



Fiction

Group 5

Shackled

Singapore International School (Hong Kong), Chan, Yuk Lui Yaron - 15

*Fortunes left on paper,
a curl of time gone by,
sinners at the crossroads.*

The eternally flaming doors of Hell cast an otherworldly glow on Yama's side profile, outlining the crescent moon on his forehead. He heaved a mighty sigh, unheard by the souls in line, so busily preoccupied with worrying about their afterlife. Whether they would be justly dealt with, in light of all the sins they have committed as a human.

The souls' idea of justice is quite odd, muses Yama. They all have committed so many crimes in their lives. The only difference between souls is that some commit petty crimes, theft and dishonesty and the sort; while others are a little more serious, murder, adultery and such variations.

Yet, all of them expect to avoid any of the eighteen hells awaiting them – that is their concept of justice. I suppose they are as satisfied as they can be, with the most righteous judge of all eternity deciding their fate.

“Sir, good morning. Soul number 918237, Chen Shimei, awaiting your judgement.” The Horse Face Guardian read off a thick parchment scroll, gesturing to a wispy shackled figure behind him.

“Is there even morning in this hell?” came his muttered response.

“Convicted of infidelity, attempted murder, and dishonesty. Executed.”

“Identity.”

“Chinese.”

“Occupation.”

“Scholar.”

“Date of birth.”

“Undocumented.”

“Parents.”

“Undocumented.”

“Siblings.”

“Undocumented.”

That doesn't sound right. No trace of his origins. Like he simply materialised out of nowhere. A frown drew Yama's brows together.

He scanned through the documents, coming up short of any mention of Chen Shimei except for a brief sentence about his scholarly studies, and a detailed description of his crimes. In works of literature.

Unworldly silence descended upon the atrium. He did not care if the spectating spirits and creatures could see the scowl distorting his facial features.

“Fictional character.”

“Dismissed.”

The wispy shackled figure’s chains clanked onto the floor, the sound echoing in the stunned atrium – this has never happened before. The crowd stared, shocked, as the figure disintegrated into oblivion. As if he never existed.

He stormed out of the antechamber, sentries scattering his furious wake.

He let his façade slip. The black complexion, crescent moon and gold-woven dragon robe vanished into thin air. A wispy shackled figure retreated to the Great Yama’s private quarters, head bowed and shoulders hunched.

His footsteps whispered across the yellow clay floor, bringing him to his library. It was a translucent duplicate of the Forbidden Library, expanding and crumbling in sync. Before his eyes, new shelves gracefully sprang up, filling with newly written scrolls on its own accord; there were cubbyholes littered with ancient codices, crumbling with age, becoming more gossamer-like by the second and slowly receding into the serpentine labyrinth of history. His eyes were involuntarily drawn to his own section, filled to the brim with literature dedicated to his legends. The gold-embossed titles still gleamed brightly, defiantly, against the tides of time.

He scoffed – the truth blended in so perfectly with gruesome hyperboles and fabricated tales of a later dynasty. People did not like him. They were merely in love with the concept of him – a fair judge, a master solver of mysteries, a superior Sherlock Holmes, a breath of fresh air in a corrupt palace. No one had ever known him as a person, at all.

People remembering, but not knowing.

He was preserved as a fictional character, a legend. But he was once a real person. No one recognised that.

The thin golden bands loosely encircling his wrist tightened, almost imperceptibly. As if he needed the reminder. The reminder of the incorporeal stories shackling his incorporeal soul to this incorporeal in-between realm

For Justice

Singapore International School (Hong Kong), Yuen, Lok Sum Sherrie – 15

Justice.

Humans spit the word out, regurgitate fanciful, groundless ideas others shove directly down their throats about justice, daring to insult its holiness. Politicians, barristers, judges, the police, are a disgrace, self-perceived know-it-alls who are merely three-year-olds claiming to be Einstein and Edison.

There are two people in this world who understand justice. Judge Pao, and I, his devoted disciple.

Justice is not beautiful. Justice is not sweet. Justice is not flowers, chocolate or candy. Justice is not the facade, the false promise humans make to pursue their biased form of “fairness”.

Justice is real, so real. Justice is an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a life for a life. It is the debt imposed on humans who mistreat others and leave unscathed, paid with the currency of blood.

Justice is the system of pain, and pain is both pleasure and the punishment for pleasure. Mosquitoes drink human blood to their heart and stomach's content, but at the swift swat of the human hand, their exoskeletons are shattered. A child throwing a tantrum hurls spaghetti strands at his parents, enjoying their momentary disgust, but his father soon unlatches his belt, drags him off the chair and leaves a swollen red patch on his back. Serial killers are relished from the sight of innocent blood, but descend into the eternal flames of hell at my hands. Pleasure from punishment, punishment for pleasure, a cycle that had existed since the world began spinning about its axis.

And so I live for one sole purpose. Justice. To inflict it upon the entire world. Be the pillar of morality.

I can do wonders for this broken world.

I, Judge Pao.

Officer Wong Yuet-King

Hong Kong Wan Chai Police Office, 26th July 9:17am

“Target: Judge Pao, an anonymous serial killer responsible for three killings so far. Judge Lam Hui-Ming, housewife Tsui Yuen-Mei, ganglord Ma Tsz-Lok and a cryptic warning of more. Currently, we have no evidence pointing to his identity nor appearance. Nor any trace of him from the crime scene.”

I nod to the beat of officer Lai's monotonous articulations. Monotonous, but with weight. A serial killer let loose, in one of the world's most secure cities, a criminal by the alias Judge Pao, an unknown man playing with fire.

“Officer Wong Yuet-King, focus.”

“Yes, sir.”

Officer Lai swipes his fingers on the screen, revealing three photographs, each of blood letters painted on walls, lopsided and dripping, followed by a scruffy drawing of a crescent moon.

“For justice – Judge Pao”

The ominous declarations of justice never failed to send chills down my spine. A serial killer, I repeat, a serial killer, claiming to be just and righteous. In what world does this broken logic exist?

The man is a psychopath.

Lai swipes to the side again, this time, a shot of three adults lying limp on the cement floor of an alley in a peculiar shape. A tall man bent into a curved line, with a woman lying straight next to him, their heads and feet

touching. Another shorter man lay straight in a diagonal line, his head set on the woman's stomach. Their faces pale, their eyes closed, knives stabbed perpendicularly into their necks, red with overflowing crimson blood.

Crimson like the burning flames fueled by the gasoline of rage engulfing my brain, burning down to the embers of determination to catch this culprit. I draw in a short breath, appalled at this Judge Pao's ruthless measures.

"Our goals are direct but will be difficult to achieve. First, garner information and profile victims. Second, work out connections and the criminal's motive. Three, catch him before he strikes. Simple, but complicated."

Meeting over. We break into teams. Embark on the endless search and demand for autopsy reports, forensic reports, witnesses, victims' personal information, last whereabouts.

This man is unfolding a game of chess, with the perception that the police force are his frontline pawns.

Except, we are pawns that will snap his fingers off once he attempts to move us.

Lam Hui-Ming

Restaurant, 15th July 2022, 1:30pm

The sweet yet astringent aftertaste of Cabernet Sauvignon lingers in my mouth as I fork down a piece of porterhouse steak, feeding it into my eager mouth, letting the tender meat melt at the touch of my tongue.

This. This is what it feels to be rich. Humans live, breathe and desire for luxury. Money holds more weight than anything else in the world. More than conscience, kindness, honesty or justice. Humans can betray their conscience, humans can be cruel, humans can be liars, humans can be unfair. But humans cannot live without money.

And I am no exception.

And so when I received the call to come here today, right now. I had no hesitation. I saw an express route to luxury and I took it. With open hands.

Chan Man-Ho was offering a whopping 15 million HKD for essentially one single statement of acquittal. Anyone would jump at the chance. Even against conscience or justice.

"So Mr Lam, I believe we have a deal?" his secretary asked.

I reached to shake his hand.

High Court, 18th July 2022, 3:13am

"The Court hereby pronounces defendant Chan Man-Ho acquittal. Case closed."

I can feel the silent uproar of protest within the enclosed room, I will be slandered by the media, questioned by colleagues, perhaps even removed from the job.

But I'm achieving the ultimate meaning of life.

Who cares?

Restaurant, 25th July 2022, 1:30pm

"Thank you for your cooperation Mr Lam."

I hear his voice from behind, the secretary who had offered to treat me to yet another extravagant lunch. He claps me on the shoulder heartily.

I turn around, "it's my pleas..."

Darkness.
Tsui Yuen-Mei

I could've had everything. A master degree in finance from arguably one of the most prestigious universities in the entire world. I could've been a wildly wealthy financier.

I was met with the devil of love. A devil disguised in the iridescent veil of bliss, one who ripped its disguise apart as soon as I got married and delivered our first child. One who deceived me into sacrifice, where I gave up on my future in business and reduced myself to a housewife.

A 27 year-old. Not even past 30. Washing dishes, doing laundry, vacuum-cleaning. I'm constantly drenched in sweat 30 hours a day, when I should be leaning back in an ergonomic chair in a perfectly cool office, coffee delivered to my desk at my beck and call. Serving an arrogant man who prides himself in believing he holds up a family at his own hands. Singlehandedly raising a 3-year old brat who believes the world revolves around him.

Any normal human would be driven crazy. Imagine holding a master degree and being enslaved to performing brainless household chores for the rest of your life.

Why does everyone sympathise with Cinderella but not me?

And so I do what I do. The high pressure steam bottled inside of me needs to be vented out. The pure loathing and rage I have for my life has to escape.

I realised I needed a vent for resentment.

A live punching bag that could take the pain away from me. A live punching bag that could scream and shriek and cry all the indignation and tears I couldn't.

It was pure coincidence and convenience that I had a 3-year-old.

And so I did what I needed to. For me to survive. I punched, I kicked, I banged him with rattan.

Home, 25th July 4:56pm

The sizzling sound of the iron on cotton, I push it round and round down the pant legs.

Darkness.

Ma Tsz-Lok

Bar, 23rd July 1:27am

"I'm sorry, boss, I won't..."

I smash an empty beer glass bottle against his head. Shards of green frosted glass lie motionless on the floor, innocently reflecting the dim light from the dark club. Droplets of red accompanied the shattered glass. Grave goods for the useless, weak dog lying dead on the floor.

I wipe my hands on the jacket of whoever was next to me.

"Clean up," I order.

I whip out a pack of cigarettes, light up one and stick it into my mouth. The intoxicating scent of smoke infiltrates my mouth as I strut out the club.

I open the door and make my way into the alley, looking left and right then back straight.

Darkness.

Wong Yuet-King

I drag my footsteps back to our apartment in Kowloon. A whirlwind of thought clouds my mind. Judge corruption, child abuse, gang murder. Where's the correlation?

The connection lies in crime, lies in degraded morality, lies in injustice. Lies in the need for proper legal action and charges and imprisonment. Not for a man to barge in, stab knives into their throats, and claim he did it for justice. Justice is the quality of being fair, yes, but justice is forgiving, justice is realising humans make mistakes and a moral compass that guides them towards greater good.

Justice is not "resolving" crime with greater crime.

Lives can be changed. But lives can never be retrieved once taken away. Humans only have one life, do they not deserve chances to turn over a new leaf, to turn to justice?

I stick my key into the lock, twist the doorknob and push it wide open. A family dinner that I have no stomach to attend.

"Welcome home!" Dad exclaims, throwing his hands into the air. My relatives greet me warmly, until the commotion subdues to the ringing noises and thoughts in my head.

"Here", Dad shoves a glass of champagne through my intertwined, trembling fingers. "What maniac was it today?"

"Serial killer," I whisper back into his ear.

"Hey hey hey, Yuet-King, now's not the time to talk about work ah, family dinner time. Put everything else away at least for now ok?" My uncle, my main source of embarrassment, butts in.

"Let's talk about something more fun! Like how I decided your name." My uncle's smile etched across his face, one I desperately wanted to wipe off and duck-tape so he would stop bragging about it.

"Why haven't I heard that before? Yuet-King is such a pretty name, respect for the moon." My grandmother comments, she turns her head to face the open window, "isn't it beautiful tonight?"

She points at the crescent moon hanging sky, an alert guardian over the stars and night sky, she then cups her hand against my cheek, "just like my granddaughter."

I force out a small upturning of the corners of my lips.

"Beautiful..." my uncle stands up and breathes out in admiration, and I catch a glimpse of the tattoo of a crescent moon on his ankle, one he got and displayed in public on my 3rd birthday, which he proclaimed to be a symbol of his eternal support and love for his niece.

You see the reason behind my embarrassment?

That night, I bury myself under my blankets and embrace the darkness. But my mind refuses to submit to unconsciousness. Thoughts flow relentlessly through my head like a river running through the folds of my brain. I can't control them, overwhelming my head with thoughts on justice, murder, and the moon.

Judge Pao, the real Judge Pao, had the symbol of a moon imprinted on his forehead. A respectable man and symbol who's legacy of upholding justice continues to inspire, motivate and pump blood and life into modern society.

How can our morals be so distorted? How can we be such a disgrace to our ancestors who have set such an example?

Hong Kong Wan Chai Police Office, 27th July 10:43am

“Sir, from the reports we have received, all three knives seem to have the same logo carved onto them, that of local brand Leung Brothers. Currently, there is only one small scale shop located in Mong Kok.”

“Off we go.”

“Yes, sir.”

One step closer to locking handcuffs on this madman.

Leung Brothers' Knife Shop, 27th July 10:43am

We step into the narrow door of the shop, the bell rings and an old man pops out from behind the counter. “What do you want?” The old man asks indifferently, wiping his sweat off from his worn-out, yellowed T-shirt.

Officer Lai whips out his police warrant card and shoves it straight in front of the old man’s eyes.

“Police.”

The old man raises his hands in surrender and falls onto his knees, when he speaks, his voice is trembling, like a shabby, fragile piece of glass on the verge of shattering.

“I...I didn’t do... do anything sir. I run an honest...honest business.” He shakily enunciates, sweat dripping down his forehead.

“I never said you didn’t, we are here to seek your assistance in an investigation. Anything you say right now will potentially become court evidence, so if I were you I would be completely truthful. Has someone stocked a large number of knives with you before the 26th of July?”

The trembling old man hobbles back to his counter with difficulty, slips on his thin-rimmed glasses and reveals a thick catalogue book from under the counter. He flips through the pages, squinting through the dusted glass of his spectacles.

“26th July...there was a customer that bought exactly 10 knives of ours. People typically buy two to four...”

“Show me the model.”

“Yes, sir.” He hobbles directly to the shelf in his store, scrutinising quietly and eventually brandishing a long, pointed, butcher’s knife.

My brain begins whirring on its own, the knife I had seen in Officer Lai’s announcement, the knife I had seen in the report, the knife I was staring into now. Staring with contempt. At how this very knife had deprived humans of their right to live. Every human deserves to live, even criminals. Every human has a life. A life that cannot be retrieved once taken.

I hurl the knife at the ceramic floor. It clashes with the strident, ear-piercing clang of steel.

Every human deserves to live.

“Who was it,” I demand, my voice quivering ever so slightly. My eyes are steeled. I ignite the fuse of rage in myself, beginning with a spark, leading to a fatal explosion.

The man squints harder at the book.

The fire grows, inches closer to the bomb.

“Wong Man-Lok.”

The flames are extinguished instantly by the downpouring of water at a subzero temperature, incessantly overwhelmed by a drastically different emotion. One of shame, one of denial, one of fear.

I drag my footsteps back to our apartment in Kowloon. A whirlwind of thought clouds my mind. My name, his name, the moon. A petrifying correlation.

I stick my key into the lock, twist the doorknob and push it open narrowly.

Officer Lai shoots out from behind me, snapping handcuffs on Wong Man-Lok.

My uncle.

He thrashes in retaliation, curses at Officer Lai, spits profanities straight into my face, kicks straight into the shins of Lai.

I shut my eyes, wait for his denial to come, wait for the desperate plea and clarification. That it was not him. That he had nothing to do with it.

It never comes.

I hear footsteps, footsteps of compromise. I open my eyes again. His silhouette fading into the blinding light pouring in from the open door. So bright yet so dark.

All I can manage is stare. Stare at the tattoo of the crescent moon imprinted on his ankle. As innocent as pride for a niece.

Had it truly been for me?

Or an everlasting facade of perceived justice.

Justice is beautiful. Justice is sweet. Justice is the key to civilisation, the sacred promise humans uphold to vow to pursue inner virtue and morality.

Justice.



Creative Writing
Fiction

Group 5

Xiao

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Yes, your honor,' Zhangxi confirmed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Am I dead?" Arthur asked nervously.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Nay, he was right. I ended up regretting my immature foolishness for the rest of my life. To be frank, being cursed to an eternity of torture is more like a grand reward. At least the pain distracts me from my eternal guilt," Linxiao grinned again as if trying to mask his self-pity, "say, Arthur, was it? How old are your relatives?"

"My grandma is 85," Arthur answered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

New Tales of Judge Pao

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Why was he here? What could he do here?

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

Ironic.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He believed.

He hoped.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Families with elders working to the bone to keep their families alive, only withered away as the rich got richer. Adults who toiled tirelessly to keep the ship afloat soon came to the bitter realisation that irreparable damage was caused by those in power. Children rotted away under a barrage of malnourishment and poverty, never actualising whatever potential they had.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Not in this world.

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

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

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

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

More time passed. Years, decades, centuries.

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

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

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

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

And so, Bao ignored the voice.

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

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

"What."

"Judge Bao! Honor's mine! You see—"

"Get to it."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Do nothing."

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

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

"But—"

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

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

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

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

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

Bao turned to leave.

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

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

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

“Why won't it stop?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Bao blinked, somewhat dumbfounded.

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

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

"What is it, child?"

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

Bao offered gentle words of comfort.

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

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

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

An instant reply. "Yes, of course."

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

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

"Mei..."

"I'm sorry for asking—"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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