Tian’s servants. He brought servant Xin, who confessed that she burned down the palace.

Knowing this, the emperor immediately raised from his seat. He wanted to arrest concubine Tian immediately. Judge Pao, however, seemed to be suspicious. “We can’t confirm that concubine Tian would’ve done it. Only one of the servants admitted to this, which is not enough evidence to conclude anything. For all we know, she could’ve been bribed by someone to lie.”

Guards were placed in her palace with the decree to search for anomalies. Although the Emperor was partially convinced and agreed not to arrest her, he was still suspicious. "I will give you a week to prove otherwise. If you cannot do so, we will arrest Concubine Tian."

Judge Pao knew it wasn't concubine Tian, but he didn't have any conclusive evidence. In the following days, he was often seen alone in his room, pacing back and forth and pondering the case.

"Sir, we could not find anything in Concubine Tian's palace. What should we do next?" came the voice of the servants.

While the Emperor was deep in thought, Judge Pao came, accompanied by the distant sounds of the horses. After being granted permission, Judge Pao slowly walked in. He sighed, saying, "Your Majesty, the Empress intentionally burned down her palace."

The emperor, confused, asked Judge Pao to give conclusive evidence. Judge Pao replied: "Your Majesty. I was suspicious of why most of the valuable parts of the palace survived and how the Empress appeared calm when she heard the news." Then, he gestured to his servant, who brought a leaflet forward: "Your Majesty, here is a list of all exports and imports within the palace." "The Empress was the only one who asked for firewood, which was an odd request since we use coal in the courts for warmth. As for concubine Tian's servants, they were bribed by her to sabotage the fame that concubine Tian had," Judge Pao concluded.

This was a shocking statement. The emperor, with a frown, addressed the uncomfortable Empress, "Is this something you admit to doing?" With the Empress unable to defend herself, she was sentenced to be grounded inside her palace for two years as punishment. Judge Pao had once again solved the case.

# New Tales of Judge Pao

*Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Chan, Charlotte – 12*

With a scrape and a clang, the massive mahogany doors were heaved apart as the delicate lilac and peach shades of dawn gave way to the brilliant sunlight that bathed the sky in golden light. Inside, there was a large chamber with a low, wooden table carved with intricate patterns of birds and flowers. Behind that table was a man, a man with a long beard, a long, blue robe and a face that was both stern and compassionate at the same time. He was no other than Judge Pao himself. In the day, throngs of people came to him, some to seek his help and advice, others to seek justice for themselves and others around him. At night, Judge Pao served as a source of justice for the wronged souls. He assessed claims of innocence or guilt just like how he gave advice – with impartiality, mercy and wisdom.

One day, a nearby town – Li-Jien was set abuzz with a case of theft. Not because thefts were uncommon, but because of the unusual nature of that particular theft. A family heirloom was stolen. Curiously, it was kept out of sentiment, not value. The victim was perplexed. The local officers were perplexed. So, Judge Pao was asked to help out.

“I will need the entire story. I will need all of the facts.” said Judge Pao, striding into the room. “What and who was burgled?” Fumbling, an officer took out a piece of paper.

“Zhang Xiangman, the magistrate of the town. A year ago, a jade pendant was stolen. Its value was approximately three taels of silver. There are a multitude of other thefts, but that one is different.”

“How so?” Judge Pao prompted.

The officer hesitated slightly, and said “Well – the pendant was locked away in a strong, bronze safe. Yet, the thief took his time to break it, while all the time in a room nearby was a wooden box with a lock extremely simple to pick, filled with gold bangles, jade hairpins and pearl earrings and such of the mistress. The value of all those combined would be at least twenty-one taels, maybe more. There was even a set of ivory mah-jong tiles in a box on the same table as the safe.”

Judge Pao nodded. “Less time, less value...” Judge Pao thought for a moment. “This Zhang Xiangman – he must be rich, then?”

“One would expect so. He is a high-ranking official. Of course there have been rumours...but then one can hardly trust rumours, can you?” The official gave a small, dismissive laugh.

“Hmm.” Judge Pao paused in thought. “I would like you to prepare a horse. I shall visit the victim.” “Yes, your Honour. Of course, your Honour.” murmured the officer, bowing submissively, going outside to prepare a carriage.

Meanwhile, Judge Pao paced up and down the chamber, muttering to himself. “Nothing else taken...could the thief have thought there was something valuable inside? No...he would have taken the other jewellery too...Why should the thief take the object most sentimentally valued rather than the object that would fetch the highest price on the market. A strange case...”

“Your carriage, your Honour,” announced the officer, reappearing on the steps to lead him down. Stepping into the carriage, Judge Pao asked “Where did the theft occur?” The official blinked multiple times. “Well – um – it disappeared near the market at the city centre. You can’t miss it – it has an emerald green roof.” Judge Pao contemplated the information for a moment and called out to the coachman, “Take me to the market at the city centre.” With the crack of a whip and the spirited whinnying of four sturdy horses, they were gone.

“Your Honour,” Zhang Xiangman was saying as Judge Pao swept in. “I am –” Judge Pao stopped him with a wave of his hand. “I would like a description of your missing pendant and to look at the room where the pendant was kept.” “But naturally. Shenyi, prepare some Longjing tea and bring it to the peony room. Bring me the mistress’s lacquer box.” The servant girl bowed and hurried out of the room.

Minutes later, Judge Pao was being served tea in a low, large chamber with panels of wood carved with delicate peonies. In the middle was a large table, on which was a beautiful lacquer box and a set of ivory mah-jong tiles, which appeared to be well thumbed. Selecting a jade pendant from a box, Zhang Xiangman placed it carefully



on the table. "This," he proclaimed, "belongs to my wife. It is of a very simple design – there are practically no carvings on it. It is very similar to the stolen pendant, with one difference – the stolen pendant was made of white jade – beautiful, but less expensive." "This pendant was kept in this lacquer box, I suppose?" Judge Pao remarked. "Yes, and as you can see, there is only a simple lock on the box." Xiangman replied.

"Who discovered the theft?" Judge Pao questioned, sternly.

"Shenyi – the servant girl you saw just now. She was dusting the rooms." Xiangman replied readily.

"In that case, I should like to interrogate the servants, primarily Shenyi." Judge Pao said, tersely. Xiangman frowned, very slightly irritated.

"I assure you they are all quite above suspicion. They are extremely faithful and have been serving us for at least five years." he said, slightly stiffly.

"Nevertheless," Judge Pao said in a placating tone, "the interrogations will prove to be most fruitful, I am sure." Reluctantly, Xiangman left the room.

"Your name is Shenyi and you have been working for the master for three years. Is that correct?" Judge Pao asked. "Yes, your Honour." Shenyi murmured deferentially. Asking her a series of questions, Judge Pao established what she said she knew. She had been cleaning the residence that day. She had finished cleaning the master's rooms and the mistress's rooms and was starting to clean the guest rooms and studies when she had discovered the theft. The theft happened in one of the master's study rooms. She had opened the door and discovered the missing safe. The master had been away on trade business and the mistress had been visiting her relatives. She had not seen anything out of the ordinary. After seeing the theft, she had reported it to the master's second secretary. There were about fifty servants in the residence, mostly household servants who did the cooking and cleaning as well as some personal maids and secretaries of the mistress and the master. Judge Pao noted these points down, and dismissed Shenyi. He repeated his questions with a few more servants. Then, he sat down once more, deep in contemplation. He selected the jade pendant from the box and examined it, fingering it gently. A startled look flitted onto his face. He brushed a hand over the mah-jong tiles, and frowned in thought. Then, he went out

Dressed in a plain linen robe, Judge Pao stopped at several points around town – the local tavern, the markets, the casino, various shady shops on the outskirts of the city – inquiring about Zhang Xiangman and his servants.

Some time later, he arrived back at Zhang Xiangman's house and within a few minutes he was once again in the peony room, sipping delicately from a cup of tea. He reclined in his seat, his eyes inscrutable.

"You've been gambling, Xiangman." Judge Pao said. "You've been gambling, and you're in debt. You took the jewellery to a discreet jeweller who made detailed copies of them. The family heirloom you took away with you, but before you could replace it with a copy, Shenyi discovered the theft. The mah-jong tiles, the local rumours...not very subtle. You didn't sell the jewellery publicly, because you knew that would cause a scandal." Xiangman's pupils were dilated, and his breathing came out in short, fast bursts.

"I do not know how other judges would treat an official," mused Judge Pao, "but I do know that to me, a person, whether peasant or prince, should be punished like all others. Officers!"

Judge Pao did not judge others' innocence or guilt by their wealth or social status, but rather by facts. Like many legal systems around the globe, Judge Pao thought that crimes were crimes, and independent of whether the perpetrator was influential or not.

Judge Pao may be dead, but his spirit and legacy, that of impartiality, still lives on.

# The Price of the Stage

*Wellington College International Shanghai, Temporini, Lucrezia – 11*

The nightmares flooded her dreams as the alarm clock pulled her back to reality which was no better than her dreams. She sluggishly dragged herself out of bed and looked around her room, her dark and damp room. If a stranger came in, they would immediately be able to understand how much she cared about it, no matter how simple and poor it might seem. She pulled her body to the bathroom and washed her face in the icy water. She lifted her head up and looked in the mirror. “Don’t worry” she said to herself “One day, the name Diana Odair will be as famous as Judge Pao”. She gave herself a tiny smile and then broke into tears. She could feel the anger and regret spread like fire through her body, feelings she couldn’t even explain to herself, let alone others.

As she waited for the bread for Judge Pao to finish baking, she picked up a book and went to her cozy corner in the back of the garage. She read her troubles away until the booming voice of Judge Pao snapped her awake. “Where are you useless thing! Bring me my breakfast, NOW!” “Yes sir” mumbled Diana. She walked up the stairs to his bedroom with a tray that must have weighed 10 kilos. She knocked on Judge Pao’s room and slowly opened the creaking door. The unimaginably large room filled with dust always made her sneeze. The old-fashioned wooden furniture had small carvings made from the most expensive wood Diana could find. It was a gigantic contrast to her room that only had one wardrobe and a bed and nothing else. She had asked him multiple times for some more furniture but the only furniture she gained was a bright purple bruise on her cheek. She went over to the switch and the crystal chandelier burst into fake flames. She walked over to her master and put the tray on his plush bed. He slowly sat up moaning “What took you so long?” He demanded “If you have been reading again, I swear I’ll burn all the books in this house! Do you understand?!” The young girl looked down at the aging and grumpy man “Yes sir.” She mumbled. “That’s what I like to hear, now LEAVE!” She sheepishly left the room and ran up the stairs to her room to hide the books again.

The phone rang through the house meaning only one thing. A new case to solve. She ran down the stairs as fast as she could and picked up the phone. After a short talk with the caller, she immediately dashed up to Judge Pao’s room knocked and quietly whispered “There is a new case for us. The bank manager, Festus Heavensbee, got kidnapped from the bank. They have asked us to track him down and rescue him.” Judge Pao blinked his eyes and turned his back to her “Sleep now, case later.” He mumbled. “Ok, well, I’ll meet you at the bank in three hours.” And with that she dashed out of his room.

She left the gigantic mansion and went to the nearest bus stop. After an hour, she finally pushed her way off that awful and crowded bus. She quickly walked to the bank and immediately started working. The room smelled of dry blood and a nauseating amount of perfume. The glass door and the windows were shattered. She thought that there weren’t any other clues and that she’d have to start working with what she had when she saw something fall in the corner. She slowly walked towards it and kneeled down to check what it was. The damp wallpaper smelled of extremely strong rose perfume, as if it was to hide the scent of the blood. The sound of footsteps stopped her in her tracks before she could touch anything. She ducked behind the table just in time and listened to the two men who had just came in. “Come on let’s just grab him and go!” said the gigantic and extremely muscular one. “No, we already took him, the boss said to get everything in this bank and meet him at the car park.” said the second one, who in contrast to the first one was tiny and basically just skin and bones. “On second thought, maybe he did say that” replied the first one. He sighed angrily “Do you ever pay attention to anything?” The two men grabbed everything they could find dashed out in haste. After a good minute or two, Diana peaked out of the table leg. She found a black tracksuit and put it on. Her plan was simple, she’d tell the two men she also worked for “the boss” and get in the van with them. Then once she arrived there, she would disappear call the police and arrest them. She dashed out and found the two men loading their van with the items they collected. “What are you two doing?” Diana boomed in the most commanding voice she could muster up. “We don’t answer to girls,” bellowed the first one “especially weak ones. It’s the girls that answer us.” “Well then I guess you’ll fail, and the boss will fire you.” She whispered. The two men were startled by Diana knowing who the boss was. “How do you know the boss.” The

second one said in a hushed and demanding tone. "I thought you be smart enough to understand." Diana laughed "I work for him as well and he asked me to come and make sure that you two don't mess up." The two men gestured for her to get into the van and Diana tried to suppress her excitement as she jumped in.

After about two hours, they finally arrived at their destination. "We have arrived at our destination, the abandoned car park behind the town theatre." The first man's voice brought her back from her daydreams as they parked and quietly slipped out. The car park's walls were full of graffiti, and they looked like they were going to crumble under their own weight. Then Diana remembered her plan and started running away before the second man called out to her and said "Where are you going young lady?" "I forgot to tell you that I don't only work for your boss but also for some other ones. One of them just called me and" the first man interrupted her "Whatever it is you should go, run, go." "Thank you" she whispered and with that she dashed out of the car park. She immediately picked up her phone and called the police. It took no time for the police to come. She quickly recapped everything that had happened and the police charged into the car park at full speed just as the two men came out of the boss's office. They arrested them and Diana ran into the boss's office to find Festus Heavensbee tied to a chair. She untied him and helped him up. "Thank you" snapped Festus. "Well, just doing my job." Diana snapped back.

After their bitter conversation, Diana and Festus came out just to find the interviewers already finishing the interview with Judge Pao. They packed up and walked to the theatre where they, actually only Judge Pao, would receive a medal from the mayor. Behind the curtains, Diana put on her sparkly black dress that trailed behind her when she walked. It had been given to her by her brother on her 17<sup>th</sup> birthday and it was one of the only things that reminded her of her family.

"Please welcome to the stage Judge Pao and his apprentice Diana Odair." The mayor voice happily rang through the theatre. The two came out and were welcomed by a warm round of applause. "Today we are here to congratulate Judge Pao for his amazing work and for solving 50 cases each year for 5 years in a row. That's 250 cases in 5 years." The crowd started cheering louder than ever but in Diana's head the worst was happening. "Oh no, 250 cases, he said he would stop his career as soon as he hit it. That means I'll lose my job and I'll become a babysitter for him, and my story will end like that before it even starts." The mayor gave Judge Pao his medal and asked, "Is there anything else that you would like to add Judge Pao?" he opened mouth to talk when "BANG!" Judge Pao collapsed on the floor and immediately Diana knew her story was far from over...

# A Revenge Murder

*Wellington College International Shanghai, Zhu, Matthew – 11*

It was a windy morning; the branches of a willow tree were beating. A tall broad-shouldered man with long thin eyes walked on the pavement to the court building. He was the famous Judge Pao, a detective who had solved many murder cases. He walked up the steps of the court to attend the daily meeting. A group of government officials had gathered in the court. He sat down in his chair. "Does he know?" They started to whisper. Judge Pao looked at them blankly. One of the officials stood up and said in a hurried voice, "The nephew of the emperor, Mr. Zhao, was murdered last night in his bedroom. He was poisoned. He asked for a bottle of wine and the new maid brought it up to him. The bottle of wine has no fingerprints on it other than Mr. Zhao's. We found poison in the leftover wine. He was dead about midnight. The last person who saw him alive was his eldest son. He was reading a book to Mr. Zhao. He left the room at about 10 o'clock. No one knows who the murderer is." Another man piped up and said, "But we know the suspects: his three sons or the new maid who lives in the house." Judge Pao asked, "What about the other servants? And how can you be so sure that no one could enter the house?" The first man answered, "The door was bolt locked and none of the other servants lived in the house last night." Judge Pao stood up, stroked his beard, and said slowly, "I would like to meet the suspects."

All the members of government left, except a man who knew Mr. Zhao and his family well. He then started. "There is the eldest son, Xing. He isn't the type to murder, but he is the only one to have the motivation. When his father is gone, he will inherit all the fortunes his father leaves him. Then there is the second son, Ling. He is good natured. Now, the youngest son Bing. He is a spoiled child, but he loves his father. I see no reason for him to murder his father. The maid is a new servant, I know nothing about her. But she gives me the impression that she was not a maid before." Judge Pao now felt ready to meet the possible suspects.

Xing was a 25-year-old man. Judge Pao asked a series of questions in a calm voice, "Did you hear any unusual sound last night? What were you doing? Can you tell me about your brothers and the maid?" "I didn't hear anything, I was sleeping. Well, my brother Bing, he likes father, but my brother Ling is an evil and horrible person. I wouldn't be surprised if he has killed people. For the maid, I know nothing about her except that she lives in the house."

Ling seemed quite different from what Xing had described. He was polite and friendly when Judge Pao interviewed him. "It serves him right. Father was bold, greedy, and selfish. He embezzled money that was meant for the troops protecting the borders. Xing is just like father. He looks innocent, but I know he has been longing for father's fortunes and status."

"What about Bing and the maid?" Asked Judge Pao.

"Bing? Father's pet? He is weak. He can't do anything like that. The maid? I don't know anything about her."

The interview with Bing supported what Ling said. "Well, I didn't do it. Ling's bedroom was next to mine. I was sure he stayed in his bedroom as the door squeaks when opened, which would wake me up. As for the maid, I don't know why she would want to kill father. She just came. Xing is more likely."

Finally, it was the maid's turn for the interview. The maid was in her 20's. Somehow her appearance and manners reminded Judge Pao of the three sons he just interviewed. She told him that Mr. Zhao asked her to stay in

the house that night. After bringing the wine, she went straight to sleep, because she didn't want to disturb Xing's reading to Mr. Zhao.

The room of Mr. Zhao looked uninteresting at first sight, but clues started to appear upon further examination. When Judge Pao lifted the rug up, he found a piece of paper. Tiny writing was on the paper which read, "I know what you did to my father. I will revenge for Zhao Ping."

The room grew tense. Judge Pao continued, "When I found this piece of paper, I knew who the murderer was. Zhao Ping was the little brother of Mr. Zhao. The two of them were supposed to split their father's fortunes. But Zhao Ping died mysteriously. All the money went to Mr. Zhao. There were rumors that Mr. Zhao planned his brother's death so that he could get all the money. This is a revenge murder planned by a person connected to Zhao Ping. Zhao Ping had one daughter, who is of the same age as the maid. When she entered the room just now, she reminded me of Mr. Zhao's sons. Now I know why. They are cousins. The maid planned the whole thing. She chose the right time to so that Xing was the suspect.

There was a silence in the room. People stared at the maid. The maid closed her eyes and said in a deep emotional voice which echoed in the room, "He ruined my life and my family. He is ruthless, cruel, cold-hearted, and merciless. He doesn't deserve to live, and if I had the chance, I would've had killed him a million times." With that, two guards took her away from the court. Judge Pao stood up and said in a relieved voice, "I guess now I can retire from this case." He walked out of the courthouse and stepped onto the pavement with swaying willow trees, where birds were singing.