



Fiction

Group 4

When the Buzz of the Air Conditioner Stops

ESF Island School, Ng, Cyrus – 15

“So, how can we help you?” asked Zhang, my partner. The middle-aged Filipino lady reached across the dusty table and grabbed our hands. Under the fluorescent light, which blinked every few seconds, I saw a graceful beauty in the woman that natural aging and life’s troubles had eroded. Her skin was now a rough, barren desert, and her eyes were black holes.

“Please, good sirs, you have to help me. My name is Agila, and I am—was—the maid of Mr. Thompson Jr., the son of the venerable Mr. Thompson. I’ve been his loyal servant for decades, but he has sued me!” Agila’s grip on our hands tightened as she continued her explanation. It was as if she was afraid we would stand up and leave. “I’ve been to every law firm in Hong Kong, but when I told them who was taking action against me, they always put on their hollow, wretched smiles and shooed me away.”

“Agila, you don’t have to worry about that happening here,” I said reassuringly. Zhang darted me a look of tentativeness, and dare I say, for a good reason. Mr. Thompson owned a virtual monopoly over the energy supply of Hong Kong, and although the man stays incognito in public, rumors purport he owns half of all land in the city. On the other hand, his son, Mr. Thompson, Jr., is a fervent advocate for renewable energy, rights for immigrants, a fairer justice system, etc., and has been on television innumerable times. Although the general public believed the family’s outward saintliness, most law firms have studied their ruthless, Machiavellian journey to power, which often involved wiping their competition off the face of the earth. Whenever one went against the powerful family, there was always an underlying sense of legal, perhaps even personal, danger.

“Around this time last month, I woke up in the morning to see a terrifying sight,” Agila continued, “As I squinted my eyes in horror and disbelief, I saw it without a shadow of a doubt—one of my fellow servants, Roberto, laying dead in the garden.”

“How did you know he was dead?” asked Zhang as he raised his eyebrow.

“His face was pale, contrasting sharply with the lush greenery surrounding him. He was still as a rock—like a frozen artifact from a museum.” Agila caught her breath for a moment. “I’m sorry, Roberto was my only friend in the household. I still remember how he consoled me for hours whenever the boss yelled at me or beat me.”

Agila continued, “Anyhow, I dashed out of my room, pajamas still on, and rushed over next to Roberto. I hoped there was something I could do. I really did! Unfortunately, Mr. Thompson Jr. had spotted me and accused me of killing Roberto! But that’s all he has.”

Sensing her conflicted expression, I sighed and asked, “Agila, I know there’s something else. We need to know if we’re going to help you. What other evidence does he have?”

Agila looked uneasily at me, then at Zhang, and whispered, “He also has a video of me committing the murder.”

Zhang and I laid back in our chairs.

Sensing our doubt, Agila immediately followed up, “Well—well, it’s fake, of course. You have to believe me! Mr. Thompson Jr. has cameras trained across his villa, including one directly filming the garden. So when they tried to accuse me, they faked a video of me killing him!”

By now, tears were welling up in Agila’s eyes. She tried to suppress her emotions, but it was as effective as covering a geyser with a wooden plank.

Faking a film with artificial intelligence is certainly within the ability of the Thompson family, as they own numerous technology companies. But regardless, the case became arduous.

I looked at Zhang, and after thoughtfully closing his eyes for a second, he nodded. Looking back at Agila, I said in a serious tone, “We’re happy to help you, Agila. But one last concern—do you understand that our methods are...slightly unorthodox?”

“How so, if I may ask?”

“Well, it starts with our family history,” I continued as I lightly sighed. I had done this numerous times, but the pure absurdity of what I was about to say would often deter clients.

Sensing my doubt, Zhang explained, “We’re the descendants of Judge Pao, the ingenious, incorruptible Chinese judge. We’re able to solve cases because Jiang here,” he said as he patted me on the back, “can—how do I put this....”

Then, we explained all the specifics and glanced nervously at the dusty table.

To our surprise and relief, Agila simply smiled.

“That reassures me,” she said while wiping away a tear, “In the other law firms I’ve been to, they speak without wisdom. I’ve heard similar tales about my ancestors. It makes me feel secure knowing that I’m in good hands.”

“We will do anything we can to prove you innocent,” Zhang said, joyful that someone had not only accepted but embraced our methods.

Then, Agila dropped to her knees. Tears were now streaming down her face. “Oh, thank you, thank you! You have saved my family and me. Unfortunately, I have nothing to pay you now, but I will work the rest of my life to repay this massive debt!”

Hurriedly, I stood up and pulled her back to her seat. “There’s no need for that, Agila; it’s what we’re meant to do.”

After a few more passionate blessings and thanks, we extracted Agila’s testimony, and she left.

I exited the small room and went into the main part of our office. Admittedly, the space was a mess. In the past, we littered crumpled pieces of paper across the floor, stacked files like a mountain range on the tables, and let dust infect every corner of the room. In the ceiling was an air conditioner covered in grime, and it buzzed loudly regardless if it was on or off. Thus, every hour of work was like living in a factory, but its pure annoyance united us like a bright bonfire. Such was the consequence of our family business policy—we only charge those who can spare the money. My partners, other descendants of Judge Pao, consisted of five ragtag young men with thick glasses; once, when the air conditioner broke down, they proposed charging every person a fixed rat, but luckily I vetoed it.

“Everyone, be quiet!” Zhang exclaimed. “Let Jiang conduct his magic in silence.”

I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, and focused on the darkness which descended upon me like a blanket. The buzz of the air conditioner stopped. I was isolated, locked in the silence and emptiness of my mind. But suddenly, like a sun peeking above the bleak horizon, a flash of light filled the darkness. Another mind filled my head, one that was more illuminated.

“Hello, Jiang.” The words reverberated throughout my head. The voice was booming and gravelly. Strangely, the voice felt physical, as I could feel its mass. I recognized the voice. It was him, the one and only Judge Pao.

“Hello, forefather,” I replied. After the Judge’s brief tenure as an official during the Ming Dynasty, he returned to the supernatural underworld to become the infernal judge. Strangely enough, I held the ability to be “possessed” by him, while no one else in the firm did, despite them also being descendants. I once asked the Judge about this, to which he ominously replied, “time will soon tell, my son.”

I described, in detail, the situation as described by Agila while the Judge listened in silence. When I finished, a courtroom filled my vision. The walls were not palpable but an infinite plane of red and black, stretching as far as the eye could see. Standing before me was an exquisitely sculpted hardwood table inscribed with ancient Chinese characters and a vast open space. In the distance, barely perceptible, was a sea of faint specters that floated and glowed like glass jellyfish.

As I turned my head to the right, I could see a massive character thrice my size wearing a wise, long beard on his old, wise face and a heavy black futou on his bright, bald head. His robe was black and embroidered in shining red, yellow, and green. Although the courtroom was relatively dim, he was emitting a strong golden light, like the Sun in the darkness of space. It was the physical manifestation of the Judge, and even two meters away, I could feel his presence pulling me into orbit.

“Come forth, Roberto. Descendant of Alab III and the son of Honesto. The man wrongfully murdered in the garden.” the Judge’s voice boomed across the courtroom.

From the sea of specters, one glided into the open area. Another hologram suddenly flooded my mind.

Now, I was looking at a garden with a bright full moon in the sky. I could hear whistling from myself, with the buzz of cicadas in the background. In my hand was a heavy watering can. I realized what was happening—Roberto was showing what had happened that fateful night from his perspective, like a video on playback.

Suddenly, Roberto could hear footsteps from behind. Startled, he spun around to see Mr. Thompson Jr., a man with a face so skinny and pale its edges he was like a carcass. Unfortunately, the watering can in Roberto’s hand remained open, and Mr. Thompson Jr. was met with a splash of water on his expensive robe.

Realizing what he had done, Roberto fell to his knees and cried, “Please, sir! Have mercy! It was an accident—I swear!”

Mr. Thompson Jr. did not move. His face remained stoic, like a statue. For an entire minute, he did not speak, simply looking into Roberto’s eyes with a piercing stare. And then, a smile crept up on his face. Or rather, a more accurate description would be that the corners of his mouth moved up. In a sinister, soft voice, Mr. Thompson Jr. slowly said, emphasizing every word, “No worries, Roberto.”

Roberto breathed a sigh of relief, got up from his knees, and dusted himself off.

“Thank you, thank you, sir! Again, I am so—”

Unfortunately, that was when the hologram blacked out, and I was back in the infernal courtroom.

But a moment later, another hologram flooded my eyes. However, this time, my eyes told me it was not a playback but something occurring in real time.

I was in a room surrounded by huge glass panes, which were so clean that they glinted from the sparkling moon. In the distance, I could see Repulse Bay’s beaches and the silent ocean’s vast expanse. Stunning pieces of artwork were carefully placed around the room, even some hanging from the ceiling in a suspended dance. The floor was shining, hand-cut marble, and in the center of the room was a carpet made from a tiger’s skin. I smelled a pleasant incense and heard the faint reverberance of piano keys. It was as if someone was attempting to construct heaven on earth.

However, my heart skipped a beat as I saw who I was in the faint reflection of the shining glass. A demon with a crooked face and horns made of steel. A body of blood-red strips of muscle and hints of pale, bare bones, like a human without skin. A pair of eyes so piercing, they were comparable to bows loaded with lit arrows. Then it struck me—it was a reincarnation of the Judge. Our family history book states that he had once posed as a demon to scare a criminal into confessing to a heinous crime.

As the Judge walked through the hallway to another glassy room, the sound of the piano loudened. Yet, I could still hear the faint smushing of the Judge’s feet, like a piece of slime being dragged across the floor. Then, I saw the origin of the piano sounds. In front of me was a man in exquisite silk pajamas, playing a slow, quiet requiem with his bony hands. As he turned, I could see that it was the same man that Roberto was talking to before his death—Mr. Thompson Jr.

Mr. Thompson Jr.’s eyes, which first seemed tired, now burst wide. He jumped off his chair, picked it up with difficulty, and threw it at the Judge. It simply passed through him and broke into a dozen pieces.

Mr. Thompson Jr. went on his knees and cried, “Who—who are you? Please, if it is money you want, I will make you rich!”

The Judge croaked, “Confess.”

Mr. Thompson Jr. exclaimed, “I don’t understand what you are talking—”

“The murder!” the Judge boomed as he marched forward.

“Okay, okay! I confess! I killed the servant, but—” Mr. Thompson exclaimed in submission, now in tears.

The Judge replied, “I thought so. Now give me the real video footage so that justice can be served. Or else, you will have to deal with something much worse than prison.”

Mr. Thompson Jr. shakingly turned to his wooden desk, opened a hidden cupboard, and pulled out a hard drive. He then shakingly tossed it over to the Judge.

I felt my body shift as the Judge returned to his normal caricature. He laughed, “I’m just a ghost, my child—how could I hurt you”?

Suddenly, I blacked out and opened my eyes. The familiar buzz of a faulty air conditioner filled my ears.

Zhang asked, “You were out for a while. Got what you need?”

I looked down at my hand. A hard drive.

Preparing for the trial was tedious, particularly since we decided to countersue Mr. Thompson Jr., but with the real footage of the murder in hand, victory was in sight.

Agila was overjoyed, smiling at the sea of reporters as she entered the courtroom. Even Zhang, who espoused the importance of staying stoic, was suppressing a smirk. I initially shared a similar feeling, but when I saw the lawyer on the other side joking and laughing minutes before the trial, I admittedly felt a hint of nervousness. Perhaps they had found—or fabricated—another piece of evidence that proved Agila was guilty, and Mr. Thompson Jr. not?

The courtroom shook as people shuffled in. Everyone in the courtroom seemed excited—it was a classic David versus Goliath situation—except for the twelve jury members, who had bleak, nervous expressions on their faces.

“All rise for Judge Judy, “ announced the clerk.

Everyone behind us gasped with awe and disbelief as the truth unraveled along with the trial. Yet, Mr. Thompson Jr. and his band of lawyers did not appear to be perturbed in the slightest. On the contrary, a smile seemed to crawl up their faces as the trial concluded.

“...and therefore, it is clear that the defendant is guilty beyond a reasonable doubt!” I exclaimed.

“Thank you. The defendant may now make their closing argument”, said the Judge.

Mr. Thompson Jr.'s lawyer stood up, now grinning from ear to ear, and said, “we’ll pass on that.”

Gasps echoed throughout the courtroom, and the Judge stammered, “That—that is certainly a novelty. If you forfeit the chance to make a closing argument, the jury will vote now. Seeing the evidence the plaintiff possesses, I find it disfavorable for you to simply “pass” on this final opportunity.”

The lawyer chuckled and replied, “Your Honor, Mr. Thompson Jr. is a busy man; besides, we are quite confident about the result.”

“Very well, “ said the Judge, “The Jury has a week to consider their decision.”

To everyone’s surprise, the head jury member raised his shaking hand and said, “Your Honor, we have already decided.”

“I beg your pardon?” the Judge exclaimed in disbelief.

Then, I saw the jury’s faces. They weren’t expressions of nervousness but fear. Not expressions of anxiousness but guilt. I could see them fearfully eyeing Mr. Thompson Jr., who simply smirked. It was the expression one makes if the grim reaper was pacing toward them with an outstretched hand or if the shadow of a tsunami was upon them. Or when a criminal has a noose around his neck, with the stool under him about to be kicked away. Or simply when one has to kill a stranger to protect their family.

“So what is the jury’s decision?”

As I understood the situation, I shut my eyes. Yet I could not block out the crowd’s astonishment nor Agila’s cries.

Everyone was quiet as we somberly walked back to the office, half in shock and half in anger.

“We need to appeal the jury’s decision,” I said as I broke the silence.

“Are you mad?” Zhang looked at me in disbelief. “They’ll destroy us!”

Suddenly, a notification sounded.

We all received an email:

“We see the potential in your practice and are willing to hire all of you. You will continue to fight for justice, just from our perspective. You will have riches and prestige. If you are interested, reply, and we will give you further instructions. The choice is yours.

Sincerely,

Mr. Thompson Jr.”

When I came to work a week later, I was completely alone. All I could hear was the lonely buzz of the air conditioner.

I closed my eyes and heard a voice in my head. A familiar voice.

“This is why I chose you.”

“They all left; what can I do?”

“No matter how bad the situation may seem, justice will always prevail. If not in life, then in death.”

So, I emailed Mr. Thompson Jr. and his lawyers that I would fight, no matter how badly the odds were stacked against me.

I never got a response from them. A few days later, I heard a loud bang in the distance and the shattering of my window. The buzz of the air conditioner stopped.

When I came to, I was in a red-black courtroom. I wore a large black futou, with a faint golden light coming off my body. A sea of specters lay before me, all with different stories, yet, they were all identical in my eyes.

Long Before

ESF Island School, Wong, Jennie – 14

Picture this.

Once upon a time, long before tales of midnight immortality:

Bao Zheng, not a lord or magistrate or justicus just yet, and certainly not an immortal judge; just an unfamed, unknown baby.

He's born to an unlikely pair. His father is an official and the son of officials, and his calloused commoner mother a woman who fought mountains for firewood even while her belly swelled with life.

It's this wood that burns as she heaves and groans; maybe it's this flame that tempers Bao Zheng's gilded, gallant soul?

She gasps one last time as finally her son escapes her weary womb. Immediately, she cradles him in her arms, marvelling at his smallness. But though the mother, still smeared with a patina of ash and blood, smiles at her newborn son, the father only stares for a second before his face shadows with scorn.

"Niang Zi, throw him away." He says it matter-of-factly. Too easily.

"*What?*" She chokes out. "Why?"

He glares at her in exasperation. "Just *look* at him. He'll ruin everything I've worked so hard for. Bring me to my knees. Turn our gold to dirt. Like the colour of his cursed flesh."

"But –"

"He'll ruin everything," he hisses. "Niang Zi, are you blind? Look at him. He's *cursed*. Tell me, dear, do you want this nice, comfortable life or not?"

She winces, barely holding back tears. Indeed, Bao Zheng's skin is black as the basin of his future ballads, his eyes small and starless, his mouth thin and crooked. In his father's scholar eyes, practised at picking out mistakes: he is ugly, unbearably so, to the point of damnation.

To the father, it is a simple problem with a simple solution. There is a curse born into his family, an incorrect stitch. An easy riddle, far below him. Undo the stitch before it ruins the tapestry. Let their lives stay blessed and blissful.

The baby stares back at his father, long and searching, but the father only glares back. The mother holds her baby tighter even as her arms falter. She kisses him on the moon on his forehead, ivory-like against his night-black skin. He stares back up at her, beautiful and unshakably innocent. She holds him like they'd fall apart.

He says it like it is easy, she thinks, but he didn't feel his soul go from a greenhouse to a cavernous, forsaken temple, empty but for her love and mocking it with its echos, all she's sacrificed alone and abandoned under the too-high ceilings.

But she is his wife, and a dutiful one at that.

Her steps are unsteady as never before as they walk outside. Seconds away from shattering. But still she lays down her then-nameless baby. Maybe no tears escape her eyes, and no words flit out her lips, but she bifurcates, cleaves into two, all while the father's lips curl upwards. Another problem solved. Another disaster averted. A life of lavishness untarnished.

And so they walk away, hand in hand, baby left behind, entrusted to wraiths and dogs and other such loves. He wails. And though the air seems barren, it exhales something out. Slow and soft and serene.

Yes, there it is, barely perceptible:

The promise of being found.

A minute passes. Two.

Then at long last, something appears from out of the shadows. But not a prowling monster, nor a grinning ghost.

A girl.

She glides gingerly towards him; she's barely more than a child herself. Unsure, fragile, stalk-slender – but her eyes are sharp and scrutinising.

Hands shivering, she traces the moon on his forehead. Wipes away the tears falling from his blistering eyes. She strokes the skin stretched over his sapling bones: the skin the same shade as hers.

She makes up her mind then.

Wu Miaozhen lifts her beautiful, breathing brother off the ground.

She blinks, and the years fall away like leaves.

Bao Zheng grows like a reed, dark and hale and healthy. Maybe it's his father that gives him his sharp mind, quick and steadfast and capable, and maybe it's from his mother where he gets his commoner blood that makes him parched for something better than this.

But it's the girl who raises him, his sister-in-law mother, that teaches him how to be kind. To direct his thirst to be for justice. To water the world.

Picture this.

Bao Zheng is but a young child of seven years old, sitting with his sister-in-law mother and nephew-brother Bao Mian at their worn dining table.

Four knocks on the door, sharp, quick, and miserable.

Wu Miaozhen stands up from the table where bowls of painstakingly distributed rice lay. She opens the door to see the old man who lives down the street, in a house more in tatters than even theirs.

He's skeletal, starving. His entire body shrinks into himself. Words slide tentatively out his mouth: "Sister Wu, may you spare your poor neighbour some congee?"

Bao Zheng gapes, and Bao Mian stifles a scoff. Does he think that their household, run by a widow supporting two sons, has much of anything to spare? Yes, his sister-in-law mother receives money from his father, but not much. She labours day and night to fill their bowls with rice instead of congee.

Yet Wu Miaozhen beams. "Of course."

"Thank you, Sister Wu – I will repay you tenfold, I swear—"

"There's no need." Gentle, but steadfast. She walks to the table and picks up her bowl of rice, steam still wafting from it, and hands it to the man.

Tears well up in his eyes. "Thank you, Sister Wu...Rice, not just congee..." He cradles the bowl close to his chest, the warmth of the bowl seeping through him. "I've been hungry since the new minister's taken over." He bows, head knocking against his knees. "I— I owe you my life."

She offers him another smile. "Those with the same illness commiserate with each other."

"Greed pays back with evil, but you will receive a world of riches in return for your kindness," he replies in turn.

Wu Miaozhen dips her head, lips pursed. As soon as the man leaves with a final word of thanks, she turns to her two sons. "Riches might ruin me," she tells them. "If you ever receive a world of riches, pray it does not poison you too."

"Why did you give him your rice, Sao Niang?" Bao Zheng asks. He doesn't mean it to be accusatory, but it comes out that way. "Now because of him we'll have less food."

Wu Miaozen sits back down. "It's not because of him. It's because of the taxes." She smiles reassuringly. "Fear not, Bao Zheng. You and Bao Mian won't have to eat less."

Bao Zheng blinks. "But then...?"

"I am a grown woman. You two are growing boys. You need it more than me. And so did that old man."

So Bao Zheng and Bao Mian eat. Guiltily but hungrily.

Bao Zheng pushes his bowl towards her a few times, but she doesn't take a single bite. He looks at the steadfast expression on her hunger-carved face, the thin line of her mouth curving into a wan smile, and etches this memory onto the membrane of his mind.

Picture this.

Bao Zheng, thirteen years old now, crouched over his papers. He's one of the few children in their village lucky enough to go to school, and he takes to academics like a fish to water – as in, he wonders how he lived before it. He enjoys the way his words give the paper meaning. He swipes his quill and watches, entranced, the way his thoughts become something tangible. Real.

His sister-in-law mother walks into the room, a rare weight to her footsteps. Even realer.

"Bao Zheng, I have a favour to ask of you."

"...Yes?" She rarely asks for things from him. A note of apprehension twinges.

"You know Yang and Hei, from down the street?"

Bao Zheng nods. He used to play with them a bit before he began going to school.

"I know this is a lot to ask, but it would be good for you to teach them how to read and write."

His first instinct is to refuse. He needs to devote all his time to his own academics, not to help the children down the street, but his sister-in-law mother continues on before he can open his mouth.

"They can't afford to go to school like you can, Bao Zheng. You're likely the only and best teacher they will ever be able to have." Her tone is soft but her words are firm, and he understands that there's really no choice being given.

Though at first he complains in his head as the two children are sat down across from him, and chafes at their incompetence, when they leave, waving and whooping in pride, a spark of satisfaction twinges in his heart.

Wu Miaozen smiles. "That wasn't so bad, was it?"

"No. It wasn't," Bao Zheng replies. "The actual teaching wasn't fun at first, but..."

"But it feels good to give back to the community, no?" Wu Miaozen strokes his head. "It feels good to be kind. Help them. Teach them how to escape a life of toil."

"What's wrong with toil?" The air tenses, and his voice becomes taut, his words needles. His sister-in-law mother is the hardest worker he knows, and to him, she's perfect.

"There's nothing shameful in the act in of itself. But it's what it means." She licks her lips, as if to oil her words. "It means that even children labour day and night while the officials reap the rewards of their work."

"...Yes." He thinks of his scribbled papers. Then of Wu Miaozen's callouses. Of every time she told him to not help and to focus on his studies instead.

"You are so, so smart, Bao Zheng, and you are so, so clever. I have faith that you can do anything you put your mind to. " Her voice cracks for a split second. "You could become an official, definitely. But don't become like them." Her voice is the fiercest it's ever been, and it ignites a match inside him.

"I'm your son. I could never."

Wu Miaozen turns her gaze to the window, and watches the small figures of Yang and Hei ploughing and planting. So experienced despite their small age. Relentless, even though their eyes must be drooping and their minds exhausted from their lesson with Bao Zheng. "I hope one day it will be better for them. For us all."

"I – I'll make it better then." The words come out his mouth before he even registers them.

"You will?"

Bao Zheng grips her arms as he barrels on. Later she'd tell him his eyes were aflame. "I – I'll work hard, and I'll become an official, and I'll make it better, and I – I'll change the world."

He thinks of how Hei and Yang's money must disappear routinely into bottomless pockets, never to be seen again, making them toil at the tender age of nine. He thinks of the old man. He thinks of his sister-in-law mother, begging at an official's feet, pouring every last yen into his hands and him still finding it wanting.

"And I – I won't become like them. I won't become like the official that makes them labour. I won't become like the official that made that old man hungry."

And he wouldn't become like his father.

Wu Miaozhen pauses, taken aback by his sudden conviction, before she smiles softly. "I believe in you. But you'd better work hard at it."

"I will," Bao Zheng vows.

For the children. For the old man.

For his sister-in-law mother.

Yes, he's the flesh and bone of his blood parents. They echo in his cheekbones, reflect in his build. Features freeing the more he grows older.

But it's his sister-in-law mother who greets him when he comes home from school, bone-tired. It's her who ladles out his congee, folds his clothes, smiles at his pride, and comforts him when he cries.

It's his her who he thinks of when he heads for his imperial test, after years of devotion. Despite himself, his palms are slick with sweat.

Bao Zheng thinks of her medicine-stained smile. Her already-lined face, her sunken but still dimpled cheeks. He thinks of the comfort of their little family, sitting around their rickety dinner table. Whole if not yet holy.

Throughout the entire test, whenever his heart begins to race just a bit too fast, he thinks of her.

When he receives the results a few weeks later, that he's been approved, that his dreams are coming to fruition, he jumps to his feet and hugs her tight. Later he's dubbed 'the iron-faced judge', but in that moment a grin splits his face wide open. Wu Miaozhen smiles back at him. "I always knew you could do it."

Just as he's about to leave, the very next day, he finds his father and mother waiting outside. Their hair's streaked heavily with white, Bao Zheng notes, as they kowtow on their knees for forgiveness. His father's gaze bores into the ground instead of glaring at Bao Zheng's face.

"Bao Zheng... son... I beg for your forgiveness." He coughs, low and ailing. "I am sorry that we threw you away. I'm sorry. We were cruel, and too quick to judge. How could we have known you would go into the brilliant young man you are today? We are old now, and we would like to spend the last years of our lives reunited with you. Our long lost son."

Bao Zheng's face twists into a sneer. His eye twitches, and his foot strays to kick his 'father'. Send him shocked and reeling. But he catches Wu Miaozhen's stern gaze in the corner of his eye.

So Bao Zheng breathes in and summons his kindness instead. "Okay. You hurt me, and you never raised me, but... I forgive you. I do."

And he means it, because Wu Miaozhen smiles.

But even though they're now on good terms, and Bao Zheng does not scorn his father and mock his mother in his head at every turn, their interactions are still strangled. They wave to and greet each other, and share sips of tea, but he doesn't go to the man that threw him away for advice. Doesn't go to the woman that birthed him just to let him go to cry.

Instead he goes to the woman that shaped him. Raised him. Made him.

Steady, smiling Wu Miaozen, who does not pad her words with flattery but supports him regardless of everything. And really, is there anything as hallowed as a sister-in-law mother's love?

Ten years crawl by, and he begins to doubt whether he should be impatient for the time when he finally becomes an official, once both of them die. He's happy in his existence here, slow and sleepy but beloved.

He watches his father's mind deteriorate. He howls and barks out messy garbles meant only for the mad, far from his past succinct grace. His pale skin turns grey and palloured. His mother's face hollows with worry as his father shudders, hands twisted around the brushes he no longer needs, but cannot ever leave.

Would it be worth it?

When his father dies at long last – breath rattling against his throat, mouth devoid of words – first falling to his knees, like he only ever did once in life, and then sinking into the miry ground...

His mother cries, long and slow and heavy as the rain falls furiously. But Bao Zheng only stares and says nothing as the water runs down his skin in relentless rivulets, like mockeries of teardrops.

She falls not long after. Hearth-heart gone out without a flicker of a flame, leaving only ash and dust. He says nothing, feels nothing, even as his mother's body burns.

In the end it is when his sister-in-law mother dies that he collapses at long last.

A quiet affair, splayed out in her creaking bed. Sun-bleached knots fanned out around her head. Hungry hands holding each other. Dark eyes open but blank.

Bao Zheng cracks like glass. Crumples like the papers he's been fearing. Falls to his knees like his father.

And after all the rites, grander than her entire life, are finished, and the fires settle down, he hesitates yet again.

There's nothing holding him back from being an official and achieving his dream now. There's nothing left in this village left for him, now that his family is dead and Bao Mian is long gone.

But he's already waited a decade. Why not a few more?

He could be happy here for the rest of his life. Marry one of the girls down the street. Sire, raise, and love some children. Grow old content and carefree, unburdened of legacy, legends and such other poisons.

Does he really want to become his father, heaving and hardly breathing, callous and cruel?

Would he not rather be like his sister-in-law, humble but happy, who took his hands slowly so he wouldn't forget? Who kissed him on his forehead, chapped lips grazing the watery moon, as she wiped his tears away? Who died surrounded by the warmth of her long labour?

The saddest words are always 'it might've been.' Humans always have regrets. All we can do is hope we end up with the right ones.

Slow and soft and serene.

He can almost see the topography of her face again, almost reaches out to touch it. But of course, she isn't really there.

Bao Zheng grasps a breath in.

He embarks on his journey, builds a legacy that'll live far beyond him – for his sister-in-law mother above all else –

And he becomes a legend, a deity, justice made flesh, the subject of countless stories – but he never forgets his first tale.

The story of a baby left screaming...

And the girl who found him.

The Common People

ESF King George V School, Chan, Valerie – 14

For deities, time passes differently.

Bang the gavel, bring down the guillotine. A day passes, then a hundred years. Time is lost amidst the banging of courtroom doors and subservient bows, weeks and months and a thousand years, but nothing changes.

He doesn't change, and neither does the afterlife, but that is what differentiates it from the world of the living, the *yang* — all that is breathing and breathtakingly bright; all that is everchanging.

The mortal world is everchanging. How many times has he said these exact words to desperate spirits, those who cling to his robes as they kowtow, as they beg?

“—*My son, Judge. Please just let me see him for the last time.*”

“I’m begging you, Lord Pao, we’ve been married for a mere hundred days! Won’t you be merciful and give me a chance to bid goodbye?”

It is not as if he isn't moved, as if he takes delight in watching them grovel. The contrary, really. He sees the spirits with nothing to their names and recalls his own family, his own son, tugging at his sleeves just as the spirits do.

It's just that he is Judge Pao. He is righteous. He is incorruptible. He is just. He cannot afford any pity for sinners. All he can do is to balance the scales, straighten his notes, and offer one last piece of advice — one that he learned the hard way.

“The mortal world is everchanging, and we are not.”

For deities, time passes differently.

It is an honour to ascend into paradise, and even more so to be deified, but it is one that you cannot question, nor refuse.

“Whoever would refuse to ascend? To leave your family, your sovereign, everything binding you to the mortal world?”

The statement echoes through the parlour for less than a moment before uproarious laughter and agreeable murmurs ring in the air.

“Ganbei!” Ten cups are lifted, but only nine clink against each other. Their owners all swivel towards the tenth. Pao Zheng, the newest entry to their ranks, tips back his cup of *baijiu* and drinks until there is nothing left; his cup hangs loosely between unmoving fingers before it crashes onto the floor, a shattered mess of porcelain.

“Lord Pao, did you mean what you said?” One of the lords chuckles disbelievingly. “I mean, you're one of us now, and you've just ascended to such a revered position. Of course, it's worth it.”

The drinking parlour falls silent; the remaining nine lords of the afterlife watch with caution as Pao Zheng rises from his seat, yellow robes rippling like molten gold, his crescent mark shining like liquid silver.

“Of course, it is worth it,” he echoes, waving a hand. The cup disappears from, and his fingers close around thin air. “I shall retire early for tonight. Please do enjoy the wine, my fellow lords.”

As a heavy curtain of darkness falls upon the sky, he looks upon the sloping mountains, the still waters that surround his place of judgement; the three glittering scythes hanging upon the wall, dangling by their handles — a golden dragon, a silver tiger, a bronze hound. He looks upon the Tower of Remembrance, standing tall.

The tower, he thinks, a smile flitting across his face. A rare moment where he allowed himself to act on his sympathy to the people. They had cried and pleaded, and he had tried to uphold his austere façade in front of his fellow lords,

but he had felt their longing as if it were his own. He had tried. But in the end, he conceded, anyway, and called for the construction of a tower for discontent spirits to see their home one last time.

How long had it been since *he* had last seen his home? He closes his eyes, and when they open, he's standing in the tower, memories around him. He sighs, a weary, hopeful breath, a wish and a prayer —

For deities, time passes differently.

They are everywhere, and they are nowhere. Time is just another construct they see through. Past and present and future are mere threads in the webs they weave with the snap of a finger and the twist of a hand, and they are therefore free from the constraints of time.

Pao Zheng had been mortal once, though. He knows how it feels to have time slip through his fingers like sand. He knows how it feels to watch as a child grows out of his embrace and takes his first steps, speak his first words, fall sick for the first time. Then watch, as the child is lowered into the ground before his hair had even turned grey.

He knows, he *knew* how it felt not to have enough time. But now, he has been deified, bestowed with a name of utmost honour. He is Pao Qing-tian. He and his name now stand for the salvation of the common people, the protection against all that is unjust and corrupt. He has all the time he would ever want — so why does he feel that deep, all-consuming yearning that should only plague those with numbered days?

Deities live on memories. Remember them, and they live on to bless, to curse, to judge, to listen. And as memories sustain them, deities collect memories, a fragile equilibrium of giving and taking, for they live on as amalgams of how they are remembered.

It also stands, as such, that deities can appear everywhere and anywhere they are remembered, where memories of them have not faded yet. It is with this thought that Pao Zheng visits Kaifeng, his hometown.

“Lady Dong,” he calls, looking around the empty manor house for a glimpse of the light pink dresses his wife favoured. “Ah-Yi?”

No answer. His ancestral home remains strangely silent, and yet, his favourite paintings still hang on the walls in pristine condition, and reports from his most prominent cases still line the tables.

Just how long has it been? He wonders as he wanders through the hallways, calling the names of his wife, his sons, but no one replies. The last rays of sunlight shine through the domed windows, casting golden light on the solitary marble plaque in his garden, and the joss sticks standing next to it.

Joss sticks? Pao Zheng blinked once, twice. His parents had been buried in his ancestral plot, and so had his son; channelling his energy, he reappears in the garden, looking up at the plaque —

For deities, time passes differently.

If the present hurts, then one must return to the past.

“*Baba*, how did the case go?” It is his son, his young Ah-Yi, running up to him and pulling at the sleeves of his robe, “My teacher told me that my writing has improved and that someday I’ll be as great of an official as you are!”

He smiles indulgently at his son. How could he not, when everything is going so well? When the emperor is satisfied with his performance and his duties are growing in importance; when his son is bright and healthy, and his household is prosperous; when he is upright and sleeps every night knowing that his character has not been corrupted. How could he not be happy?

“I’ll tell you about the case today, Ah-Yi,” he begins, “it began when a man showed up with an ox...”

My Ah-Yi.

The letter sits heavy on the wooden desk, delivered right after he had just lit his candle; the candle has burned down to the wick, crying its last tears, but the letter remains unopened.

Pao Zheng sits at his desk, hat askew, face flushed. The wave of elation from his audience with the emperor has not faded yet, nor has the grim pride he took from meting out justice to those who deserved it. "They've started to call you Justice Pao, the iron-faced judge," the emperor's favoured eunuch had told him, a hint of jealousy in his words. "Even the emperor wants you to serve in a better position — not that there's many better ones than being the imperial censor. Ah, heavens above, you should've seen his expression when he had to give up on the edict."

Pao Zheng had smiled, then, his first genuine one since the case had begun, more of a quick upward quirk of his lips than the fully-fledged one that none but his wife and son are privy to. *My Ah-Yi*, he thinks again, pressing his fingers to his temples, as if it could make the gods hear his fervent prayers.

He had impeached Yao-zuo, today; the corrupt man that was promoted on behalf of his familial ties with Concubine Zhang loved so. All the other censors had warned him not to continue pushing for fairness, and he knew the risks, but how could he, when tolerating one man's advances meant allowing more to follow in his footsteps?

"I have been honest, and I have been pious," he whispers, reaching for the letter with trembling hands, "I have not once accepted dirty money. I have done well by my parents. On account of all that, please..." The rest of his prayer goes unsaid, but as he rips it open and shakes out the contents, he can only whisper two words.

"My son."

There is only a slip of paper, short and succinct.

Pao-gong,

Ah-Yi passed peacefully in his sleep. The malady ailing him faded before his last moments. We are in mourning here, but do not rush to return. He would not want you to toil yourself. Lady Dong urges me to remarry after the mourning period, but I shall stay and fulfil my promised duties. I will do so with a willing heart. My son is frail, as well, and I will devote myself to his care and Lady Dong.

Your humble daughter-in-law

He falls to his knees. He has but one rightful son, Pao Yi, and though he knows of the illegitimate boy he may have fathered, Ah-Yi should have been his heir, his blood, his pride and joy.

"My son, why?"

Have my prayers gone unanswered?

For deities, time passes differently.

If the present hurts, then one can return to the past; but what if the past hurts, too, if not more?

One can turn to the future.

The first thing he sees, standing in the same place, is a woman, her hair tied in a bun, pointing at the placard on his desk. *The legacy of Judge Pao*, it reads, in brassy gold print. He winces at the use of the emperor's colour, and the smudges of small fingerprints, before he looks to his left and directly into the faces of a dozen children, peering curiously at the sign.

"Teacher, he was a *magistrate* of the capital," says a boy with narrowed eyes, "was he magical?"

"He was a magistrate, not magical," the girl next to him says, sniffing.

“But *I’m* descended from him, you know,” another girl says. “My dad says that I’m a thirty–fourth–generation descendant of his, and that one of my uncles is a really successful person!”

The two other children turn on her and glare. “If that’s true, then I’m descended from the emperor,” scoffs the boy, “Stop bragging please.”

“It says here that he disowns any descendants who committed bribery,” the girl says, “and we all know that you paid the school to get in, Yue–mei. You’re good at nothing.”

The girl flinches at the raucous laughter of her peers, and so does Pao Zheng, flushing red with anger. Does the name that he worked so hard to build mean nothing to these people? Is it not enough to protect his own descendants?

What have they become?

“*Mama*, what was your father like?” a girl sits on her mother’s lap, and it takes a few moments for Pao Zheng to recognise his own daughter, his En–qi. “Grandmother told me that he was a judge who served the emperor, wasn’t he?”

“Yes, dear, and he was also a magistrate for the capital city. He was a very good man, you see. When he was around, he would stop corrupt people and decide on the consequences of their actions. He was very stern, though, and people used to say that his smile was rarer than clear waters in the Yellow River.”

The girl nods seriously. “Then did he teach you words and make carvings with you, like *baba* does with me?”

A laugh, and En–qi shakes her head. Is that resignation? Bitterness? “Oh, no. I was betrothed to your *baba* by the time I was your age. And besides, he didn’t spend that much time with me, really —”

Pao Zheng frowns when En–qi whispers in her daughter’s ear, leaning in to hear.

“— after all, I’m a girl. He didn’t need me when he had your Uncle Yi. Boys are meant to shape history, you know. But it’s okay. You can be whatever you want.”

“Even if I’m a girl?”

“Even if you’re a girl.”

For deities, time passes differently.

Time passes differently, but they feel just as mortals do, if not with some detachment. Pao Zheng is in the Infernal Bureaucracy once more, but he feels the same sickly shame he did after a failed appeal.

His own daughter sees him... like that? Has he failed? He had thought that he was a good father to his children. A fair one, if not a fully present one, at the very least; but even his own daughter saw his favour for Ah–Yi.

“How can I judge others for their wrongs when I myself have much to atone for?” he whispers to himself, pacing in the empty courtroom. The flames cast long shadows on the walls, forming ominous patterns.

He sees the plaque in his garden in his mind’s eye, a marble monstrosity six feet tall, detailing his achievements and his life.

The ancestry document detailing the lineage of Justice Pao has been destroyed, as has most statues and paintings of the famous judge. He has now been buried elsewhere, and a new gravestone has been erected for him elsewhere.

He had not been able to stand being in there for another moment, to catch another glimpse of the description of how so many remnants of his legacy had been destroyed. Yet, both the past and the present hurt.

“It never stops hurting.”

The deity of memories stands by the doors, a knowing smile on her face. “Meng Po,” he addresses her, with a respectful bow. She pockets her ladle before entering. “What never stops hurting?”

“Memories. Weren’t you thinking about that?” She smiles knowingly at him. “Ah, we gods aren’t that different from mortals. Why do you think so many spirits are willing to drink the soup of forgetfulness? You may look back and regret your actions, but check on your descendants again, Judge. Sometimes, you must look forward and be proud of what you have, and not what you *should’ve* done.”

For deities, time passes differently.

But for mortals, a sliver of time is worth more than gold.

Pao Zheng appears at a harbour, docked full of ships and abuzz with chatter. He approaches the nearest dockhand, who merely raises his eyebrows at his eclectic form of dress.

“Young man, what is this place?”

“This is the port, sir. The boats all belong to my employer.”

“They *all* do? Who, pray tell, is your employer?”

The dockhand’s eyes widen, and he drops the boxes that he had been loading. “Are you not from here, sir? He owns the largest shipping company in the world. They call him Hong Kong’s first businessman of truly international stature.”

“And what name does he go by?”

“Sir Pao Yue-kong. He really saved us common people by opening so many job opportunities.”

In another corner of the country, a temple stands. By now, it is dark, but a melody floats in the quiet night.

“There is a Pao Qing-tian in Kaifeng, who is selfless in the world.”

Pao Zheng nears the temple, and finds four words etched into its doors —

The Pao Ancestral Shrine

Strangely, it’s empty, save for an old man, sweeping. As Pao Zheng nears, he looks up. “I’m sorry, sir, we’re closed for the night. If you’d like to pay your respects to Judge Pao, please return tomorrow.”

“Oh, no. I’m just passing by. Is this the shrine of the famous judge?”

“Yes, yes. I’m just taking care of it as a descendant of his should.”

“Ah, I thought a lot of his descendants would be here. I must have been mistaken.”

“It’s just me, I’m afraid. I do the best I can, in the hopes that he’ll see and be proud.”

Pao Zheng smiles as he turns to leave. “I’m sure he would be proud of you.”

“Thank you, sir.”

For deities, time passes differently, but as Pao Zheng returns to his chambers in the afterlife, he wishes, for the first time, that time would slow, and that he could watch his descendants grow.

Regret seems to follow him like persistent shadows.

He *would've* spent more time with his wife, his children, if he knew that their days together were so limited.

He *could've* done better by his loved ones, could've left more to them than a legacy that was more judge than parent.

He *should've* shown more compassion, more pity to the common people who had begged him for a sliver of mercy.

Would've, could've, should've. Meng Po was right — it doesn't do to dwell on memories and forget to live.

“Move on, and judge fairly without drowning in the past,” he wonders. “Is this what she wanted me to learn?”

As Pao Qing-tian, saviour of the people, shrugs on his heavy overcoat and prepares for a new day, he thinks about his descendant, sweeping all alone.

Thank you. I'm proud of you.

The Lessons I've Learnt

ESF King George V School, Zhao, Rou – 15

Hell, 2024

My throat is sticky and sour when I open my eyes. I swirl my tongue against my cheeks, sample the indent beneath my tongue. Fear, desire and sorrow congealed so densely it clogs the base of my mouth.

I swallow — count off on my fingers, run out. My palms are open and flat and I suppose it's been centuries since I've woken up. There is a sort of bone-deep pleasure within being without living and feeling without thinking. A sort of juxtaposition, really, but justice always comes calling through. I suppose that's why I'm here.

We really are slaves to our temptation, I think to myself as I wet my lips, sample the air. It's ironic for an immortal judge, I know; I chase the tart, tangy smell of citrus and fear and yet again, I think to myself: I never did like hell much.

Agony is an impression. It is a burning of heat and destruction that takes shape as the trembling, fractures of a volcanic eruption. Imperceptible, until it cleaves the sky into halves, then quarters, more if you will, and in a split second, torment is charring through eroding flesh and diffusing into blood cells, fusing with organs once pumping till you are stretched to your limit (muscles, limbs, tissue — taut) and so you are choking with pain.

But conceptualised agony is this: a mass of writhing bodies coalesced into an entity — it shudders. The tormented claw druggedly at each other, each tremor of a limb sending oscillations and vibrations that ripple languidly (push, fall, ebbs out). They see nothing much — do not know anything much save for their affliction, and so there is something so breathtakingly sad that comes with: my eyes (brown), an undulating sea of souls (black) — to watch them spill into the millions and back.

To be a human: intricately crafted organs ticking in tandem like clockwork, true and right. Amalgamation of thoughts and complexity defined through minute mathematical strands of snaking, whorling genetics. It is plain and simple beauty; an astronomical feat of precision to create such a masterpiece and for it to be stripped into a metaphor (the sea of the tormented is an ocean), the world must truly be an unjust place.

Perhaps sentenced to an eternity of damning agony, there is nothing I can do for them but listen, and so I hear:

I hear of a sickness — a malady that ebbs and flows like the current (it drowns).

I hear of a loss so sudden it snatches your breath away within the space of one heartbeat to the next.

I hear of an aching loneliness that settles into your bones like a long-lost friend, it is saying *hello there, I did not forget about you*.

Unmistakably, undeniably, the culprit: a God (rampant).

I find him sitting languidly at a coffee shop, ankles crossed, bowler hat tipped low. He is holding a book and stirs a cup of coffee absentmindedly. There is a lantern drooping at the mouth of the shop; it sways slightly crooked, and I worry fleetingly that perhaps it will be toppled by the breath of an idle, wayward breeze.

He looks up at me then, closes his book and folds his palms neatly on his lap. "Judge Pao." I notice for the first time that he is not a man but a boy. "Your legend precedes you, why are you here?"

His words are humorous to me, and I almost smile. "You've heard of me, you must know why I've come."

The boy-God's eyes are impassive when they find mine — I am reminded of coal. It is sanded into globular beads (hooded), smooth and eerily still and he says to me. "With all due respect, Judge, I did what I had to do."

I feel the slide of a toneless laughter settle against my tongue — this call-and-response, so incessant it has become tedious:

I have seen people like you. Men who will look me in the eye (stand stagnant, solitary) in a field of dead bodies like open-mouthed roses. Do not cease their grasp twirled guiltless around the hilt of a serrated blade (see that it drips with viscous blood). Perhaps they might say that *who do you think I am, I am no murderer*, but then they are lucid beneath a falling, crimson sun and innards are strung as if they are fairy lights: twinkling, twinkling over reaching, reaching (ice-cold) fingers.

As if you had not been standing there all day, waiting to be found. There is no one for miles — not a single person but for you and I.

“Do you know of the disruption you have caused?” I know that you do not. “Do you know how many lives you have ended, because you have flooded the Afterlife with the tormented, and they will always be in agony now.”

“It’s not like that.” He says.

Look how the clock hand swings in perfect cadence despite itself; you cannot stop yourself from telling lies. When the time comes, I will look back to today and consider that look on your face: I suppose the question really is: are you excusing yourself to me, or are you excusing you to yourself? I find myself leaning forwards (you lean back) — I decide then, that I will take us away.

To the left: a haphazard row of machines: stertorous and flickering in mechanical tandem. Their lights are dizzying, and against my eyes they pop like bubbles, bright and swollen.

To the right: a procession of hospital beds — they cram one beside the other beside the other beside the other. Wires and IV tubes fall like paper chains: crumpled, they are branching every which way.

“What is this?” the boy-God says. “Where are we?”

I watch as doctors clothed in blue hurry from one bed to another (it is going from one life to the next); gas particles set into motion — they are inevitably and unchangeably bound to collide and spin. Set off in opposite trajectories, to meet again at some other point in some other moment of some other time.

“Covid, is it?” the boy-God doesn’t reply — turns to watch as a nurse begins working deft fingers at a plastic bubble: it is distended and billowing disproportionately, unshapely with the promise of air. The apparatus is set up within moments and soon, the surface is clouding and misting. Fogged up with breath that is faint and bruising. The patient is breathing, though; at least there is that.

But a little girl dies on the next bed over.

I watched her heart contract — a tremulous, fluttering thing. It is not so much as the beating of a heart but a quiet throb that shivers against her ribcage. It stops then, and it is just like that.

She is clothed in wires that could not bring her miniscule body back to life. “Time of death: 1:12 pm.” I hear someone say, and I wonder how the absence of a noise can be quite so deafening.

There would be dead nerves and inflammatory cells where they should not have been — they will entangle themselves through her brain. You would find whitish-pink wads stuffed up and through her lungs like tawdry roses. They fill up empty spaces where the truth is, it really should have been air.

Now we stand in a field. It meanders on, sunken and lovely.

Someone has decided to stick a flag into the sweet-smelling grass. Then another, another and another and another. “This is what your pandemic has taken,” I say, “one flag for each life.” The boy-God is crying now.

When the sun begins to rise: a crumpled paper bag, pink-cheeked flowers collected from the side of a road — to come here alone (morning dew softens trouser rims). To set down a flag, *I left him behind in a field of flowers*. It is beautiful, I would say. Poetic and lovely; if anything, it is heartbreaking.

To think that in the course of time all the flowers would bloom brilliant and wild one day. To think that there is not a thing in the world that could change: flags that do not (cannot) grow — ends of eras they mark, till the last moment they fall and die against the ground.

I listen to the flutter of cheap fabric. “Is this what you wanted?” I say. “You created a pandemic; did you do it for this?”

The boy-God shakes his head furiously.

The truth is not always as beautiful as a field full of flowers.

Now we are in a parking lot. Its contents: metal trucks (precisely seven), a chain link fence. Beyond, I watch a horizon, clear-cut and unbound — it begins to unravel. “There came a point,” I say, “at the height of the pandemic where there was just not enough space for the dead. Morgues had become exhausted, hospitals exhausted of resources: there was death one after the other and it really did seem like they would never stop.

“Within the solution they found, bodies were swaddled in white and stored in refrigerated trucks. It was hoped they could prevent the fated decay of the human body, and they did; at least there is that.”

For a while, the boy-God does not speak, and when he does it is so soft I am unsure if it was the wind. “Judge Pao, I was so tired.” I wait for him to elaborate. “You’ve seen how they only look outside: material obsession for reputation, fame now, for glory next. To exhaust their bodies: squeeze it so dry as if they could last a lifetime. You know as well as I, they cannot.

“Judge Pao, do they not understand? I don’t suppose they do: we are all that we have, really. The constant within a perpetually fluctuating cosmos (forever impermanent): in the end, there is only nothing but ourselves.”

“The way they forsake themselves — I have not seen one person live completely for themselves, not even for one day. The decision to work: sun is up now, you are awake still. Memories have begun to erode (you know this because you searched it up the other night). A body and a brain drained from another night of sleep that you did not have — these are the people my virus will damage.

“To take their bodies for granted. Overwork it as if it were a tool for them to run, but in truth if there is no body but for you, there is no you but for your body.

“Can’t you see they have broken down (exhausted) already, every defense their own body has built. To damage themselves like this: all they needed to do was to take a little better care of themselves.”

I feel like crying now. “Silly boy,” perhaps in truth the boy-God did care more than I ever showed. “But children cannot look after themselves. Neither can toddlers nor newborn babies. No one’s fault is cancer — still, they have become victims to your sickness.”

We are both in tears now, and the boy-God looks up at me from where he has sunken to the ground. “What do I do, Judge Pao?”

In the end, it is no one’s fault. It is the boy-God’s fault, and it is not because in the end, I do believe he got his message across. The child changed the world forever — there will come a time one day when it begins to recover.

It is also true that my legend precedes me: after all Justice Pao is not a name you receive quite so lightly.

And so when I kill the boy-God, I am afraid that there would never be an end to these tears.

The Trials of Xin Yue

HKUGA College, Choy, Hiu Chi Charis – 16

Part One

It was happening again.

Shadows were creeping at the periphery of her vision – dark tendrils forming eerie shapes. A familiar chill in her bones. Chaotic voices in her head grew louder and louder and louder, like a chorus of ravens that wouldn't stop screeching.

Xin Yue felt as if she was going to black out.

“Go away,” she half-shouted, swatting at the shadows with her arms. “Go AWAY!” A passing servant gave her a stare, which she ignored. *This isn't the time for hallucinations*, she thought. *Father is expecting me.*

Xin Yue dug her nails into her palms. She forced herself to focus. The shadows receded. She tore across the wooden corridors, leaving the shadows behind her.

It was dinner time at the Wen Mansion, where Xin Yue and her father lived. The mansion was a large, wooden house built around a central courtyard. The house had multiple carved stone doorways. Short flights of stone steps connected it to the courtyard. Fish tanks, filled with orange and white koi, glittered in the moonlight.

Xin Yue hurled herself into the dining room, panting. She was conscious of the eyes of her father and the numerous maids, which were fixed on her as she walked to the end of the room and took her seat at the far end of the dining table.

“You're late,” her father, Wen Ming, uttered disapprovingly, with a stern expression on his face. He was sitting at the other end of the large dining table, where plates and plates of steaming food had already been placed.

“I'm sorry, Father,” Xin Yue said, in a small voice, avoiding his gaze. Father hated it when she didn't follow the household routine. She looked away, so that his presence would be less real.

There was dark heavy furniture strung around the dining room — expensive Huanghuali wood — which had always seemed too grand to her. A flow of maids came in and out of the room, bringing new dishes from the kitchen area and then taking away empty bowls – expensive green celadon ceramics. Only the best ever satisfied Wen Ming.

And that affected his expectations of his daughter as well. Xin Yue remembered his reaction when he had first known that she had hallucinations...

It was her aunt, Li Yuet Hei, who had told Wen Ming about Xin Yue's hallucinations. Once, Xin Yue had tried to confide in her aunt about the shadows and the voices, but she only dismissed her concerns. Later that day, Wen Ming had pulled Xin Yue into her room and locked the door behind him as he left, saying that it would “calm her down”. Xin Yue had realized that her aunt had betrayed her trust, and that she had revealed everything to her father.

Wen Ming had locked Xin Yue in her room for a week, leaving her alone and isolated. Without anything to distract her, the voices only became louder, the shadows larger. No matter how much she begged to be let out, her requests were denied.

The brisk footsteps of a servant entering the room snapped her out of her thoughts. The servant walked to Wen Ming's side and whispered in his ear. Wen Ming stood up abruptly. “Your aunt has arrived. Eat your dinner. I will go out to greet her,” he said, giving one last stern look at Xin Yue before striding out of the room.

As soon as Wen Ming was out of sight, Xin Yue got up from the dining table, desperately wanting to get out of the suffocating place. The servants took no notice of her as she silently slipped out of the room.

Xin Yue walked out of the courtyard and into the street to the market area, hoping to clear her head.

The market was empty; the whole area was silent. The town people had all returned to their houses hours before. Where there was usually a bustle of people, fruit and vegetable vendors, rice shopkeepers, and tea merchants, now, all the stores were quiet.

Xin Yue looked up. The sky was pitch-black, like a dome looming over her. She shivered. The dark sky reminded her of the shadows in her hallucinations, threatening to consume her.

She hadn't always been like this. Xin Yue used to love the night sky when she was a little kid. Sitting on the grass, and holding on to her mother's hand while gazing up into the stars used to be her favorite pastime. She tried to do the same now, mentally striving to summon up some childhood memories. None would come. She closed her eyes and pictured her mother's warm smiling face, the only face that had ever brought her comfort.

Instead, her father's face, etched with lines of hate, appeared in her head. His eyes were filled with rage. Flinching, Xin Yue fought the urge to run away. The shadows began to re-emerge, twisting and morphing into monsters. The voices in her head grew louder, all jumbled up, and incomprehensible.

Then, a dizzying sensation came over her. *No*, she thought desperately, before the darkness dragged her down.

When Xin Yue came to her senses, she was lying in a narrow stone-paved alleyway.

The first thing she noticed was the fresh, sweet scent of tea leaves and the smell of fish and shrimp. Still lying on the ground, Xin Yue turned her head to the side, seeing a tea merchant's shop and a dried foods store come into view. Why was she there? She couldn't remember.

The next thing she realized was that her hands were covered with blood, and that in her right hand she was clutching an iron knife with a dark carved wooden handle. She immediately let go of the knife. It fell with a clatter onto the stone flags.

Confused, she sat up — and stared.

Two meters away, her aunt was lying on the ground, a dark red bloodstain spreading on her chest. She was still, making no movement or sound.

Xin Yue was horrified. She felt numb. For a second, she thought it was all just a dream, one of her hallucinations. But the cold sting of wind on her face and the stickiness of the blood on her hands were too real to be just a dream. She didn't touch her aunt. She took a few steps backwards, backing out of the alley. She broke into a wild run, tears streaming down her cheeks.

Xin Yue came to a halt in front of the town mayor's house. She hadn't intended to go there, but somehow her feet had brought her there of their own accord. Before she could stop herself, she knocked on the door.

The mayor opened it. Xin Yue saw his eyes widen and his expression turn to shock as he saw her hands covered with blood, and her eyes shining with tears. "I— I stabbed my aunt," she blurted out.

There was no going back now. Xin Yue knew this would be her death sentence.

Laying on a wooden couch, Xin Yue stared up at the ceiling.

The mayor had had her locked in a room like a holding cell. "It's for your own safety," he had told her, before rushing to her home to talk with her father.

Xin Yue could hear guards outside her door, whispering about what she had done. "*They all think I'm insane,*" she thought to herself bitterly, "*Maybe I am. I'm a murderer.*"

She could still feel the blood on her hands.

A creaking sound jerked Xin Yue's mind back into the room. The mayor opened the door with her father, who entered the room alone and looked at her for some time silently. He made her sit opposite him.

He then started to talk. About the legal matters, about how he was trying to prove her innocence.

It all felt forced. There was no affection. He didn't hold Xin Yue. She stayed silent, sitting stiffly on the wooden couch, listening to his words without truly paying attention.

"What's the point?" she thought. "We both know that I'll be hanged."

Part Two

The early rays of the sun poured through Pao's window, illuminating the mounds of paper piled on top of his desk.

Case files that needed to be filled in with trial proceedings, reports of crimes that were waiting to be proofread, discharges that had to be authenticated...

There was much to do, and work was never over for the Judge of Kaifeng.

Pao heard the door open behind him. He turned to see one of his subordinates, Zhao Hu, entering the room. He had a tense look on his face.

"What is the matter, Zhao Hu?" Pao asked. It was rare for his subordinates to enter his study uninvited, and they only did it when something had gone terribly wrong.

"Did you hear about the recent murder case, Your Honor? The one about Wen Ming's daughter killing her aunt?" Zhao Hu asked. Pao shook his head. Wen Ming... Pao remembered him as one of Keifeng's government officials, one who had risen to power and had obtained riches in a very short amount of time. He had had his suspicions about Wen Ming giving — and taking — bribes, but there was never any evidence against him.

Pao remembered Wen Ming's daughter as a laughing three-year-old, hanging onto her father's sleeve. *She* was a murderer?

"Well, the girl, Wen Xin Yue, confessed that she had stabbed her aunt. She had a clear motive as well — her aunt had broken her trust in the past," Zhao Hu described.

"A clear motive *and* a clear confession?" Pao thought. In his experience, murders were rarely this simple. There seemed to be something... off about this case, but Pao couldn't explain what.

"Your Honor, it has been determined that Wen Xin Yue will be hanged tomorrow evening — without a trial," Zhao Hu continued tightly.

Pao stiffened. *No*. What if the girl was innocent? He couldn't let her receive the death sentence without a proper trial or an investigation. Death is too serious a punishment to dish out lightly, especially to a young girl.

"Zhao Hu, arrange a meeting with the mayor today. I will see to it that Wen Xin Yue receives a trial before any sentence is declared."

"WEI— WU—"

The shout echoed through the courtroom, reverberating through the air like thunder. The girl in the middle of the courtroom flailed, falling to her knees, and began to shiver.

Pao raised his gavel, smooth and firm under his palm, then brought it slamming down onto the table. "Wen Xin Yue! What have you been accused of?" he boomed.

“Murder, Your Honor,” Xin Yue forced out.

“Did you kill Li Yuet Hei, your aunt?” he questioned.

Xin Yue lifted her head in his direction, taking a deep breath before answering.

“Yes. I stabbed her.” Her voice was distant, as if she was recalling a detail taught to her instead of a memory.

“What were your motivations to kill her?”

“I— I hated her. She broke my trust and told my father about my hallucinations,” she shuddered at the recollection. “He locked me in my room for a week because of that. But I didn’t want her *dead*. I *never* wanted any of this.” Her eyes were wide and pleading.

“You say you didn’t want to kill her. Then why did you stab her?”

“I— don’t know— I don’t remember anything that happened—”

Pao narrowed his eyes, leaning forward.

“Explain what you were doing on the night of the murder.”

Xin Yue started to shake.

“I was taking a walk... I was in the market when I passed out. I found myself in an alleyway when I woke up, holding a knife — there was blood. So much blood. My aunt was lying a few meters away. I think she was dead by then—” She broke off.

Pao stiffened. *So she was unconscious.*

“Did you remember carrying out the action of stabbing?” Pao asked, “Can you say for sure that you murdered your aunt?”

Xin Yue ducked her head.

“...I don’t remember stabbing her, or how I got the knife...” she faltered. “But it must have been me, right? How else could she have been killed?”

Bang! Pao slammed the gavel, the sound echoing through the stunned silence of the courtroom.

“Due to the defendant’s mental condition, it is impossible to determine her guilt in this matter,” Pao bellowed, eyes narrowing once more, “This court will carry out an investigation to follow up on this case.”

He raised his voice further.

“Court is adjourned!”

Pao decided to give a lot of his time to the girl. To protect his own reputation, he always met her in the presence of his own daughter.

Two scribes were told to sit behind a folding screen. Pao told them, “You must write down every word that you hear, even if they sound odd or even mad. You must write them all down.”

On the table Xin Yue sat at, Pao placed paper, inks, and brushes — so that she could write and doodle while they talked. He arranged for light foods, fruit, and water to be placed near the girl. The combination of her talking, her writing, and her doodles was very revealing. The environment had made Xinyue feel safe. She had no inhibitions.

In just a week, Xin Yue revealed everything she had observed about her father's character and actions. His multiple masks were identified, and irreparably damaged. Her absolute innocence became crystal clear.

With care, mental relaxation, adequate sleep, and nutritious food — Xin Yue's mental health quickly improved. The voices in her head ceased. She became coherent and logical. Soon, Xin Yue was Pao's ideal witness against her own father.

“WEI— WU—”

The shout echoed through the courtroom, reverberating through the air like thunder once more. However, this time, the person standing on the floor in front of Pao wasn't Wen Xin Yue.

Instead, it was her father, Wen Ming. He was held in place by two guards, one on either side of him, forcefully restraining him as he tried to get out of their hold.

Boom! Pao smashed his gavel against his table, silencing the court. “Wen Ming,” Pao hollered, “Do you know your crime?”

“I am guilty of nothing, Your Honour,” Wen Ming replied, his face impassive and his voice calm.

“Wen Ming, you are here on multiple charges, including bribery. Your acquisition of riches in a short amount of time raises suspicions, as does your rise to power.”

“You have no evidence to support that claim,” Wen Ming responded, in that same collected voice. “What you have heard are only rumors.”

“Your daughter has evidence.” Pao gestured at Xin Yue, who stood on the stage, ready to give evidence against her father. Her eyes were sharp and focused as she stepped forward to speak.

“I saw Father accept gifts and cash bribes from multiple people,” Xin Yue said, in a clear voice. Her face was white but determined.

“My daughter is insane! She doesn't know what she is saying!” began Wen Ming. His calm demeanor had disappeared, and he was starting to act more desperately. His face twisted as he struggled against the guards holding him in place.

“She is completely sane. With adequate care, her hallucinations have gone and she has recovered,” stated Pao, with a frown on his face.

Bang!

“*Explain yourself, Wen Ming!*”

“She is a *murderer*,” Wen Ming spat out, “It should be *her* trial instead of mine.”

Pao saw Xin Yue's expression turn to one of hurt, and he felt a sliver of rage towards Wen Ming. He fought to keep his face impassive.

“On that note,” Pao said, “I believe we have a witness that saw what happened on the night of the murder.” He gestured to a man standing on the side of the courtroom. “Explain what you saw.”

The man stepped forward. He was short and had a steely look in his eye. He wore a long, straight-cut jacket, one that merchants in the market wore.

“I am Zhang Han Yiu. I own the tea store next to the alleyway where the murder of Li Yuet Hei happened. On that night, I returned to my shop and witnessed the entire ordeal,” he said matter-of-factly. Wen Ming's face turned deathly pale. “I witnessed Wen Ming and Li Yuet Hei enter the alleyway. They appeared to be searching for Wen Xin Yue.”

“When Wen Ming saw his daughter unconscious on the floor, he stared for ten seconds, then proceeded to pull out a knife and stab Li Yuet Hei in the chest. I saw him put the knife in his daughter’s hand before leaving the scene.”

“LIES!” Wen Ming bellowed, “IT’S ALL LIES!”

Surprisingly, it was Xin Yue who spoke up next. “Why kill her?” she asked quietly.

“*Your* aunt kept extorting money from me!” yelled Wen Ming, his face turning red with rage. “She knew about my bribery, and kept dropping hints about what she wanted. I KNEW it would escalate,” Lost in his own fury, he seemed to have forgotten that he was in court.

Xin Yue’s face was pale. “So you wanted her gone. You wanted me gone too, and me falling unconscious gave you the perfect opportunity. You could have gotten rid of the blackmailing aunt and the mentally unstable daughter, and no one would have known.” Her last sentence came out as a whisper.

“YES! AND I WOULD HAVE SUCCEEDED TOO, IF NOT FOR HIM!” Wen Ming screamed, spit flying out of his mouth. He seemed to have lost all control of himself.

Bang! The impact of wood against wood sounded once more, reverberating through the astonished silence of the court. Wen Ming looked as if he had been hit.

Finally, justice can be done. Allowing himself to feel a twinge of triumph, Pao raised his voice once more.

“This court hereby finds Wen Ming guilty of murder and bribery, and sentences him to death by hanging!”

Bao's Smile

Maryknoll Convent School (Secondary Section), Sun, Aleka – 16

Bao Zheng never smiles, notices Gongsun.

He has been Bao's assistant for – how many years? Too many to count. He'd even consider Bao a friend. He's seen Bao's smirk, a subtle quirk of the mouth directed to corrupted clerks as they woefully await their punishment. He's seen Bao's fake laugh, seemingly welcoming as he greeted greedy officials who desired his good favour, but only someone who has spent as much time with Bao as Gongsun can notice the disdain betrayed by his eyes. He's even seen Bao's rare face of content, only occasionally shown when receiving gratitude from citizens he'd helped, not originating from ego but from knowing that justice has been administered. Yet he'd never seen Bao smile before, a real smile, one that blooms from happiness, one that crinkles the corners of one's eyes, one that draws two people closer together.

Perhaps it is due to his position as a judge. His stern demeanor has certainly instilled fear and wrung out confessions from guilt-ridden wrongdoers. Still, Gongsun doesn't believe that Bao is incapable of smiling. There must be something that makes him truly happy.

He is on a quest, Gongsun decided, to find what makes the iron-faced judge, judge Bao, smile.

★

'You spent 10 years taking care of your parents right after you qualified for *jinslu*?' Gongsun said in wonder. 'That was incredible devotion.'

'You overstate things,' replied Bao, pouring two cups of liquor. 'They were ailing at the time. I wanted to cherish whatever time I had left with them. I would be heartless not to.'

They were sitting in Bao's garden, relaxing after a long day of listening to appeals. A tall vase of liquor rested on the table between them, surrounded by the fragrance of spring flowers and the chilled evening air. Bao placed a filled cup in front of Gongsun and took a sip from his own. Gongsun noticed the faraway look Bao had on his face when speaking of his parents. Taking a gulp from his own cup, Gongsun probed deeper.

'You must be lucky to have been raised by such wonderful parents,' he prompted.

Bao took the bait. 'I was indeed. We weren't well off, but my parents had high hopes for me. Earned money so that I could read, so that I could go to school. They weren't well educated, but they were the ones to first teach me the teachings of Confucius.' Bao's voice thickened as he reminisced, eyes shimmering as if recalling treasured memories. But his mouth remained a tight line.

'They were honest people. Hardworking people.' Bao took another sip from his cup and sighed. 'At that time, there was a powerful family that controlled basically everything in our town using their wealth. They exploited peasants, including my parents. Made them work without pay. Bribed local officials so that they'd turn a blind eye.' Gongsun noticed a shift in Bao's demeanor. Bao's eyes lost that glazed look. Instead, they were filled with something akin to contempt. 'Most of the peasants were illiterate, and so couldn't file grievances. Those who could had their accounts altered by corrupt clerks.' He downed the rest of the liquor and slammed the cup down. The clang echoed in the night air. 'I couldn't believe the injustice!'

'That was a different time, it's not like that now.' Gongsun tried hastily to calm down Bao. He didn't mean to get him this riled up. Seeing his friend still seething, Gongsun decided this attempt to make Bao smile was a lost cause. 'Let's not fixate on the past now.' He raised his cup. 'To justice!'

★

Gongsun refrained from talking about Bao's past, now knowing that he had such a deep history with and hatred for injustice. Though he wondered, what else might make Bao crack a smile?

The New Year was just round the corner. A friend of Gongsun's, Li, invited Gongsun to his abode, and out of his admiration for Bao Zheng's uprightness, Bao was invited as well.

Bao and Gongsun were received generously. A feast had been prepared for them. Delicacies lined the long dining table. The warm lighting in the dining hall illuminated the conversing faces, and music accompanied the chatting and laughing. Gongsun indulged in great food and delightful conversation, but noticed that Bao was oddly quiet. Bao, who normally could eat a horse at mealtimes, seemed to have a restrained appetite today.

Later, Gongsun found Bao on a balcony that overlooked the streets. Despite the feast and entertainment, Bao seemed to be in a fowl mood. Gongsun found him looking out at the city, backlit by light from inside the house, beard and flowing sleeves swimming in the wind.

Gongsun went to stand beside him, sharing his view of the city. In the streets below, he saw people hanging up lanterns, making firecrackers, and make other preparations for the New Year in a few days.

'Has anyone here displeased you?' inquired Gongsun, unable to understand why Bao was so glum on such a festive day. 'You seemed to have a poor appetite at dinner just now.'

'The feast was delicious, but my, what a display of wealth this place is.' He gestured at the carved pillars, the gold door knockers, the numerous servants inside the house.

'I assure you, none of it was ill-gotten. Li is a silk merchant, and made a fortune from trading all over the Central Land—'

'No, no, I wasn't saying that your friend acquired his wealth by ill means,' interjected Bao. 'I meant I feel out of place here. However delicious that feast was, I mustn't indulge in good food, lest I become accustomed to it. However fortunate we ourselves are, we mustn't forget the struggles of the common man.' Bao mused, looking down at the street again. A column of white steam rose up from a potato vendor's stall, warmth slicing through the evening chill. Passerbys walked closer to the stall on purpose, perhaps to smell the potatoes or feel the warm of the steam, then walked away reluctantly. Young children sat nearby bundled in their coats, drooling at the scent wafting down the street.

Of course! How could Gongsun not have noticed that despite Bao's high government ranking, he has never seen Bao indulge in wealth. He wore commoners' clothing, except to social events. Whenever they dined together, Bao rarely ate meat. Gongsun cannot believe that after being an assistant to a master of observing details for so many years, he didn't even notice this about his daily habits. Embarrassed, and quite impressed by Bao's temperance, Gongsun opted for silence.

★

A tricky case presented to Bao had his head spinning for quite a few days. A servant was accused of murdering his master by a blow to the head with a wooden staff. However, there were no witnesses to the crime, and Bao could tell that the supposed murder weapon wouldn't have been lethal enough to kill the man. Confused by the manner of death, Bao put Gongsun in charge of the autopsy.

Gongsun did as told. As he examined the brain he did find that the man suffered significant trauma to the brain tissue, which could warrant his death. However, he did also observe minor, corrosive damage to the peripheral brain tissue. Normally, such minor observations would be ignored, but if Bao suspects the cause of death isn't obvious... his hunches are usually correct.

Plus, drawing from his expertise in medicine, he might have an idea as to what caused the peripheral damage...

After days and nights of reviewing his own medicinal journals and consulting master herbalists, Gongsun presented the results of the autopsy to Bao: brain damage due to ingestion of wolf's bane, causing the man to lose consciousness and presumably hitting his head on a sharp object, causing his death. Bao, pleasantly surprised to hear that his initial hunch was right, immediately had a suspect – the man's widow, who regularly went into the mountains to collect firewood. Sure enough, When Bao and Gongsun went up that mountain to investigate, there was a patch of wolf's bane to the side of the path, with a spot of dirt at the center of the patch which indicated that someone recently plucked the poisonous herb from the patch.

The widow was sentenced to murder, and the servant was let go. The widow confessed to poisoning her husband, then accusing the servant of killing him after the servant found the husband dead in his bedroom, presumably due to him passing out and hitting his head on a desk corner. However, the servant had still lost the trust of the family and had to return to his hometown, where he must find an alternative way to support his family instead. Nevertheless, the servant thanked Bao for clearing his name.

Gongsun, particularly glad about his own contribution to the case, sought out Bao to celebrate this tricky solve. Yet Bao wasn't as satisfied with the result of the case as he was. 'What good had it brought? The truth was revealed, yes, but was it just for that servant to lose his job?' Bao paced in front of his desk, unable to let the case go. 'Justice that punishes the wrongdoer as well as the innocent is no justice at all. I regret not having done everything in my power to help that servant.'

Gongsun was once again left speechless. Caught up in solving the case, he had forgotten the aim of solving the case – delivering justice. It was then that Gongsun understood, Bao doesn't get satisfaction from solving cases, but from delivering justice to all parties. Seeing that Bao seemed to be consumed by his own thoughts, Gongsun decided it would be best to leave him alone for now.

★

After nearly three months on his quest for Bao's smile, Gongsun finally opted for directness. 'Bao,' he began, as they were reviewing reports one afternoon, 'do you know that you've never smiled in front of me?'

Bao paused briefly. 'I suppose I haven't.' Gongsun expected Bao to continue on with an explanation, but Bao simply ended his sentence there, as if dropping this topic. Gongsun was left exasperated.

'Well, why?' he exclaimed impatiently. 'For months I have been trying to see what it takes to make you smile. But apparently bringing up your parents reminds you of the injustice that happened to them, you don't like indulging in riches, and you only get satisfaction from cases if the ending is just. Is there anything that makes you more happy than – I don't know – justice?' Gongsun can't believe that Bao's only source of happiness is his work. That is just too sad.

Bao suddenly barked a laugh, a deep, throaty sound that had the tiniest hint of humor, a sound that caught Gongsun off guard. 'You've been trying to get a smile out of me for three months? I appreciate that you finally decided to be direct about it.' Shaking his head in disbelief, he continued, 'Administering justice is my lifelong goal. It gives me ultimate satisfaction.'

Bao suddenly put down the report he was looking at, and faced Gongsun to get his attention. 'That being said, it isn't the only thing that gives me happiness.'

Gongsun perked up his ears in curiosity.

'You have been a very valuable assistant to me for all these years, Gongsun, and more importantly a dear friend. And I'm touched that you devoted these three months to find out what makes me happy. You are truly a sincere and loyal friend of mine. The fact that I have you as my friend, Gongsun,' Bao said, looking him in the eye, 'gives me happiness.'

And then, as if he'd done this many times before, the corners of Bao's mouth moved up, the edges of his eyes crinkled, his facial features morphed as naturally as they ever did into an expression that radiated warmth and fondness, an expression that Gongsun finally saw – a smile.



Creative Writing
Fiction
Group 4

The Quarter Moon Disappearance

CCC Ming Yin College, Choy, Siu Long – 16

Another Day, Another Case

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

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

“Silence.”

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

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

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

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

Searching Fortune Market

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

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

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

One Piece of the Puzzle

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

We arrive at what looks like primitive walls from another dynasty, and rural houses in between –Sheng Estate could hardly be called an “Estate”. “But the family inside is living proof this land is still their own,” Pao said, “for what reason would Zi resort to murder, to taint their name forever?” An old man came out and greeted us, “Welcome to Sheng Estate. There’s not much here, but please be comfortable. What brings you here?” “We would

like to ask you about Sheng Zi.” In a moment, the old man’s peaceful face changed to one of desperation. “Please help him!” he pleaded, grabbing Pao’s sleeve. My hand reached out to take hold of the man, but Pao stopped me and let him continue. “He’s innocent! He wouldn’t do such a thing!” “We understand. How can we believe you?” The old man spoke through tears, “Zi is a caring father! He works earnestly to feed his wife and son! Zi is a respectable and knowing man, he considers the estate’s well-being! We wouldn’t be here if Zi didn’t preserve our land!” Listening to the emotional old man, I could hear his sadness, and of his trust. Lord Pao put his hand on the old man, and said, “We are here to find the truth. If you believe in Zi, tell no lies; and if you believe in us, speak the truth.” When the old man calmed down, I spoke. “When had Zi been that day?” “He was tending to his farm, like usual. Nothing out of the ordinary happened! He went out to the market, and came back like normal!” “Does he have any quarrel with the farmer?” “We are neighbours, but he rarely is there, so we don’t talk much. He is always out to settle disputes, I hear.” Pao thanks the man, and says, “One more thing. Have Zi come by since his arrest?”

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

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

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

“The family that has influence over the city”

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

“the family that bought out the market once”

The Jin’s.

Detour

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

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

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

Light beneath the eyes

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

“If that is the case...”

“Hurry, to the murder scene!”

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

“Zi...”

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

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

He Who Illuminates, Crescent Moon

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

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

The Moon Rules the Night

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"An uneducated commoner's remarks are emptier than his own meaningless life. We must put this lowlife in his proper place, before he harms anyone else with his filthy hands." Such strong words, Bao thought.

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

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

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

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

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

"The process does not matter, Bao."

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

"What do you mean, Mister Chen?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Bao, my friend: there's no time to collect the original receipt. Chen at this rate has probably already picked up on what we're on about. Tomorrow, he will sue us, and when we get dumped in court, he will use all of his willpower to try and overturn this case on the top of its head. This sheet is more than enough to prove his guilt. If even THAT doesn't work, then I'll have my trump card ready." Bao felt uneasy, and in an attempt to sway his "friend", Zhou slipped up, and uttered: "He killed your parents, Bao Zheng! Won't you take revenge against your killer who robbed the lives of your loved ones? They should've died a naturally peaceful death, and yet off they went to the afterlife by the scent of peaches!"

This time, Bao knew exactly what was wrong.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Moon and Her Flowers

G.T. (Ellen Yeung) College, Tse, Zhena – 15

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Renzong chuckles at her uncharacteristic burst of enthusiasm.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I knew it! I knew it wasn't natural causes! Who is to be punished for taking away my beloved consort?" exclaimed the emperor, who was thrumming with both anticipation and anger. "I will explain it all in a moment. Please cover your nose and mouth before we enter the garden." Said Bao, handing him a piece of cloth. The door of the glass dome clicked once more, and the two men stepped in. "This place... is extremely deadly. This species of flower you see here, is known as the Angel's Trumpet. A very potent poison and hallucinogen that I've only read about in Lady Ying Yue's botany journal yesterday. If you inhale the scent of the flower too much, you can die." Said Bao Zheng, gesturing to the blooms hanging innocently on their branches. "The flowers are the most potent at night-time, when the scent is the heaviest to attract moths for pollination. However, the Angel's Trumpet contains the highest concentration of alkaloids, which give it its lethal and hallucinogenic properties. According to Lady Ying Yue's journal, she has been knowingly cultivating this species for quite a while, and the toxins accumulated in her body over time, causing her death."

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

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

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

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

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