



# Fiction

Group 5

# Good Things

*Dulwich College Beijing, Rhyu, Suah – Year 12*

It was the soft approach of spring when I found the object buried in my backyard.

Obviously, I had no business digging holes in my backyard. It was hardly mine: by doing this, in fact, I was facing the fury of an elderly landlord. Dirt was splattered everywhere, and I'd known for a fact, even before we started, that the stains would be impossible to get off the walls.

The children had wanted to dig for treasure, though. They had been obsessed with some kind of detective mystery show.

"Daddy! Daddy!" The youngest one pulled at my arm. "I'd like to see some *gold*."

I hadn't had the heart to tell them no. Who would? It wasn't as though we would actually find treasure: the possibilities were abysmal. I would be lucky if my children didn't contract some kind of virus from the hard-packed dirt.

Regardless, they had looked at me with the pleading eyes that no parent could quite refuse. I'd sighed, taken the shovel from the storage room, and had handed both of them gloves.

At the daughter's insistence, we'd dug a meter or so deep. It was getting to me and I had to get up early for the market sale tomorrow, so my mouth had opened on a barely-formulated *let's stop* when the shovel had clanged against something hard.

The vibrations were hard enough to shake me to my teeth. I stopped, winced, and stared down.

"*Baba*." The girl said. "Did we really find treasure?"

"Gold!" The other one echoed. I blinked, leaned down, and felt the floor: it was hard to the touch.

*No way*, I thought, and dug it up with my nails. Something snapped but I was too curious to care; it was an old wooden box, reinforced with metal trimmings, about as long as my forearm.

"Treasure?" My children quipped.

And that, simply, was how I'd found it.

—

I couldn't hold down a job. I had no wife. I had two children in a one-bedroom apartment with bare walls and little heating.

That didn't mean I was stupid. This was a relic.

The box lay on the table, the lock smashed but the wood carefully undamaged; the contents placed neatly in a row for the world to see. It was a set of rocks or some kind of hard white material: oddly shaped, but that was obvious as it had come from an incredibly random box.

"Daddy, do you know what it is?"

I turned. My son stood there, dressed in clothes too big, looking at the cluster of rocks with interest: although it had initially been dulled from the disappointment of it *not* being a rock, it wasn't something common, either.

"Do you think it's treasure?" My daughter said.

"I'm not sure, hon."

"It's exciting, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is."

They were tucked into bed. I read them bedtime stories and I turned off the lights, and only when they were sound asleep, did I find it safe to return to the table, watching the white shard silently.

A dug-up relic, stored in a box still intact?

...how much would it cost?

It depended on what it was, and how long it had been there—by the state of the box, quite some time—but it looked as though it could cost quite some bit. I knew people who could help me sell it and fetch it at a satisfactory price. People who wanted it for personal possessions tended to have the highest price. It was illegal, yes, but it cost...

A lot. Worth the electricity bills. The phone bills. The house. The children and their innocent quips about wanting *this*, wanting *that*...

This *shard*, whatever this was... it could do something. It probably wasn't something important, but it probably cost more than I did, too. I just needed to wrap it back into the box, sell it as some kind of mystical Qing dynasty object, and it would help us for months, maybe years.

Money was the first thing my mind went to—money was the first thing any man's mind went to. How could it not? Relics like this surely cost millions.

I rolled the objects in question in my palm: all different shapes and sizes. Most about as long as a finger joint. They were ragged and old and dirty and ugly but it probably cost enough to make us a living. The box looked old; the shards themselves looked old; everything looked old.

That was good, right? The older, the more valuable. I'd heard stories about friends digging things up on the Great Wall, finding it to be some object of importance, and being set for life. They'd sold it to illegal collectors, because the government didn't reimburse them for what they found. In fact, you had a higher chance of getting arrested for destroying public land.

I'd found it, with my children. It was *mine*.

Money had literally rolled over on its belly for me to rub. I turned over the box and felt around for anything that could serve as a clue to what it would be, if it would be any value. Faded letters marked the sides but I could hardly make it out.

It was valuable. It would cost money.

It looked like a fortune.

—

"Do you think," I mused as nonchalantly as I could, over a can of cheap beer, "You could dig up a treasure and sell it?"

One of my work partners sat opposite on me on a crate, holding his own can; I watched with half-asleep eyes as he chugged from it and slammed it down onto the table, wiping at his mouth hastily with the back of his hand.

"Treasure?" He said, finally. "What's this about?"

"Nothing."

"Doesn't sound like nothing."

"Just answer the question."

The coworker leaned back, stared at me for a long time; I stared back, wondering if the kids could hear us now. I'd put them to bed, but that didn't mean they were asleep. If they could hear us, what would they think? Would they be confused, worried, sad? Disappointed?

"Depends what it is." He said, finally, caving in. "If it's a piece of paper, it's pretty much useless, innit? But something like, say, *gold*—"

"Not gold."

“Shame.” I took a deep drink. He watched me, all the while. “What’s it, then?”

“None of your business.”

“So there *is* a treasure.” He laughed at the expression on my face. “What do you want to do, sell it? Where’d you find it, anyway? It could be just any random thing they stuffed in there...”

“It was in a box.”

“And?”

“It looked old.”

“And?”

“It was... I dunno what it was.”

“How’d you expect to sell it, then?”

I shrugged. It wasn’t as though that hadn’t come to mind, but that wasn’t relevant: it was easier to put it back in the box and package it as something that wasn’t. What would it be sold as? A shard of pottery from the 1200s? A Qing Dynasty ornament for the high-class women? Anything could work, as long as it looked the part.

“Can I see it?”

I looked at him, then to the children’s room.

“Alright.” I conceded, at his curious glance. The table drawer was emptied of its contents: box and all. The white shard blinked at me curiously. “There it is. Could be worth nothing. I just dug it up outta nowhere.”

“Did you now?” He picked it up with clumsy fingers, damp from the precipitation that clung onto his beer can. “Looks cute. Show me the box?”

He’d worked at a museum before. I handed it to him and he examined it, muttering a soft *ow* at the splinter that pricked up defensively.

“Anything?” I asked.

“Dunno. From the state of it, it looks pretty old.” He glanced up. “I think this would make quite some fortune if you sold it well enough. I can get a few people to look over it, maybe try and find out what it is...” He leaned closer. “Hang on, is this *bone*?”

“What?” I wiped my hands on my pants. “My *kids* touched that.”

“Old people bone is *very* expensive.”

“Now you’re joking.”

“I’m not, cross my heart.”

“You must be joking.” I laughed. “There’s no way. Why would a *shard* of bone—that’s not even a full human being. That’s not even *half a human*. Why would anyone...”

“See for yourself.” He set the box on the table and gestured to me; I reached forwards, cringing, and wondered if it was even alright to touch old bone. Shouldn’t it be... sanitized... or something of the sort? Touched with gloves?

Not that I believed him, but...

“The anatomy of the hand, I’d think.” He puffed out his chest. ‘I could be a doctor.’”

For good humor, I said, “Uh—huh.”

“Plus, look at all the spongy material—that’s no animal. Human bones are more porous, and less curved. I dealt with a lot of those. Human remains for sure. You know moving it from its original location can be a crime, right?”

I ignored him, focusing on the way the box beckoned at me. I reached forwards, a little tentatively, and shook the contents. They clattered around.

“Are you sure?” I repeated.

“Of course I’m sure. I can’t examine it in detail, but I’d assume so. And the box—”

I frowned. It seemed my headache had worsened. “What about it?”

“Very expensive.” He turned the box. “Heard of *zitan* wood?”

“Like, red sanders?”

“Uh—huh.” It *did* look red, to be honest. But how... “You could sell this even now for quite some bit, but back in the dynasties it was probably worth as much as gold. Royalty-level, so whoever this is, they’re quite rich. It’s still one of the rarest, I think.”

My heart skipped a beat. *Gold*.

He looked up at me and smiled. I felt my heart plummet to my stomach for an instant, and for a moment I pictured him crushing it between his fingertips, or taking a run for it, but instead he placed it gently down on the table and folded his hands.

He looked like he knew a lot. I’d known him since I moved here, so of course he would.

“...are you going to sell it?”

I didn’t say anything. I didn’t need to: I’d been caught red-handed.

“It could be quite expensive.” He suggested. “Illegal, though.”

I nodded wordlessly.

The children’s face lingered in my mind, their faces bright, their eyes wide with curiosity as they clutched at whatever contents lay inside the box.

It was for them, I decided. Who cared about some old person’s bones?

My mouth had opened to respond—who cared about guilt, I wasn’t *guilty*, it was some old person that had died years ago—but someone said my name and called me *dad* and I thought, what kind of dad would do this?

A one that cared about his family, I thought.

Something touched the back of my shirt and pulled at it gently. I turned, startled, the pounding of my head making nothing better. My child stood there; her eyes were wide, like she’d seen something she shouldn’t have.

“...are you going to sell it?” She asked, quietly.

Or *heard* something she shouldn’t have, I thought. Great. This complicated matters.

“No. Of course not.” I lied.

“Lying isn’t good.”

“I’m not lying.”

“Selling people isn’t good.”

“I’m not selling people.”

“Do a good thing, *baba*.”

I watched her. It was all for your own good, I wanted to say, but what parent wanted to trample on their kid's dreams? It wasn't as though I could force her to do anything. How was I supposed to tell her—to tell any of them—that we weren't rich, that we could do better, that all it needed was putting this on the market? Who *cared* about this, anyway?

"It's not a bad thing." I muttered. "I found it. It's mine. It's for you. It's for all of you..."

"Of course it's a bad thing." The child said. "It's a person. Are you going to sell a person?"

Was I?

*Could I?*

—

The government officials came on a Friday.

It was just after the children had returned from school. I'd been anxiously waiting, every day, wondering when would be my last chance to see the mysterious remains. I'd put it back, and I'd set up tape around a fence and then I'd called the government line. They'd come in a few days. Justice was swift, after all.

As I held on tightly to the hands of my two children and walked past where we'd first dug up the relic, even I could tell there was something different.

The sirens, for a start, and the policemen, the special-looking professionals who'd turned up, a few people in suits. Someone dressed quite expensively who didn't look like they were from around here.

*Ah*, I thought. So they'd come.

I'd called them, but no credit to me, of course. They probably didn't even know I was here, because I'd reported anonymous in case of any legal troubles.

The children gaped. "What's that?"

"Daddy's friends are here." I told them. "Do you want to go to the playground?"

It was a subtle plea, and one they recognized, as they instantly left with their bags still on their shoulders. I stood there, wondering just what it was I wanted to do here.

Maybe, I thought, just watch. I stood there and watched. The police cars still ringing, the intercoms buzzing, and someone yelled something about bone: I saw a flash of something white and several men in gloves hustled by.

The sight wasn't the most interesting in the world. Just a few people digging around for a relic I'd already dug up, and a lot of them seemed to want to go deeper and wider to see if there was really nothing there. Based on the looks of it, it seemed like there wasn't much. They looked as busy as ever.

A lot of hassle for just a few bones, but that was just my opinion.

As I stood there, watching, I felt someone come up beside me; it wasn't the police, and they didn't bother me, so I didn't bother them, either. I simply stood there.

"...penny for your thoughts?" They said, finally, after a stagnant pause.

I blinked. "Oh." After a moment, "Nothing much."

It was the man in the expensive suit I'd seen from earlier. He was older than me, around fifty or sixty, and had gloves on. A hat, too. The one who didn't look like he was from around here.

"I can guess." He laughed. "Must be a hassle, huh? All this noise..."

"No, it's alright." It was strange of me to speak like this. "Noise isn't rare here. The new sight is, though. Never seen anyone important."

“Someone anonymous reported a relic here.” He laughed. “Important—it’s pretty damn important, alright. They’ve got all hands on deck for this.”

My heart skipped a beat. “Is that so?”

“Yep.” He glanced at me. “Are you curious?”

“Naturally.”

He closed his eyes. Laughed again. He had an air to him that made me wonder if he was really from the government, or from any legal facility. I wondered what he was here for, whether it be buying the artifact itself or some kind of personal connection.

“It’s the thirty-fifth discovered piece.”

“Sorry?”

“The thirty-fifth discovered piece.” He repeated. “Of Bao Zheng.”

The name entered my ears and sunk deep into my bone.

I jolted.

“B— Bao Zheng?”

“Yes.”

“*That* Bao Zheng.”

“Yes.”

“I... how come...?”

I’d thought it was some kind of important person, and the box had confirmed it. But I’d never considered it to be something like that, something of such a big *scale*—

For a moment, I felt glad that I’d reported it.

“Ah. Well,” The man said, snapping me out of my thoughts, “He’s just an old man now. But back then, he had a lot of political enemies, you see, so his family cut him up into little pieces and scattered him around China so that the enemies couldn’t dig him up and do godawful things to his body.”

I’d never heard *that* before. “Huh.”

“Seems like a large hassle for a guy who existed ages ago, right?”

I jolted. “What? No, of course not. He’s someone of utmost importance. I can’t possibly...” He looked like he wanted to smile; I swallowed my words back again, clearing my throat instead. “Sorry. It must be funny, for you to see someone talking like this. Especially not someone like me.”

“No, no, nothing’s wrong with it.” The man smiled. “I’m just relieved, is all.”

“Relieved?”

“Yes. I thought people would have forgotten about him, but I’m glad they remember him. Everyone remembers him, not just us... not just his ancestors.”

“Anc—?”

He ducked his head and placed a finger on his lips, his eyes glinting. *Shh*. “I just wanted to see,” He continued, quietly. “Who’d reported him. You could have sold him, you know. He’d make quite the price.”

“Oh. I...” So he’d known. I wasn’t surprised. “...you can thank my children for that.”

His gaze shifted towards the playground. There were few children there, especially due to the loudness of the site next to it, so it was obvious who my children were: the boy and the girl on the swings, laughing. Talking animatedly. The kind of kids a father couldn't refuse.

"You're right," He said. He certainly laughed a lot; he laughed now, too, just as the sirens cut off abruptly. His words, thus, seemed louder than the others. "But I must thank you too. It seems as though the legacy of Bao Zheng lives on."

"You think?"

"Yeah." He said. "Small or big, good things are good things. And what you did there—that's a good thing. No matter why you did it."



# Judge Pao and the Modern Day

*ESF Sha Tin College, Wang, Andy – 17*

“Objection!”

She blurted out, cutting off the Prosecution. She quickly added, “Irrelevance, Your Honor.”

The prosecutor glanced over. Unmoving, she stared at the judge.

Judge Fernand peeked out over her spectacles. “I’m listening, Ms. Li.”

“Your Honor, this trial is about my client’s involvement in company embezzlement, not any extramarital affairs that he may have had previously.” Li rattled off, determined to end this line of questioning.

The prosecutor sighed and turned to face her. “His lack of faith clearly demonstrates his innate greed. This is extremely relevant to the case.”

“I disagree. “

“Don’t we all.”

“Enough.” The judge called. “Objection overruled. Carry on, Mr. Kain.”

“Thank you, your honor.” Li caught the faintest hint of a smirk on Prosecutor Kain’s face. *Dammit!* She thought as she eyed her client, sitting meekly in the defendant’s chair, nervously answering the questions. *He’s still hiding his life from me. How does he expect me to help him if he’s not letting me be prepared?!*

“Thank you, your Honor.” Kain stepped back to his corner and plopped down on the rickety wooden chair. “That’s all from me.”

Judge Fernand turned her attention on Li. “You may now begin cross-examination.”

Li drew a deep breath, focusing on the pressure, expunging her mind and clearing her thoughts. Slowly exhaling, she stepped over to her client, and began. “Mr. Clay...”

...

“Mr. Kain, Ms. Li, as we are out of time, the court will provide one more day of trial. The bailiff will notify you of the final date. Court is adjourned.”

Judge Pao sat on the soft woven mat, the wind flowing in through the open window and softly caressing his face. He toiled over the documents on his table, crossing out words with his ink brush and adding in corrections and addendums. The tea he brewed this morning laid untouched, its warmth long lost to the cool breeze outside. Judge Pao’s eyes furiously worked over his stack of parchment, determined to weed out any small errors and to present an irrefutable case. If he was unable to convince the Emperor this last time, he grimly thought, at least he’d already had his affairs in order.

For the past few months Judge Pao had been investigating a newly appointed official, charged with taxing the villages on the outskirts of the city. Pao had always been interested to hear the reasons for his promotion, as he does with every other official. However, this time, no one was able to give him an answer.

Which meant backroom deals, bribes, favors, and everything that looked upon Judge Pao’s morals and spat in its face. So, he started digging, especially when the official’s lifestyle became more extravagant, purchasing goods he had no business buying on an official’s salary. And so, his suspicions were confirmed. The villages were taxed incredibly hard, with every available coin and grain whisked away, leading the villagers to fend for themselves. This man is the absolute worst of all that Judge Pao despised, and although the Emperor may be running out of patience, he would do his duty in removing corruption, especially one that forsakes the people for his own gain.

The sun moved into the seventh Shi of the day. Judge Pao glanced up, swept all his documents into a pile, and hurriedly left his small hut. He dodged and weaved through the wagons and buffaloes, flowing through the throngs of people in the bustling street, reaching the entrance to the citadel. The guards, seeing his official robes, hurriedly pulled the gates open and accompanied him to the palace doors.

In front of the imposing doors he had grown so accustomed to, Judge Pao took a quick moment to compose himself. This was it. He would succeed. Failure was not an option. Taking a breath, he nodded at the guards, who bowed and pulled the doors open.

He crossed over the door threshold...

Thwack.

Judge Pao raised his head quickly, startled. Had he done something wrong? Was the Emperor not expecting him? Turning his head, he scanned the room. At first, he recognized nothing amiss.

Then, it all came crashing down.

The unfamiliar colors, the abnormally dressed officials, the Emperor's seat replaced by a table, occupied by an unfamiliar woman, her clothes black and silky, a miniature hammer in her hand. He stared at her, confused. Had he stumbled upon a funeral? Did he mistake the time of his meeting? Though before he could speak, arms grabbed him and pulled him roughly to the back, out through the doors again.

Pao found himself face to face with a stocky man, clad in tight fitting sky blue...robes? Whatever he was wearing, he was pointing and speaking in what Pao believed was Chinese, but with such an incredibly hard to understand accent. Unable to comprehend the man's actions, Pao just stood there, staring at him.

"Look, sir, if you want to attend the trial, you'll need to use the visitors entrance, not the main entrance to the room."

Bailiff Johnson explained exasperatedly to the man in traditional robes.

"Sir, you really need to move. We'll need to use the door soon."

No response.

*Isn't that wonderful.* Johnson thought. *Is he just doing this on purpose?*

"Last warning, sir. You need to move."

Still no response.

Right as he was about to grab the man's arm, the doors to the courtroom flew open with a bang. Startled, both men turned, with the robed man dropping the bundle he'd been holding in his hands. It rolled and unfurled across the lobby floor, its contents lines of indecipherable symbols.

As the courtroom emptied, most people who exited blew by without a single glance. The last person to exit, however, bent down and started helping the man collect the scrolls. Johnson moved in to intervene.

"Ma'am, you should let me. I'll de—"

"Thank you, Bailiff. But I'll be quite fine." Li smiled. "By the way, the judge was calling for you."

"O-Okay. Good day, ma'am."

"You too."

Walking back into the courtroom, Johnson moved over to the judge. Judge Fernand took her glasses off, sighed then rubbed her eyes.

"Still no news on that witness, Chen?"

Johnson shook his head.

With all the scrolls gathered and rolled, she handed them back to the man, who bowed in gratitude. On closer inspection, she realized this was no ordinary man. His composure, outfit, and even the words on his scrolls seemed to suggest he wasn't average. She thought he seemed familiar, but clearly no one she'd ever met was like him. Dusting off her suit, she was about to leave when a sudden thought struck her.

*Traditional robes? Scrolls? The righteous aura?*

Whipping out her phone, she tapped furiously on the screen, stealing glances at the man every now and then. Finally, she reached the page she was looking for.

[Bao Zheng - Wikipedia](#)

[Judge Pao \(TV Series\) IMDb](#)

[Watch Judge Pao online at onlineTV](#)

*Impossible.* She thought. *A cosplayer, maybe?*

She enlarged the photo of the man's face, and marched over.

"Hey, you. This is who you're dressing up as, right?"

The man stared at the phone like he'd never seen one before.

"You know, it's cool and all, but maybe just get a studio to roleplay in." She continued, "People have jobs to do here."

He remained silent. Then, opening his mouth,

"What is this you're showing me?"

Judge Pao surprised even himself as the words came out of his mouth. Come to think of it, this is the first time he's spoken in this new place. He had thought communication would be impossible, what with the accents of the people here. But it seems the woman in front of him could understand.

"It's you, isn't it? Or at least, who you're dressing up as." She pointed at the image on the small glowing...jade plate? Marble tablet? Whatever it was, Pao had never seen it before.

"I'm not quite sure what you're trying to say." He responded, surprising himself. Somehow, he could understand the language of this place, despite having trouble before.

"What I'm saying is, you're dressing up as Judge Pao."

His eyes lit up. "You know of my name! You must be here to guide me back to the Emperor then. Please send him my fullest apologies and lead the way."

She looked completely befuddled.

"...Is there a problem?"

Staring in his eyes, the woman started trembling. Then, she let out a hearty chuckle and slapped him on his arm.

"Of course you'd stay in character. Well, goodbye then."

As she turned to leave, he hurried to catch up with her.

"Please wait. You know my name, which must mean I'm still in the palace. Why else would you come find and assist me?"

She shrugged. "I was being nice."

"So please continue."

"Sorry, no can do. I've got cases and clients that I need to handle. If you ask the guard, they'll give you directions."

*How could I when I don't even understand them?* Pao thought.

Pao didn't realize they were leaving the building as they talked. Putting his thoughts aside, he glanced up.

**HONK!**

It was as if an army of geese had invaded his ears. Screeches and honks could be heard assaulting his senses, dropping him to his knees. Unintelligible chatter and speech clouded his mind. Otherworldly music played from impossible sources around him, barraging his head with the dissonant cacophony of noises. The ground proved no respite either. His reality crumbled around him, as he watched horseless carts race each other down black tracks designed seemingly

specifically for them. He watched colors change in blinks of the eye, and large, shiny birds hover in the sky far above him. It was too much.

She had been checking her phone when she heard a thud next to her. As she glanced over, she noticed the man lying on the ground, eyes rolled up into his head. She rushed to support him and move him back into the lobby of the courthouse. *Sunstroke, maybe?*

As she looked for a guard to watch the man instead, she heard a small groan behind her. The man slowly opened his eyes and locked on to her eyes intensely.

“You collapsed back there.” She hurried over, handing him a bottle of water. “Here, drink this.”

He took the bottle, but appeared like he was unable to use it.

*Doesn't know how to open a bottle. She considered. Fainted when he went outside.*

*Just...just maybe.*

She cautiously sat down next to him.

“When you say you’re Judge Pao...you mean you’re the real one?”

He scoffed at the question. “The real one? There are no other Judge Paos. Of course I’m him.”

“And just to confirm...what year is it today?”

“Why, today?” He tilted his head, considering. “Why, 1034, of course.”

“...”

She stared at his face, deadpan.

“Be serious, please. What’s the year currently?”

“I just told you. It’s 1034. How do you not know the year?”

She took her phone out and opened his Wikipedia page and asked him a series of questions. He answered them all correctly.

She put her phone back and took in a deep breath, then sighed.

“I can’t believe I’m doing this....” She muttered. “But I’ll do it anyways.”

Turning to face the judge directly, she started to explain the situation to him.

What the woman, no, Li, told him was incredible. To think he’d be in the future, to be able to witness China’s eventual prosperity, was incredibly humbling. Pao wished to read these futuristic laws they have in place now, and to meet the current Emperor. But it seems like it’d have to wait.

“So, to sum it all up, I’d like your expertise and assistance on my case.” Li finished, handing Pao a pile of papers.

“The problem I’m facing is that the star witness won’t testify. I believe it’s because of threats against his person, but I can’t prove that.”

Pao studied the pages in front of him. It seems like the defendant is charged with multiple acts of armed assault, but the only witness refuses to testify. He dropped the page and picked up another, studying the people the defendant was connected to.

...

Li was awoken from her slumber as Pao tapped her on the shoulder. She groggily sat up and noticed that the sun had set and it had been 4 hours since they sat down.

“I believe we may have our suspect.” He handed her a piece of paper with ancient Chinese characters on it. She stared at the paper, dumbfounded.

“You’ll have to explain it to me, I can’t read that.”

“Very well.” Pao swept the other paper to one side. “It intrigued me that a witness, who by all accounts is an upstanding citizen, would refuse to testify. So I looked deeper.”

Pao handed me two photos. One was a young man, the other a photo of a Police Lieutenant.

“The young man is the witness’s son. Otherwise normal, he was caught defacing a wall. The one on the right was the arresting officer.”

Li sat back, thinking about the connection between these two and the defendant. Then she realized.

“The Lieutenant! He’s threatening the witness with his son!” She exclaimed, standing up.

“Correct.” Pao wrinkled his nose. “The defendant is a friend of his, so he thought to protect him through threatening to charge the witness’s son with charges that, while false, would place him in the system for a long time. Truly despicable.”

She stood up and grabbed Pao’s arm. “Let’s go.”

“Where to?” He asked, standing up and smoothing out his robes.

“To the precinct. We’re going to have a chat with him.”

Pao was still not used to the future. The cramped cabin of the horseless carriage left his stomach unsettled, though his desire and will to stamp out corruption left this feeling behind. He stared at the imposing building, which was supposed to symbolize justice and order, house a corrupt enforcer of the law. Following Li, they made it to the top floor, where the offices were situated. Pao spotted the balding Lieutenant from the drawings, and so he made for him, with Li following behind.

Lieutenant Brown tapped away at his keyboard, finishing up his logs for the day. He was just about to close his computer down when he heard footsteps, gradually growing louder, then shapes appearing outside his office, with his door being thrown open. He instinctively pushed back and placed his hand on his holster, before realizing he had left his gun in the armory. He could only watch as that lawyer walked in, with a...is that Judge Pao?

“Explain yourselves!” He roared, pushing his chair back and towering up to intimidate them. “Explain the meaning of this!”

“Sorry, Lieutenant, but we need to have a word with you.” The lawyer explained. *Damn her*, he thought, *these meddling...*

The Judge Pao lookalike stepped up. He seemed unfazed by the Lieutenants attempts, appearing simply...disappointed?

Judge Pao looked at the Lieutenant with disdain and sadness.

“You, sir, are an officer of the law. You uphold justice and provide security for the people around you, do you not?” He asked the officer, feigning kindness.

The officer gulped and stammered “O—Of course, it’s what I pledged to do.”

“THEN WHAT WERE YOU THINKING, THREATENING AN INNOCENT MAN WITH HIS SON?”

The Lieutenant recoiled from the sudden outburst, moving to the corner of the office. The façade of understanding and kindness now reduced to anger and contempt.

“YOUR JOB IS TO ENFORCE THE LAW, AND TO UPHOLD IT.” Judge Pao continued, with his voice thundering across the small office. “NO ONE IS ABOVE THE LAW, NOT LEAST THOSE WHO ENFORCE IT.”

Pao looked at the officer huddled in the corner, and lowered his tone.

“But I believe you were misguided. There is a chance for you to make it right.”

The Lieutenant raised his head.

“Let the son be tried for his actions, nothing more, nothing less. But do not threaten the witness with false charges.”

The man nodded quickly.

Judge Pao stared down at the man, then sighed and offered his hand out.

“I trust you are an honorable man. You took this job for a reason, and I believe you’ll redeem yourself.”

The Lieutenant nodded again and clambered to his feet.

“Then it seems it’s settled. Good night, both of you.” With a sweep of his robes, Judge Pao disappeared.

Li glanced back at the Lieutenant, then hurried after the judge. But by the time she reached the street, he was already gone.

“In light of recent testimony, we, the jury, unanimously decide that the defendant...”

“is guilty of all charges upon him.”

After the trial, the witness thanked her profusely, though she didn’t have the heart to tell him it was her who managed to end the threats against him. She thought about the judge, and the short time they spent together.

“I wonder how he’s doing...”

“The Emperor will see you now.”

Judge Pao blinked and found himself back in the palace, outside of the audience chamber. He vaguely remembered something about the future and a corrupt lawman, though it seems more like a dream. Whatever it was, the important thing now was to convince the Emperor of his case, and to get the corrupt official removed.

The doors swung open, and there sat the Emperor.

Judge Pao bowed, and stepped into the room.

# A Mothball's House

*ESF Sha Tin College, Wong, Hay – 17*

A well-respected personage is Magistrate Fong, head of all fourteen branches of the Judiciary; equally well-respected is his wife, Madame Fong, mother of fourteen children to carry on the Fong family name.

“If only you would hurry up, my little pigeon, the waiters at Dorsia won’t wait for anybody. Not even for someone as well-respected as me.”

“Oh — but, bear-bear, the mink won’t brush up! The moths have eaten the lining all to pieces!”

“The coat? What a trivial thing! How women trouble themselves over the smallest of matters! You shall have a new coat right this evening, my little sparrow.”

“Oh! Oh! You don’t mean that, do you, dear?”

“My silly little duckling! I always mean what I say. I have never made a promise I failed to keep. Now, please — get a move on. Wear this coat for now. It’s very cold outside — you’ll catch a chill.”

“Oh, bear-bear, I know I can always rely on you to protect me.”

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“Don’t worry about the boys at the door, by the way — I’ve paid them off. Prize money!” The Magistrate pats his pocket with a self-satisfied smirk. “Your sentence, then. Three months?”

“Three months instead of thirty years, in exchange for thirty million dollars? You strike a hard bargain. I cannot refuse it. If you’ll take this, Your Worship—”

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“My little warbler! What do you say to a play on this fine evening?” the Magistrate bellows up the stairs, closing the door and placing his yellowed wig on a nearby stand purchased especially for this purpose.

“Oh, bear-bear, I don’t know if — I’ve got some mending — what if the children want—”

“I’ve acquired us tickets, little songbird, for nine this evening. Why don’t you get dressed? Wear that blue mink I bought you last week. I do love a woman in mink. Oh, and the red silk. Make sure you’re wearing that red silk.”

“What play are we going to see?” Madame Fong asks as soon as she can get a word in sideways. “I don’t want anything too gory. None of that fire and blood and anguish. Those are so irredeemably gloomy.”

“Oh, it’s *A Doll’s House* tonight. I know you’ll adore it. You do love your little dolls. It’s by that Danish playwright — or is he Swedish? Ibsen — I don’t suppose you’d know who that is. You never troubled your pretty little head about all that vapid Literature back in school.”

Madame Fong puts on her gloves. (It is a cold night outside.) The electric heater by the stove has reddened her cheeks to a feverish ruddy glow. The Magistrate strips off his carmine robes of office and shrugs on a jacket with unfashionable glossy lapels that is two sizes too small for him. They venture out into the winter chill.

“Shall we drive tonight, or will we get the chauffeur to take us there?”

“Whichever you please, my kingfisher. You look adorable in blue.”

“Well, I’ve certainly fished a king,” she giggles, reaching over to straighten his glossy lapels.

The Fongs’ chauffeur is a ‘reformed criminal’, a triad member trialled for murder who evidenced his remorse to the Magistrate with a king’s ransom and was subsequently acquitted of all charges. Madame Fong does not know this. She knows him only as a buck-toothed boy with a good sense of direction and a bad habit of scratching his armpits in polite company. (Both are direct consequences from his years with the 14K; a former courier, the chauffeur also developed a nerve disorder from narcotic use.)

“I think I can drive tonight,” he says, brushing off her fleshy red-nailed hand. “I only had three gins at work.”

Madame Fong does not comment — does not let even the slightest appearance of disapproval cross her brow.

They get into the stuffy interior of the car. The Magistrate turns on the engine; Madame Fong arranges her mink coat. They drive in silence.

Sundawn Road, on the peninsula, is renowned for bad traffic. By law, private cars must yield to public transport. The Magistrate has no such scruples. Down goes the accelerator. Past goes the car. In no time they are at the door of the Theatre.

“After you, little heron. How long your legs look! I adore your legs.”

They enter and sit in the second-front row. The lights go down.

*“Do you suppose I am going to make myself ridiculous before my whole staff, to let people think that I am a man to be swayed by all sorts of outside influence?”* Helmer loftily asks his wife.

“What a noble man!” the Magistrate exclaims loudly in the ensuing silence to his wife. Madame Fong is petrified with embarrassment. The actor playing Helmer looks directly at the Magistrate.

*“He’s so proud of being a man — it’d be so painful and humiliating for him to know that he owed anything to me. It’d completely wreck our relationship,”* Nora murmurs. Madame Fong fidgets. The Magistrate glares at her. “Sorry, dear — I can’t see very well from here,” she whispers in response.

*“When I lived with Papa, he used to tell me what he thought about everything, so that I never had any opinions but his. And if I did have any of my own, I kept them quiet, because he wouldn’t have liked them. He called me his little doll, and he played with me just the way I played with my dolls.”*

Madame Fong dabs at her eyes. It is the Magistrate’s turn to fidget. Fidget he does, cracking his knuckles and stretching his legs, to the irritation of the woman in front of him.

“Let’s go, Ann.”

“—Go? Now? Before the performance’s ended? Isn’t that — isn’t that unspeakably rude?”

“It’s ridiculous and dull. A domestic squabble. Not even a well-crafted play.”

Madame Fong has no choice but to get up, head hung, and to hobble away on her heels. (Louboutins, red-soled. His gift to her for their 18th anniversary.)

Outside the theatre the Magistrate storms across the pavilion to his car, parked squarely across two stark yellow lines. He flings the door open for his wife and sits down heavily.

“Where are we going?”

The Magistrate makes no reply. They drive. The lights of the city blur into a formless mass. Madame Fong screeches.

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“FATALITY ON SUNDAWN ROAD —SEVEN MORE INJURED.”

Madame Fong folds the newspaper cutting away. Her eyes are tearless, peeking out from her tomb mask of bandages and plaster. The Magistrate’s sister takes it and rises from her hospital cot.

“What *did* happen that night?”

Madame Fong raises her shoulders in a shrug.

.....



“Next case!”

“Your Excellency! The Jade Emperor and the Immortals versus Wu Cheng’en: motion to appeal!”

“Denied. Next case!”

“The Jade Emperor and the Immortals versus Pu Songling!”

“Next case!”

“The Jade Emperor and the Immortals versus Cao Xueqin!”

“Next case!”

“The Jade Emperor and the Immortals versus Fong Yee En!”

“Next case!”

“He has a Writ, Your Excellency!”

“A Writ?”

“A Writ! Here, Your Excellency! May I approach the bench?”

The *yama* of the Seventh Gate looks up. He takes the Writ.

“You — you are Fong Yee En?”

The Magistrate — for indeed it is he — looks rather the worse for wear. He wears his carmine robes of office, in tatters, and his lapelled jacket, in shreds. A good third of his face is crusted in blood and his arm is broken. The devil-bailiff who hauled him in gives him a vicious kick in the rear.

“Speak when you’re spoken to, wretch!”

“I am Fong Yee En, though I have not been addressed thus for a long time. In my past life I was a Magistrate of the City. I present here a Writ, an heirloom passed down generation to generation in my wife’s family. It invokes the right to an audience with the Lord Rescriptor Pao.”

The devil-bailiff makes an abhorrent shriek of laughter. “The right, you say? Foolish man. You have no rights here.”

“Silence!” screams the *yama*, the purple veins in his purple face popping. “The writ is genuine. Take him to the Lord Rescriptor.”

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“What are you going to do, now that His Worship is dead?”

Madame Fong turns weakly to the journalist, who leans over the railing of her garden fence with a microphone. “How did you get here?”

“Never mind that. Are you going to move out?”

“Yes, I suppose so. I’ll start packing up what he’s left me and leave this city. The children will go to live with my relatives.”

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Dragged in front of the Lord Rescriptor, Fong Yee En makes nine obsequious kowtows.

The Lord Rescriptor does not say a word. He sits on a dais, on an unassuming chair, at a low bench; he holds a brush in his hand and steadies the paper with the other.

“Your Excellency! Here before you is Fong Yee En, holder of a Writ granted to your descendants.”

Some time passes. Fong scratches his knee. At last, the Lord Rescriptor Pao stops writing and raises his head to gaze at Fong.



“Madame, it really is time to go.”

“Just one moment!”

She stands and makes to depart, pocketing her brush, before a flutter of brown catches her eye. It burrows into the plush blue fur of her mink coat.

“No! You’re not taking that! Not his last present!”

A swift brandishing of the brush; a satisfying crunch; an ooze of yellow hemolympathic slime.

# Alana

*Korean International School, Hilton, Dominic William – 16*

We received a case earlier today. A woman named Alana had mysteriously died, and I was appointed with my co-detective, Yun, to investigate. It was Yun's first time, but I promised to help him if anything went wrong. We visited her place of residence, and the air just felt like jelly. You could cut the tension with a knife, even though no one was home. We scanned the upstairs bedroom, the room that Alana had since childhood. It was tragic to see someone's belongings hours after they'd passed. Alas, no trace of Alana. There was ancient literature littered across shelves and pages spread across the floor. Some of them had Alana's writing on them, and I collected them as evidence. One of them was a short story written by her about the death of a friend. We currently do not know if this friend in question is real, but the description of their death, an acetaminophen overdose was detailed and visceral, so it was something notable to being back to the police. In the room, there wasn't a single trace of blood, and there was no evidence of a violent crime. It was silent outside, but it made us anything but calm.

Yun was making a lot of noise shuffling through Alana's messy arrangement of discombobulated pages, so I asked him what he was doing. I was looking away the whole time because I was going through her phone, looking for signs of crying for help. Yun didn't respond to me, so I thought nothing of it and assumed he was just as busy as me. Then the shuffling stopped. It took me a while to notice, but the silence felt louder and louder the longer I left it. I turned to look for him but he was nowhere to be seen. The sun beamed through the blinds and lights up where his shadow once was.

I immediately felt this soul crushing feeling of impending doom. It felt as if Yun was never even there to begin with. I cannot even remember what his face looked like. My desire leave the room became more and more urgent as I began to feel dizzy and the walls seemed like they were closing in. The door shut behind me as I left, and I couldn't open it no matter the force I used. Yun came running out of the kitchen with a disgusted, desperate look on his face, bolting up the stairs and into the room as fast as possible. The wind trail behind him made my heart sink. I can't explain why, it just felt awful and completely shrouded me in darkness. I still couldn't get in the room, and Yun was in there. I slowly made my way downstairs, and there was Alana, on the kitchen floor. She had a small, pharmaceutical looking bottle in her cold, static hand with pills spilled around the floor, but the pills on the floor didn't fill up even half of the bottle. I began to feel weak, the air felt thicker and thicker every second. Then I woke up inside her room, back where we were in the beginning. Yun was there, in the same place where he was shuffling through papers before. I urged him to come to the kitchen to check if Alana was there, but she wasn't. No pills, no bottle, no trace of Alana. We went back to the police department to ask about the Alana case, but they were confused and told us that they hadn't received a case about anybody named Alana for many years.

# Flooded

*Korean International School, Mannion, Catriona Louise – 17*

The gentle breeze caressed his skin as Pao strolled along the river bank. He enjoyed these moments away from the hectic life at the palace, to once again reconnect with nature and himself. The people in these rural areas cared not for status or titles but for work and family. The genuinity of the village people allowed his mind to reset. As he walked past, they would call and greet him warmly, oftentimes striking up a light-hearted conversation about whatever trivialities occurred in their daily lives. He continues his walk, breathing in the slightly cold air, the scent of wet blades of grass engulfing his lungs, pushing out the old smell of incense which he often inhaled back at the palace. Crisp crunches from his sandals against the sandy path echoed in the quiet. Pao soaked in these moments he had to himself.

But the life of a high-ranking palace official can never stay quiet for too long. Judge Pao looked up at the sky to see storm clouds approaching from afar. Knowing how long it takes to reach the palace, he called it a day and began his journey back, saying goodbye to the calmness of rural Kaifeng.

By the time he had reached the palace, the rain had begun pouring down quite heavily. He opened the gates to the main palace only to be greeted by other officials and footmen running around in a panic. He listened to their words of jumbled words of anxiety and concluded that a flood was spreading across the city. A flood? Judge Pao had trouble believing this. With Kaifeng being so close to the yellow river the emperor and his officials made sure that when they built on this land, they would do so in a way that would prevent the city from flooding. All documents of land modifications had been thoroughly inspected to ensure nothing would go astray. Some documents inspected by Pao himself.

With this doubt in his mind established, Judge Pao made his way to the nearest balcony and, despite the heavy rain, went stood outside and inspected the land. Sure enough, a flood could be seen even from the palace. The water levels rising so quickly it was visible from kilometers away. Pao took one look at the raining sky. He concluded that this was just a passing storm. A strong storm but one that would pass within the next few hours. He nodded to himself before closing the balcony doors and making his way to a nearby writing desk to complete some of his previous work.

Just as he had thought, the rain stopped after just a few hours. Once the sky had cleared up, Judge Pao left the palace and left on his journey to the rural areas once again. The flood remained high and showed no signs of draining away on its own any time soon.

When he reached the rural areas, he noticed how the water levels were indeed higher, confirming his theory that the cause of the flood had been from around these hidden areas. Those living in low-lying huts had long already evacuated to the mountains. Judge Pao knew they were safe but half of his heart still ached for their destroyed belongings and homes. The other half of his heart had already begun worrying about the damage in costs they would have to face from the destroyed crops but he pushed these thoughts to the back of his mind and focused on the current task at hand.

He looked out at the river and its tributaries. As to be expected, the homes of a particularly powerful family in the area stood strong, unwavering before the tons of water surrounding it. But something caught his eye while looking at the picturesque homes. Each house had several pavilions extending from the central living space. Upon further inspection, these pavilions were being built directly on top of the river. Brand new pavilions spanned along the tributaries at regular intervals. The sheer number of them shocked even Judge Pao. There was no way the government would allow so many pavilions to be built in such an area. He approached the central one and confronted the owners.

Pao was greeted by a server and proceeded to explain who he was and his reasons for the sudden visit. He was invited inside while the server called for the master of the house. Judge Pao once again explained the situation to the master who reacted aggressively, shouting and claiming that it was his land therefore he could do as he pleased with the land. Judge Pao, being used to these reactions, responded calmly and asked to see the documents for the land. The master found a copy and handed them over. Judge Pao took the documents without reading them and excused himself.

Once Judge Pao reached the palace, he immediately called for the demolition of the pavilions. With his position in government, such an announcement was accepted and off the footmen went to carry out his request. Pao placed the

document on his desk and waited. He looked out at the flooded city and the glittering full moon above. He once again nodded to himself and the wait for the demolitions began.

Three days later, Judge Pao was approached by one of the footmen that was sent out. The footman explained that one household refused to take down their pavilions. Pao excused the footman, not asking for any further information, and turned to the document on his desk. He inspected the deed for the first time since he got it. At a glance, it was a fully legitimate document but upon further inspection, Judge Pao found a flaw in its legality, thereby proving it to be a counterfeit. He called back the footman and told him to go demolish the pavilions, not under request but as they were illegally built on unowned land.

Over the next few days, the flood began to recede. The Emperor could be heard celebrating and praising the gods. That was fair enough and Pao was perfectly fine with not being credited for his work.

One day, Judge Pao had gone in to officially document the demolition of the pavilions for these records should be kept. As he entered the main hall of the palace, he heard the emperor talking with some of his advisors. Pao approached them and asked what they were discussing. The emperor himself explained to Pao how he felt that they should express their gratitude to the gods for allowing the flood to recede after all these weeks. Showing gratitude to the gods was nothing out of the ordinary, perhaps another parade or a holiday for the people to all show their gratitude. These were the ideas Pao thought the emperor would say but what came out of His mouth was nothing of the sort.

“I shall be issuing a blanket amnesty to all the criminals of Kaifeng.” announced the emperor.

Judge Pao stood quiet for a second. He processed what the emperor had just said.

“We shall also promote all citizens of rank. That includes all civil and military officers. Promote them all.” the emperor continued proudly.

Once again, Judge Pao stood and processed this information. A blanket amnesty to all criminals and a promotion to all officers. The logic made no sense to Judge Pao but the other advisors were cheering and praising the emperor. Incompetent yes-men.

The Emperor, encouraged by his advisors, went on, “giving our citizens a second chance and new opportunities. Yes, the gods will be very pleased to see this. The flood has reformed our city. From today, we shall show the gods that we have become better followers thanks to their punishment. From today, a new China is born. From today—”

Judge Pao suddenly interrupted the emperor, “Your Majesty, do you think abandoning our justice system is the most appropriate way to go about this?”

The emperor, not used to being interrupted, was taken aback for a moment but He valued what Pao had to say so he let him continue.

Pao read the emperor’s expression and went on, “These criminals you plan to set free are criminals for a reason. Justice is not to be taken lightly. And what about these promotions you plan to give out? Our government has a system for a reason. There is only one way to rise through the ranks and that is through meaningful contribution to our society. Acts of crime should be punished. Acts of virtue should be rewarded. Do you not concur?”

The emperor considered these words thoroughly. It was easy to see that He was weighing the two options in His head.

Seeing the emperor not fully convinced yet, Judge Pao made one more statement. “If we so easily set justice and meritocracy aside, how can we be so sure that will be where it ends? We should stand true to the system we have worked hard to maintain,”

After listening to his advisor’s words, the emperor accepted that Judge Pao made a valid point and decided to not go through with His plan. The other advisors looked at Pao in awe, wondering how he just got away with practically scolding the emperor for His decisions. A newfound respect for Judge Pao was born within them.

Judge Pao stayed with the emperor and the other advisors for the rest of the meeting. Once they were excused, Pao walked out of the palace and made his way once more to the countryside of Kaifeng. The gentle breeze caressed his skin and he once again set off to stroll along the riverbank.

# Unfolding a Jewel

*Korean International School, Yau, Long Wai Ambrose – 16*

The night train towards Guangzhou rolled into Hengyang station as the clock struck eleven. Samantha, having endured an overtime shift, was standing at the eerily quiet platforms as the dimly illuminated windows flew by. With a long screech, the train came to a halt. The doors bounced open and Samantha stepped onto the carriage with only a few passengers. She rested on the hard seats and placed her handbag to her side. A group of unkemptly dressed young men rushed into the carriage just as the train prepared to depart. The doors slammed shut. Cries were heard.

The train started to shift away from the station. It would stop twice before entering the empty countryside. She remembered that it would stop twice more in the deteriorating, disappearing villages past midnight. At the first stop, Hengnan, there were a few people who boarded the train and one or two who alighted. She recalled one or two carrying huge sacks. At the second station she was on the verge of falling asleep when she heard a few footsteps, after which the carriage dimmed as it passed through the vast rural area.

As the sun rose above the fields the train approached Guangzhou. Samantha's eyes opened. Nothing around appeared to have changed. She glanced at her smartwatch, and plucked open her leather handbag. There was no clinging sound she was used to. She scrambled through the bag and realised her diamond necklace was lost. Trembling, she scanned the seats around her in disbelief. Her eyes magnified. It was nowhere to be seen.

As the train stopped she dashed out of the train and ran along the quickest way she found on her phone to the nearest police station. Panting, she violently dragged open the door and bolted into the report room. The door slammed shut. The staff greeted her.

'Sorry mister, I have lost a ... a necklace on a train. I think it might have got stolen by someone. It was a diamond necklace. It's very important to me. It is not just because it is very expensive. My husband gave it to me a long time ago and now he has cancer and only has a few months to live. The necklace even has my name crafted on it...' she sobbed.

'Alright. From where did you take the train?' The officer enquired empathetically.

'From Hengyang.' She murmured, trying to suppress her tears.

'When did you board and alight the train?'

'Around 11pm yesterday, I forgot, and around ten past seven today.'

'Were you sleeping during the ride?'

'Yes, for the most part.'

'Don't worry. We might be able to get a CCTV clip and that might help find your necklace back, hopefully. May you provide us with your name and phone number? We might want to contact you for more information.'

'Samantha Leung, 6801-6779.'

'Thank you. You may leave.' Samantha shuffled out of the room, but unable to revolve around the trauma, she stood outside of the police station like a statue, her head staring down, her eyes still.

The lead in the investigating team walked sternly out of the police car. Samantha's eyes rotated towards him as he confidently pulled open the glass doors and stepped inside the metallic-looking building, then into the lift. He emerged into the investigative department office, and following a warm greeting gave a brief conclusion to one of the cases the team was investigating for the past weeks with great appreciation of the members' efforts. The usually severe-looking team smiled in unison.

'And this time, I would like to give a special thank-you to Yan Zhang. He has been an excellent investigator throughout many of our past cases. Not only is he very cautious with his decisions, he is also eager to find new

evidence if he thinks what is known is inadequate. These are appreciable qualities that we should adopt more often.’ He said.

At this moment, the main computer in the office made a ‘beep–beep’ sound. The investigators gathered around the screen with Yan in the front getting shoved by those behind. ‘The victim is downstairs ... uh ... doesn’t sound too complicated,’ he commented.

‘Yeah, the thief simply took the necklace away. I wonder why nobody spotted him.’ Yan recalled from the CCTV clip of the carriage.

‘Was he threatening?’ Anbo, an apprentice, asked.

‘Doesn’t appear to be.’

The car arrived at Changning station under the gentle midday sun. It was a quiet station built next to a quiet street, where one could hear the butterflies dance between the dense bushes adjacent to the narrow, uneven pavements. Yan knocked on the door of the station office, staffed by only one middle–aged man with a long grey beard and dishevelled hair.

‘Are we sure we should go here?’ Anbo whispered.

‘Why not?’ Yan replied.

The door swung open.

‘How are you?’ Hailed the station manager.

‘Sorry to interrupt you but we suspect a thief who stole a necklace from a woman on a train exited through here. The train arrived here around 2am last Friday. The thief was wearing broken plain white clothes. Do you know who he is?’ Yan inquired.

‘I think I recognise who you are talking about.’ He responded sincerely.

‘Do you know anything about what he usually does, and where did he go after leaving the station that night?’ Yan asked excitedly.

‘Not much, but I might have heard about him discussing with a person he works with in the farms here about needing more money. That was like two or three months ago and I might not remember correctly but here you go anyway.’

‘Thank you very much!’

‘Thanks for visiting!’

‘“Needing more money”,’ remarked Anbo. ‘What can that tell us? I’m wondering. Would he be doing work now?’

‘We need more information to find him out of the hundreds of people working around here. I think he might have been very urgent in selling the necklace away. It might be a good idea to ask the station manager if there is someone who sells those around.’

Yan delivered the question.

‘Well there is! Follow that street on the left and walk along that to the centre of the village, turn right and there would be two or three in the small buildings towards your left.’

‘Thanks!’



The two motivated investigators followed the instructions to the centre of the village after a twenty minute walk. It was busier than imagined. Carts and livestock strolled across the chaotic streets and vendors selling cheap food and amenities shouted in discordance. The duo split and scanned the narrow stuffy alleys. Not long later Anbo's phone rang.

'Come to me,' notified Yan.

Yan spotted the necklace from the array of jewellery on this seller's desk. After a brief inquiry he decided it would be logical to suspect that he did not live here but rather in the town where he boarded the train. He dived into his notes on his phone and confirmed the town was Yutian.

'Hi,' Anbo hustled in, 'how's the investigation going on?'

Yan described his plans.

'Then how did the station manager know so much about him?'

'He probably recalled the wrong person. Happens from time to time. We should contact the local authorities in Yutian. We might get some valuable information. If it seems likely that he is over there, we would go there to find and arrest him. I don't think people like him would routinely visit a lot of different places anyway.'

Back at the office, Anbo was annoyed. 'Why is the authorities over there so unresponsive?'

'Very much likely a staff shortage. It is indeed a very small and rather deserted place, you know.'

'I guess it really takes a lot of patience.'

After one or two hours of ideas flushing through Yan's head and Anbo blankly gazing around the renovated room, a voice message popped out on the screen. Eagerly, Yan clicked into it.

'Hello investigators! It has been a very long time since we ever got contacted. This is just a very chill place. But concerning your case, I think the thief does in fact work in a local farm. I occasionally see him sitting in the huts next to the paddy fields around the rims of the village. You might want to ask the farm owners. They know when and where you would find him, unless something very unusual happens. Probably not related to the case, but...' Yan stopped the voice message. 'Well, I think we should go there to find the farm owners. We'll depart tomorrow.'

'Alright.'

Yutian was the polar opposite of Changning. Empty streets, dilapidated houses, vacant stores and carts lying on the side of cracked roads. Hardly any sign of people. The occasional pickup truck bumping through. Following a crude, possibly outdated map they scavenged around to find the owner of the farms, hugging onto themselves as northerly winds swept through the vast plain. The blue skies faded into a sheet of clouds. Raindrops flung and shattered onto the broken concrete. Yan felt more determined as the rain flickered over his face, while Anbo was not so sure.

After one or two hours of tedious searching the two investigators found what they thought was the farm owner's home. There was an undecorated wooden table of an irregular square and a few chairs near the door. A blue pen and a pale yellow notebook covered in barely comprehensible handwriting was lying on the table. The duo waited patiently. It was fifteen minutes later that a figure appeared from the ladder leading to the second floor. She shuffled towards the door. 'Hi!'

'Hello!' Greeted Yan. After a short conversation he pulled out his phone, showed her the CCTV clip and introduced the case to the bemused farm owner.

'Oh! You're finding him? He's usually so compliant. I wouldn't have guessed he would have done such a spiteful thing. I sent him off to get something from another town. I don't know if he would come back though. He wore a green shirt and a pair of torn grey pants.'

'Which town?'

'Jiahe. The one to the west.'

'What did you tell him to get?' Asked Yan. He swore to himself that the case should be nearing its end.

'Some farming tools to replace our old and blunt ones.'

'I'll try my best to find him. Sorry for interrupting you.'

'I don't mind!'

'Thanks!'

The two departed the underdeveloped village on their car, rolling along the country roads. The short bushes flew by. Anbo was not accustomed to travelling all over the region. He has lived in the city for all his life. While traversing a large roundabout with heavy traffic, they suddenly heard a shouting crowd on the other end of the narrow street. Yan immediately steered with his instinct into the street. As they neared, the shouts became louder and louder. 'Thief! Thief!'

They stopped a few blocks away from the crowd and dashed out of the car into the cluster of people. 'Is that the police?' A man yelled. 'The thief is running over there!' The twosome sprinted in the direction a few people pointed. A skinny man that matched the exact descriptions of the farm owner came into their sight. Yan plucked out his gun and pointed at him. 'Freeze!'

The man ignored him for a moment and then turned back. He was frightened.

'We suspect you for theft, not once, but twice,' Yan recited as he pulled with assistance from Anbo and a few from the crowd. Attention was focused on them. Anbo's heart pounded. As they entered the police car racing towards the city for custody and further investigation.

The night settled and Yan decided to drive Anbo home. They slid into his petite car.

'What do you feel about your job?' Asked Anbo curiously.

'I just really enjoy it. It is a very intricate job where we have to gather evidence. I think that is very important as we always need sufficient evidence to reveal who were guilty and who were innocent.'

'That made me think about someone famous. Someone from ancient China.'

'Judge Pao?'

'Yes. It's him.'

'Well, it's a shame I could never match his analytical prowess. I could only share the same spirit.'

They smiled.

# Shackled

*Singapore International School (Hong Kong), Chan, Yuk Lui Yaroua – 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.*

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“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.

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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, gang lord 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

## New Tales of Judge Pao

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

# Xiao

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

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

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

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

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

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

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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!"

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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.

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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?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Not in this world.

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

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

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

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

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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.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Bao blinked, somewhat dumbfounded.

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

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

"What is it, child?"

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

Bao offered gentle words of comfort.

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

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

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

An instant reply. "Yes, of course."

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

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

"Mei..."

"I'm sorry for asking—"

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

# The Legend of the Jinshimo

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dear Li Xiansheng,

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

Respectfully,

Tao Chun

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

# The Phantom Flute

*Shanghai High School International Division, Liao, David – 17*

“Report! Report!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was a week until I arrived in the North.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Khitan remained silent.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"But he's ranting nonsense!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I stared at the wolf head, "No"

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

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

He looked down at his hands.

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

Two days, I noted, just when Wang arrived.

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

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

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

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

“Yes?” I said.

Xiao shifted uncomfortably “What’s your plan?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“The North?” he asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Xiao nodded.

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

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

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



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

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

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

“I assure you, I’m not....”

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

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

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

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

I stood up, “We have a guest.”

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

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

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

Xiao gasped.

It was Fang.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I smiled, “Maybe, maybe not.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Fang snarled, "Lies, speculation."

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

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

Fang had little blood on his face.

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

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

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

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

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

The guards followed his fate three days later.

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

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

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

“Why?” he asked.

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

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

# The Grey Murder

*Shanghai High School International Division, Liu, Ryan – 17*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I stayed silent.

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

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

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

★

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

“Can I go home?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I nodded and motioned for him to continue.

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

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

Chang's son nodded.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

★

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

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

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

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

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

“We know you killed Chang.” I stumbled backward. “Don’t you dare attempt to hurt me.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

★

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You tripped him into a lake."

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

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

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

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

Lin kept his silence.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

★

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

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

Judge Pao nodded.



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

“Lin was a good judge.”

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

Judge Pao sighed and turned away.

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

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