



Fiction

Group 4

I'll See You Again Some Day

American International School, Jiang, Hui Hui – 15

“Tell us another story, sister Wan!” the children cried gleefully, running in circles around the older girl in front of them.

“Awww... but I think I’ve told you all the stories I remember already. I’m afraid there’s not much more for me to say.” she sighed, getting up from her seat. The children of Liyuan loved to hear stories from Wan, and quite frankly, Wan liked telling stories to them. So, whenever she had time, she would go visit the children and tell them various stories she had heard or imagined throughout her days. Today, in particular, she was chronicling the anecdotes of Judge Pao.

“A new one, then! Please?” the children called out again.

Wan thought for a moment, considering if she should entertain their request or not. “Hm. Very well then.” she smiled, gesturing for the children to gather around. The children cheered, eagerly sitting down to listen to what new adventure Wan had in store for them.

“Settle down, children, and let me tell you a tale. A new one.” she waved her hands dramatically, setting the scene for her story, “A bit of a tragic one though, if you wouldn’t mind?”

The children shook their heads.

“Well, it’s a good thing that I’ve once met this Judge Pao, then.” she began, “You see, this story took place in this very town, and it all starts with a mysterious case...”

Nobody had solved the case thus far. Well, technically, it was more of a question. A burning one that yearned for an answer. It was a relatively simple one, in concept. Two siblings were living together in the same household, alone. The younger sister, Ling Wan, was beloved, but also known to be frail and sickly most of the time, often not being seen around the village for months on end while holed up in the house. The older sister, Ling Zi, worked to provide food and shelter for the two of them, and was well respected as a role model for the younger children in the community. One windy night, not much more than a month ago, Wan passed away suddenly. Strangely, after the death of her younger sibling, instead of mourning, Zi appeared confused, not remembering many parts of her own life and even going so far as to have shown noticeable changes in personality as well. Many rumours had even surfaced, accusing Wan of switching bodies with Zi. And yet, nothing seemed clear. That one burning question remained unanswered: what exactly happened that day?

Judge Pao had arrived in the small town of Liyuan to investigate this exact case. It wasn’t like one of his usual investigations, but he had still felt the need to personally come to look into the incident. After all, if he didn’t do it, who would? The townspeople were desperate to find a proper answer to everything that had happened, and they had called on all the help they could afford to find. He was the only one left. Other detectives and officials alike had tried their hand at finding answers, and all of their attempts were met with resounding failures. Some of them had even claimed that a vengeful spirit haunted them throughout their visit, appearing before them whenever they tried to investigate and only leaving once they, too, left. Pao was one of the most renowned specialists in the country, and the moment he had heard of the story of the Ling siblings, he had wanted to find the answers himself. If it really was true that, in fact, a ghost had lingered behind, perhaps there was something more to the story that the others had missed.

“Zi” had been apprehended due to the rumours and suspicions, and the Ling residence was left empty without her presence. A good thing for Judge Pao, as he would be able to inspect things without distraction.

He stepped into the eerie interior of the house, the door creaking as it shut behind him. The dwindling lights of the setting sun filtered in through the windows, casting a dim light into the room.

It didn't take long for the ghostly apparition to fade into view, just as the reports had claimed. The spirit's appearance mirrored Zi's in almost every aspect, from her neatly tied hair to the long flowing robes that she had frequently worn when she was alive. Nearby objects floated around her in a protective sphere, as if ready to act at her command. To any other person, it may have simply seemed that "Zi" had somehow escaped back to her home, minus the floating objects. He made no mistake, however. This was not the same "Zi" that the townspeople had detained.

"Leave," she bellowed, her glaring eyes piercing through the muted ribbons of scarlet lustre and gloomy shadows, "you are not welcome here."

"Be at peace, earth-bound spirit," Pao said, giving a slight bow of respect to the spirit, "I mean no harm."

"So as the many that came before you have claimed," the spirit scoffed, balancing a porcelain teacup carried by invisible strings in between her fingers.

"I am only here to help. I can bring those who have harmed you to proper justice, if only you would assist me." he assured her in the calmest voice he could.

"There is none to be served here," she snapped back, the cup shattering into pieces in her hands and clattering to the floor, "I'm afraid you've all come expecting the wrong results." She frowned, taking a few steps towards the newest intruder to her home. Cold air followed her footsteps like an unseen veil, apprehensive silence demanding fear from any who would dare encroach upon her territory. And yet, he stood his ground.

"You are not like the others," she spoke, "you did not cower at the sight of me. Did not run despite knowing that I am not quite alive like you are."

"I heard talks of a spirit lingering behind in the Ling household," he told her, "although, one thing is for certain. You are not a vengeful one."

She seemed to relax at that statement.

"I'm here to find out what exactly happened. So, please, if you will tell me your story as well, I would be most grateful." he continued, seeing that she did not seem as hostile as before.

She hesitated for a moment, unsure of whether to trust the stranger or not, but eventually, she opened her mouth to speak. "Then you must know one thing," she started, "no matter what conclusion you draw, no matter what else you may discover or what may point you in a different direction, Wan has no part in it. My little sister is not to blame."

"Is that so?" he began, "I've heard rumours. They say that your sister stole your body for your health and murder—"

"I DID NOT DIE BECAUSE OF HER!" Zi yelled, cutting him off. She clenched her hand into a fist, trying to calm herself, "No. A deity came before me that night when she was suffering, and she offered me a chance to save Wan..."

She settled onto the floor, letting out a deep sigh.

"You chose to take her fate instead?" he realized, slowly piecing together the clues and hints that he had gathered. He took a seat next to her, dusting the floor a bit before sitting.

"It was my own choice to switch. I couldn't just stand by idly and watch her die." she continued, her voice trembling with a slight sorrow.

"Was there no other way?" he asked, wishing that he could do more to comfort her.

"No, it... It was her heart that nearly killed her that day. She was born much more frail than others, and it would have happened sooner or later, even if it wasn't that night. If we've swapped then... she can live without that burden now." she replied, tears threatening to fall from her eyes.

He took a breath. It was his job to serve justice to those who had done harm to others, but it was just as much his job to prove those wrongfully accused innocent, and he had no intention of making any exceptions.

“I know your intentions are not malicious. You could show the rest too. Your words would be better than mine by far. You could answer everything, prove Wan’s innocence once and for all.” he suggested, offering her a hand.

She smiled, but shook her head. “I’m afraid I’m unable to leave this house as a spirit, and they would not listen to me. They’re scared of me.” she replied. “And,” she added, raising her left hand to the fading sunlight from outside, “I’m afraid I’m running out of time as well.” The light seamlessly phased through her near-translucent hand, almost as if it didn’t even exist.

Pao thought hard about it. There must be something that they could do, some physical evidence that they could provide. Anything that could prove what he had heard today. He could not just simply leave things as they were now, knowing what he knew.

“Is there anything that you’ve left behind for Wan? Something that could serve as evidence, perhaps?” he turned to Zi, hoping that she would also have an answer for this question.

Zi opened her mouth as if to say something, but shut it again.

“I’m sorry,” she apologized, “I wrote a note for her before we swapped, but it... I lost it in the wind that night.” She closed her eyes, biting on her lip, “I didn’t have the time to replace it.”

A lead. Evidence. Not all was hopeless, it seemed. Closure could still be given. What’s lost could always be found again, and this note would be no different. Pao stood up with a new resolve, propelled by this discovery.

“Then, there is still hope. We can still save Wan,” he declared, “this, I will promise you.”

She looked up at him, her eyes welling up with heartened tears.

He stepped towards the doors, plans circling through his head on what actions he could take. This would be a bit hard to find, but with enough help, it would not be impossible. He had looked into more difficult cases than this one, so what was a little note in the face of everything else?

Pao pushed the door open, the cool night air rushing in to greet him. The sun had long since set already.

“Before you go, could I ask you a favour?” she called to him. He turned back. Moonlight glistened from her hair, giving it an otherworldly shine in the darkness.

“When you meet her, tell Wan that I will only move on when I know that she’s safe and happy. Tell her that I will always be with her, that I’ll be watching her from above, and not to blame herself for what happened. Tell her that I’ll always love her.” she continued, speaking loud as if hoping that her voice could carry itself through the night to her sister.

“And then?” a child urged, hopping around impatiently.

“Yeah! And then what happened?” another joined in.

Wan snapped out of her thoughts, returning to the present moment. “And then Judge Pao found the note and proved to everyone that Zi’s sister was innocent! The end!” she finished, clapping her hands to emphasize the ending, “How nice, right?”

The crowd fell into a hushed silence.

“Booo! Anticlimactic!” the children complained.

“You didn’t even explain what happened to Zi!” someone protested.

“Oh, she moved on to the afterlife after that, and was allowed to visit Wan 3 times a year.” Wan made up. She glanced at the setting sun in the distance.

“Alright, my dearest audience. I do believe it’s time for you and I to part ways now. It’s getting late, and you should get home before it gets dark.” she laughed, nudging the children on their way.

“But sister Wan, we’re older now! We can stay up later!” they whined.

“Ah, well, if you insist, you can always stay around and help me clean up the garden!” she teased, letting go of them for a moment.

“Ack! No way!” they retorted, suddenly in a hurry to get home.

She waved, watching them each reunite with their families and return to their homes. Finally, she saw the last child safely reach his home.

From her pocket, she carefully retrieved a yellowed and crinkled paper. A small rip still remained from the first gusts of wind that had entangled the note within the branches of a willow tree. Despite the years that have passed by, despite the people that have come and went, that same gentle handwriting still remained, and this is what it read:

“My dearest Wan,

I’m sorry I am not able to be here for you right now. You must be so confused. You might be hurt, you might even hate me for the decision I made. For this I am sorry, but I could not stand by and watch you suffer another moment like that. Please know that this was my choice and my choice only, and you are not to blame. Now, you can at least have a better chance at life with this newfound health. Live your dreams, and don’t let me hold you back.

I love you,

– Your sister, Zi”

She thought about the ending to the story she had told the children. If only things were that great when it came to real life, right? It wasn’t a complete lie, though. Thanks to Judge Pao and the note that he had found, Wan had been able to move on in her life. She was found innocent and released, able to return to her home. But, well, there was still someone missing.

By the time Pao and Wan had managed to return to the Ling residence, Zi was nowhere to be found. Actually, Wan had never seen Zi a single time after that night where they had swapped.

They say time can heal all wounds, but despite the countless days that had passed, nothing could take away the memory of that night. She could still remember the pain in her chest that wouldn’t go away. She had tried to call for help, but not a sound would come from her mouth.

Despite the comforting words and reassurances from everyone she would come to know year by year, nothing could remove that sense of guilt that she felt when she realized that she had taken her sister’s life away, that heart sinking acknowledgement that it was her who was supposed to have died that day.

And worse, yet, was knowing that she never got to say a proper farewell. She had the chance to. Zi was still there, at their home, holding on for her sake, but even then, she had blown that chance.

There was nothing that could fix all that had been lost. Time could not be rewinded, after all. But life works in mysterious ways, doesn’t it? After everything that had happened, she was still standing here, able to live a mostly normal life. Perhaps, now, the only thing that there is to be done here is to look towards the future with new hope, leaving the past behind.

Wan walked through the calm town, humming a small tune to herself as she basked in the welcoming glow of dusk. She kept walking until she found herself upon a small tomb. She kneeled before it, taking a deep breath.

“Hello, sister,” she began, “I’m doing okay nowadays. When I have time, I tell stories to the children here. They’re so delightful to be around! I wish you could meet them.” She ran a finger through her hair, tucking a stray strand behind her ear. “I hope you’re doing well up there as well.” she continued.

She paused for a moment.

“You know, it’s all thanks to you and Judge Pao that I’m able to live comfortably like I am right now,” she said, “the land right here that was used to honour you was given to me by him as well.” She felt a teardrop roll down her cheek. “Really, I can’t thank you both enough.” she cried, using the sleeve of her robe to wipe the droplet away. She smiled at the grave, imagining her sister behind it, nodding along to her words. The thought comforted her a little.

Another day was beginning to end. The sun was barely visible in the distance now. Wan got up from her spot, dusting off her dress.

“I’ll get going now,” she told the imaginary Zi, “I’ll see you again. Someday.”

Justice Brings Peace, Peace Brings Balance

Canadian International School of Hong Kong, Chu, Alex – 14

High above in the night sky, the shimmering sun sets down the west, tinting the air with a gleaming hue of peach, while the ominous moon slowly ascends from the east: a lone white sphere perched upon a field of darkness. The competing scopes of light and dark, east and west, battle in the night sky: a scene that has taken place for countless millennia. But, amidst the chaos is a peaceful balance: one side never subdues the other, the scales never tipped in any direction, all is fair and equal, as everything must be.

Miles beneath this scene is a bustling kingdom built atop the dunes of western China. Countless wooden huts stand scattered across the domain in a circle, bright candle lights shining out the windows. Chatter fills the streets as people bustle across the city back home. In the heart of the kingdom lies a majestic palace, towering over the city with its grandeur. Its exterior is laced in a shimmering gold, sunlight bouncing off its walls, showering the city with brightness. Within the halls of the palace is a marble chamber almost completely empty aside from a gold throne in the center of the room and an ornate wooden table beside it. On top of this table is an antique, golden scale, with the words “Justice brings peace. Peace brings balance.” engraved upon it.

Atop the throne sits a man with a stern disposition on his face. He has a scruffy mane of sparkling white hair that sticks out violently in all directions, a thick, gray beard that trickles down to his chest, and eyes filled to the brim with knowledge and experience, but utterly devoid of innocence. A tattered black robe wraps around his body, a white shawl hangs upon his neck, and embedded into the center of the robe is a massive symbol of yin and yang: the renowned emblem for peace, balance and nature. As the man sits atop the throne, he curiously surveys his robe as if seeing it for the first time, unable to take his eyes off the symbol. While the room oozes class and royalty, his presence oddly radiates humility.

Suddenly, the chamber doors open and a ripple of wind pervades the room, and his robe flutters, returning him into the present.

A mousy man enters the chamber and approaches the throne, slowly inching towards it. He takes a loud gulp, and barely musters the confidence to squeak, “Judge Pao Zheng, the defendant has arrived.” Immediately, he scurries back across the hall and stands beside the entrance, legs still shaky.

Nearby, a halting screech fills the palace, the sound of metal shackles scraping against the hard marble floors. The sound grows louder and the stomping of feet emerges gradually, filling the air with a lingering tension. The doors to the chamber are forced open, and there stands two royal guards, both holding tightly onto a disheveled old man shrouded in a torn cloth with blotches of dirt plastered across its surface. The man’s ankles are tightly enclosed in thick shackles, squeezing his ankles purple. His bloodshot eyes rest atop a pair of pendant eye bags that bulge out of his face. The hopeless frown on his face droops down so dejectedly that Judge Pao’s indifference wavers for a second, a look of sympathy on his face, before quickly returning to his strict demeanor.

Eyes half open, the prisoner lazily pulls his head up, but at the sight of Judge Pao, his once hollow eyes appear to shimmer with hope, and his sullen frown disappears into a look of shock. The guards stiffen and glance warily at one another, then turn their gaze towards Judge Pao for guidance, but his mouth utters no sound.

The mousy man beside the door breaks the eerie silence by announcing, “Defendant name: Pao Jing. Arrested for the murder of a civilian. Uncle of Judge Pao Zhe-.”

His voice trails off, eyes widened in shock. Judge Pao turns his head towards him and gives a slight nod of confirmation, a look of indifference still holding steady across his face.

The prisoner opens his mouth for the first time and exclaims, “Zheng, my sweet nephew! It’s been years since I’ve seen you...since your parents’ incident,” he sighs, excitement falling into sadness. He moves his gaze across the room and asks, “H—how did you get here? How did you get all this?”

Judge Pao stands up, surveying his uncle in silence, until finally sighing, “Yes, sometimes I wonder how I was able to achieve all this,” his hand resting upon the throne, eyebrows furrowed, continuing, “but, I was chosen for a reason. I am the only one who can restore balance, justice and peace to this broken world.” His gaze meets the ornate scale atop his table, both ends balanced with stones in perfect equilibrium. For a while, his eyes don’t blink, and he pauses his speech, seemingly mesmerized by the lone artifact.

“Sir?” a guard questioned tentatively, breaking the heavy silence in the room.

Judge Pao blinks his eyes and shakes his head violently, muttering, “Sorry, I—I don’t know what happened”.

Nobody says anything for a moment, until the prisoner suddenly bursts out in pleas, “Zheng, please! Help me. I didn’t mean to kill him. I was out late at night, and it was really dark, but I could see the shadow of somebody nearby coming towards me. I swear I thought I saw a knife in his hand, so I struck first, but one thing led to another, and...” his eyes fill with tears, and he helplessly collapses to the ground, weeping.

The guards look at one another, then down at the prisoner below, and at the sight of him crumbling on the ground in his torn clothes, their own eyes begin to water.

Judge Pao looks disturbed for a second, but he violently shakes his head again, whipping it back and forth until he clears his mind, avoiding the eyes of his uncle.

Sighing, Judge Pao finally says, “The defendant...is guilty.”

His uncle meets his gaze, eyes full of utter shock.

“No, please. Zheng. Don’t do this to me. W—we’re family,” he weeps.

“You murdered an innocent civilian,” he says, eyes still averting his uncle’s gaze, “You are guilty. Take him away.”

The guards hesitate for a moment, but choose to obey the judge, dragging the prisoner away. As they exit the chamber, Pao Jing’s cries echo through the halls. He screams of betrayal and treachery, and as Judge Pao leaves the chamber, he can still hear the howls in his head.

Judge Pao enters a deserted room in the palace, locking the door behind him.

Suddenly, a cold chill pervades the room. His eyes roll back, revealing nothing but white, and his feet lift up from the ground, levitating. A bright glow surrounds his body, and it grows until finally subsuming him.

When Judge Pao’s feet return to the floor, he’s no longer in a palace but a rocky terrain covered in black soot. A massive river of lava slithers through the landscape, steam scorching from its surface. In the distance, soot covered mountains extend high into the sky until they disappear through the hazy mist above.

Judge Pao takes a few steps forward, but the space in front of him remains bare, until he clears his throat and shouts, “Justice brings Peace! Peace brings balance!”

The ground rumbles. The soil before him begins to rise from the ground, and a small hut materializes, composed of the same soot as the rest of this realm. He enters the hut and inside is a humble office, its interior shrouded in dark rocks.

Judge Pao drags his feet towards his desk at the end of the room and plops himself onto his chair, sighing heavily. He grabs a photo from his desk, and at the mere sight of it, tears stream down his face, his strict disposition finally shattering. In the picture is a man and a woman, both clothed in shimmering robes, and the woman holds a baby in her arms. Both share Zheng’s features, the man with a scruffy mane and a thick beard, the woman with eyes full of knowledge, but devoid of innocence. The baby smiles joyfully, not a care in the world.

Written on the photo frame is “Ming Pao, Li Pao and baby Zheng”. Judge Pao’s mind lingers to the time of the murder. Within the thick of the night, the door is kicked open. The screams and shouts of Mom and Dad pierce the air, until two stabs bring silence. The killer never to be seen again. His only unsolvable case.

Pao returns to his office, teardrops still streaming down his face. Then, the sound of thundering footsteps emerges outside. A new hoard of the dead have arrived in the afterlife. Zheng looks out his window, and he sees his uncle amidst the crowd, and he immediately clutches the yin and yang symbol, muttering solemnly,
“Justice brings Peace. Peace brings balance.”

Body Flattened, Face Smashed, Pulse Gone: The Rise of the Taotie

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Assor, Yoav – 15

The beautiful morning sun gazed at Bao's room, his eyes slowly opening to the enchanting horizon. "Another day of work, another day of fulfillment, and another day of purpose", exclaimed Bao as he quickly pounced out of bed. He put on his large red cloak, ate a bowl of thick noodles, and dashed out the front door. Bao was a loved man in his city, a hero of the people some would say. Bao was thanked for his direct involvement in bringing back the positive light of the city, one that had been gone for many years, one that was needed for all to thrive. The city of Tianchang was hit with a large wave of crime, a metaphoric wave that felt real to the citizens. Bloodshed after bloodshed after bloodshed, cries after cries after cries. As he walked through the busy, tight, and rather reeking market path, he was swarmed with calls of love. "We love you," said one, "Sent from god," said the other. This new profound love towards Bao was a collective emotion, an expression of gratitude, trust, and care. The short but long route to work was completed, his ego at an all-time high and stress at an all-time low. The wide doors of the precinct open inwards, Bao took long strides towards his desk seeking approval, a comment, a gesture, something to create inner satisfaction. "Morning genius", there it was thought Bao as he smirks his way towards his desk. "You've received a letter," said Bao's secretary. "A letter? I haven't received a letter in years. Don't most people just come here to file a complaint." said Bao in a sense of confusion. As the wrinkled letter is passed towards Bao he snatches it. Without a second of hesitation, the letter is aggressively ripped open.

16th of October 1044

Mr. Bao Zheng

Police Station

1603 East Tianchang road

Dear Mr.Zheng, I trust you are well.

My name is Jia Liu, I am seeking immediate help at my apartment. This morning wasn't a morning out of the ordinary, the bright yellow sun was rising and the birds' chirps filled the city. I was slowly sipping on my hot tea when I heard a large thump coming from the direction of my bedroom. The loud sounds of our city led me to the conclusion that it was nothing to worry about. Whether it was the chimes of the market bells or the screams of the playing children, It couldn't have been anything to cause suspicion, at least I thought. I and my husband of 40 years have never missed breakfast together. He would always tell me 'life without love is like a tree without blossoms or fruits.' Breakfast was our favorite time of the day, where he'd express every linger of stress, of doubt, of fear. Where he'd express his love to me in a poetic masterpiece. Where he'd thank me for helping him stay true in a world of slithering snakes. I loved him. Loved—past tense for the word love. The large thump that had no correlation to my life suddenly did. He is no longer with us. Body flattened, face smashed, pulse gone. I can't do this, Mr.Zheng. Please head here as soon as possible. My address is 1092 Manxing Road, floor 5.

Regards,

Mrs.Liu

"This is not good," said Bao. "Call my team, we have a case to solve."

Bao and his team of case solvers aggressively put their coats on, scrambling towards the apartment. "This is the last thing this city needs," said one of Bao's teammates. Bao rolled his eyes, as they continued to push through the swarms of people. "Get out of the way," exclaimed Bao. His patience began to thin and his blood pressure increased Bao knew his reputation was on the line. When the group finally arrived at the apartment they were astonished at its beauty. Emerald-plated doors, gold-coated furniture, and antiques in all directions. "What does a wealthy weasel need from a bunch of dirtbags like us." said one of the case solvers. As whispered giggles filled the group the large doors opened. "Thank you for coming, Detective Bao," said Jia Liu. Her presence was one of elegance, beauty, and enchantment. Her Colorful yet elegant dress, slicked-back hair, and beautiful red shoes caught the attention of the group. "Hey if something did happen to her husband I wouldn't mind stepping in," whispered one of the younger detectives in Bao's

direction. "Zip it," said Bao as they slowly entered the home. In the home the group carefully walks through the narrow corridors, attempting not to cause any damage. There he was. Body flattened, face smashed, pulse gone. Just as she described. Purple as lavender and quiet as a snail. "I'm afraid there is no bringing him back," said Bao. Cries fill the room, tears of agony, of misery, of pain. As Bao turned the body to further inspect he noticed a suspicious print on his left arm. "Did he always have this mark?" asked Bao. "No, I have never seen such a thing," said Jia. A bright blue line, crooked as thunder, from the palm of his hand until the ends of his shoulder. "This is indeed something, what's the word, ah yes unique. Let's get Dr.Xia to examine the body before coming to conclusions," said Bao. Hours pass, the grieving family sits in misery, and the investigators continue their work. "Bao make your way into the crime scene," said Dr.Xia. Bao walked into the room. It has been a few hours since the death, the room smelt of rotting flesh, the body slowly molding. It was not a pleasant sight, even for a profound detective. "I must say this is nothing I've ever seen before," said Bao. "Then you must not be as experienced as they say," said Dr.Xia in a humorous tone. Bao with an angry look in his eyes, asked for the cause of Death, to put this case to rest. To keep his reputation, to keep a calm city but most importantly to give the family certainty. The certainty to provide them with the courage to live their life, to fulfill every last moment even if it's without their loved one. Bao waited and waited and waited, anxiously stomping his feet and bending his hands. "Natural Causes," said Dr.Xia. "Natural causes, did you not see the vigorous blue line? If I can point out, it is still growing!" said Bao. "Who's the doctor here?" asked Dr.Xia in a rather sarcastic tone. Unwilling to put his ego aside, Bao stormed out of the room, leaving a foot dent in the hardwood floors. "Natural Causes" announced Bao. The grieving family, tears still flooding down, noses blocked, eyes red, Thank Bao and his team. And that was supposed to be the end of the day for Bao and his team, but if this mysterious world of tragedy and fear taught them anything, the worst was yet to come.

The sun had now set, the busy streets of the city at a halt. Bao had just arrived home after his busy day. He slowly took his coat off, so slowly that the ripples of the jacket slowly caressing his shirt could be heard from the other side of town. He was still curious, confused, yet slightly intrigued. "What in god's name was that line," thought Bao. A thought that would stick with him for the rest of the night. Taking a shower, "what was that line?", eating his dinner, "what was that line?", and even when brushing his teeth, "what was that line?" Who knew a natural phenomenon of human death would cause such infuriating thoughts? For Bao, the idea of uncertainty and curiosity was one of terror. The twisting of the mind, the recurring thoughts, the overthinking. It was too much for Bao, which is why he won't rest until his questions are answered. But in this case, he needed a rest, even if that mysterious line was to remain mysterious. Curtains closed, mattress ready. It was time to call it a day. "BOOM BOOM BOOM" the sound of Bao's doors filled the small apartment. "I'm coming," yelled Bao. As Bao opened his rather screeching door, there was nobody there. Bao looked around to attempt to spot this 'Prankster.' Head moving to the right, blank. To the left, blank. The sleepy state of Bao even looked at the ceiling, yet again blank. But when he looked down at his feet, a small package waited for him. Brown envelope, the size of Bao's hand. He knew that this wasn't a good sign. The already large frown on Bao's face turned larger, his heart rate increased, cheeks slowly turned pinker and pinker. He rips the envelope open, accidentally tearing the side of the page.

16th of October 1044

Mr. Bao Zheng
782 fa xian road
Block A floor 3

Dear Mr.Zhang, I'm so sorry for disturbing you during your times of rest but this is an emergency. My Family and I were enjoying our day together, nothing out of the ordinary. Games in the living room, laughter around the house, It was a pleasant day. As this day of joy, love and memory came to an end, it wasn't the only thing that came to an end. I was feeling rather tired, so I did my usual walk around the house to say goodnight. When I reached my youngest son, 12 years old, with beautiful light hair and the bluest of eyes. The healthiest 12-year-old out there, really. Strict diet, always active, my little boy. He was dead, Body flattened, face smashed, pulse gone. Please come here as soon as possible, if there's the hope of bringing him back it's now. My address is 984 Tianjin road. You'll see the large silver doors, turn right and enter the pathway. There you will find my house. Please be here soon.
Regards,

Body flattened, face smashed, pulse gone. That sounded oddly familiar to Bao. It had been hours since the orange skies had faded. The streets were a graveyard and Bao was out on his second case of the day. Keeping the letter close in hand, Bao soared through the city breeze. Panting, shivering, barely standing, but there it was. The large silver doors, just as it said in the letter. Barely breathing, Bao gave a rhythmic knock on the door, in an attempt to lighten the mood. "An attempt," he thought to himself, what could go wrong? When the doors opened widely the mood was rather dark. An anxious mother stood at the front door. House gown, glasses, hair tied up. She was shaking, but not from the cold. Bao entered the apartment, the slim corridors gave him a knock on the shoulders. In the living room, the family awaits, weeping in agony, screaming in pain. "If you don't mind I will go check on your son," said Bao. The doors of the bedroom open, and there he is. Once again, Body flattened, face smashed, pulse gone. Coincidental? Thousands die a day, and descriptions of death are limited. Maybe they studied English at the same school, thought Bao. Until things did not look so coincidental anymore. As Bao examined the body he turned over the boy's left arm. There it was, that shining blue line. The line that was supposedly natural causes, the line that was nothing to worry about. There it was, yet again. Destroying another life. "This death was no natural cause, there is something out there coming for our people. Whether it's physical or spiritual, a disease or a villain. Justice will be served." announced Bao somberly towards the victim's family. "If you excuse me I have a matter to deal with." Just like the flash, Bao was out of the door and sprinting back home.

His apartment doors open widely, and without bothering to close them he sat at his desk. On his desk, a large pile of books. Not just any books, but a collection of old Chinese myths. The books were full of dust, pages barely staying intact. The sounds of flipping pages was the only auditory hint of life in that apartment. Not even a breath could be heard. Sheer focus, determination, and grit are what got Bao through that night. When the orange sun was finally up, Bao's mood was the opposite. Tired, helpless, anxious. Only some of what Bao was enduring, not to mention two possible murders that society deemed natural causes. Exactly how it sounds..... And these deaths have also provided Bao with a difficult dilemma. Tell your precinct that something mysterious is occurring, something out of this planet, literally, risk your reputation, and face embarrassment. Or solve this case alone, which could end up being natural causes after all. Bao remains clueless, too tired to think, act, weep, or stress. Sure the sun was bright, his office desk was waiting for him, the workers who adored him, and the civilians who looked up to him. It was all there, just like any other day. But the opportunity to solve a case like this was once in a lifetime.

Glasses on, cloak fitted, shoes tied. A look of vengeance, revenge, and determination in his eyes. From now on it was Bao and Bao only, his chance to save the city. The city he loves, the city that loves him. Bao left his apartment, looking down at the busy city streets, attempting to go unseen. His feet strode through the alleyways, kilometers of simultaneous steps. His legs were noodles and his head a rollercoaster, he arrived. The grand halls of all halls, the buildings of all buildings, Bao's favorite place of all. The library. To most, the library was hell on earth, walls of frustration, walls of history. But to Bao, it was heaven. It was his place where his blocked-off mind was finally free. He stared at the beautiful, minimalistic yet extravagant exterior of the Library. "It's time," said Bao. Bao entered the doors of the library. Complete silence, not a whisper, breath, or soul could be heard. It was like a graveyard. Chairs out of place, books scattered, shelves barely staying intact. Suddenly a delicate voice is heard from the corner of the room. "How can I help you?" Bao looked around, unable to spot the voice. He continued to look around but saw nothing. Suddenly in the corner of his eye, she stands, a short woman, so small even his glasses could barely comprehend the size. "I'm looking for your health section," said Bao. "aisle 9" she replied. And in the blink of an eye, she disappeared yet again. Confused, Bao headed towards aisle 9. In aisle 9 a limited selection of books, a helpless Bao became impotent. He slowly stacked the books and wobbled over to the nearest desk. He pulled the chair back, an echoing screech filled the room. Page flip after page flip after page, frustration after frustration after frustration. Nothing. Nothing mentions a blue line. Nothing mentions a line. Bao was losing hope, losing determination, and losing his grit. For the first time in his life, it was unachievable, unsolvable, and unfulfilling. His posture was now low, his mouth with a subtle frown. He re-stacked the books and wobbled his way back to the shelves. When all looked lost. When the case is deemed to be unsolvable. Hidden in a shelf crack. There it was. Something too familiar. Something that

has caused too much harm. 20cm by 20 cm, white exterior, thick brown pages, and on the front. His worst nightmare, the city's worst nightmare, the world's worst nightmare. In large Arial font, 'Body flattened, face smashed, pulse gone'.

Bao reached his arm towards the book, attempting to wiggle it out. On the tip of his toes, reaching, pulling, doing anything in his power. The sound of the crashing shelves was heard, but it didn't matter to Bao. He snatched the dusty book in his hands and dashed out the library doors. Out on the busy streets, pushing, shoving and trembling over the pedestrians. Finally, the apartment doors were sealed, and it was time to read the book. "Oh god" yelled Bao, at the top of his lungs.

The Taotie: Green-skinned beasts. Large bulging eyes. Terrifying horns. Fangs the size of humans. Out to kill Whatever stands in his way. Last known attack: 21 Jan 90 BCE.

Signs Before Attack: Random deaths. Blue Veins. Body flattened, face smashed, pulse gone. Body flattened, face smashed, pulse gone. Body flattened, face smashed, pulse gone. Be heard, Be feared, The taotie is here.

Trembling on his feet, sweat dripping down his somber face. Bao knew something was coming. Without a second thought, he was out again. This time there was no joyful library reading. It was to save the city. A weak, sleep-deprived Bao ran towards the precinct. He slammed the doors wide open. "Ladies and gentlemen, we are under attack. Not by another mafia, or psychotic alcoholic. This is deeper. It is a battle against the supernatural. The creature your grandma warned you about before bed. It's time for war." Said, Bao. Laughs alongside looks of confusion fill the small room. Bao pleaded for an inch of belief. But it was too late. In the horizon skies of green-headed towards the city, on the ground mayhem begins. Bao tried his best, but it was too late. Bao may fight, Bao may kill but the only thing looking certain is that the phrase Body flattened, face smashed, pulse gone, will return. If anyone can save the city now. It was Bao.

The Not-so-Grand Entrance

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Chua, Cate – 14

Synopsis: On the day of his retirement, Doctor Jin Ping invites his entire family to his mansion in order to share some important yet upsetting news with several family members. However, his housekeeper discovers him dead the following morning.

The Not-so-Grand Entrance

The morning after the gathering...

“Morning Mr Ping!” Irene yelled, Jin Ping’s housekeeper, as she walked up the stairs.

After huge family gatherings, Mr Ping had a routine of playing a few rounds of xiangqi with his personal caretaker, Mina. Occasionally, he would fall asleep there, the isolated tiny room at the top of the mansion.

“Mr Ping, you in there?” Irene asked as she stood outside the door.

“Mr Ping, I’m outside your door,” Irene exclaimed, with a slight tremble in her voice. Something was wrong. Mr Ping would always respond to Irene before she entered, or, at least give some sort of audible signal that he was in there.

“Mr Ping, I’m coming in!” She sighed, unaware of a monstrosity of a scene she was about to enter.

As she opened the door, wickedness met her eyes. Mr Ping, lying unconscious on the wooden ground with a slashed neck was immediately apparent. As she blinked in disbelief, everything began to get clearer. A grotesque image of Mr Ping’s bleeding head began to form in her sight. Shock filled the room. She stood as still as a tomb, her expression as if she had just been stabbed in the back. Suddenly, the pungent smell of Mr Ping’s rotting blood started to hit her nose.

“No, no, this is unreal.” Irene whimpered with clenched teeth, slapping herself back to reality. Mortified, she ran down the stairs.

Heated

During the gathering...

“Are you insane? You can’t just throw your fortune down the drain like that!” Xin yelled, furious at his grandfather.

“No, I’ve decided it’s all going to Mina.”

Xin chuckled. “That stupid caretaker of yours? You’re out of your mind.”

“I can confidently say that I’m clear-headed, and it’s done. It’s official. I’ve already done it, The amendment to my will has been made.”

“I’m telling you.” Dan hissed, rage flowing through his veins.

“It is the right decision!” Ping asserted.

As Dan stormed off, he snarled at Ping and headed upstairs.

“You will not succeed!” He yelled.

Questioning

3 days after...

It was time. The time to unfold the events that led up to Ping's suspicious demise. The officials arrived at the Ping house. The officials wore cape-like, flowy clothing, those that were called Hanfu's. The Hanfu that the officials were wearing consisted of fine silks, with a fresh colour scheme of black and blue, finished with detailed embroidery of birds on blossom trees placed in the middle of their Hanfu.

"Good afternoon, Eric Ping, Grace Ping, Thomas Wu and Selena Chen. We're simply here to discuss the events prior to Mr Ping's death."

The four individuals entered the room individually.

"Okay, we'll start off with Eric Ping, Mr Ping's son. We were informed that on the night of this gathering, the entire family showed up to discuss Mr Ping's retirement. Am I right?"

"Yes."

"Tell me about it. What occurred, who was present?"

"Well, it was certainly a pleasant evening. Prior to this gathering, we had a few conflicts. It was just nice to come back together. We just conversed with each other and brought back the spirit of the Ping family – we just had a good time."

"May I ask, who showed up that evening?"

"Mina, my father's caretaker. She's great, we treat her like family. She wasn't here recently, I suppose she had a family emergency. Irene, our housekeeper, always on task. The rest of us were here as well."

"And your children?"

"Oh yes, I forgot. My son Xin was here. He seemed upset with my father, for some absurd reason. So, he left early I assume."

As Eric finished his questioning, Selena entered the room with a nasty expression pasted over her face. The people who lived nearby Jin Ping absolutely despised Selena, due to her rude nature. Selena always wasn't afraid to show the slightest bit of disrespect, though, that was what formed a shockingly rebellious and outrageous image of her by the neighbourhood, especially since these "rude" mannerisms were coming from, a female.

"First, who is that guy, sitting at the back?" Selena rudely remarked. Tilting her head sideways, she judgementally glared at the man.

"Miss, this is—"

"I am Bao. Please, don't feel intimidated, or bothered by my presence. I am just here to observe. I will stay here serene and respectful." Judge Bao interrupted.

As Selena stared at the odd-looking man, she couldn't help but notice his stark appearance. He looked different from the ordinary. He had tan skin, dark upturned eyebrows, and a protruding crescent moon on

the middle of his forehead. He was clothed differently from the rest of the officials. His Hanfu was similar to the rest, but with a gold and red colour scheme, colours that symbolised luck and royalty. Topped off his Hanfu displayed a gorgeous dragon embroidery.

“Miss Chen, daughter of Mr Ping. I will ask you a few questions, please respond accordingly.” Official Liu said.

“Eric said you seemed troubled during that evening. He said, “I don’t know about her. She was all fuzzy. In fact, flustered, to describe her demeanour at the time.” Provide an explanation to us, please.” Officer Liu quoted.

“Flustered? What is that man on about? I wasn’t anything like that!” Selena barked.

“He said you seemed heated. What did Ping say to you?” Officer Liu sighed.

Selena slowly looked at the ground, recalling her conversation with her father, Jin Ping.

“You will be disowned, left to shrivel and die, if you continue this attitude, Selena!” Ping’s voice echoed in her head. Suddenly, she flinched, snapping out of her flashback.

“It wasn’t anything. It was just a conversation about, household duties. Really, it wasn’t an argument or anything like that. Xin though, that was really something.” Selena disclosed whilst blushing.

“Mr Ping’s grandson, right? Xin.”

“Yes. I’m forbidden from speaking about family matters. But anyways, with Xin, something was always off. He’s like the burden of this family, arguments always arose between my father and him. That evening, might have been the worst of them all. Usually, they would have their petty quarrels in front of us, but this time it was done in a room. It was very muffled, none of us could understand anything they were saying.” Selena disclosed.

Xiangqi

The night after the gathering...

“Mina, 1 more round, yes!” Mr Ping exclaimed.

Mr Ping had drank too much that evening. Mina and Ping had been playing Xiangqi for the past hour and a half.

Mina ignored Mr Ping. She was tired and wanted to get home quickly.

“Mina, stop ignoring me!” Mr Ping chuckled.

“Ping, it’s getting late. You need to rest. You’re getting old. Snap out of this goofy spirit.” Mina grunted as she prepared his medication.

Due to the effects of Mr Ping’s ageing, he developed a condition that made him weak and fragile.

Mina slowly took out the two herb mixtures required for Ping. These herbs were mixed individually into two cups of tea every night to sustain his condition. As Ping quickly devoured the first dose of tea, Ping began to speak a long confession.

“You know, sometimes I wish I were better to my children. Selena, my daughter. I do realise I get a little harsh on her, sometimes. But this treatment towards her stems from my own family, my own mother used

to have this strange obsession with degradation at the time. It was reflected in her treatment towards her children. I was the black sheep of the family. All I want is just to be a better father before I'm gone." Ping sadly giggled, a subtle hint of regret in his laugh.

Suddenly, Mina froze in her tracks.

"No... this isn't possible." Mina whimpered.

"What's the matter?" Mr Ping asked gently.

"Your medication, I switched the two! I gave you way more of the Baoxide than you were supposed to intake!" She shrieked.

Terror took over Mina's face as she anxiously rummaged her hands through the bamboo basket of medication prescribed for Ping. To her worst fear, the paopaine was absent from the basket, the emergency herb for accidental overdose.

Tears welled up in her eyes as she looked up to Mr Ping with genuine fear. She fell onto her knees as her hands cupped her soaked face.

"It's not in here!" She cried out loud. She stared at Mr Ping with absolute disbelief, with tears pouring out of her eyes, dripping down to the cold ground as she wailed from emotional agony.

As those words left her mouth, Ping felt his heart sting. The effects were starting. Ping unexpectedly sprang up and gripped onto Mina's tense shoulders with both his cold hands.

"Mina, listen to me. I'll get you out of this. Listen to me, and follow every single instruction I tell you." Ping asserted.

As Mr Ping began devising the escape plan to Mina, a wave of terror took over her body. She couldn't comprehend that at that point, as every second passed by, death was slowly creeping up on him.

Mina quickly ran down the stairs, beginning the first stage of her escape plan.

Jin Ping POV

I couldn't stand to see myself like this. I was dying. How could this be possible? My long-known caretaker, someone I trusted, someone I sympathised with, accidentally kills me? This didn't seem right. She's Mina, she wouldn't dare to do something like this.

I paused for a minute, reflecting on my entire life's purpose.

There is no other choice. This is the time I enter the gateway of death. Goodbye, Ping.

As he looked down at the knife, he forcefully sliced it through his neck. He felt the impact of it. Then he felt an intense tingle. The hormones and searing pain started to kick in. He panicked and sensed a burning, searing pain from the adrenaline. Then He felt the heat. It was heat like nothing he ever imagined. He couldn't hear anything, except for Mina's muffled cries, then high-pitched ringing. His vision started to get blurry. He couldn't smell anything. He was numb everywhere. Then he felt every muscle in his body

tense up, as he let out a huge, tormenting scream, and fell to the ground. His five senses were eventually diminished, as his life got stripped away, slowly and painfully.

More Heated

During the gathering, after the quarrel...

Engulfed by jealousy after finding out Ping's inheritance would go to Mina, evil took over.

Xin ferociously ran up the stairs on all fours like an animal. Still enraged by what he was just informed with, he felt that he needed to do something. He didn't care what it was, it just had to be, something. Something foul, wicked, villainous. He couldn't accept the thought of Mina coming first before his own family.

He silently did a 360 around his surroundings before opening the door to the room Ping would let himself loose in. This was a room of enjoyment for Ping, he would play xiangqi with Mina and take his medication; it was a very personal space for Ping.

Standing still in the room, Xin contemplated for a brief moment until the brilliant idea of tampering with Ping's drugs appeared.

Xin swiftly whipped out his hands tingling with malice and proceeded to switch the herbs of the two prescribed doses for Ping that night. Without any second thought, he also took out the paopaine, the emergency life-saving herb. The greed had completely submerged Xin's mind.

"How clandestine!" Xin snickered.

Little did he know, Irene secretly observed everything he was doing as she hid at the bottom side of the stairs. Unaware of what Xin was doing, she knew he was up to no good.

The Assault on both sides

The afternoon, a day after the incident...

The time had arrived, it was 1 pm. Irene stood there, wandering around the darkness of the room. Xin had found out about her presence during his tampering through an anonymous messenger. She was waiting and ready to expose the sick imbecile, one that desired to kill his own grandfather.

Suddenly, she heard a snicker. Before she could turn around, a sharp, intense pain struck from her back. A feeling of shock washed over her, Xin's cackle possessing her as her heart started beating slower before relinquishing to the floor where she sunk into the entrance of demise.

Xin walked out of the stinking room, shaking the blood off his hand in disgust. Not disgusted by the blood, but rather disgusted at how someone couldn't be on his side. He walked into a back alley which he instructed his messenger to hide there.

"Mina, Ku. Find her. Take her here." Xin growled, instructing his messenger as he angrily shoved him away.

"Mina. Help." A familiar voice sounded.

Mina paused for a moment, to realize that voice was Irene.

“Irene!!” She yelled.

She frantically sprinted into the fog, closer to the voice. She ran into trees, scraped herself, and tripped over rocks. Her clothes were starting to tear. She was desperate. She ran, her heart pounding faster with each step. She stopped. The fog started to fade away, and in front of her was a rusty, discoloured door which seemed to be an abandoned treatment room.

She kicked the door open and saw the poor woman lying on the floor, inert.

“It’s too late. He did this.” Irene’s quivering last words were.

As those words left her mouth, two officers entered the scene. With Mina and Irene being the only two subjects in the scene, Mina was undoubtedly suspected as the culprit.

“Stop! It’s not what it looks like!” Mina refuted, desperately trying to break out of the officers’ clutches before she got dragged out of the door.

Bao’s reveal

“Last up for questioning, Mina Ku,” Officer Liu demanded.

With a tensed body frame, Mina hesitantly walked into the room. Gripped by the shoulders by the two officers, her hands were tied together by a rope.

The Ping family gasped in horror as they watched Mina enter the room.

“It was you?! We trusted you!” Selena fumed with bloodshot eyes.

“Tell us everything.” Officer Liu urged.

“It was after the gathering. I prepared Mr Ping’s medication, and served the appropriate medication he had to intake that night.”

“Is there anyone missing from this list?” Officer Liu asked, showing her the slip of paper.

Mina carefully examined the list, “Irene.” she responded.

“Irene, the housekeeper. Am I right?” Officer Liu confirmed.

“Yes. She was present during that night. I am aware that she is missing from the questioning, sir.” she said.

“She killed my grandfather. And Irene!” A raspy voice sounded from the back.

The Ping family gasped in unison. Unexpectedly, everybody turned around to see, Xin.

“I know this because you always had this gross obsession with our family. You were always full of spite, full of jealousy. I know you switched the medication because you knew that once Ping was gone his fortune would all go to you. His deteriorating condition led to his retirement and that was the beginning of your plan. You were too full of avarice you just had to do it.”

The Ping family gasped even louder. They were utterly confused yet shocked at how Xin was to find out about this information which they were never told.

“How would you know about Irene’s death if you weren’t present?” Mina rebuked.

Xin froze in his tracks and turned pale. Shaking his head frantically, he began to mumble indistinguishable words.

“I—I’m she—did” He stammered, backing away.

Before Xin tried to run out of the door, Judge Bao slammed the door shut.

“It seems to make sense now..” Bao said.

“At the evening of the gathering, you were flustered, angry, shocked, at your grandfather. You had a quarrel with him. “You will not succeed!” Thomas quoted, after you left the argument. You proceeded to leave early, as your father Eric said. However, it would not make sense that you left the house as Grace remarked that she woke up to noisy footsteps above her, given mind her room is located right under the top room. This was the perfect time for you to tamper with Mr Ping’s medication, as you knew everyone was busy downstairs.” Bao stated.

“And?— You don’t even know what happened after! Stop being delusional.” Xin scolded.

“But! You realised your secret plan wasn’t so secret after all, finding out that there was someone watching you—”

“Irene!” Mina interrupted, as officer Zheng silenced her.

“Yes. You then panic, realising you have been caught red-handed. You decide to meet up with Irene, as evidenced by a note in her pocket, “6 Pubei street. See me. 1 pm.” it reads. To cover up your tracks, you stab her! One witness down. Victory! Not yet. A cover-up for Irene’s death is needed, so you send an anonymous messenger to both Mina and our two officers to investigate the scene. Mina is present after you leave, and our officers arrive as well. She is alone with the corpse, then becomes the culprit.”

“I hereby declare that the cause of Mr Ping’s death was murder by Xin Chen!” Judge Bao snapped.

“This family, you all are a bunch of fools. You fail to get along, and are too blind to realise the hidden truths. Jin Ping was a good man. He did, indeed end his life for Miss Mina Ku. You should all be ashamed of yourself. This case is finished.” Judge Bao asserted.

After Xin Chen was exposed, Judge Bao walked out of the room and scoffed at the murderous fool. The officers aggressively tied Xin’s hands together as he entered his walk of shame towards the door, waiting for his execution.

The Parchment Deal

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Elbaz, Elya – 15

It was a very typical late Sunday afternoon in the small town of Xi An, Northern China. Light rain pitter-pattered on the brick roof of Ming Cha Tea House, a famous tea shop in the center of the city; the shop was calm, with Chinese calligraphy scrolls, beautiful lanterns on the ceiling, and silk fabric on the walls. The shop was, as usual, brimming with people. Cups were clinking, waitresses were walking from table to table. Older women and their husbands were gossiping, as usual, talking about the events of the week. Except this time, they were whispering.

“Is it really true? Is he really here?” An old woman asked, looking around the room. Her cheeks turned red, and her whole face blushed at the idea of being in the same room as Judge Bao.

“Where is he? Judge Bao is in the same room as us!” An old man with a long beard gushed to his wife. He seemed eager to find Bao, he looked persistently around the room. When the man found Bao at the back of the teashop, he let out a look of admiration.

“What could he be doing here?” A middle aged woman asked.

Well, almost typical.

People’s eyes would not move from Bao. He was wearing a short sleeved red robe with a turban on his head drinking tea alone at a table in the back. Bao had a strange appearance — a short man with sad, wayworn eyes who had grown a long white beard over the years. It was not straggly but rather thick, the kind of beard a wise person would have. Bao was known for being extremely just and fair.

This general awe was soon to be interrupted when a tall police officer suddenly entered the shop through the door and ran towards Bao across the shop. As he was running, he knocked over two teacups which shattered on the floor.

“Sir, Bao you are under arrest for working against the government, you have the right to remain silent!”

Whispers spread across the room like a virus in a small town.

“But I thought he was just and fair...” One of the old women said.

The teashop became completely silent as Bao stood up calmly at the back of the teashop. The police officers tied his hands with a rope. Bao touched his long white beard with his hands tied together. A dozen other police officers set foot in the teashop. Only the sound of soft breathing could be heard in the background.

Bao stayed quiet for a while, maybe a few seconds, maybe a few minutes. It didn’t matter. In a shaky soft voice, Bao broke the silence: “*May I ask what this is about? Why are you handcuffing me, sir?*”

“You are accused of working against the government.” The officer said. Truthfully, he was reluctant to arrest Bao, whom he had always admired since he was young.

But police officers violently took Bao by the arm and carried him to the back of their ox cart.

The ride was bumpy and uncomfortable. After the ride, Bao was tossed into a police station in an old wooden building on a small narrow street. The walls of the station were splattered with filth, and dirt was found at each corner of the room. The near room was full of shadows, muting colors and softening the

volume of the daytime. A gust of cold air blew over Bao, causing his body to shiver. Bao was walking very slowly, dodging several objects, chairs, tables, and a book left on the floor.

“Please let me go, I told you, I am innocent.” Bao whispered to a police officer. The officer ignored him. Instead, he gave him new clothes — a suit with a long sleeved white shirt, wide on the arms and loose white pants.

The clothes they gave to criminals.

Bao reluctantly watched the police officers remove the rope from his hands and hold him to the bathroom. How did this happen to him? Was he going to have to stay here long? The man could stay until someone bailed him out, waiting for the trial, yet it seemed like he was going to spend the rest of his days here, imprisoned like a lion in a cage.

Afterwards, the officer reattached the rope, afraid that Bao would attempt an escape, and they continued to walk in silence, passing through each cell. Bao kept his head down as he walked down an entire station with two police officers on his side. Every officer they passed could not detach their eyes from Bao.

“What is Judge Bao doing here, handcuffed?” A police officer murmured as his jaw dropped to the floor.

“Judge Bao? Judge Bao is being sentenced? It doesn’t make any sense...” Another police officer said, a perplexed look on his face. His eyes narrowed, eyebrows furrowed creating a series of wrinkles on his forehead.

“Have fun here, Bao! You sentenced my entire family!” An angry prisoner shouted before being yelled at by the police.

In a few minutes only, the entire prison was aware. The more people looked at him, the more he kept his head down.

“You are going to stay in this cell tonight while the police process some evidence, and until someone bails you out,” the police officer opened the door and tossed Bao inside. Bao fell on the floor, cutting his cheek as tiny trickles of blood trailed down his chin. The cell was narrow and small; inside was just a long wooden bench.

Thud. The tall wooden door slammed behind him, sound reverberating across the hollow walls. Bao did not move, as if he was expecting it to open.

“Well, well, well,” A tall man emerged from the shadows said. “Am I imagining things or am I in the same room as Judge Bao again?”

Oh no... It couldn't be!

“Hello, Zhong Hua. Quite some time has passed since we last met.” Bao had sentenced him years ago for stealing books in a small library, and throwing them at police officers afterwards.

“Yes, some time has passed since you sentenced me. Don’t seem so surprised to see me old man, I broke free and here I am again,” He said walking around the cell, almost monotonously. “Is the good Judge Bao really a criminal like the rest of us? What did you *do*?”

“I have been wrongly accused of working against the government,” Bao sighed.

"You know, these sorts of matters are not taken lightly..." Zhong Hua added. He sat back down and faced Bao, hands put together. Bao looked at him, a worried look on his face for the first time.

"I know someone who got sentenced to prison for life because of it. He even got tortured. The emperor is stricter than any other emperor we have had! And trust me, prison is no joke, especially for a judge like you. If I were you, I would be afraid of what other prisoners would do to you..."

"But I am sure you will be fine!" He added mischievously.

Bao's stomach twisted, his heart took a jump. Bao knew that this man was not to be trusted but he knew how the court worked. He had been a judge for so many years that he knew how easily people get sentenced for life. And in this case, working against the government was not taken lightly. Zhong Hua was right, he could face torture for life! Maybe even the death penalty!

He asked Zhong Hua, "Is there a chance I might not be sentenced to prison for life?"

"As your friend, which is what I am," He said in a playful tone. "I am going to tell you the truth, I don't think that there is any hope! Unless..."

"Unless what?"

"Unless you know someone related to the emperor. And I happen to know the emperor's cousin himself, and I am sure he could let it slide for you." He raised his eyebrows. "And then you won't have to worry about getting tortured as an old man all alone in prison."

Bao knew that it was corrupt to interfere with an investigation. Yet, the thought of him getting tortured made him shiver.

"You would do that for me?" Bao asked instead, reluctant to trust him.

"Yes, that's what friends do, right?" He winked at Bao. "But, you could do something for me in return... Since you are my friend and I am going to do you a huge favor."

"What is it...?" Bao asked suspiciously, leaning forward, he knew how Zhong Hua could be, he was mistrustful.

"I need you to look at the case where you sentenced me and admit that you made a mistake, and that I am actually innocent."

"I am sorry, but I do not think that I will be able to do this."

"This is your choice, but I am innocent just like you are innocent, right? So, you would just be reinstalling justice. And, you would keep your freedom for the rest of your life."

But Bao was not foolish. He knew that this man was guilty, he had committed a theft. *It was a petty theft.* He thought. *It would also mean committing a real crime, corruption. But, my freedom, reputation, and job is on the line.*

"I will let you think about it." Zhong Hua told Bao, looking him straight in the eye.

He slept on a wooden bench. It was cold, his lips could not stop twitching, his body shivered, his legs were shaking. Bao could not find sleep, so he spent the night thinking about the man's proposal. Despite his thinking, when the town bells rang, announcing the morning, Bao was still unsure. In the morning, Bao's knee started to hurt, he rolled up his pants, and saw his scar. It was a big bruise, all over his knee. He had fallen while playing polo with his children. And it hit him. He had children, a partner, a very good job, amazing friends, and the support of all of China. He could not give it all up and let everyone down!

“Zhong Hua,” Bao whispered as he poked the man, who was still sleeping, on the arm.

“Hm...” He hummed.

“I have considered your offer...” Bao could not believe what he was about to say.

Zhong Hua opened his eyes and sat up straight.

“I agree to your conditions, if you promise to keep my liberty and prove my innocence, I will prove yours.” Bao felt shameful saying those words, his desperation had won him over, he avoided eye contact with Zhong Hua.

Zhong Hua seemed satisfied with this sentence, a cheeky smile formed on his face.

“Very well, I will notify my good friend.” Zhong Hua took out a piece of parchment paper from his pocket, and rolled up his pants. He had stolen this from a bookstore. He took out a feather hiding in his left sock, and a little box of ink stuck in his right sock. And wrote *“I, Zhong Hua promise to prove Bao Zheng’s innocence, if you promise to free him when you are free.”*

Both men signed at the bottom of the napkin.

After what seemed like an eternity, a guard appeared and escorted Bao out of the prison; his family had bailed him out. *Those were my first and last instants in prison*, Bao thought. As he exited the police station, Bao took one last look at the prison, turned around, and walked away with his head high. He thought that he would feel remorse, but he didn’t. Bao knew that his freedom was guaranteed for now. He felt as powerful as the god ShangTi, controlling victory in battle.

Bao got home and a few days later, he received a letter. The letter arrived from the postal service, and has his name in it.

“Dear Bao Zheng,

We have been informed of your innocence in the government case. We are deeply sorry for the inconveniences we caused. The people will be informed very shortly, and your position as judge has been reinstated.

Best Regards

Police Station of Xi An”

Bao felt pleased to read this and ran to the cabinet where he kept all of his case files. He opened Zhong Hua’s file and immediately wrote a letter to the police station to let them know about the changes.

“Dear Xi An Police Station,

I have received your letter, I am glad to hear that my duties will be reinstated. I am writing because of an old case...”

He stopped writing. Was he going to write those words? His body shivered. After those were written, the investigation would be launched. There was no turning back at his decision.

"I am writing because of an old case that I found to be inaccurate. I have found that the person sentenced, Zhong Hua, is innocent and I believe that it would be very important to reopen the case and investigate. I will send you another letter with more details so we can discuss it shortly.

*Best Regards
Judge Bao"*

Bao felt odd writing those untrue words. He would have to free a man who he knew was guilty. However, this was the deal.

That day, Bao spent all day signing papers, and forging evidence. He sent it to the police station and, a few weeks later, Zhong Hua was freed. He walked out the prison doors, as far as the wind could take him. The day he was freed was a bright sunny day, the blue sky was clear, a light breeze blew. Judge Bao spent all day, a smile on his face.

The following morning, Bao walked to work, and encountered a teashop. He knew he was late, and he should not stop, but he did anyway. Bao ordered a cup of tea, and drank it on a table close to the door, so he could leave as fast as possible. He was the only customer there. When he was done, an idea rose in his mind. *What if I didn't pay?*

The tea was quite expensive, after all. Bao glanced at the workers, who were busy, washing tea cups and plates and walked out the door. He had left without paying! Bao ran to work with a huge smile on his face! He had just saved money. *Who would have thought that doing the wrong thing would work out so well?*

When Bao got to work, he pulled out a stack of paper. The file was a very thick, fifty page long report about a murder. It would take him hours to read it. After reading a few pages, Bao struggled to keep his eyes open. The case was a murder, as usual, and he knew that the victim's partner was guilty. What was the point of reading all these pages when he was almost sure that the wife was guilty? And so, Bao wrote down that the wife was guilty without reading the full report. He closed the file, and slammed it down the drawer, along with all the cases he had "solved."

He continued for days. He once got stopped by a police officer for driving his cart too fast and said, "Sir, I am Judge Bao, Judge in the high court. I apologize, I will make sure to go slower" The officer let him go because of his name. He once even paid a man to drop charges. The man was violently attacked by another, but Bao thought *This case seems long and pointless. I am sure I can arrange a deal with the victim.* And he paid the man a large sum of money to drop his charges.

One day, he was taking a walk in the park by himself and got tired. His legs felt drained. He stopped and sat on the grass around a river. It was a lovely day; the lake reflection shone as bright as a diamond. A light breeze hit Bao, causing his hat to fall in the water. Bao reached his hand in the water to get it back, and he froze. On the lake, was someone's reflection. And although it was indeed his reflection, Bao could not recognize the man he was seeing. What had happened to him? Acting sinful, and corrupt! How did he let himself act that way? Bao's face turned red, eyes stared at his hat, still on the floor. He felt too shameful to look anywhere else.

"I cannot behave this way anymore." Bao whispered. He knew what he needed to do. As he walked back home from the park, he encountered the same teashop he had stolen from a few days prior. Bao entered the teashop.

"Judge Bao, nice to see you again. What would you like today?" The same worker asked with a smile on his face.

“Hello, I have not come here for tea. I have come here to see you. The truth is, the last time I drank here, I did not pay for my tea. I am unsure if you noticed or not, but I preferred to come here to give you my sincere apologies and give the money I owe you.” Bao handed him the money, three paperbills.

“I would not have expected this from you Bao, but thank you for being honest and bringing the money back.”

Bao rectified every mistake he had made, from cases, to bribery, to unfinished cases.

Bao stopped by the police station and fixed the mistake he made when he let Zhong Hua free. He needed to make things right. Zhong Hua was thrown back into prison, and justice was partially reinstated.

Bao left the police station, he walked out the door freely feeling at ease. Bao followed the sunlight until the moon rose, and followed the clouds until the stars rose.

Black Dog

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Kinjo, Yushin – 15

John was trudging out of the studio wearing a defeated look. He had just finished an eight-hour shoot, repeating the same line through countless retakes, a line he had reiterated to the mirror for days before filming the high-paying commercial. He walked the dark dead streets around the Kowloon studio searching for a taxi. Eventually, John spotted one parked alongside the road. He signalled and entered the cab with a sigh. He told the driver his destination but the only response he got was the loud vibration of snores. John leaned toward the front seat and was engulfed by the funky smell of vomit and the sight of a drunken cabbie sprawling awkwardly with his head tipped back. John clenched his teeth and stomped out of the cab, deciding just to walk home.

Eventually, after dragging himself back home, John was greeted by the sound of panting behind his apartment door. As soon as he pushed it ajar, the black head of a young dog squeezed into the gap. The excited animal levered the door fully open and immediately jumped up on John, who was nearly knocked to the ground in his exhausted state. John smiled and petted the dog who, for the past five months, had helped keep his sanity on a leash. As a jobbing actor in moderate demand and of middling repute among Hong Kong's casting directors, he found both the longueurs of unemployment and the bursts of activity involved in shooting TV commercials were made tolerable by the acquisition of the black dog. His spirits were lifted enough to play with him for a few minutes before John limped into his bedroom and passed out on cue.

A few hours later, John was brought back to life by the juddering of his mobile phone. He fumbled in his pocket, retrieved the buzzing nuisance and put it to his ear reluctantly. Hearing the voice on the other end, he shot up into a sitting position. It was his agent, calling to inform him that an extensive audition process he'd undergone some months earlier had resulted in him being offered the lead role of Judge Pao in an upcoming TV series. After thanking his agent, he lay back down and went out like a light once more.

When he had finally woken up, he had to call his agent to verify that the good news had not been part of a cruel dream. He began striding restlessly around his small apartment, the dog shadowing him like a guilty conscience. John tried to picture how his life might change if he graduated from performing character parts in TV dramas to becoming the star of a successful major series with a multimillion-dollar budget and viewership across Hong Kong and the region. Then with a smirk, he dismissed these frivolous fantasies from the theme park of ego and sat down to commence the suddenly daunting task of researching a character as colossal as Judge Pao.

He stayed at his computer through the night until a ray of sunlight shot through a chink in the curtains, momentarily blinding him. He stood up stiffly and irritably and began stalking his apartment looking for any uncrumpled items of smart casual wear to throw on. He only had thirty minutes left until he needed to be at the studio. He dashed out the door and then did an about-turn, realizing he had forgotten to feed the dog. Once outside his modest five-storey walk-up building, he scouted anxiously for a taxi. Catching his reflection in a window, he began trying to smooth down his uncombed hair as he scanned the streets. He might be on track to becoming a star but he still had to be on time. A taxi with its sign-up cruised by, prompting him to gesticulate wildly at the approaching knight in red like a bit-part actor on a battlefield set trying to catch the attention of a director. Just then, an old man with a black dog shuffled out of a side street and signalled the same taxi. The driver waved the old man away and waited for John. John looked at the old man, who was now bending wearily and speaking affectionately to his devoted friend. John could see that neither of them was in the best condition and remembering his good fortune, he pointed the driver toward the elderly pair. Squinting at John with a look of relief, the old man helped his dog into the scowling driver's cab. Even though he knew that he now wouldn't make the studio on time, John smiled.

John reached the studio twenty minutes late. He apologized to the production manager of the advertising agency, who luckily was in a good mood because he had just wrapped up a brand deal that morning. John was let off for his tardiness. He was relieved that no one on set seemed to be upset that he was late. Filming on the advert resumed, and John was as ready as he could be with all the practice he had put into delivering the all-important line. Nevertheless, he was worried his performance might not be up to scratch. He felt exhausted, the buzz of being cast as Judge Pao having subsided somewhat. After splashing his face and slapping himself a few times in the bathroom, he marched on set and gave the director a thumbs up.

Surprisingly they nailed the shot that morning and the director even gave John kudos for his prodigious performance. He stayed at the studio for a couple more hours post-shoot at the director's request to look over the footage.

Now that the advert shoot was over John had six weeks to prepare for the role of Judge Pao. Of course, he had grown up reading stories about the famous Song Dynasty politician and had seen quite a few earlier TV shows based on his life. But after the previous night's deep dive into the life of Judge Pao, he knew there was a lot more preparation needed before he could start building the character based on the script that was now on its way to him in the mail.

Four weeks passed and John had sufficient understanding of Judge Pao to immerse himself in creating his interpretation of the character while rehearsing his lines. The dog would unwittingly play the other roles. This would even go on when they went out on walks, eliciting many funny looks as this unlikely acting duo strolled through the park.

It was the night before the first day of filming. He had decided to finish off his day by watching some TV before bed to relax, sipping hot tea with the dog curled up on the sofa beside him. It felt like a new life. It seemed perfect. As he flipped through the channels something on a neighbourhood digital channel caught his eye. An image of a lost puppy stared at him from the screen. Something about the puppy looked familiar, even down to the collar it had on. He turned off the TV, deciding it was time for bed. He had a hard time getting to sleep.

A few hours after John fell asleep, the busy city had already woken up. The familiar sound of cars honking and people shouting was suddenly drowned out by the vociferous alarm. John was in an unusually deep sleep which even the alarm's raucous shriek couldn't interrupt. Fortunately, the dog woke up. The dog jumped on John's bed and crawled across the bed sheets. John was pulled from another world in which he was Judge Pao presiding over a case about the ownership of a chicken by what felt like a wet towel being dragged repeatedly across his nose. John's eyelids slowly opened as he returned to this world. He was perplexed as to why the dog was bouncing about on his bed as John routinely woke up first. He grabbed his phone and instantly saw that the alarm had already gone off, but sighed with relief as he noticed what time it was. He got out of bed and rewarded the dog with a treat. He got ready, left the apartment and headed to the TV studio.

He arrived one hour ahead of schedule. When he got to the set, a producer introduced him to the script supervisor and the costume designer and then a runner escorted him to his dressing room. While the crew fixed the lights for the first shooting set-up, John spent the time rereading his lines for the day's scheduled scenes. As he flipped through the bulky script, the image of the missing puppy he'd seen on TV popped into his mind and wouldn't go away. It was distracting him.

After a fairly successful first day of shooting, the cast and even the crew seemed to smile at John more than when he had worked on other TV productions. He still felt as if something was out of place but he decided to ignore the feeling. But later at home when he should have been recharging his vocal cords for the following day's shoot. He still could not be at ease. He decided to look up the news item about the dog on the digital channel's website. The cute lost puppy was the first thing he saw. It had become one of the top stories thanks to its haunting photo. He learned that it belonged to a 75-year-old widower who had raised it until it went missing at six months old. There was a short video in which the dog bounced around the old man's apartment as the sound of laughter and delight emanated from behind the camera. Although there was no photo of the owner, after watching the video John felt like he knew him and felt keenly for his loss. If the puppy in the photo was not the younger version of the strapping black dog that was currently staring at John with trusting eyes from the sofa, then it must be a doppelganger. John's heart rate started to increase. There was a strong chance that the dog John had found wandering around dolorously at the foot of a nearby hillside and thought was a stray might belong to someone else, despite no chip having been detected by a local vet. He studied the image and had to admit it looked remarkably like his present companion back when he had found him. But then again, many dogs looked alike and even had similar collars. Yet he couldn't stop looking at the image. He turned and looked at the dog. The more he looked, the more he spotted identical features. He tried to suppress his concern and settle into bed.

It was the next morning. John felt awfully drained; he hadn't been able to fall into a deep sleep for the whole night, with any small sound waking him up. He forced himself out of bed, his eyelids drooping with

each step he took toward the bathroom. It began to be stressful to walk around his apartment because he found it painful to look at the dog. He skipped breakfast and headed to work wishing that he could relax a little.

He arrived at the studio one and a half hours earlier than scheduled. He went to his dressing room, trying to block out thoughts of the missing puppy. He read through the script but he couldn't focus. He feared a looming sadness, for he was almost certain that the dog in his house was the old man's missing puppy. He ventured out of his oppressive cell to walk around the studio set, dressed in Judge Pao's judicial robes and wishing for a miracle as a condemned man prays for a reprieve.

The first half of the day went by surprisingly smoothly. But when they broke for lunch John couldn't help returning to the image of the missing puppy even though he knew it going to make him feel worse. Watching the video again, he spotted something. He freeze-framed a shot of the black puppy and zoomed in. It had a familiar white dot on its right ear.

He spent the rest of his lunch break just sitting in his robes and thinking as his food slowly got cold. Then lunch was over and he had no other option but to continue shooting. When the day's filming was finally over he took the long way home on foot. He thought about keeping the dog. But the more he contemplated it, the more he hated himself. However, it was equally painful to think about giving him back because he had become such an important part of his life. Hadn't they already accepted each other as family? When he got home he tried to play with the animal as usual, but whenever he was around it he could only feel guilt and shame.

A few days had passed and John was still in turmoil. After changing, he checked himself in the mirror. Even though he looked very fine wearing the impressive robes of Judge Pao, he felt less like an actor and more like a fraud. A question formed in his mind. What would the judge do? Slowly a teardrop rolled down his face. John knew what he had to do. He wiped away the tear. The decision had been made.

That night when he got back home, John was welcomed by the usual excited face and wagging tail. He sat down and petted the dog who wriggled around the floor and rolled onto his back so that John could stroke his stomach. John was smiling as uncontrollable tears slid down his cheeks. He knew that he had made the right choice. The old man deserved to have his beloved pet returned even though doing so would be the hardest thing John had ever had to do. He spent the night playing with the dog for the last time. The time they had shared could never be forgotten.

The next morning John retrieved the old man's phone number from the TV channel's website. He inputted the number into his phone, closed his eyes and took several deep breaths. Then he opened his eyes and pressed the green circle on the phone's display.

Judgement From Above

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Yong, Casey – 14

“Before I pass, put my final words on the historical records,” Bao Zheng breathes out, his voice airy but bogged down by the weight of his words. He can barely make out the silhouettes of his loved ones standing beside him. “Any of my descendants who commit bribery as an official, shall not be allowed back home nor buried in the family burial site. He who shares not my values is not my descendant.”

As that last decree leaves the ghost of his lips, Bao Zheng shuts his eyes. Within minutes, his breathing slows until eventually it comes to a halt.

Soon, Bao Zheng wakes up.

Groggily, he surveys his surroundings, his head whipping around to find any sort of clue he could sniff out as to where he was. As he blinks away the drowsiness, he quickly notices there is nothing around him.

Nothing, except the night sky. Tiny, gleaming stars in every direction and position they could be, on a backdrop of a serene abyss.

He looks down, and he finds himself laying on a bed of similar aesthetic. His blanket, enveloping his stout body snugly, is now tightly stitched with stars, held together by the lines connecting one constellation to another. Bao Zheng grabs onto the fabric and the material crinkles on his hand, soft and malleable.

His robes have changed accordingly as well; originally a dull yellow, now a shimmering midnight blue, dotted with small, bright crescent moons sewn into the hem of the sleeves.

Bao Zheng attempts to sit up, expecting the usual crick in his back he’s gained from old age to rear its head, but he feels no sign of it.

This had not been the afterlife I had expected.

“You have awoken.”

Bao Zheng’s head whips over to the source of the voice and finds an imposing figure with a fiery red face, the height of two doors stacked on top of one another. The man adorns a warrior’s outfit, fit for the highest-ranking general he recognizes from the San Guo Dynasty. His robes are a gleaming emerald green with countless gold medallions clipped on. A source of light coming from nowhere casts shadows behind him, stretching miles beyond his already large stature, as he glares down at Bao Zheng.

“Guan-gong,” Bao Zheng gives the deity a perfect, ninety-degree bow. He makes a note of how his back is no longer weighed down by his age, as he was on his deathbed. “I see you have come to see me.”

“Justice Bao Zheng,” his voice bellows through the chamber of stars, bouncing off of non-existent walls. “What regrets do you hold?”

Bao Zheng can’t hold himself back from stiffening, but his gaze is still fixed on the galaxy beneath his feet.

“My lord, I do not understand what you are referring to. I do not believe I have committed egregious enough deeds to land me a lifetime of suffering and misery, but if you are to bring me to Hell,” Bao Zheng cautiously kneels before Guanyu, pressing his hands and his forehead to the floor against the bottomless floor. “I will follow as an obedient servant to the gods. If you are throwing me a lifeline, or providing me an opportunity for salvation for what I have done, I am forever in your debt and will repent in any way you find necessary.”

“Rise. That is not what I am referring to. I am asking you, what regrets do you hold?”

“...Guan-gong, are you referring to my accomplishments and deeds as a judge? If I had passed any unfair judgment or perpetuated any sort of injustice—”

“Do not think you can dodge my questions with your trained eloquence.” Guanyu does not sound impatient, but his voice is slightly louder than before. Bao Zheng is familiar with the voice he takes upon as well, one he’s harnessed many times for himself. “Answer me the question of which I have asked you: what regrets do you hold?”

Bao Zheng flips through the book of his life, pages bound by flimsy string as he runs through any cases he would’ve wanted to end differently, and emerges with nothing.

“I hold no regrets for my life, my lord.”

“As I’m sure a man with your prestige would know, lying will get you nowhere, child.”

Bao Zheng stays silent and frowns. A man with a cheeky grin and dark hair, and a middle-aged woman with a soft smile and faint crow’s feet, appear in his mind.

“There is one, but I...”

“Speak.”

“It has long since been forgotten to the past, it—” Bao Zheng clears his throat. “It is less of a regret and more so of a point of self-improvement, one of which I am sure all of humankind hold.”

“You are speaking of your false conviction of Bao Mian, your nephew, for bribery and malfeasance,” Guanyu states.

“It had been halted before anything substantial could have come of it. Everyone involved had emerged unscathed and I can only be glad for it.”

Guanyu hums. “Unscathed, you say?”

“Yes. The rightful criminals had been sentenced to a life of punishment, not him.”

Through sharp eyes trained to catch tells, Bao Zheng detects a shift in Guanyu’s countenance, but one he can’t quite pinpoint.

“Very well then. Let us see how you would fare when put into that situation. If he was guilty, if you were to see his life come to an end.”

Before Bao Zheng is given time to fully process the information, he hears a snap and the world goes dark.

Bao Zheng opens his eyes to a world of blurry color. He stumbles backwards, realizing he’s suddenly upright again and leans against what feels to be a table behind him to regain his balance. He shakes his head to quell a sudden wave of nausea, before he looks up and sees a middle-aged woman clad in pale pink robes with wide eyes, pointing and screaming at him.

“You dare turn your back on this family, on us!” She yells, tears streaming down her face as if rivers were flowing from them.

“My...” Bao Zheng’s head throbs. “Auntie, forgive me, but what do you speak of?”

“What else could I have spoken of, wretched traitor of our family?” Venom coats her every word, as flecks of spit fly out of her mouth. “Do you find yourself so uncaring to not acknowledge what we are even discussing?”

He remembers this clearly, the woman, the yells, the circumstance. However, as he looks around, at the time of day, at the tapestry arrangement, at what she's wearing – it's all slightly different. When Aunt Wu had last screamed at him over Bao Mian's arrest, they had shed tears and shouted their voices hoarse, only for the criminals to show themselves the next day.

The light streaming through the windows now though, tells a different story.

She clutches the folds of her dress tightly, strands of her graying hair falling in front of her face. "I can't believe I could have ever once raised you as my own!"

"Auntie—"

"He is my son. He is your family too, and you are willing to throw all of that away, for what. Prestige? Your so-called justice? Family always comes first and—"

With years upon years worth of deduction experience under his belt, along with Guanyu's parting words, it doesn't take long for Bao Zheng to piece together what is unfolding before his eyes.

"I...he is...where is he right now?"

"You need—" she scoffs shakily, flopping down onto a nearby chair and holding her head in her hands. "You even forget his execution date, after *you* decreed that was the fate that he deserved!"

Frantic, Bao Zheng's peeks through the window once more, trying to detect the time of day from the sun's position in the sky.

Nine o'clock. He has an hour or so before the usual time of scheduled execution.

Without even letting his thoughts fully marinate, he runs out the door and sprints down the street.

His legs take him farther than he's remembered they've been able to for a long time, his robe billowing and tripping him up as he fights against the wind, dashing through the streets he grew up in to hopefully reach the execution grounds before the time is up and what is done cannot be undone. He weaves through crowds of civilians, pushing through workers carrying buckets over their shoulders, evading the carriages of merchants, ignoring the various complaints at him as he brushes shoulders with people he's too frazzled to even recognize the voices of.

As he runs, his mind works overtime, stringing together what Guanyu had just told him with what was currently happening before him. Bao Zheng is acutely aware of the powers of the gods work beyond his mortal comprehension, but it surely doesn't stop him from trying, as he repeats Guanyu's last words in his head over and over again like a mantra.

If you were to see his life come to an end.

Bao Zheng attempts to conjure up reasons in his frenzy. Maybe it's a hallucination, or time travel, or even some sort of demon's punishment—

Bao Zheng's footsteps and thoughts skid to a halt, as a crowd of people raising their fists and shouting in fury, blocks his way.

"Fraud! Fraud! Fraud!" they chant.

Bao Zheng's legs freeze, as if he was suddenly submerged into the ocean, water filling up to his neck. Tentatively, he wades through the horde of limbs, pushing past civilians with reckless abandon, to get through the commotion.

Finally, after making his way to the front, Bao Zheng is greeted at the head of a slack body, dangling by the throat. The body's face is obscured by the head of tousled black hair threaded with gray, and falling in front

of his face, as he spins ever so slightly. The body wears torn, brown garments, ones only befitting of a prisoner.

He resists the urge to drop to his knees. He might now be in a body decades younger, and he's seen enough punishments to know that this is comparatively merciful.

But he knows who that body belongs to and it makes all the difference.

What is it you want me to see, Guan-gong? The body of my nephew? Bao Zheng thinks miserably, looking up into the clear blue sky, one far too bright for the horror before him.

All of a sudden, Bao Zheng's eyes instinctively fly to the body and to watch as its arms seize upwards inelegantly, as if there was a puppeteer pulling the strings. Bao Zheng's eyes widen and a wave of gasps sweeps through the crowd.

"Witchcraft—"

"The gods—"

"Who had—"

The neck of the body falls into an awkward angle backwards, bones protruding through the thin layer of skin. The body twitches erratically, fingers making audible cracking noises, as they twist and snap on his hands.

Bao Zheng's knees shake and he takes a deep breath, closing his eyes to try and calm himself. He believes in the deities above, that there has to be some sort of meaning—

"Bao Qingtian."

Bao Zheng's eyes are pried open by an invisible force, digging into the folds of his eyelids. He's forced to open them wide and stare straight at the now spasming corpse of Bao Mian. He notices that the common folk around him have all vanished, the pavement cleared of any sort of hustle and bustle. The sky has now darkened, inky clouds moving in a formation to fully blanket the sky, though not one like the fabric of night he had seen before. The corpse of Bao Mian, however, even when barely illuminated under the lack of light, is clear as day.

Bao Zheng thinks the whispers of the common folk were right. This has to be witchcraft.

"Bao Qingtian," the unknown voice repeats. The name is unfamiliar, but Bao Zheng knows it calls for him. If he focuses hard, Bao Zheng is able to discern the voice coming from Bao Mian's body, but it's too dark to see if his mouth is moving to begin with.

"Yes?" Bao Zheng tries, compelling his voice to remain neutral. He might not understand what's going on, but he still remembers from the stories his aunt had told him decades ago; that to show fear to mythical beings, is the same as surrendering to their wrath.

"You would sentence me to prison, knowing I would suffer."

"Had you committed those crimes, yes."

"Does Confucius mean nothing to you?"

"Confucius is a wise man and—"

The sudden feeling of a hand appears at the base of his collarbone and snakes up to his Adam's apple, smooth fingers curving at the front of his neck. Bao Zheng tries to look around, but the invisible hand holds his neck in place, making him stare at the corpse.

“Answer.”

“I,” Bao Zheng sucks in a breath, steadying his voice, “believe in his teachings.”

“Then why did you betray me?” Bao Mian’s voice distorts, clipping in and out.

“I did not—”

The invisible hand tightens its grip on Bao Zheng’s neck, its fingers digging into the flesh.

“Betrayal.”

“Do you want to hear what I believe, or do you want me to say what fits into your truth?”

Bao Mian’s mouth opens like a door on its hinges, and a jade green snake drops from the jaw of his body. It slithers towards Bao Zheng, as the invisible hands increase and lock around his wrists, holding them behind him. Two other hands push him and he loses balance, falling to his knees. A final hand grabs him by the top knot and drags his head upwards, his neck exposed.

The snake makes its way up his body and he squeezes his eyes shut, praying his rapid heartbeat and frantic breathing don’t betray him. The snake moves up his ankle, his waist, his chest, until it makes a home on his shoulders.

Bao Zheng closes his eyes and prays to every god he can think of, as the snake inches closer towards his neck. Soon, its head is on his left shoulder, its tail on his right, and it...wraps around his neck.

“Sacrificing your nephew for the sake of justice,” it hisses. “You were ready for it all to end this way. Do you stand by your terms, facing him?”

Bao Zheng’s eyelids flutter open once more and Bao Mian is limp once again, drooping like a wilted plant, all the pigment gone from his body.

“He died,” the snake rasps. “Because of you.”

“...”

The snake’s tongue licks up his neck, curling around like an accessory as it talks straight into it. “It is easy to say you would have executed him nonetheless since the crime’s real perpetrator had not been him. But seeing this, seeing him, do you think otherwise?”

“I...”

Bao Zheng has seen many limp bodies like this one in his lifetime, ones he’s caused and ones he didn’t. He can only hope his culprits were right every time, can only hope none of them were unjustly subjected to a fate like this, can only hope the gods had made the right plan for them in the afterlife.

But Bao Zheng followed a singular moral code and he had sworn an oath to himself to abide by it for as long as he lived.

“No,” he declares, standing firm in his decision and commanding his voice not to waver. “If he were a true criminal, I would never in my life regret sentencing him to death.”

As soon as the words exit his mouth, the whole world freezes in time. The hanging body stops swaying, the snake stops hissing, the invisible hands lose their grip.

Another snap and Bao Zheng is submerged in darkness once more.

Seconds later, light returns and Bao Zheng can see once more.

He's back in the dome of night, except he is standing upright and now Guanyu, who stands before him again, is meeting his height. Guanyu's emerald robes seemingly shine brighter as well, face redder and brows thicker than before.

"That was—"

Guanyu shakes his head. "One final test, orchestrated by us gods above, to see if you are deemed worthy of being our peer."

"Gods...Our?"

Something sharp burns at the center of his forehead, searing like a brand. He winces, going to touch the pain at the source. Oddly enough, his forehead feels cool to the touch and his thumb runs over the shape of a small, crescent moon.

He retracts his finger, staring right at Guanyu with a stone-cold expression. He takes a step back, stabs his spear into the ground and inclines his head.

"Welcome to join our ranks as a deity of justice and righteousness, unwavering in bias or personal sentiment."

As the name leaves his lips, the sky around them breaks apart and away into small glass-like pieces, descending down on them like droplets of rain. They chip and crumble, shifting in color and size as they all fall in line before him, each piece in what looks to be a designated place before him, until eventually, it forms a large, silver lever-knife before him.

He bends down and takes it into his hands carefully, the blade a perfect weight and form, as the head of it seems to shift between various creatures every two seconds.

"A blade, for executions of people of various backgrounds. Now, your blade."

"This is..." Bao Zheng fidgets with the hilt and plants it into the ground. He stands upright and bows. "I thank you."

Guanyu stands back upright and his eyes twinkle with mirth. "All hail our Astral God of Civil and Military Arts: Bao Qingtian!"

The Confluence of Justice

Chinese International School, Siu, Monique – 13

“Criminal soul Zhang Xiao, proven guilty. Punishment: iron tree hanging; Imprisonment for eternity!”

The words of power echoed through the grottoes.

“Your honour! I swear! I’m innocent! It’s... that brat’s fault! His useless mother! The hellcat! She never listens to me...” The mortal defended himself but his voice was nothing compared to that of the honoured judge. The veins covering the neck of the accused purged through the gaps in the weighted chain that hung across his damaged shoulders.

“Silence! The truth will out. Sinful souls who pretend to integrity shall never be forgiven. Mistreatment of family and wife, murder of thy father, nothing else but extreme betrayal of human dignity... Hang your head in disgrace mortal”

“Lord Yama! How— how could you...”

But punishment had been announced. Two figures of peculiar countenance, one ox-headed, the other a horse, trotted down, and as if the sinner weighed no more than a sack of thin, hollow bones, dragged him down with two fingers into the Eighteen Levels of Hell.

It was evening. The scent of smoke covered the smell of old papyrus in Pao’s study. The ink pen danced gracefully under his grip, before the scene was interrupted by a mannerly knock on the mahogany door. In came his right-hand man, Teng Di.

“Your honour, on behalf of the Verification and Records Department – I have an urgent update.” Teng confessed with his head bowed.

“Carry on.” His honour escalated one hand from the pen.

“Since Governor Hong’s death, the people of Chen Jiang have elected their new leader. The allegedly democratic and knowledgeable replacement Lu Yong has successfully gained the seat and has executed his work as the head of Chen Jiang for two months to date.

However Lu Yong is not found on the list of the mortal living and is neither heard nor spoken of by any of our deities. His identity could not be validated by either hell or heaven. According to my investigation, Lu Yong has been using tax money to build slavery cells, and has been abducting citizens to unknown locations built by his security and armed forces...”

Silence. The sound that Teng hates most in conversations with his master. “Chen Jiang has always been a prosperous realm known for its history and culture, wisdom, literature and art. And what this suspect’s next actions will be is hardly predictable,” his honour inhaled a breath of vexation.

“I, Pao Zheng, as a descendant of justice; as the judge of both life and afterlife, shan’t ever let this criminal run loose, in the name of protection of mortality’s welfare and my hometown’s reputation!”

Chen Jiang, Lu Dynasty

“New and fresh bao dian! Try a bite!”

Pao, taking over the body of military leader Yi Zheng, strode through the busy streets of Chen Jiang. He brushed the pack of short whiskers underneath his chin and sighed. Alongside disappointment he also felt nostalgia as he gazed at the playgrounds and short roofs that reminded him of his mortal life.

Opening the wooden gates he found Li Yong awaiting his right-hand man. *The prey had served itself to the predator.* How much Pao longed to lunge forward and seize his soul. Instead, he kneeled to the floor. “Your majesty. It’s Yi Zheng’s honour to have your great visit. May I venture what would you want from my service?”

Such degradation.

“Ha-ha! Stand up, Zheng, I just love how you bow and scrape to please me.” Li Yong shoved his right-hand in the air, commanding his servants to stand down. Almost instantly, asked as he dragged Pao close, “Did you finish what I told you to?”

Pao glanced at Li Yong through Yi Zheng’s eyes. He stared closely, scrutinising him from the top of his forehead to the tip of his glossy leather shoes. The muscle between Li Yong’s eyes tensed, as he returned a glare, loosening his grip for an instant.

“Yes, your majesty. The cells are settled. However...”

“However?”

“Would it be enough for all of the prisoners?”

Li Yong closed his eyes and tasted the suffocating air in the closed room. “Oh, Yi Zheng. These people carry the sins of their ancestors. If prisons are not enough, construct a labyrinth of despair; if an impossible maze is not enough, construct a hell. If the hell becomes too densely packed, these criminals can be burnt and buried alive... If I surrender before such excuses, how could I continue to act for the gods?” He gave a dismissive laugh. “Zheng, if it weren’t for you, how could I gain the throne of this credulous town? I have everything under control.. Zheng, won’t you support me as I commit to the orders from the sky earnestly and perfectly? Such actions are impeccable and mysterious. Wouldn’t I be favoured by Lord Yama himself?”

Ironic.

Pao noticed a glimpse of hate and rage in Li Yong’s eyes. And he wasn’t sure to whom it was directed.

“Zheng, I would settle this properly and wouldn’t spill any single word of your lord’s schemes if I were you. You know I’m fair and just. Rewards for great service. Penalty otherwise.” Li Yong then scratched his neck.

Evening fell as a thick haze formed behind the sun. Pao squinted at the ceiling of Yi Zheng’s room. He didn’t even like breathing in such corrupt skin. He had never felt so blinded with grievance and confusion, for he had been balancing the events and conflict of all mankind ever since his release from his own mortal life. The worst things that could be seen had been seen and solved, but when it came to Li Yong, Pao knew there was more to be discovered beneath his mask.

“Your majesty, sorry for the interruption.”

The words of Teng Di’s message echoed in Pao’s mind, recalling him to his present state. “Continue.” he murmured in response.

“There is urgent news from the inventory. The elixir of extreme submissiveness is missing...”

Pao clenched his fists and wrapped his head in his arms. In his mortal guise he could hardly bear the strength of his own feelings.

“Other ministers have stated it couldn’t be found in the territories of Hell, therefore it should be stolen and smuggled through the borders of mankind... The work that your majesty has left in hell will be carried on by other ministers.”

“I understand, thank you for the update. I shall come back with our sinner and the stolen treasure.”

The next day Pao replayed the events he had experienced in search of an epiphany as he sat in the golden carriage on his way to Lu Yong’s mansion. Beside him sat Si-tu Yang, Yi Zheng’s apprentice. Pao had observed his resemblance to Teng Di in hell. “Yang, I have decided to start a revolution. Precisely, a rebellion.”

Si-tu Yang swivelled towards Pao in disbelief. “Teacher, but, I thought you were always a supporter of Lu Yong...”

Pao could see the innocence in Yang’s eyes. *Seems like Yi Zheng never revealed the truth to his student.* Perhaps it was time to reshape Yi Zheng’s character. Pao explained Lu Yong’s corruption to his innocent servant.

“Regardless, his motives are yet to be divulged.”

Yang pressed his palms to his head in disbelief. “Such devilry! Such a loathsome leader!” At the sound of his voice the carriage jerked to a sudden stop. “What would you, teacher, plan as your next step?”

Both were welcomed by governor Lu Yong in the lounge of his mansion. Pao could not allow the criminal’s acts to go any further. Excusing himself to the toilet he manoeuvred into Lu Yong’s workroom. He quickly flicked through the documents, seeking concrete evidence.

His actions were interrupted by soft footsteps beyond the closed doors.

Pao stopped all motion, muted himself by holding his breath. He could sense the hand of the approaching party reaching out to the door handles. Without delay, Pao lunged forward and slipped his scabbard between the handles skilfully in a quick, agile flow.

Bang!

The doors jerked simultaneously. The impacts continued. Splintering. Pao scanned the room for a quick escape, but a reversed candle caught his sight. Reaching out, he twisted the candlestick. The planks on the floor shifted and flipped open, showing a dark passage that would reveal secrets. Pao closed the lid as he climbed down. Holding the candle from Lu’s table, he guided his path through the shadows. He could feel dust on his palms, and as he continued searching by touch, there was a surface that was unruffled, cold and curved with delicate smoothness. It was a jar. Pao’s heart leapt. He brought the candle closer. And there was a mystifying purple glow.

“The elixir of extreme submissiveness.”

A low, mortifying voice echoed the thought in Pao’s mind.

Pao ducked as a sharp blade swung over his head. Swinging out his sword he struck a counterattack to his assailant's chest while the shadow twisted its body. It sent a plummeting strike from above. Pao blocked the blade, bowled around and slashed the enemy from his back. The attack was returned with a lacerating tear through Pao's shoulder. Before Pao could recognize the pain the enemy hurled a shuriken. Pao blocked the shuriken with the handle of his weapon. The shadow fled with the elixir.

Chasing after the shadow's footsteps Pao dashed through the crypt's chambers. Passing up the stairs they sprinted into town from the horse stable of the governor's mansion. Bolting through the streets to the ocean of forests they were two comets gliding through the night.

The hooded figure stopped at the confluence of rivers at the highest peak of Chen Jiang. It turned around and gave Pao a red, piercing stare. Pulling down his hood, Lu Yong revealed his face. "You are not Yi Zheng." He flicked out his blade. "I have suspected it since last week in Zheng's mansion."

"And who are you behind the mask called Lu Yong?" Pao retorted.

The apparition giggled eerily. "Last time I duelled Yi Zheng, he lost tragically. Hence he became my servant, and the key to my power over Chen Jiang. How should he hope to reach the level of my skills now given my long training in hell!"

This criminal's face was one Pao could never forget. He recalled the exact words he had announced in the court of the underworld: "Yu Shiu, bandit in charge of massive robbery and arson, and murderer! And now, sinner through hell and mankind, a prisoner of eternity on the loose!" Pao wielded his silver blade under the burning glaze. Yu Shiu's countenance darkened. "Pao Zheng. Do. Not. Accuse me – of what I have not done!" He held out the elixir of submissiveness. "Yama, you know what would happen if I poured this into the rivers of Chen Jiang? Yes, *everyone* would become my dog, and those sinners would always obey. The avaricious shall walk orderly to the guillotine," he caressed the elixir joyfully and with menace, "and soon those who block my way would be removed to those gates of yours, Yama, and I would be intrigued to see you performing your *justice* then."

The blood flushed in Pao's veins. He dropped the sword in his grip. Yu was too close to the river to be attacked. "What is your plan?" Yu Shiu dismissed his words. He opened the elixir jar. "Give up, Pao. I fell for your dirty trick once and shall never fall for it twice."

Pao didn't think. Dashing forward it was a bet of speed. With his immortal body Pao could easily end it with a sure stroke. But at the crucial moment he felt doubt and so the moment passed. One may wonder, as Pao did, where the line determining what is right and wrong would lie? It was left to the natural and corrupt to fight over definitions, each trying to mould the mind of the other, to move the line and gain an advantage. In a struggle with such a protean opponent would justice this time be withheld? Pao could not assure that it would not.

"Shiu!"

The gentle voice of a girl called the criminal's name. How familiar, how loving, and yet how painful it was to Shiu. He dropped to his knees, covering the elixir with his hands. He looked at the charming girl whom he once called his own. Only then his eyes glistened with clear and genuine tears. He pulled himself towards her embrace, "I have been searching for you for centuries," he confessed with momentary vulnerability. Pao saw Yu Shiu suddenly released from the shadows that had immersed him for countless moons and Pao understood the warmth that he himself once felt in the world that he swore to protect. Dried blood covered Yu's palms as he held his blade. Releasing the tension from his grip, he had left the spiral of violence and his fixation.

Pao dipped his head at the girl. "Please, tell me what happened between you." Shiu sat against the bark of the tree, strained by fatigue and tears. "It happened decades ago – before our reincarnation. My

name was Yi Hai, and Shiu was my lover. When I saw Shiu's face in the crowd just now, I recalled everything we had experienced. I followed both of you up the hill.

I had never felt so deeply in love before I met Shiu. He showed me the suffering of the underprivileged whom he offered necessities that could help them survive.. I was so charmed by his kindness and nobility that I decided to be his wife.

A few days before our wedding a prince threatened my father to make me his wife. The prince killed Shiu's father and declared to kill Shiu if I refused. I had to agree to his demands. The prince deprived Shiu of his fortune by abusing his power. Shiu was devastated, mingled with gangsters and with them he robbed the corrupted rich. Their gang gained notoriety but Shiu couldn't forget me. He vowed revenge.

On the day Shiu was about to end the prince's life and elope with me, the prince coldly stabbed me and burned both of us to death..." Yi Hai rasped from suffocation. "Shiu took the blame for murdering me, and the charge of 'massive robbery and arson'. Nobody knew about the prince's corruption and violence... That cruel man... was named Che Long."

Pao was silent. Feelings of anger, guilt, and regret brewed a storm in his chest. He felt inexpressible pain, the pain of the lovers, the pain of the unknown violence and injustice that continued under his watch, pain that the evil of others had turned someone from good to bad. Yi Hai turned to Yu Shiu and took away the elixir from his loosened grip. She placed it on her hands and knelt before Pao. "Lord Pao, please –"

Yu Shiu stopped her by pulling the elixir away. "You have suffered too much because of me," he winced, "and you should never apologise for the mistakes that I have made." He dropped to his knees. Shame and grief, his love for her had made him dismount from his unyielding horse of sorrow and vengeance. "Pao Zheng... I apologise for my twisted mind, and my attempts to create suffering because of my own adversity. I thought... I could cover the pain of my wounds through blaming the world for my misfortune, but whenever I tried to seek vengeance, I could only be reminded of the agony, of... of the flashes of flames and Yi Hai's beaten face... But whatever I do, I cannot deceive my own heart. I cannot look straight into the innocent eyes of those I have imprisoned, but this elixir could change everything, I thought. If this elixir could disconnect their minds from their bodies, their souls would not suffer... How selfish, senseless, and absurd I was! I..." Yu Shiu sank his head, "I hereby solemnly plead guilty for my crimes, and beg for your affirmation. What I have done is nothing different from that cruel prince Che Long's acts, and therefore – I am nobody to do good to humanity..."

Pao held Yu Shiu's hands and received the elixir. "I would like to apologise for my own misjudgement. The jury should punish Che Long accordingly once we return to hell. And you, Yu Shiu, and your lover, shall return to hell."

Yu Shiu looked up and knelt again. "Please! Lord Pao, my crimes are nothing related to Hai! "

Pao stared at him and smiled, for although Shiu was right, the judge knew the wishes of Shiu's beloved Hai. "Yu Shiu. Yes, you are a perpetrator, but also a victim. Do you refuse my offer to allow you and your lover to live together in my underworld, along with memories you both have shared and created?" Pao stroked his chin. "Have you misinterpreted my words?"

Yu Shiu and Yi Hai stared at each other with disbelief and joy.

Diyu, Hell: Pao's workroom

Everything was again settled in hell. Pao hummed with the nightingale in his usual office. And again, interrupted by a small knock from Teng Di. "Your honour, the soul of Zhang Xi has returned from

his flight in humanity. He was the son of the sinner Zhang Xiao.” Teng Di explained from his working documents. “May I ask why would you like to see him?”

“In fact, I have now realised the inefficiency and lack of credibility of the way that we have been using consistently before. Justice cannot be merely seen from the court – I have to step into the stories of people to acquire a new point of view. Seems like I would have to revisit humanity to spread the true words of justice and integrity, to teach and inspire students with my own words and actions. To join their society and experience the kindness of people. To seek a new perspective of goodness myself. Perhaps, a clearer, deeper way of an inquest into the boundaries of black and white.”

New Tales of Judge Pao

Creative Secondary School, Chan, Charlene – 15

"Hey Bella," Anna says as she slowly sets her cup of coffee on the fancy-looking coffee table in Bella's room, "it's your birthday in two days, isn't it?" Bella turns to face Anna with a look of surprise on her face.

"Oh, you're right! I almost forgot about that! Bella says with a slightly awkward chuckle, "It's another year to invite our friends to my birthday party! I need to send my invitations right away." Bella dashes to her table to grab her phone after finishing her conversation with Anna. Without Bella noticing, Anna gives her a cold, jealous look while her face is etched with resentment and jealousy. Since middle school, Anna and Bella have been each other's closest friends. But as they grew older and more mature, Anna came to the realisation that Bella gets more attention from other people and has a better life than she does, and that this is because Bella is richer and wealthier.

Moments of jealousy start flashing in Anna's mind. She still remembers the time when she felt like she was looked down upon by everyone else...

Bella enters the classroom at the start of seventh grade wearing an elegant Dior backpack and carrying two enormous reusable bags that are loaded with expensive sweets. "I brought some treats for you all from my trip to Paris," Bella said. She spoke in a cordial manner as she distributed the treats to each classmate.

Oh my god, Bella is so wealthy... "Her best friend must be so fortunate," claims Cassy.

"I'm sure, right! Anna should be appreciative of having such a wonderful best friend. Even though reality is always so depressing, I imagine myself as Bella's best friend," a different classmate Jason answers. "But to be completely honest, Bella and Anna don't belong together because their personalities are so different. Can't you see Bella is at least a hundred times better and wealthier than Anna?" Anna was enraged, but she was powerless to do anything about it other than bury her rage deep inside her.

Anna jerks them all back into her mind, forcing another core memory to surface. In the second semester of her eighth grade year, Anna was invited to Bella's house, where she finally had the opportunity to recognize Bella's wealth. Bella's mansion was indeed enormous and opulent, with lavish furnishings arranged throughout. Anna was extremely impressed by the living room. She had never seen a space that was so tastefully planned out. Additionally, a sizable staircase that connected all the rooms was present. Anna entered Bella's room and was startled to the core. "This room is exactly the same size as my living room...It is definitely unbelievable." Anna kept that to herself since she didn't want to embarrass herself in front of her rich best friend.

As Anna was admiring Bella's room in a jealous way, Bella's mom yelled from the living room—"Come down to the living room Bella sweetie—mommy's got a surprise for you!" Bella rushed down to the living room right after she heard her mom's request, and Anna went along since she was a visitor. Bella's mother pulled out a gleaming, sparkling silver handbag that was encrusted with numerous tiny diamonds. "Bella, do you like it? This is a reward for getting full marks on the maths test." Anna widened her eyes. That was her dream bag that she'd always ask for. "I wish I was Bella...She gets what I desire."

"Anna? Anna!" Bella tries to get Anna's attention by sweeping her hand before her eyes. "Oh, I apologise. I lost focus." Anna said, wiping away her memories of the past with a quick blink. "Don't worry about it," Bella says with another awkward laugh, "let's plan my birthday party, should we?"

"Sure, why not..." Anna does a tiny smirk as she speaks softly.

Bella enters the grand hall wearing the most detailed outfit Anna has ever seen in her life. Bella immediately becomes the centre of attention in the room with her dress, which is a plain white dress with numerous sparkling diamonds engraved on it. Every invited classmate was, in fact, astonished and shocked by her sense of style today. "What an attention seeker," Anna rolls her eyes, "Her boasting and showing off her richness pisses me off." Bella's secret admirer, Steve, overhears Anna talking to herself.

"Wow, Anna." Steve exclaims, "You're such a fake friend to Bella," with a disgusted expression on his face. "I suppose this is why no one likes you. Bella is so ideal; I desperately want to be her boyfriend. And because you're such a loser, I assume no one has a crush on you."

"She's disgusting. You're disgusting. Everyone here is disgusting!" Anna exclaims to Steve. "What makes her so great? What on earth do you see in her? Why are people so fixated on her? I have no idea at all! Aren't I actually so much better than she is?"

"Oh, dear. Look at you. You really should lower your ego. Don't you remember how people used to, and are still commenting about the fact that you don't deserve to be Bella's best friend? This really shows how terrible of a person you are and now I do witness it myself." Steve shakes his head as he lets out a giggle. Anna clenches her fists and runs away from him in an effort to stop hearing the "nonsense".

"Bella, you'll see." Anna chuckles.

Meanwhile, Bella chats with her classmates at the party while Anna approaches thirty minutes later and notices several boxes of presents for Bella. "Bella, I have a big surprise for you," Anna muttered next to her ear. "You can see what I have ready for you when you come in two minutes to the storage room." Bella is clueless but she agrees to check out the storage room because Anna seems to be saving a huge surprise for her.

Anna enters the storage room before Bella does. She stares at the setup with a satisfying smile. "Everything's ready."

"Now for the victim to arrive."

Bella enters and pushes open the storage door, not knowing Anna is behind that door, fully prepared with her plan. A long rope is quickly wrapped around Bella's neck. Anna let out all of her rage and pulled the rope in the same direction as Bella tried to pull it away from her, but she was unable to do so. "Anna...Are you doing this to me?" Bella squeals in pain.

"Yes, I am, Bella." Anna laughs in an extremely savage way, "I'm here to take revenge and to take back what I deserve."

"What did I ever do to you? Bella shouts as she sobs uncontrollably."

"In fact, a lot." Anna clarifies, "Everyone pays close attention to you! That's unjust to me, for sure. It's all because of you that my fellow classmates constantly complain that I'm not as great and wealthy as you. I feel like a nobody, especially when I'm around you, and this strategy is the only option that will help me set a better example for others. Having you disappear and vanish means that I could take your place as the ideal model."

"What..." Bella looks up. From her current perspective, all she could see was Anna and her wicked smile. "You—" Bella grabs Anna's hair however still is forced to suffer and lose her last breath as a result of Anna's decision to not wait for her to explain herself and instead pulls the rope much harder. "Bella, goodbye to this realm." In order to make it appear as though Bella committed suicide, Anna cleans up the crime scene by removing all of her fingerprints, hangs Bella from the rope that has already been attached to the ceiling, and moves a chair in the storage room underneath Bella.

Before leaving the storage room, Anna carefully opens the door to check if anyone is nearby. "Great! Guess nobody's here to sabotage my last move. Anna cheerfully skips out of the room. But little did she know that her plan was in fact, not so perfect.

"Hey Anna, where were you? Don't you remember that we have to gather the game equipment in the storage room at 3:30", asks Regina, Anna's classmate.

"I'm sorry, Regina. I had to use the restroom because I was having a terrible stomach ache, but we should go to the storage room right away before it's too late. Regina and Anna both run to the storage room as a result. "My acting must be good." Anna thought to herself as she opened the storage room door without hesitation.

"Ah!" Anna and Regina screamed at the top of their lungs when they saw Bella dangling from the rope. "Bella— is she dead?" Regina covers her mouth. As she muses over all the painful memories she has had, Anna tries to let out her tears. "I...I find this unbelievable. Why did she do this to herself?" Anna yells loudly as she sobs. People start arriving at the storage room as they heard all the screaming noises. Every one of them look incredibly shocked. They seem to have never witnessed the death of their close ones.

"What...Bella was literally fine like fifteen minutes ago!"

"Why'd she suddenly commit suicide?"

“Bella...Why...” Anna secretly does a smirk as she hears these comments all around her.

“You'll all like me at last...right?”

The most well-known detective in the community, Detective Bao, has been asked to investigate the crime scene along with his assistance, whether Bella committed suicide or was murdered. He scans through the entire ballroom to find some evidence. As he checks the CCTV camera in the security room, he rolls the tape back to around 3 o'clock, the approximate time Bella died. Detective Bao would have a much harder time unravelling the mystery considering that none of the rooms have any security cameras other than the main hall. He carefully observes each and every detail captured on tape. Bella's elegant attire and positive attitude throughout her birthday party led Bao to believe that she did not commit suicide. He identifies the suspects who left the main ballroom as Anna, Regina, Cassy, and Steve as he draws to a close his investigation. He then takes each of them into a separate room to record their justifications.

“Anna, may you please explain your purpose of exiting the main hall and how you think about Bella.” Bao says as he takes out his notebook and pen to record her words.

“My stomach hurt so badly that I went to the restroom. I must have eaten something unclean. Bella is my best friend. She's always so optimistic, so I don't understand why she killed herself!” As she makes her claim, Anna starts to cry. Bao starts to suspect Anna but decides to listen to the rest.

Regina is next. “I left the main hall with Anna to grab equipment in the storage room. Bella was hanging from the rope when we arrived and opened the storage room door. We then started screaming because she died so suddenly. It would be unusual if she actually committed suicide because she earlier appeared to be completely normal.” Regina speaks with a traumatised look.

Bao then interviews Cassy. “I guess I was having too much fun and some of my makeup came off, so I went to the bathroom to fix and apply my makeup. Anyhow, if it's any help, I made sure no one else was in the restroom before using my teeth whitening product. You know it's embarrassing to do this in the restroom with someone else present.” Cassy speaks in a casual manner because she sincerely believes she is correct.

“Well, I got Anna angry after I overheard that Anna actually despises Bella and so I claimed that Bella was better than her and she ran off, so I followed her in confusion, which is why I left the main hall. After about thirty seconds of talking to Bella, which I witnessed, she left the main hall and went somewhere else. I tried my best to follow her, but she sped away. I was unable to figure out her direction. Bella is the ideal woman for me, so I have a huge crush on her. The best personality belongs to her. She died? I can't believe it...I like her a lot...” Steve says as he takes out a handkerchief to wipe his tears away.

Steve, the final suspect to be questioned, follows Detective Bao outside. “Thank you all for your cooperation; I'm now a huge step closer to identifying the suspect.” Bao says with a smile while he makes eye contact with Anna. He sees the terror in Anna's eyes.

Bao goes back to the storage room. He uses various techniques to gather more evidence to make sure the suspect is who he expects. He tries to collect fingerprints, but Anna, the murderer, has unfortunately removed them. The room is then thoroughly vacuumed after he takes out a portable vacuum cleaner from his enormous detective bag. He discovers a few fine and thin long hairs as he clears the area of dust and other trash. He puts the hair in a sealable plastic bag and hands it to his assistant. “Please go to the testing centre for me after I capture the suspect's DNA.” Bao tells his assistant. Bao walks out of the storage room to the main hall, where mostly everyone was quietly weeping about Bella's death. “Listen up, the four of you.” Bao says with a serious look to the suspects, “Please come over. I'll need to cut off some of your hair for a DNA test.”

Bao gradually clears Steve of suspicion. He is aware that his short hair does not resemble the ones that Bao discovered on the floor in the storage room, and that Steve would not have returned to the main hall in less than a minute if he were the murderer. He still gathers the four of their hairs, though, just in case.

After several hours, Bao's assistant returns with the DNA analysis of the hair strand. Examining the test results, Bao finds that they confirm his predictions. Waiting for Bao to return with the findings, the four suspects remained silent in the ballroom. Anna can't stop crying and hopes that the hair Bao took was only Bella's hair.

Bao enters the main hall with the results. Anna starts acting out right away. "So...The hair stand is Bella's , right? Bao looks at Anna while she cries and expresses how much she misses her. "Anna, you have good acting talent. You should now pause." Everyone else turns to face her right away and expresses shock.

"Anna did it...?"

"Oh my goodness, I told you that Anna has always been on the evil side!"

"She's only 18 but murdered her best friend...Nasty. Disgusting. Awful."

Anna stops crying. "What do you mean? I'm not acting...I didn't do anything I swear. She is my best friend, so why would I ever hurt her? She hung herself. I was the one who found the body with Regina."

"Cut the act Anna." says Bao. "The results I got back from the DNA test on the hair strand match your hair that you gave us. And bad news – Cassy claimed that there was nobody else in the bathroom as she was in there for at least 10 minutes fixing her makeup, or should I say, using her teeth whitener. You stated that you were in the bathroom, didn't you? Seems like you weren't though. How about you tell us where you actually were? Is it the storage room?"

Anna says, "With only one piece of hair strand and you claim that I'm the murderer? Nonsense! How do you know that Cassy isn't lying then?"

"Cassy doesn't hold any grudges against Bella, so there is no reason for Cassy into lying where she was. As for you Anna, Steve mentioned about him talking to you about your hatred towards Bella and how you stormed out of the main hall afterwards, showing your jealousy and anger. Am I right?" says Bao.

Anna suddenly chuckled. "You got me, detective Bao. I thought my plan was perfect but I guess I'm not experienced at all to do such a thing. The way Bella acts rich and generous makes me extremely pissed off and you all would understand if you guys were me! None of you guys cared about my feelings when the all of you complimented Bella and made comparisons between the both of us. And so, I thought killing her would get you all to finally like me. Isn't this like the best method ever?"

"You're a literal hypocrite." says Steve, "This really is the reason why nobody likes you. You're insane, everyone likes Bella because she genuinely is caring and nice! None of this would've happened if she had never known you, and I wish she never did. For me, I still want to have an opportunity to be in a relationship with her, and for you, she'd always cared about you, shared things with you, laughed with you, but guess what, all those memories are just nonsense to you. You have no idea how nice she was to you. No one will ever forgive you for what you did." Everyone is immediately heartbroken after realising that Steve lost his chance to develop his love life.

Detective Bao looks at Anna, who exclaims, "Yeah exactly, I'm the one who's insane," and then she laughs. "There is nothing you can do to make the dead come back to life, so even though I've lost it a long time ago, I do not regret killing her." Bao calls the police and detains Anna as she keeps laughing all the way to the mental hospital.

Judge Pao – Monster Hunter

Creative Secondary School, Chong, Vici – 15

Rrrrrrr... it was a warning from the creature or, should I say, monster. Seeing the considerable shadows in front of the grass and between the trees while running. It was getting closer and closer; Judge Pao ran as fast as he could ... he couldn't breathe, and he started panting like something hard was stuck in his throat. He was dizzy, and the color of his sight started changing. Sometimes green, sometimes red, sometimes blue, like the complex combination of his emotions. He fell, and the time he fell held on longer and slower than it should be. He looked at the Big white full moon turning red and different from usual. He told himself that he would need revenge and keep the monster in the magic mirror because the beast had killed many innocents and tried to kill him.

When he finally opened his eyes. The bright, sparsely glittery light shines in his eyes, "she" barely opened her eyes. "She" heard a flashing sound, "she" tried to stand up, but what "she" wore was way too heavy. When "she" used all her strength to stand up, the automatic water dispenser started splashing water out. "she" was so scared because "she" never saw this "in his world." "She" raised her head, and "she" saw the reflection in the mirror; there, "she" found that "she" was wearing a ball gown and high heels, Judge Pao's A GIRL? While judge pao was still confused, some girls who called themselves her "BFFs" and "bridesmaids" pulled Bao out of the bathroom and said: why are you still here? Today's a big and happy day !!! chop chop!!!!" Big and happy day? The day I went to heaven? The day I'm dead? He wondered. That's a big sunny day?

What is going on? A magic power forced him to walk with an old man, a man called Judge Pao, his daughter; he tried to get rid of him, but the old man thought he was too nervous. At the time they walked on the bloody red carpet, there were a lot of strangers around looking at him with their big round eyes; they looked like they had something to tell. They stopped in front of a handsome gentleman wearing clothes that Judge Pao would like to wear as a man, pure white carpet, and shining golden patterns on top. Another old man was wearing a boring black "dress." Then the guy who worn a black boring "dress" started saying some crazy things like "do you take this woman to be your wife, to live together in holy matrimony, to love her..... blah blah blah" whatever. Then the guy said I do, the old man repeated the same thing and then looked at Judge Pao. She had no idea what to say and copied what her "husband" said. After the speech is finished husband slowly towards his mouth to Judge Pao's mouth, Judge Pao wants to escape, but there is the magic that controls her and does not let her move, then they kiss. At that kissing moment, Judge Pao discovered that some big fluffy cartoon toys were moving around, which she had never seen before. It was extraordinary that he was sure that that was the monster she had been searching for. Judge Pao immediately pushed her "husband" away and started running toward the toy; he bumped into it and started hitting it, then he heard something inside the toy that did not sound like the monster. Then, she stopped beating it and considered if that was her target. The toy then took off the hat itself, and Judge Pao found out it was human-like her too. She hit an innocent. She immediately ran through the crowds remotely and returned to the bathroom she first walked from.

After she arrived at the bathroom, something more suspicious happened. She saw blood leaking from the toilet, and the blood slowly soaked into her white ballgown, but she was not panicked before because she had seen lots of bloody war in her life, it was like a daily, yet she was very alert, caused she could sense the danger coming. She walked closer and closer to the blood fountain. A few seconds later, he heard some chewing sound and strong grumbling sounded, and he was more sure that danger was right behind the door. Slowly closer and closer.

Rrrrrrrrr!! It sounded the same as the monster that chased him, but the appearance was different, smaller in size, human appearance, and shockingly... it was her husband with whole blood coming out from his mouth, the pure white clean suit fully covered with rose red blood. He was painting so fast and hard and knew that the wife was his target, "Judge Pao" they both discovered each other's "real identity." Judge Pao felt useless that he didn't find that the person he kissed was his enemy, his target, and the monster. They both felt angry at the same time. They realized their target was the nearest all the time and didn't discover it. Abruptly, an intense flash and power made them fly and forced them to spin in the air. They finally changed back to their "real self." Through the "Changing back" process, the monster slowly grew bigger and bigger; the suit had been torn apart by the muscle full of veins and fur that slowly sneaked out from the pores. For Judge Pao, the strength also ripped the wedding dress apart, which made it like an explosion, but

the different part was he surprisingly had the shiny golden and hard battled suits shine like a clean mirror reflecting the monster's face. It's like it could make someone blind after looking at it. Also, having a sword that he doesn't have before. This also made judge Pao feel even more confident about defeating the monster. He believed that even god was trying to help him.

Bang! They started fighting monster was very agitated and ran towards Judge Pao, also hitting him with his bare hand. Judge Pao's battle suit was hard as rock which made the monster's hand's bone crack like weak and crispy chips. Then Judge Pao used his sword to hit the monster, but the beast had a fast reaction and muscular strength, so he could catch it and take the blade away from Judge Pao. At this difficult and intense moment, they both had lost their most threatening weapon to attack each other, which made the fight more complicated and complex to know who the winner was. Then Judge Pao used his special powers which is his smart brain. He first transfers his disadvantages to advantages to make use of it, which uses his petite body and faster speed to run into the toilet and pick up a roll of toilet paper to cover the monster's eyes. Afterward, he used the toilet pumper to pump the monster's mouth so it couldn't bite him; at last, he broke his battled suit, took the sharpest broken pieces from all of the damaged parts, and used it as a weapon, like a sword. He used all his strength to stem the monster with the sharpest broken pieces. The shiny pieces contain through the skin, and the blood slowly bleeds out from the small gaped between the parts and the separated meat. The monster tried his best to struggle against him, but he was too suffering from pain. He tried to stand up but couldn't. Judge Pao could think of the plan immediately. Oppositely the monster only knew how to attack and fight, which was useless. Judge Pao took the magic mirror out straightaway and faced the dumb monster; the magic mirror sucked the beast away, which will forever lock him in the mirror cave. This helps the innocent killed by the beast get revenge and get back to justice, and prevent more innocent from being killed.

At last, when Judge Pao defeated the monster, he felt dizzy, just like before he went to this "future world." He fell slowly, felt slightly reluctant, and looked at the noble warm light, then closed his eyes. Then when he woke up, he found himself lying on the grass in the forest. He heard people screaming his name and trying to search for him. He immediately ran to the people searching for him, but on the way, he saw blood and footsteps on the grass ... He was ready for another "detective mission" to save and help more people to do more integrity things.

New Tales of Judge Pao

Creative Secondary School, Lau, Praise – 15

For the first time in his life, my dear friend, Pao, was stumped.

Pao was a revered judge, famous for his fairness and solving cases even the most skilful investigators could not solve. I, as his right-hand man and closest friend, followed him everywhere as he investigated cases and restored justice. I knew him to be a wise and quick-witted man. This time, however, he seemed to have met his match.

Yesterday, a bloody murder took place in the manor of Lord Liu, an important official of the emperor's court. One of his chambermaids had been savagely killed by a mysterious beast, and left in a room where all openings were locked. Nobody could find out how the beast had entered and exited, so Pao and I were called to investigate.

The room was luxurious, with a plush bed covered in quilts embroidered with gold thread. The bed was strangely larger than what a usual bed would be – and the quilts, stained with blood, were mangled and torn, as if the claws of a beast had ripped and pulled at it. Several claw marks stretched from the windowsills to the ground. A few golden bowls and what looked like an oversized chamber pot were stacked up in the corner of the room, and a steel nail was found behind them. The body had been removed, but reports stated that the maid had been mauled almost beyond recognition, mutilated with chunks of flesh missing from her body. I watched as Pao circled the crime scene, examining the walls, windows and quilts. I did not see anything that did not match with what the reports said. We had been investigating every day for an entire week, but there was nothing to be found. It was obvious that the murder was the work of a beast, but how could a beast appear in the middle of the capital? Why were all the openings of the room locked?

“Hello, Judge Pao.” The willowy figure of Lord Liu interrupted my thoughts. “I believe I have found something of use.” He held up a wisp of grey fur. “This was stuck in the hinges of the back gate. I believe the beast snuck in through there, and killed my poor maid. Do you know what kind of beast would have fur like this?”

Pao felt the fur and frowned. “It is very soft and smooth, like it has been groomed before. Moreover, it smells of expensive perfume. This fur may be from a wealthy family's pet.”

“I do not own a dog, and the dogs of the neighbours are too small to commit an act like this,” Liu said as he stroked his chin. As he lifted his hand, I notice the edge of his sleeve seemed a bit burnt. He was a peculiar person. He had a narrow face that made his hooked nose seem even bigger. His beady eyes shifted, as if he were plotting something. I didn't trust him, especially since he had been involved in some scandals. He was a powerful official with many enemies who had their eyes on him. I pitied the dead maid, because she was probably killed for being involved in his business. Liu continued talking. “The only house nearby with a big animal such as this is Lord Wang! He has two large dogs, with big teeth and claws! They are more than capable of killing the maid! We must search Lord Wang's house for evidence!”

I looked to Pao for permission. He nodded absentmindedly, staring at the random nail we had found. I frowned, wondering what he was thinking about. After years of following him, I knew my dear friend's habits well. When he was staring at something, it meant that he was deep in thought. “Let us go,” he said, pocketing the nail. “It is time we pay Lord Wang a visit.”

Lord Wang's manor was not how I imagined it. As an official whose status was equal to Liu's own position, his riches should have been insurmountable. Contrary to my expectations, his manor was decorated with simple furniture and ornaments. Two large dogs, with long snouts for tracking and slender legs for running, sat obediently by the door. Liu exclaimed, “Look! There are his two hounds! Their fur matches the sample we have!”

“I beg your pardon?” Wang asked. He was dressed in simple robes and his hand clutched a tightly bound scroll. He was quiet for an official, quite harmless, really, but I supposed the emperor’s court was full of snakes and masks. “Why is my home being searched?” I waited for Pao to answer him, but Pao simply stared at the dogs. They stared back at him, cocking their heads at the stranger, trying to tell if he was a threat or not. “Are your dogs known to cause trouble?” Pao asked. Wang hastily replied, “No, they are very well-trained! They would never do anything without my command!”

Liu swiveled towards Wang. “Aha! He must be the mastermind behind this murder! He must have trained his dogs to kill on his command!” He looked expectantly at Pao, waiting for him to arrest Wang. My friend, not looking up from the dogs, waved his hand. “Guards, arrest him. We will bring him before the emperor for his judgement.” A speechless Wang was dragged out of his own house. As we got onto the carriage, I turned to Pao frantically, asking him why he had arrested Wang. “The fur sample matched the dogs, but it was only one piece of evidence! It may have been the dogs’ own actions to kill the maid!”

Pao nodded. “I agree with you,” he said, “Wang is not the killer.”

I was flabbergasted. “Then why did you have him arrested?” I asked. Pao steepled his fingers under his chin, and with a look of utmost gravity, locked gazes with me. “I believe the true killer is among the emperor’s officials. I wish to identify the killer in front of the entire court to serve as a warning.”

“Then who is the killer?” I could not stop myself from blurting out the question.

“It must be someone who knows Liu’s manor well. After all, it would be impossible to smuggle in a beast of that size without good knowledge of the manor’s layout. What I cannot make sense of, however, is why the windows and doors were locked. If the killer wanted to frame Wang for murder, it would make sense to leave the door unlocked so that someone passing by would discover the body. Besides, what animal could have been used to kill the maid? I do not think trained dogs would kill someone so savagely. The beast must have been a wild animal. And there is the question of how the beast came in. The presence of such a big animal would not have gone unnoticed by others.”

“What will you say to the emperor?” I asked worriedly. Pao was exceptionally clever, but he often did things that had great consequences if they were not handled correctly. He responded coolly, “As I said, the killer is among the emperor’s court. We shall see.”

Everyone stared as we entered the throne room. The guards dragged Wang behind us, while Liu strode confidently in the front. He swooped into a kneeling position, greeting the emperor. The rest of us followed suit. The emperor commanded, “You may rise.” Turning to Liu, he asked, “What has brought you here, Lord Liu?” While Liu explained, I scanned the throne room. Rows of officials lined the hall. Pink-clad attendants fanned the emperor, who sat in a throne carved with dragons of gold and phoenixes of ruby. The emperor was a formidable man. He towered over us all in his elevated throne, and his golden robes shone with what was probably the most expensive thread and silk of the country. But what astonished me most was not the opulent riches of the emperor, but the massive tiger that sat in a gilded cage by the emperor’s feet. It was truly a magnificent beast that befitted the power of the emperor. Its fur was the bright orange of the sun as it set, and it must have been much taller than a human when it stood on its hind legs. The emperor noticed my interest and laughed, saying, “Majestic, is it not? Lord Liu had it caught in the mountains and offered it to me. Even I was astounded when Lord Liu brought it to me from his manor.” I was embarrassed to have taken my attention off the emperor, but Pao seemed to be interested in the tiger as well. “Lord Liu brought it in, did he?” Pao turned to Liu, whose beady eyes were once again shifting. “Did the tiger happen to be kept in your manor before being presented to His Imperial Majesty?” Liu hesitated for a moment, then replied, “Yes, it was kept in a room for two weeks to be properly groomed.”

The emperor waved his hand, dismissing the topic. “We have a more important topic to discuss. Did Lord Liu say he has found the murderer of his chambermaid?” Liu straightened up and announced, “Indeed. It was Lord Wang who ordered his dogs to kill my maid!” Wang’s face paled, but he did not say a word. Instead, he gave Pao with a pleading look. My friend turned to the emperor and spoke, “I object, Your Imperial Majesty. Wang is not the killer.” The emperor raised an eyebrow. “Go on, Judge Pao.”

I watched as Pao stalked toward the centre of the room. The eyes of all the officials followed him as he cleared his throat and started speaking. “First of all, it was not Lord Wang’s dogs who killed the maid. Even if he had ordered them to kill the maid, how would they have gone into the manor unnoticed? Not to mention, the doors and windows of the room were all locked. Whatever killed the maid must already have been inside. Now, we must go back to what Lord Liu has just said. The tiger, which had been given as an offering to His Imperial Majesty, was kept in Liu’s manor for some time. The crime scene, as I remember it, had an abnormally oversized bed, of which the quilts were ripped and torn – as if an animal had been scratching it. There were also large bowls and quite a sizeable chamber pot there. All of these things were custom-made to be larger. Of course, all the best would have to be given to the emperor’s pet, would it not?” From the corner of my eye, I could see Liu visibly pale and shrink away from Pao.

“From all the following evidence, we can conclude that the tiger was kept in that room. The tiger must have killed the poor maid, who was just there to take care of it.” Pao then turned to me. “Do you remember who found the piece of fur that pointed us toward Lord Wang’s dogs?” He asked. I nodded, saying, “Yes, my lord. It was Lord Liu.”

Pao smiled. “That settles it,” he declared, “Lord Liu deliberately let his own maid be killed, and planted evidence to frame Lord Wang for murder.”

Liu sputtered, grasping for straws, “That is nonsense! T–The tiger was confined in a cage in another room! I would never let one of my servants into danger! The tiger could not have reached her! Besides, the room where the murder took place was a guest room!” The emperor seemed to be swayed by Liu’s words. He arose and asked, “Judge Pao, did you find a cage at the crime scene?”

I gulped. There was, actually, no evidence that the tiger had stayed there apart from the claw marks – which could easily come from another animal. If we could not prove that Liu was the murderer, we might be beheaded for the slander of court officials. However, Pao stayed unwavering. He confidently replied, “Of course, Lord Liu had thought about this. He did not want people to suspect that the tiger was the killer. Therefore, the tiger, along with its cage, was brought to the palace for the emperor, and kept the ruined bed to make it seem like it was a human’s room. He even locked the door after it to make it seem impossible for the killer to escape. Despite all of his careful scheming, he left behind a significant piece of evidence,” Pao held up a shiny steel nail. “This nail was found at the crime scene. It may seem a like a miscellaneous piece of clutter, but in fact,” he went up to the tiger’s cage, feeling around the edges. The tiger rose on its haunches and growled at him, but he paid it no heed. “The nail fits here.” The crowd of officials gasped as Pao slipped the nail into a hole in the cage. It fit perfectly, and anyone could see that it was the same type of nail as all the others in the cage.

Even in the face of all the evidence, Liu did not give up. “If the cage was there, how could the tiger get out? How could the person that let it out to kill the maid not get hurt?” He screeched, waving his arms, “this does not make sense!” Murmurs erupted from the crowd as they agreed. Who let the tiger out? If it was the maid, why would she open the cage if she knew the tiger would harm her?

Pao’s booming voice overpowered the audience. “It was Lord Liu himself who let the tiger out. He went into the room beforehand and unlocked the cage. Of course, you must be wondering, if Lord Liu opened the cage, why is he not hurt? The answer is fire.” He pointed at the charred edge of Liu’s sleeve. He gasped and tried to hide it, but everybody had already seen it. Pao continued, “Wild animals are naturally afraid of fire. Lord Liu must have used a torch to scare back the tiger while unlocking its cage, then let the maid in. He sacrificed an innocent life just to get the better of another of His Imperial Majesty’s officials. He is the true murderer.”

Weeks later, after Liu was found guilty and sentenced to death, I accompanied Pao to investigate another case. There was another mysterious murder in the city that left all the investigators baffled. As we left for the crime scene, I asked, “Why did you become a judge?” He was silent for a moment. Then he muttered, “I want to protect those who are defenseless against the powerful. A good judge is someone who always fights for justice regardless of status.”

I smiled. This was the reason why I wished to follow him everywhere. To fight for justice together. There are many new tales of my dear friend, Judge Pao, to come.

Judge Pao – Faces of Evil

Creative Secondary School, Li, Amos – 15

“This is where we found the body, Detective Pao. Slit throat and stab wounds. And here’s a note that was found next to the body, seems like the killer has something for you,” said an officer.

“Got it, thanks,” replied Detective Pao.

Pao took the note from the officer. The note was folded in half, with the words “For Detective Pao” on top, written in blood. Pao opened up the strip of paper and read to himself, “Hey Detective Pao, remember me? Your old pal, the Executioner. How’s that scapegoat of mine doing in prison?”. Pao froze in shock, staring blankly into the blood splattered piece of paper.

“Hey, you alright?” asked the officer.

“Ye... Yeah. Just, observing the scene, yeah.” stuttered Pao. “I’ll... go do some investigating on the victim. I will... report it back soon.” Pao rushed out the crime scene to take a breather, cold sweat running down his face. “What. How. The Executioner. Wasn’t he supposed to be locked up for another lifetime. Scapegoat? What scapegoat? There is no way I caught the wrong person. No chance!”

Pao had always been a strict man to himself, creating rules that he forced himself to follow, each and every single day in order to turn himself into an ideal human being. His strong integrity eats him up as the situation forces him to think. As he ran back to his apartment, heart beating faster with each step. “Could it actually be? Could it actually be that the man I caught 10 years ago was innocent? Shit.” He grabs his cellphone to call his detective partner, “Hey, do you remember that serial killer that calls himself the Executioner,” said Pao, trying his best to stay calm. “Yeah? What about him? He’s been locked up for 10 years already and he’s still rotting in there.” answered from the phone. “We... may have, uh, caught the wrong person,” said Pao softly. “The murder that happened earlier today, I think it might have been done by him. He even wrote a note for me.” “It’s probably just the killer messing around. It’s nothing.” replied from the phone. And the call ended.

Pao, still stunned and confused, decided to just go home for a rest and everything will be alright tomorrow.

In the middle of the night, he received a call to go investigate another murder that had just occurred. He walked to the crime scene hesitantly. Though he does not want to go at all, he wouldn’t risk being seen as an unreliable detective.

“Detective Pao! We found this note that’s for you nestled inside the victim's smashed in face. It’s something about catching the wrong person.” reported an officer. “Quite the brutal death wouldn’t you say?”

Pao took the note from the officer, hands shaking like they were about to come off. “So you told that other bastard detective. I’m assuming he shook it off like it was nothing. He’s always like that wouldn’t say. Dismissing everything no matter what.” Pao murmured to himself as he read off the note. “You on the other hand, quite the righteous person. I want to see how you will go on with this. You should talk to more people about this.” The sudden realization struck him, he was being stalked. He looked around his surroundings, but the only people around were just officers. He knew he was going insane, but he had nothing to prove it.

A few days passed, a report for both murder cases were finished. Pao, who had been living under pressure and fear ever since the first murder, contributed nothing for the investigation. Yet he was first to take a glimpse of the reports. As it turns out, the first victim was a man who had a history of abuse, and the second was a prostitute at a nearby club. Pao knew there was a correlation between the two victims, both had done something that defies human morals. He makes another call to his old partner to tell him about it. “I swear to god it is the Executioner. The two recent murder cases follow a pattern. Both victims had a bad reputation on them in some way.” Pao said shakily into the phone. “Now hold on first. This isn’t the Pao I know. He doesn’t draw conclusions that quickly. It could have been a coincidence, you know.”

came from the phone, word by each damn word. Pao knew his friend was a lost cause. He decided to find the only people he is most comfortable with, his parents.

Hands shaking, he dials in his parents' number. Time goes by, countless calls, no one answers. Pao gives up and simply leaves a voice message. "Mom! Dad! I know I haven't been calling you much lately. But I have something to tell you. That man I arrested ten years ago was the wrong person. I don't know what to do anymore. If I report this, my life will be ruined, but the framed man would have justice. Then again, it's been ten years, what justice can it bring to him." He puts away phone and falls into a coma like sleep on his bed.

It was a Saturday. He wakes up late in the afternoon. "No reports yet. That's a good sign," he thought to himself. He checks his phone, no replies from his parents. He suddenly had a feeling, a bad feeling. He got out of bed and left his apartment hastily. He got in a cab he found right outside his apartment complex, gave the driver his parents' address and sped through the road, gripping his phone tightly, hoping for a buzz.

He sprinted up and towards his parent's apartment. Without a second of hesitation, he busted through the door. Fear filled his insides, as if he was about to vomit. His parents' blank eyes stare through Pao's soul. He slams the door shut, biting down on his hand to suppress his screams. The stalker was one step ahead. He reported it back to the police and took the day off to avoid himself being involved in the case.

At this point, his detective partner doesn't give a shit. He has no one else to talk to. Pao has hit rock bottom. With a cigar, a whole bottle of whiskey and guilt eating him up from the inside, he lies on his apartment floor, wondering when will this come to an end. Drunk and confused, he gets up from the floor and waddles to his balcony. He looks down onto the lights below, intrusive thoughts creep up on him, "Ever wonder what's beyond the Pearly Gates? You're down and out, and now's your chance"

"No, no, not like this. He will get what he deserves, he will feel the pain of all his victims. Heck, even more I tell you!" Pao yelled aggressively to himself. "I will...I will kill him, his head is mine. Yea, he'll pay for all this shit he's done to everyone, to me!" A kick from his anger and drunkenness propelled him into this barbaric state. Pao snatched his phone off the floor and called his detective partner. "What is it now?" asked his partner annoyingly. "We gotta come up with a way to kill that bastard, I'll be at your place in 20," replied Pao psychotically. "Wait, wha—" the call ended.

Pao, with the sole intent to kill, rushed to his partner's apartment. "Shit, I took too long waiting for a cab, should've just walked my ass over here." exclaimed Pao. He had the sudden realization that the stalker/Executioner could have overheard his brief conversation and once again be one step ahead. But he was too blinded by rage and booze he didn't remember.

Yet, without a doubt, he bursted through the apartment door. To his expected surprise, he saw his partner dead in a pool of blood right in front of him. He fell flat on his knees, the flames of rage were extinguished. All he felt, was guilt and sadness. A melancholy tune suddenly plays gently. "Hurts doesn't it?" asked a mysterious voice in the room. Pao lifts up his head slowly with drowning eyes. He sees a silhouette of a man, sitting on a cushioned chair across the room. But he couldn't figure out who it was as the lights were dimmer than midnight. "You. I know you're behind all this. You've been stalking me since the first death haven't you." said Pao softly. "I've watched you for a long time now. Even that day when you arrested that innocent, innocent man who just happened to be at the crime scene those years ago." claimed the mysterious figure sarcastically. "So what if I'm the Executioner? So what if I've been stalking you? It took you, ten whole years to start regretting. Even then, it took someone's death to do so!" Each line, he got more aggressive.

"I know I messed up...I know I could have confessed all those years ago. But I...was a coward. I focused so much on suppressing those thoughts, but...it didn't work. I...I thought...as the days passed, I would magically forget. But it doesn't work. It never worked. It never will work. I know it's all my fault, that...my stubborn ass didn't have the guts to confess. That I chose to run instead of fight." yelled a regret-filled Pao. Tears ran down his face, fists gripped tightly as if he was ready to punch at any time. "I just...wanted to get the job done back then. Do you not understand how much stress you made me carry! Of course I wanted to capture you, but the pressure overpowered my integri..."

“Integrity my ass, Pao! Even I, an emotionless serial killer, can see through your bullshit.” the Executioner cuts Pao off.

“Integrity is one thing. Cowardness is another. Okay?” replied Pao desperately. “I have a strong sense of integrity, just...not the guts to stand up for it. You can ask anybody that I know, they’ll say the same.” A sudden silence occurs in the room. The Executioner gets up from his comfy chair. “Too bad, everybody who knows you closely are dead. Your parents, your partner who surrounds himself with drugs, and...who else? Oh right, no one!” yelled the Executioner. “Only the closest of close people know that. That’s because you had always been too scared to stand up for anything really. I can ask twenty cops and I can assure you that all twenty will not see you as integrous.”

“Fine. But why, why did you kill them, my parents, my friend?” asked Pao helplessly. “At the end of the day, the one without confidence to do anything carry the most sin. Because they can’t even admit it. The first two kills were only a warning. As for your parents and friend, I spared them from your disappointment and cowardness. I mercied them.” replied the Executioner, sounding all rightful. “As for you, the scaredy cat, I chose specifically to put you through this torture.”

He stops abruptly. “Aren’t you gonna beg me for the reason?” asked the Executioner. Pao stayed silent. “Ahhh, I see what you’re doing. You think unremorseful serial killers get bored when they’re victim becomes numb. You think you’re sooo smart don’t you.” teased the Executioner. He walks towards the quiet Pao, close but his face still avoids the front door light. With a blink of an eye, he slashed Pao in the back with a boxcutter. Pao crumbled on the group, groaning in pain. “Feel anything?” asked the Executioner teasingly, giggling. “If you despise me this much, just kill me already.” said Pao painfully. “That’s the point, you don’t deserve to be mercied. You’re not gonna kill yourself anyways, coward.” replied the Executioner.

“If you keep me alive, I’ll find you and hunt you down eventually,” said Pao, persuading. “At the end of the day, integrity doesn’t mean anything when you got absolutely nothing to back it up. I’m not afraid of one little, incapable detective.” answered the Executioner softly. He continued to carve a few more lines on Pao’s back. Pao lay on the floor, bleeding rivers out of his back, put alive. The Executioner walked out of the room right in front of him. But Pao was too paralyzed by the pain, it left him helpless. Just as the Executioner left the room though, Pao caught a glimpse of his face from the light. A soulless eye and evil smirk stared back at him.

Judge Pao The Original Detective

Creative Secondary School, Liu, Judy – 15

The father died on his son, it was supposed to be a very wonderful and joyful day. What caused this tragedy? Is it a murderer or does it happen as an accident?

Leo is a wealthy and influential person that owns a lot of property such as successful companies and a lot of real estate, probably one of the richest people in Hong Kong. The incident happens in the birthday party that celebrates his elder son David legally reaching adulthood. David is a child of a divorced family, he lived with his mother. She always exclaims about her adolescence, how she went through those days working so hard together with her ex-husband. From nothing, they built the company with their own hard work, and developed step by step to make the company more prosperous. Only then did they reach today's status and the life they now have. But in the end they separated because of too many contradictions, and she always felt a pity.

Now that his father has formed a new family, his younger son is nine years old and he's still a little kid who can't afford any responsibilities. The scheming mother and David have noticed about the problem of property distribution, and all of this supposedly comes down to belonging to the young son. They are not reconciled with these results, so have been deeply thinking about how they can strive for something beneficial to them, especially the money that they own. Jealousy leads them to be tempted to take revenge to his new family.

Leo has hypertension, and always be aware of this sickness which would risk the possibility of death if not controlled. He met a former partner in his company who hadn't seen each other for a long time. They were chatting and drinking together. Suddenly he seems to be short of breath, Nauseous, and unsteady. A sudden high blood pressure caused his death as he fainted at the birthday party. Everyone thought that the partner is the one who manipulated all this, since he is the last person that met Leo. Everyone in the industry knows they've had some grievances before, about the unhappiness in cooperation, the partners company lost some money. He might have hated him and manipulated all of this.

Judge Pao is a man of integrity, people admire him for his power to find out the truth. Noticed that they are facing the problem of property distribution, he has two sons, but the 7 years old son with her wife is too young to take care of his dad's company, and the mother absolutely does not deal with the running of the company at all. The kid and the little knowledge mother are helpless as this big company will be managed by his brother according to the law. Judge Pao is aware of this situation and decided to make a deeper investigation of this accident, and at the same time accept the commission of the partner to help clarify.

Detective Bao first came to the villa at the scene of the crime to search the surrounding environment. The table where Leo talked with his partner was in a relatively remote booth, and there should be no one around at that time. Leo died of sudden high blood pressure. After careful observation, there were no dangerous objects around. When he was about to leave, he picked up a shard of glass that shattered the glass on the ground.

He also tried to integrate into the family, carefully observing everyone in the family. He likes children very much. Seeing that Peter lost his father, he just stayed alone sullenly, and he was heartbroken every day when his father left. His mother said: "He usually stays alone in the small garden where he plays with his father, but the difference is that there are no scenes of laughter and laughter, but he just sits by the tree or on the swing in silence. Tears." Hearing this, Detective Bao sympathized with the mother who lost her husband and the child who lost her father. Since then, he has often accompanied Peter, playing with him in the small garden.

The funeral was held on a dark, foggy and rainy day. All his family members and friends attended, the atmosphere is very gloomy, and everyone feels sad for the accident. His wife knelt on the ground and cried bitterly. The grief of losing her husband made her unable to support the family alone. The ex-wife and David accompanied her to comfort her, sobbing softly with their heads bowed.

In court, many of their relatives showed up. What is surprising is that the two wives actually sat on opposite sides, and the most suspected partner sat on the same side as Leo's current wife, Peter and his mother were dumbfounded when they saw Detective Bao showed up. There was no monitoring at the scene of the incident, which made it very difficult for Detective Bao to investigate the reasons behind the incident. He knew his partner was innocent, but his words were not a witness because he was the most likely suspect.

When Detective Bao took out the will written by Leo, everyone on the spot was shocked. And the most worried ones should be the David and his ex-wife. They didn't expect that he was already prepared. Could it be that he knew what the mother and son were thinking, and had already prepared the will and hid it in order to prevent them from competing for property.

After checking, this is the testament written by Leo, which meets all the conditions with signature and fingerprint. It turned out that Detective Bao and Peter found this by accident in a secret corner when they were playing together in the small garden. It has been kept in an unknown and inconspicuous place, only vaguely revealed by the dearest young son. After reading the regulations one by one, the most shocking thing is that the father divided his inheritance between his two sons equally, realizing that Leo also considered caring about them.

After waiting quietly for a while, Detective Bao spoke up, he said "I've given enough time and chance for the truth to come." He called someone to come to the courtroom, and at the same time, take out some things and materials from the bag.

The mother and son were really flustered at this moment.

Judge Bao disclosed his finding. It's the shards of glass packed in a transparent plastic bag, it's the one that he picked up on the day of the incident. Also a paper analysis report, which includes the composition of the wine left on the rim of the glass. It contained extremely strong supercharger ingredients, and it was the problem with this glass of wine that caused Leo's blood pressure to soar. Detective Bao analyzed that this must be someone who knew that Leo was suffering from high blood pressure and poured a booster drug into the wine glass. When everyone unconsciously looked at the partner, the mysterious person spoke.

She told the truth. "I have been working with them for a while, and I think there is a certain relationship between us that they let me do this kind of thing. But today I have the courage to stand here because I want to put aside my personal relationship, explain the ins and outs of the matter clearly, and at the same time, it can be regarded as helping myself to untie this knot in my heart."

It turned out that the mother and David asked the waiter to pass the glass to the father who was talking. She said "I didn't know about what was in the wine on the spot, I was so shocked and scared when they found me and paid me money, even threatening me not to speak out." But I couldn't bear it in the end, I didn't expect that my unintentional behavior would lead to Leo's death. I'm sorry for that, but it's more important to say the truth. I always wanted to be an upright and honest person like Detective Bao. He inspired me so much to support me and give me power.

The mother and David regretted all this, regretting that they were blinded by money. No one ever suspected that it was the two of them who arranged all this behind the scenes. When the truth came out, it was unexpected that the person he loved the most took advantage of his understanding and trust in his husband and father to kill him with their own hands. They regretted it very much but admitted all this, and accepted the punishment they deserved. Although they did not get the property as they wished in the end, they knew that it was enough for Leo to have this intention.

Pao Qingtian's Legendary God Pupil Judgment Case

Creative Secondary School, Lui, Nathan – 15

On the night of February 25th, the second year of Xianping, the sky was covered with dark clouds, and it began to drizzle. There were bursts of crying babies from a remote house outside Luzhou Shen County. A fat, white baby was born. At this time, the sky was suddenly clear and the stars in the starry sky were clearly visible. The Wenqu star was even brighter. The light of the stars shone in the house, just like the apparition of Wenqu Xingjun, which shocked the baby's father, thinking that his son must have an extraordinary future, so he named him Bao Zheng, with the meaning of helping the world and saving people.

Pao Zheng was smart, intelligent, and upright since he was a child. It didn't take long for him to recite the books his father gave him, and he was able to integrate the principles in the books. When he met people in difficulties, he was willing to speak up and give generously. Zheng must be the star of Wenqu, and it won't take long for him to make a name for himself.

After that, Pao Zheng studied hard for more than ten years, and finally followed his father's footsteps in an imperial examination. He was named on the gold list. Unexpectedly, a few years later, his parents passed away one after another, and Pao Zheng even lived in the thatched hut next to his parents' grave to keep his filial piety for his parents until the mourning period expired. His filial piety moved the heavens, so on the night when Bao Zheng was about to leave the hut, the Wenqu star in the sky shone again, and the dazzling starlight shone into the dilapidated hut, and Bao Zheng's pupils became golden and bright, with an angelic aura, as if he could pierce the falsehood of the world and gain insight into the hearts of the world, so he gained the ability to see wronged souls and understand people's hearts.

Pao Zheng returned to the imperial court and was appointed as a magistrate in Tianchang County near his hometown in June. On the first day, the outside of the Yamen was surrounded by crowds, not to welcome the new official Bao Zheng, but to the rich residential area in the east of the city. In just three days, four people died. The families of the victims rushed to see Bao Zheng's arrival. "Boom! Boom! Boom!" A woman said: "Judge Bao! Judge Bao! The head of my family passed away for no reason, please find out the truth for us!". After the onlookers heard about it, some of them were secretly relieved, some were frowning, and some were so frightened that they knelt down and begged Mr. Bao to investigate the case so that the people in Tianchang County could live in peace and stability.

Bao Zheng returned to the mansion, looked at the message of the deceased, and frowned thoughtfully. The deceased, Hu Qingpo, was the richest man in Tianchang County. He had forced women into prostitution, and many had suffered from it. The deceased, Hao Du and Hao Se, were a pair of brothers. They were both gamblers and lustful. They were often chased by creditors to collect debts. The last deceased was the magistrate of Tianchang County, Duan Tiande, who was found dead in his bedroom when he was about to be transferred to a remote county due to poor management of Tianchang County. According to the family members of the deceased and Xu Zuo, the death of the four people was bizarre. When they were found, the ground was covered with silver bills, there were no wounds on their bodies, and there was no poison in the internal organs. The fear and torture, and there are some strange sphagnum moss on the ground.

Bao Zheng stayed up all night, and rushed to the scene with his men early the next morning. The Hu mansion was full of sorrow, an old housekeeper tremblingly brought Bao Zheng to the door of the master's room, and he kept chanting: "If there is any blame, don't blame it, if there is any blame, don't blame me." Bao Zheng smiled. After walking into the room, the window of the room was facing west. At this time, it was still cold in the summer season. Bao Zheng quickly used his pupils to look around and found a wet footprint on the floor. After a closer look, it was the footprints of two women, which led out of the mansion all the way to the river. They continued into the county magistrate's mansion and the mud house of the Hao brothers, and the footprints disappeared when they reached the river. Bao Zheng looked up and saw a figure with pale face, swollen body, and water plants wrapped around his head appeared in the river, thinking: "The murderer of this murder has finally appeared." So he rushed back to the mansion to check the cases of tragic deaths in the river over the years. Unexpectedly, he found that there was a sinking case in the Hu family more than ten years ago. He died of illness a few years earlier, but the strange thing is that there are only a few records in the government office, and the case cannot be finalized at all, which was puzzling.

Day and night, a wet figure came out of Bao Zheng's study room and said, "Gong Sunying has seen Judge Bao, and begs Judge Bao to thoroughly investigate the Shentang case of the Hu family thirteen years ago, and return my innocence. My concubine is Hu Qingpo." I was accused by my husband and Duan county magistrate of cheating on her because she found out that her husband was colluding with the government to sell the banned drug "Five Stones", and she was dealt with by the government Shentang. The formula of "Five Stone Powder" was handed over to the old housekeeper of the Hu Mansion for my safekeeping. I also killed those bastards. I am also willing to go to the underworld to endure four hundred years of torture. I hope Judge Bao can make public what that hypocrite did. Return my innocence! "

After Bao Zheng heard about it, although his face was calm, his heart was turbulent. He thought to himself: "At this time in the prosperous Song Dynasty, there is such a scandalous thing. This case involves government corruption, bribery, and framing people who are innocent. It should be reported to the imperial court to investigate the relevant personnel." Then he said to Gongsun Ying: "Now that you know If you pay for your life, go to the underworld to confess your crime, and I will vindicate your unjust case and return your innocence."

Bao Zheng left the mansion in a hurry, summoned his guards to find the old housekeeper overnight, and asked for the ledger and the formula of "Five Stone Powder" as evidence. The old housekeeper said: "Master Bao, here is all the evidence left by Madam, I hope you can vindicate Madam."

Not long after, the Shentang case in the Hu Mansion was rehabilitated, and the four murder cases were made public. The people in Tianchang County also knew the crimes committed by Hu Qingpo and others. After such a high-profile corruption case, Bao Zheng was transferred to other cities shortly thereafter to continue his legend.

Judge Pao – Mystery Man

Creative Secondary School, Ng, Carina – 15

“Judge Pao, you have made many achievements in your life, including eradicating violence, bringing peace to the people, and seeking justice for the people. I don't want to waste your unique ability, there will be a new start. I hereby send you to the world 100 million years later.” A muddy voice whispering in my ears.

Vitamin C-filled sunlight streaming in through the windows, the little sparrow is singing cheerfully. I gently opened my eyes, I was confused with the surroundings with a dizzy mind, as if I had been in a car accident. I walked barefoot to the door, pressed down the door handle, then pushed it. The wide living room makes me feel like the maze in Alice in Wonderland. A middle-aged woman who was wearing an apron walked straight to me out of the blue and said, “Mr. Pao, please be minded that you have an event to attend tonight, I have already ironed your suits.” I question closely, “Sorry, I forgot what the event I'm attending is for?” The woman said, “Oh, sorry I forgot to remind you of the whole schedule for tonight. The venue of the event is in the Kowloon Ritz-Carlton Hotel, it is located in the highest building in Hong Kong. As you are a member of the bar association, you are invited to celebrate the founding day of it from 7:00 p.m. to 11:30 p.m.” After her introduction, I said “Alright, I'll take that in mind.” The woman said worriedly “Mr. Pao, you seem to be tired with your recent work, do you want to cancel this schedule?” I replied “I'm fine, I can handle it.” The woman said “Alright, if you have any needs or questions you can find me.” I nodded and she left. I walked back to my bedroom, the bedside displayed a few photos of myself except the one, I subliminally held and looked into it. It gave me a weird feeling, somehow familiar, especially that little girl in the photo.

The night came soonly, I was appreciating the aesthetic sunset through the car window, unconsciously I had arrived at 6:45 p.m. with a non-wary heart. The lobby was full. A man in a blue suit walked to me, beaming and said “Hi Pao, long time no see.” I realized he is my friend, Fred. I used a friendly tone to greet him, “Hi Fred, it's been a while since we had a conversation. I hope everything that's happening to you is fine.” Fred said, “Thank you Pao, I hope you are doing good as well, especially the social atmosphere now is not as good as before.” I replied, “Crimes, illegal drug trafficking, corruption, are the cases that we always need to follow, however it is our job, so we should deal with it.” Fred nodded and said, “you're right ! It's amazing to have a roughly 10 minute chat with you, we should go to the 95th floor to enjoy.” My relationship with Fred seems to be closer in a short period of time.

We settled down on our own seats while our chairperson Mr.Lau sat in the middle of the long table. The speech was powerful, and made us hungry quickly. Finally, we could see different kinds of delicacies placed in front of our eyes, however I just prefer Shrimp and lobster towers. We went back to our seats and tucked in the food that we took, carrying out the concept of carpe diem. Oops ! The glass of water splashed on my suit jacket. Fred said with concern, “Pao, I guess you have to go to the bathroom.” I replied, “That's what I'm thinking, Fred.” I left my seat and headed to the bathroom by myself. When I was walking through the corridor, I looked down and checked the time on my watch, didn't pay attention to the front, accidentally bumped into a waitress, we all apologized to each other automatically, then I returned quickly after cleaning with some tissues. I saw our Chairperson was chatting with Fred while I'm in the bathroom, then I walked over to them who both holding a champagne, the chairperson looked at me and said, “Hi Pao, nice to see you attending the event, but excuse me, I have to leave now, let's chat next time.” I said, “Sure!” But probably there will not be any chance to chat with him later.

It's almost the end of today's celebration. Our chairperson stood up to make a conclusion today. His face was red, his body had had a huge wine smell, he was obviously drunk. Don't know why I feel something foreboding will happen later by my intuition. I started to keep an eye on the one who was the most outstanding, speaking loudly. Yes, I'm right. He collapsed instantly after a few seconds, some white foam came out from his mouth, the whole body was twitching, everyone was shocked, we quickly called the ambulance. I was guilty, I am the one who can feel him! I thought it was just an imagination, unexpected to see this happen in front of my eyes. I don't know what to do, nothing I could do for him. I keep asking myself, is this planned by someone? Am I the awful suspect? Why did it suddenly happen ? These questions all popped up in my mind. I was sweating a little, Fred saw that and asked me “Are you ok, Pao ?” I pretended I was calm and said “I was shocked, but I'm fine.” That's it, the celebration was ruined. I went back home then looked in the mirror in the home's toilet. I looked at myself, throwing back about things

that happened today. I was wondering if I had a superpower that I could predict the things that happened in the future, cause I could feel him in my heart. A

Ring, Ring, the morning is a new start, the policies came knocking on our door to record statements of yesterday's situation. The police primarily researched that our chairperson is poisoned by the champagne, that means there's someone poisoned him, but they haven't arrested the suspect at this moment. The suspect might be someone that showed up on yesterday. then I told everything that I knew to him and they asked more closely "Did you saw anything that is strange?" I replied "Hmmmmm.....let me think." After a few seconds ago, I did think of something strange, then I say, " Oh yes! I remembered that on when I was going to the bathroom there's a girl bumped into me." They asked, "What is she wearing?" I said, "She's probably wearing black." They said, "Thanks for you information, we would continue investigate this case." I said, "hope the truth will be discover soon..." The polices left.

My heart again feel a breeze of foreboding, the police makes me remind of my friend Fred, while I was walking back to centre, he was chatting with our chairperson, the most important thing is that they both held a glass of champagne! I I didn't mean to suspect my friend, but just thinking there might be a chance of him doing it? As I'm a lawyer, I'm pretty calm everytime, but when in friendship, I treat and trust them seriously. Therefore, it's just a guess, not necserrarily he's the suspect. I still got trust on him with some doubt, so I choose to hang out with him to test him.

"Hi Pao it's good to see you again!" Fred said,
" Yes, it's good to see you." I said,
"Let's enter the bar." Fred said,

We both walk into the bar, ordered some alcohol to enjoy and chill. Unexpectedly, he actually get drunk really fast, his capacity for liquor is weak. I take the opportunity to ask him, " What do you think about our chairperson?" Fred said with muddy vioce, "Hmmm..... He is just pretending to be justice. In fact, he does corruption, defiently unworthy to competent this significant position." After I heard this, I already knew what's the truth because he got a motive to do that, my emotion is complicated, I can't believe he would do that. But as a lawyer, I realised that breaking the law is incorrect, therefore even he is my friend, I noticed that I have to tell the police.

The police take action quickly, they arrested him on the next day. I have no last word to say to him, he totally blowed my mind up. I could not believe that it's really my friend, the police even found drugs in his house, it makes me could not trust anyone easily.

"Judge Pao, your mission is completed, your justice soul is impressive. Thank you so much." Again a muddy voice whispering in my ears.

Cover your tracks

Creative Secondary School, Tung, Anson – 15

"How did you discover the corpse?" Winston questions a delivery man, who found the victim lying dead in his house three days ago. Bright white lights shine directly onto the delivery man's face, revealing his pale face, with sweat dripping down, bitten lips and blinking eyes. Under the x-ray that disclose the mind of the delivery man, he spits out everything while tensed up. "I...I was delivering a package, which he had ordered a month ago, to the victim's house. I knocked on the door, and rang the doorbell numerous times, but there just weren't any responses. I accidentally pushed the door and it opened, then I found the victim lying face down in the house. I am definitely innocent! I don't know anything except for this!"

"Sir, please calm down, this is just a regular interrogation." Winston says while recording what the delivery man has just said, and asks again, "Was there anyone with you when you found the victim?" The delivery man immediately replied, "Yes! I had a co-worker with me as driver, and he observed the whole scene as well! Officer, please trust that it wasn't me being the murderer!" Winston closed his file, "Thank you for your cooperation, this is the end of the questioning."

After the delivery man has left, Winston lies down on his table, sighing deeply. "How has the case been going on, Winston?" The Chief comes over and asked.

"I have no clues at all..." Winston mumbles, "The killer covered his tracks and left no clues..."

"Right, this is tricky, but this is a great learning opportunity for you, young detective. Good luck, I have faith in you." The Officer says, then continues on to put pressure on Winston. "The public is in fear because of this case, so we must find the murderer as soon as possible."

"I will try my best, Officer." Winston replies tiredly.

Going back to home, Winston sits on the floor behind the tea table, brings out his notebook and starts to organise the case and his thoughts again. He begins to recall the scene when they first investigated after the report of the delivery man. There was a man around thirty years old, lying on the floor with his face facing down, head pointing towards the door but two metres away from the front door. There was a knife left, stabbed into the man's back. "The man might be trying to escape from the house and run from the murderer, while being stabbed from the back." Winston jots down his judgement on how the victim died.

"Were there any tracks left by the murderer on the knife?" Winston leads himself to this question, and flips back to the investigation notes, begins to read, "The knife was identical to other knives found in the kitchen, and no fingerprints were found on the knife." It was a sharp knife, with blood stains clinged to it. The black handle had no fingerprints attached to it. It was like the endless cryptic black hole, like the killer's pupil, drawing Winston into the mystery. Winston analyses to himself, "The murderer probably got the knife from the victim's kitchen while wearing gloves, so no one would be able to trace back to the sales record of that type of knife nor from his fingerprints to identify him. His tracks have been attentively covered..."

Back to the floor, the cabinet, and the table, no hair strands that belong to someone other than the victim were found. The hair strands were absent, also the strands of hint. "No hair strands, so the murderer was either bald or he purposely shaved his hair." Winston carries on the analysis. "What if we shrink the circle of suspicion to those who are bald?" Winston's mind is instantly lit up by this new method, shining brightly as if it is a light bulb with electricity passing through. Sadly, the light bulb stops burning the next second, as reality hits Winston — the killer could have shaved his head, which he or she probably has hair grown back now. Another possibility was that the killer was naturally bald. The little track that appeared just now becomes buried by heavy dirt after the realisation. Winston must look for another path.

"How about CCTV and witnesses?" Winston asks himself again. Grabbing his laptop out, turning it on, logging into the city's CCTV recording system, Winston searches for CCTV recording around the victim's house. He moves his cursor across his laptop's screen to the victim's house. Dots of CCTV spots are as tiny as footprints of kittens, in contrast they are all across the city, except in a few areas, the rural countryside, where it seems like the kittens hate to travel to and have just left a few footprints.

Unfortunately, where the victim lived is in one of those areas, and there aren't any CCTV spots on the street where the victim lived. Winston curses and looks for witnesses instead. He opens another tab, and searches for Google Map. He locates where the victim lived, and sadly discovers that the victim didn't have any neighbour living near him, which the closest household was five kilometres apart from his house and obviously couldn't witness any part of his death. "Seems like there is favouritism towards the killer, even the god is helping him with covering his tracks." Winston laughed bitterly.

He crawls up from the floor and lays on the sofa behind him. "Let's put the case behind and relax a bit..." Winston says to himself, trying to clear off his occupied mind with some TV shows. Switching back and forth from channels to channels, looking for an entertaining show, an advertisement unexpectedly captures Winston's attention.

"Besides covering your location tracks, how can you forget to cover your internet tracks? Use VPN to cover them!" Judge Pao from the television screen said, energetically inviting others to install VPN. Winston sits up seriously, while staring at the television screen with full focus. "Your internet tracks can actually be used illegally to track who you are, where you are and when you are at that specific location. Now go and install Surfshark VPN!"

Winston grabs his car key and rushes out the door. He drives to the victim's house, to verify an idea of his, inspired by Judge Pao in the VPN advertisement.

Arriving there, Winston takes out his phone and goes to the setting, to connect wifi. In the block, there is only one lonely wifi lying in it, which doesn't have a password. Winston excitedly clicks into it, and his phone successfully connects to it. Using the wifi, Winston sent a message to the Chief, "I think I found the only track left by the murderer."

The next day, Winston directly goes to the IT department to ask for their help.

"You want to know the IP address of this wifi?" The staff asks with doubt.

"Yes, please. This is crucial to the murder case." Winston begs.

The staff turns over and types paragraphs of chunky coding on the computer, making clicking sound rapidly, just like Winston's heartbeat. "Here, I found it." The staff shows Winston the IP address.

"Is it also possible if you can trace back which devices have used this wifi in the last 3 months?" Winston raises another request.

"A piece of cake," The staff repeats the process again, "The wifi was last used by an iPhone 11, IP address 111.188.203.241."

Winston copies that all in his notebook. "Great, thanks for the help, I will return to you very soon."

"Where are you going?"

"To the Chief's office!" Winston leaves the IT department hurriedly.

Knocking on the door, Winston enters the Chief's office. "What have you found, Winston?" The Chief mumbles while yawning, with his eyes half-closed. "I just saw your message. What is the breakthrough?"

"The killer accidentally connected to the house's wifi, which allowed us to trace back to his IP address, and we can locate him or her easily now."

The Chief opens his eyes widely. "How did you come up with this?" He exclaimed.

"Thanks to Judge Pao. The story is long, but I thought of the idea of internet tracks, which wasn't covered by the killer."

"Keep it simple, now I will order the IT department to locate the killer!" The Chief breaks through the door and heads to the IT department.

A few days later, the murderer is found. He can't believe the fact that he is found, and madly repeated, "I have covered all my tracks! Why can the police still find me?"

"Because you have left out your internet tracks. You have used the house's wifi." Winston tells him his negligence.

The murderer is struck by realisation. He is stoned like a sculpture. He confesses everything to Winston with remorse. "I have covered all my tracks, but it should have been the message that I sent to my girlfriend. I received a message from my girlfriend that night, and replied to it. My phone should have been automatically connected to the wifi before I replied to that message, so you are able to trace me today."

Winston finally relieves. He puts down his pen after recording. "You won't have the chance to cover your tracks in jail. Every action of yours will be observed and recorded."

Ghosts of Judge Pao

Creative Secondary School, Wong, Dorothy – 15

Chapter 1: At home

“Hey guys, what’s up! Welcome back to my channel! I am Tom. ” Tom said optimistically. “Today we are going to interview 10 people randomly, asking their opinion on if all killers should be against the law.”

Ring ring ring. Zero’s eyes are glued to the television until the phone rings and his gaze is diverted. He slowly put his hands on the sofa, rotated his legs and softly put it on the ground. He then pushed the sofa to brace himself up. He walked backward to the dining table and grabbed the phone. He was very concentrated on the television and didn’t even notice who called. He just answered the phone. “Hello?”

“Hey, you know how annoying is.....”

“HUH?” Zero impulsively screamed. He immediately hung up the call. He ran around the house searching for the controller and rapidly turned off the television. His heart was pounding and panting heavily. “One, two, three, breathe. There is a huge distance from the television and the sound is soft. Hugo won’t hear anything. My secret is still with myself right? Three deep breaths and you will call him back.” Zero murmured, and called back, “Hi, how is your day? I just got some connection problems.”

“I am good, I might have heard a scream just now. Are you ok?” Hugo replied worryly

“Yes! Why did you call?”

“Nahh, it’s just some random boring talk. The volunteer center! I had been there since I was 20. After volunteering for 44 years, they told me I am too old! I can’t clean the zoo anymore! We all know this isn’t reasonable! I’m just 64 years old, I still haven’t reached the retirement year! How dare they said that to me! I didn’t ask for anything, I am doing it on a volunteer basis! You know how much I loved the animals, you know how much I like to swing around with the monkey!”

“Yes of course I know, how can they do this to you! You are obviously very young, unlike me. Although I might have a slightly younger age than you, my body age isn’t. Recently, my hair has been falling out speedily. I am going to be bald! When we meet next time, please don’t laugh at me!”

“Ha, ha, ha. I will try not to. When are we going to meet? My son is having his birthday next week, do you want to come over and celebrate? ”

“Yes, yes, yes! Of course. Please don’t tell your son that someone is coming, I want to give him a surprise!”

“Sure, see you next week!”

When Zero hung up the phone, his face changed. “Plan succeeded.” said Zero with no facial expressions. He walked to his desk, and put a tick on the task paper sheet. The column is about meeting Hugo’s son. He took out a burner phone from his drawer, and dialed a number, “Success, bring what I need and meet at the same spot.” “Better do it quickly, the organization is giving me a lot of pressure. We all know what they want from you, especially when you are 60 and have AD. (Alzheimer’s disease)” Replied by the guy on the other end. He then laid back on the sofa and continued the show.

Chapter 2: At the crime scene

“Three months per crime, huh! I have been hunting you for 7 years! Still using the same drugs, die from overdose.” Yelled Peter the police officer. “Ironically I don’t even know your identity, after all these years. Not your sex, not your age, not your height. I know nothing. How can you get away from the crime scene every time with no witness? 28 crimes! Are you a ghost!” The more Peter says, the harder he can’t control his emotions, “Breathe Peter. One, two, three, breathe.” He gradually clench his fists and unawarely frown. He has lots of questions in his mind, why three months, why drugs, and what is the relation between the victims? Peter’s boss can’t deal with it anymore, so he told Peter he was kicked out of this case. Peter was very upset about what his boss did to him, however he really wants to find out and this is the best way. He left a note in the case file. They will invite the famous detective, Pao, for help. Although Pao has a packed schedule, his sense of justice can’t bear with himself getting away.

Pao comes to the crime scene at the speed of light. He takes a look at the corpse, then the case file. The killer likes to use sodium thiopental to anesthetize the target, then use pancuronium bromide to paralyze the victim, and potassium chloride to stop the heart so that the person dies. Even Pao, who is very experienced, sighed, "This guy is literally a ghost! Let me meet you!" After reading, Pao saw the note from Peter.

Hi, I am Peter the pervious policeman that handle this case. In the file there are evidence I had found in the past seven years. After seven years I still have no direction on proceed with the case. Sometimes I feel a force dragging me away from the case which makes me think it's ghosts not a ghost. Be careful, this is what I can help with." After Pao read the note, he left the crime scene and went home.

He puts every victims' photos on the crime solving board, trying to find a connection. He wonders if it is random killings or vendettas? The targets are across different classes of society; they could be cleaners or they could be millionaires. It seems totally random, however it doesn't make sense and there are two reasons. First, why would the killer choose poisoning but not using knives or other weapons? Everything will be more simple, and harder to discover. As the supplier for that three drugs are very limited. Second, why three months per kill? If random killing normally is to satisfy their abnormal inner heart. If it's vendetta how come during the interview section, all the victim's close friends or family members don't know who has he had a feud with? There are 28 murders and more than 500 interviews, how is this possible? Pao is so confuse, therefore he decided to see the case from another perspective. This cause his empty eyes to gradually become sharp. As the supplier for the special drugs are very limited, people can't buy it on the street easily. He wanted to find the manufacturer that produced those drugs.

Pao set off at dawn and came home when it was dusk. After the whole day of rushing through manufacturers, he was exhausted. Therefore he decided to eat something delicious to satisfy his inner heart. He walked back and forth on the street searching for a suitable restaurant. He targeted a Chinese restaurant, and looked inside the restaurant's window, hoping to see some smiley faces on customers. His attention was drawn to an employment advertisement. Pao jumped up and did a fist pump, he yelled, "Yes! Peter you might be right about the ghosts! I have a wild guess." Everyone put their attention on Pao and gazed at him as if they were looking at an idiot. Afterwards, Pao rushed to the crime scene, looking for any possible evidence to support his guess.

Pao looked under the sofa, every drawer, in the closet. He can't find any evidence to support his guess, so he starts questioning himself. He questions himself whether he is overthinking and too imaginative. He starts scratching his head, harder and harder; until a strand of hair slowly falls from the scalp to his forehead then gradually falls down the ground in front of him. He got inspired and searched again. This time he is much more careful, every nook and cranny was searched. After 3 hours of searching, he found it. He takes out a tape and glues the evidence on it. Then he took his phone from his pocket and made a call to his friend at the forensic department, "Terry, do me a favor."

Bang! "Hands in the air! Where it's visible! You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law."

"What?"

"You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be provided for you. Do you understand the rights I have just read to you?"

"Why am I under arrest? What did I do?"

"Come on, don't play dumb with me."

"No, I'm not."

"We'll see!"

"At least tell me why I am here."

The door banged and left him in the interrogation room. After waiting for a few minutes, Pao walked in with a laugh and a sarcastic gaze. Peter looked innocent and nervous as if a monster just came into the cage. Then said, "7 years eluding arrest and committed 28 cases. Who are you? Who are you Peter!"

Peter replied, "Sorry, what do you mean? I'm a policeman?"

“Oh sorry, maybe I shouldn't call you Peter, right **Zero?**”

All of the sudden, Peter laughed and lay back into the chair. He crossed his arm and stared at Pao.

“What do you have to accuse me of? ”

“Do you really think we are fools? After 7 years of searching, we found a lot! We know who raised you! We know how they raise you! We just can't figure out how you do it, and that's why you are here!”

“Come on. We all know you are just bluffing me.” with a sneered

“You want proof huh! We have a lot of irrefutable evidence, do you really want us to go to that point? As we always say, anyone who comes clean gets treated with leniency, anyone who holds back the truth gets treated harshly.”

“I am all ears. I am just a good policeman working in the police force, after a killer called Zero.”

“You are walking on the edge of the cliff!” Then Pao knocked on the two-way mirror.

“Hi, this is what you want right?” Terry slowly walked in the interrogation room, and said, “Here is your proof.”

Thud! Terry hardly threw down a stack of evidence in front of Peter. Peter picked up the first one and carefully looked at it. He is still very calm at this stage, however, after picking up the second one. His eyebrow uncontrollably frowned, gradually opened his mouth. After a few seconds he realized his expression, and relaxed. When he viewed the third one, even when he realized his reaction, he couldn't control himself and started twitching.

Pao took the chance to break through Peter's psychological defenses, “Here is the deal.”

Chapter 3: At the court

The day came, the day when all the victims' families wished for, the day when the attorney is ready for a fight, the day when the defendant hates. There is sobbing, there is victory, and there is anger. In the courtroom, you can observe almost all human emotions.

“Quiet! Everyone stand up.”

“Have a seat. Case 18720, murder in the first degree. Defendant Peter Miller. ” said the judge.

“Your Honor, defendant Peter Miller had committed 28 crimes since January 2010. From then to now, there are 28 victims found, all poisoned. Mary Smith, Jordan Williams..... Three drugs are used: sodium thiopental, pancuronium bromide and potassium chloride. It's the same drug used for Euthanasia. On my hand, there are three pieces of evidence to prove my claim. First, a hair in the crime scene to prove he has been at the crime scene. When I figured out the crimes were committed by more than one person, I tried to find proof. I searched numerous times at the crime scene and found some hair. Then I used tape to collect the evidence. The DNA report shows it matches Peter's. May I take it to you, Your Honor.”

“Permitted.” said the Judge.

“The second evidence I have is some testimonies from Peter's co-workers and a mental health report. Most co-workers testify Peter has a strange temper and no one can communicate with him after 6pm. Many believe he might have multiple personalities as in the morning he is a caring, generous and kind person; however after 6 he lost the colour and emotion on his face, sometimes saying something horrible such as killing. Therefore we secretly did a mental test. The test confirms that he suffers from Dissociative Identity Disorder with two obvious symptoms: dissociative amnesia and identity alteration. There is a violent and ruthless killing machine controlling his mind as the main body. Here is the report from the doctor Charlie Brown. We believe he has had this mental issue since 8 years ago, which is the same time when he joined the police force. However there is no information about Peter Miller before that. So who is Peter? He was reported missing in 1967 at age 7. After he was raised by Mila who belongs to an organization. Then he joined the same organization as Mila. This is an organization that train assassins and trained Peter to be one. After he starts to be older, the organization tells him to infiltrate the police force. After 11 years of brainwashing about killing, in the police force he finally learn how to identify right from wrong. However this started bothering him as he found taking away others life bothered him. Peter is

constantly condemned by his conscience and this is when he starts having insomnia and various mental issues. He tried to use ways that make others die less painfully to comfort his inner self. Yet, it doesn't work well. Slowly his body split into another identity to bear with his pain and stress. I would like to hand over the recording of the testimony and the mental issue report."

"Permitted." said the judge.

"The third evidence is what is behind Peter, the organization. As I said, I had realized more than one person is behind the crimes. If we can't find the relationship between those crimes, why do we need to assume the killer knows? What if he was employed to do the assassinations while he has no idea who his targets are! Therefore we want to make a deal. If he confesses what he knows after 53 years in the organization, we will set him free."

"No way! That must be a NO." "Setting a killer free? Are you serious?" "He is an incredibly dangerous person!" Victims' families start complaining. They are loud, earsplitting, and stentorian which make the court a market!

"Quiet!" After the judges picked up the gavel and knocked. Immediately he gained back the control of the field. "Let's listen to what he is going to say."

"Thank You your honor. Of course, under the premise Peter must pleaded guilty in the case, and do 100 hours of community service. We made this decision under few circumstances. First, he was taught to do so. At the age of seven, your mindset is not well develop yet. If peers tell you to rob a bank you will as you don't have the ability to identify right from wrong. If an adult tells you, your subconscious mind will convince you that what adults say is true. Combined with the punishment mechanism, the children will become your puppet easily. Secondly, he has mental issues. During the process he doesn't have the control of his mind. Can you imagine what's is like if someone move your hand to conduct murder while you can do nothing to control it? Last, when he realized right and wrong, he immediately used ways to make the victim suffer less. This move shows he started to fight against the demon in his body. This improvement is significant which is why I truly believe that he can rehabilitate. If he has the ability to assist us in catching the real boss and we are not using it, we are at a disadvantage. Catching the real boss also means saving more lives as the problem isn't on Peter but the organization behind him. He is just a piece in the boss's evil plan! This is all I would like to say, Your Honor. I would really like you to consider carefully, as it's about the country's benefits, the citizens life, and possibly your life as well!"

"You are heard. I will consider seriously about the deal and let's take a 30 minute break."

Pao knows what the break means, it's when the decision is made. He is very worried, and constantly pace back and forth outside the court. Of course he wants the bad guys to be in prison; however this is a special case, Peter was raised as a machine not human. He can't have feelings, he can't think about anything, he just receives the code and completes the mission.

"Stand up."

"The decision has been made, and I am here to announce my decision. " said the Judge, "Mr. Peter Miller, do you plead guilty to murder in the first degree? "

"Is the deal still effective? "

"Let me repeat. Do you plead guilty Mr. Peter Miller? "

Silence. The sound of the chair movement, the low frequency mic buzz, and the breathing sound of Peter. Everything is clear and sharp. However inside everyone's brain it's very noisy, there are voices screaming, shouting, sobbing. Various emotions are floating in the courtroom. Finally, "Yes."

The Adventure of Judge Pao

Creative Secondary School, Wong, Kiki – 16

One evening, Judge Pao is putting his grandson to sleep. He is now 60 years old, even though he is old, he is still working as a judge. His grandson is now 4 years old and came back to visit him along with his daughter. His grandson has been so excited to visit him because he has heard so many stories about his grandpa.

“Grandpa, can you tell me a story about you?” said grandson.

“Of course, let me tell you a story about the case of Chen Shimei, he was married to the princess—” Judge Pao started.

“No, that’s boring. I want to hear an exciting story.” grandson interrupted.

“How about The Cat and the Prince?” asked Judge Pao. “It was around 20 years ago during the previous emperor’s reign. The old emperor didn’t have a son then and was desperate to have a son to become the next emperor”

—
It was a long time ago, the emperor didn’t have a son to pass on the throne to. The emperor told his consorts that whoever can first birth him a son would become the new empress. The consorts and concubines were all in a frenzy competition to try and gain favor from the emperor. Around 9 months later, Consort Li and Consort Lau were both about to give birth. One night, as Consort Li was about to give birth, everyone in the palace was holding their breath and wondering if the child will be a boy.

A few hours after the birth of the child, the emperor paid a visit to Consort Li and their child. The emperor moved the cloth and looked into the crib. What he saw was terrible, like a red ball of flesh with limbs and a tail. The emperor was traumatized and thought that Consort Li must have committed a grave sin for her child to be so deformed and demonic. He demoted Consort Li and confined her in a corner of the palace. Days later, Consort Lau gave birth to a healthy son. Consort Lau’s son became the crown prince and Consort Li was crowned empress. Unfortunately, three years later, the crown prince died and the emperor had no heir once more.

—
Today, I am going to visit the doctor’s office and hope to find a doctor who will come and take a look at my son. My poor son who has been sick since birth. I arrive at the doctor’s office and see a young man. He is taller than average and thin, he looks kind and studious. At the moment, he is writing down the ingredients for a medicine broth for a patient. As soon as I saw him I knew this must be the young doctor that was recommended. There is just something about his young man that I can’t put my finger on but all of this doesn’t matter as long as he can help me.

I observe the young man for a while and can tell that he cares a lot about his patients. As soon as the current patient leaves, I approach him and ask, “Are you Doctor Yan Jiang?”

He turns, looks at me and says, “That’s me, if you are here for a diagnosis, please line up.”

“Do you have time to take a look at my son this week? He is very young and very sick” I say to him.

“I see. Leave your address with my assistant and I will contact you.” the young man says.

—
It has been a few days since I went to the doctor’s office and Dr. Jiang sent word that he would come to my house this afternoon. I hope he can help Gao, my youngest son. It is now early in the afternoon and I can hear the servants greeting someone at the front door. It must be Dr. Jiang. I feel so relieved, he is my last chance at saving Gao.

The servant leads Dr. Jiang into my study. I stand up to greet him and take him to Gao’s room.

When Dr. Jiang sees Gao, he moves to sit next to my son and takes his pulse. Jiang sees how pale Gao is and asks me how long Gao has been sick like this. The truth is Gao has been sick since birth. I can see that Dr. Jiang is struggling with something.

Dr. Jiang takes a deep breath and says, “I’m sorry, Judge Pa—” “Judge Pao! Is anyone here?” interrupts a voice.

Suddenly, a eunuch enters the room, he sees me and proceeds to give me the emperor’s message, “Judge Pao, you are to enter the palace immediately.”

What bad timing! I have no time to think before the eunuch pushes me out of Gao's room and asks me to change into my formal robes.

When I arrive at the palace, the eunuch leads me to the emperor's study. I see the emperor sitting behind his desk with a million thoughts weighing heavily on his mind. He looks up as I enter and motions for me to get closer to him.

I get closer and get ready to bow in greeting, "Emperor, may you live a thousand ye—" "You may get up", interrupts the emperor. I stand up straight and wait for the emperor to speak.

I have never seen the emperor behaving like this before. He is one of the most straight-forward person I know and it is not like him to hesitate. The only time he ever hesitated was when he made that decree that sparked the race between the consorts to birth him an heir four years ago. Oh, whatever that is troubling the emperor now must be related to the young crown prince.

"Judge Pao, there is unfortunate news. The crown prince, my only son, is dead." the emperor says, "So young as well, just three years old. Am I being punished? Is our country being punished by the gods?"

I have no words for the emperor. I can only imagine how the emperor must be feeling. A terrible thought passes through my mind, 'is this how I will feel when Gao dies?'

"The country needs a crown prince for stability. I need you to help me. I want you to investigate the prince's death. However, the most important thing is I want you to track down all the royal nephews I have. I am too old to have another son. Find me a royal nephew that is suitable for the throne. Of course, everything said today will remain between us." the emperor says to me quietly.

"I understand, your majesty. I take my leave." I say.

The emperor has given me two very important tasks. The most pressing thing now is for me to make a few visits to the royal nephews as our country's stability depends on it. I know that Prince Yan, the emperor's younger brother, has a son and I should be able to pay a visit today.

I arrive at Prince Yan's mansion and hear the sound of children playing. I can see they are playing in the garden but there is another boy reading under a tree. I feel surprised because the boy looks so young.

I wait in the gazebo for the prince as I observe the children. The prince soon arrives and I greet him.

"Is that your youngest son?" I ask, pointing at the reading boy.

"Yes. Why are you here, old friend?" Prince Yan replies.

"The emperor has asked me to find him a suitable heir."

"Heir? But what about the crowned prince?" asks the Prince, shocked.

"He is dead. I will investigate that later but this heir business is a priority." I reply.

Prince Yan doesn't speak for a while. I wait for him to process his thoughts.

"You are here to look at my sons then." Prince Yan states.

"Are you ok with this?" I ask.

"It's not like I have a choice. The country needs a crown prince. It is our royal duty."

When Prince Yan said that it is his royal duty, I understood. I also have duties to the emperor and to the country. No matter how much I want to stay at home with my son, I can't.

"Children, come here." Prince Yan shouts, startling me out of my thoughts.

The two older boys run towards us and the younger boy walks slowly to the gazebo as well.

"This is Judge Pao, children, introduce yourself." Prince Yan says.

The oldest boy is Prince Mu, 7 years old. A strong boy who is proud of his status and rumor says he constantly skips his lessons. The middle son is Prince Ling, 5 years old. A studious but playful boy, always following his older brother. Lastly, there is Prince Zhen, 3 years old. A quiet boy who enjoys reading, servants say he is already intellectually on par with Prince Ling.

Out of the three boys, I think Prince Zhen is the most suitable to inherit the throne. He is smart and young. He will be able to learn and adapt to life in the palace. Moreover, his mannerisms remind me of the emperor.

—

After visiting all the Princes, I wrote up my recommendations and sent my observations to the emperor. Finally, I have solved the most pressing task and can go home and see my family. It has been four days since this whole mess started. I hope Dr. Jiang and my son didn't mind being left alone.

I get to Gao's room and hear Dr. Jiang's voice. I feel so thankful that Dr. Jiang has decided to stay and help Gao despite my abrupt and rude departure the other day. I enter the room and see my son doing so much better than before. He now has some color to his cheeks and his breathing is much quieter and deeper than before. I cannot believe how much he has improved in four days. Dr. Jiang must be a miracle worker.

I ask Dr. Jiang to accompany me to my study so that we can have a chat.

"Dr. Jiang, thank you so much for all you have done. I have never seen Gao so vibrant before. How much do I owe you? Name your price." I say to Dr. Jiang.

"Judge Pao, I am actually a big fan. Instead of payment, I would like to observe you at work. On top of having medical skills, I am also a skilled coroner." Dr. Jiang says.

I am shocked to say the least. I didn't expect that. I don't see a problem with his request and I am in desperate need of a skilled coroner. Furthermore, if he is working for me, he can be close by and treat my son. After careful consideration, I nod.

—

Today is the day that I will start my next investigation. The emperor has received my recommendations and will consider adopting Prince Yan's son, Prince Zhen to be his heir. I will investigate the crown prince's death today. First, I need to get Dr. Jiang, my new coroner.

We arrived at the palace bright and early. I question the servants and Dr. Jiang goes to check out the body. From the servants, I learnt that the crown prince was weak since birth because he was born prematurely. A few days before his death, the prince was sick because of the sudden change in weather. I recall that there was a flash blizzard a week ago so the story seems true enough. I just have to examine the prince's bedroom and wait for Dr. Jiang's report before I can come to any conclusions.

I visit the prince's bedroom and I can tell that everything was left exactly the way it was. I look at the coal burner in the room and see that the coal was last used a week ago. I examine the windows and see that the windows have been sealed properly for the winter. Next, I check out the cups on the nightstand. I put my trusty silver needle in the liquid to test for poison but nothing happened. Lastly, I observe the bed. The bed was a good distance away from the window and the coal burner so I don't think those are the causes of death. The bed doesn't look particularly messy so no sign of struggle. I can see a wash basin and towel by the bed so the prince was running a fever but the maids were looking after him appropriately. So far, I have no reason to suspect foul play.

Dr. Jiang comes in at that moment and gently shakes his head.

"Anything to report?" I ask.

"The prince was weaker and smaller than his peers so I guess he was born premature by four weeks. The circumstances are a bit suspicious, almost like the premature birth was induced. There is not much information I can get from the body without a full dissection. However, I can see and smell traces of medicine, sweat and phlegm on his clothes. I have also read the royal doctor's prescriptions but that was very standard. Overall, I can conclude that the prince was sick with a high fever and likely died from it as he was so weak. The doctor and the medicine both did their jobs but they weren't enough to cure the illness." Dr. Jiang reports to me in a leveled voice.

So, from all the evidence we have gathered, we can conclude that the prince died from natural causes. No foul play and no negligence.

Suddenly, a maid shouts, "It's the curse. Consort Li placed a curse on the crown prince! Everyone knows she committed unspeakable sins."

I turn to look at the maid who spoke but she is already removed from the room. I glance at Dr. Jiang to see his reaction but he looks unfazed. I guess the maid is just in shock over the prince's death but still she should know better than to speak out of turn in the palace. After all, spewing such fantastical and irrational tales about the royal family is punishable by death.

As far as I am concerned, there is no concrete evidence nor even a hint of suspicion surrounding the prince's death. It's the end of the day and Dr. Jiang and I will go home and write up our reports to the emperor.

—
Dr. Jiang and I are bringing the report to the emperor. As we approach the palace, we can hear commotions and all kinds of hushed voices. I strain my ears and hear that Consort Li's palace was burnt down last night. I look at Dr. Jiang and we both remember what the maid said about Consort Li placing a curse on the crown prince.

We enter and see the emperor pacing along the palace, deep in thought. I don't want to disturb him so I give my report to the eunuch and decide to leave.

"Judge Pao, I have another job for you. The fire last night and Consort Li, I want to know the truth." the emperor says.

"Yes, your majesty." I reply and turn to leave. A million thoughts are racing through my head. There must be some connections that I am missing between the crown prince and Consort Li.

According to the records, Consort Li and Consort Lau were both pregnant 4 years ago. Consort Lau gave birth to the crown prince and was promoted to be the empress. So what happened to Consort Li's child? Why is the entry on Consort Li's child missing? I feel this is somehow important to all these questions.

The first place we visit is Consort Li's burnt palace. The scent of smoke is thick and the palace workers are already clearing the debris. I stop one of the high ranking maids, she must be Consort Li's personal maid. I take her aside and question her.

"Have you seen Consort Li?" "No."

"When was the last time you saw her?" "Yesterday afternoon"

"Were you serving here during Consort Li's pregnancy?" "Yes, I was a low ranking maid then."

"What can you tell me about the pregnancy? Did she carry the child to term?" I ask and stare into her eyes intently.

"Judge Pao, Consort Li birthed a boy 3 years ago. I saw him. But then, he was gone. I don't know what happened. Next thing I know, I was ordered to bury a chest in the garden. Under the cherry blossom tree." the maid whispers to us, looking behind her to check no one is around.

"Thank you. You may go." I say to her.

Dr. Jiang and I go to the cherry blossom tree and begin digging. Soon, the spade hit the chest. We lift up the chest and open it. Inside is a body, as I suspect. I nod at Dr. Jiang and leave him to it.

I walk back to the burnt palace and go inside. Did Consort Li die in the fire? Was it an accident? If so, is her death due to the crown prince's death? I look around the palace and find a particularly charred place. This must be where the fire was started but it is nowhere near the coal burner, which makes it suspicious. I give the area a sniff and there is a strong scent of rice and sweetness. The fire must have been started with a strong rice alcohol.

Dr. Jiang comes in and says, "Judge Pao, the bones are not human remains. There is a pronounced snout, a tail and the joints are all wrong. If I am not mistaken, it must be some sort of cat."

A cat? But the maid said she saw a boy moments after the birth. So where is the missing prince?

New Tales of Judge Pao

Creative Secondary School, Wong, Marcus – 15

Justice served! Right?

“Where is my son, did you take him!” cries a newlywed. “Here take my gold pendant, it’s much more than the amount I owe you...or whatever you want just give me back my son!” “Stop it! Go away! Go get some help! I didn’t do anything” a juvenile howls back with a cha siu bao in his hands. “I am going to the chancery if you don’t tell me right now!” screams the helpmate with tears rolling down her cheeks. “GO then, just leave me alone, I have buns to sell!” the chap yanks away the woman’s hand and disappears into the crowd.

Lengthening steps, the woman stomps into the chancery crying out “Mr Thornhill has kidnapped my kid! Please help me get him back!” Ms Dream then demands “Find me Judge Pao! I want Justice. He can even summon ghosts right?” The police officers thought a patient from the asylum had escaped and brought her into the interrogation room.

“Why are you so freaked out!”

“My son is missing, is he dead!?”

“Find me Judge Pao, he will give me the truth! I have heard a lot about him, he’s the best detective and judge in town right?”

“He’s an expensive judge! You can’t just call him out like this!”

“Please get me him! I really want to know where my son is! This is not fair!” Ms Dream’s non-stop whining seems to work, the police officer pulls out an application form for seeing Judge Pao.

“Done!” Ms Dream has scrambled her name on the form before the officer explains to him where goes where. “When can I see him?” Asked Ms Dream with a furrowing brow. “At least in a couple of days, he has a lot to do.” “Ok, have a good day!” Ms Dream ambled out the chancery with a big smirk hanging on her face.

“Ms Dream Addams, proceed forward.” Pao announced with a dull voice.

“Yes, your majesty, please help me find my missing son.”

“Another missing son ey” Pao signed with a cha siu bao in his hands. “When was the last time you’ve seen him?” Pao queried.

“The day before yesterday.” Dream coughed frustratedly.

“Please add your majesty after every sentence you’ve spoken, I deserve respect!” Pao cuts in.

“Sor...rry I didn’t mean to disrespect you.” “Can you help me find my son?” Shuttters Ms Dream.

“Ok. But you have to pay 10 gold bars first or stay here for a night” Pao says with a randy face.

“WHAT? Is this how justice works!?” Hollered Ms Dream.

“Come back tomorrow with the 10 gold bars or stay here for a night with me! Or else case closed”

Ms Dreams wandered back home with a despairing sole, desperate to find his son but doesn’t even have one gold bar. She tumbles on the ground in agony, mentally and physically exhausted. Looking at the bespangled galaxy gleaming in the pitch black vacuum, she doesn’t believe in justice anymore. She has made up her mind and decided to spend a night with Judge Pao.

After the long night Ms Dream has lost faith in this world, Judge Pao puts his dragon robe back on that has “Justice, Fairness, Equity” embroidered on it and resumes Ms Dream’s case. “Well Well Well, we have found your son, but he is in buns.” Judge Pao giggled out “It is one of the most abnormal and funniest cases we have ever seen Ms Dream HAHA” Pao brusted out with a Cha Siu Bao. “Your son is delicious like you ey?” Pao cackled out. “We actually found him dead on the street a couple days ago but we sold him to a pork shop for one gold bar since we were one gold bar short from buying a horse” “We did not find who did this but we will be compensating you with a quarter gold bar.” Pao added “what....” Ms Dream wept “Case closed! Justice served!”

This is the society we live in. Justice? Never heard of it, is it a food?

Insight

Diocesan Boys School, Tsang, Eric –

The crisp air was nauseating. He had only spent a couple of weeks in this drunken daze and already his internal compass had gone haywire. He gazed afar. The impassive mountains blocked his view, rolling away erratically. His wife liked to write about these mountains, he recalled placidly. They gave her space. Twirling the golden threads of the sun around her pen, then unfurling them into fantasies. Which direction led back home?

The silence was suffocating. He thought of the grand hall in the capital where he once worked, where every voice resonated throughout the room, a ferocious symphony that found your fate. Before he left, a tune was written for him. It was now stuck in his head.

The colour of his skin, marred by poor nutrition and the unforgiving environment, had become indistinguishable from the dreary sky and the cracked, yellow earth. Tenacity would not yield to physical hardship, yet his imposing might struggled under the weight of responsibility. He had cracked under mental duress.

The rattle of the cart trickled away as a bead of sweat trickled into his eye, irritating a tear from it, which silently fell, a round crystal that bored into the soil. He dug his toe into the damp spot left behind. His crystal had not lasted long, nor made any impression on the weary earth.

He paused, reproachful.

He walked down a path, knocking at each door to see if anyone would answer and let him stay. A cold breeze swept over him. High social status brought him admiration and warmth from citizens, yet he had to tread a fine line on family finances. Now, he was stripped barren.

The largest house sat in the middle of the village, moderately decorated. This had to be the town hall, he thought. It intimidated him, but he knocked. Immediately the door swung open. An old woman appeared! He jerked his body straight.

‘Ah, son, we’ve been waiting for you! Come in; dinner is ready.’ The old woman held a warm, practised smile, beckoning him in.

Fate had taught him to be honest. He began to object, that he wasn’t their son, but the old woman swiftly cut him off.

‘Oh, stop wasting time. Talk about it after you’ve come in.’

He couldn’t help but notice that while her left eyeball glared intently at him, her right occasionally slipped in a lapse of control before she jerked it back into correct focus. Like the reins of an untamed horse. He acquiesced and cautiously followed her into the house.

Her husband was seated at the dinner table. The old man greeted him cheerfully and put another bowl and set of utensils on the table. There was only freshly cooked chicken, pork and a thin soup.

‘So, son, tell us of your travels. How’s life in the capital?’ The old man asked as he cut his meat.

He finally got a good look at her face. ‘I’m not your son,’ he replied. He studied the old woman’s eyes. They floated around untethered. When she tilted her head to slurp her bowl of soup, her irises briefly sunk to the bottom before bouncing back up, continuing to wander. A wave of revulsion hit him, which he quickly fought off.

The old man continued to cut his meat. 'Ah, that's alright. What's your name?'

'Ren Yi.' A hoarse utterance through chapped lips. Behind him, lines of writing bound the walls, reflected in the sheen of their irises. Ashen-grey and jet-black. Ren Yi imagined the ink coursing through his veins. His sigh condensed and dissipated in the air, a fleeting thought. He brought his attention back to the weird woman. She was munching tastefully on the mild meat.

The old man nodded. 'She's blind.' He and his wife were unperturbed by the stranger in their house.

'So what brings you here, dear? Tell us your story,' the blind woman inquired. Ren Yi felt himself being pushed again into that maze of regrets. He searched for a suitable entrance, but it was too cloudy, the walls twined with dense, tangled growth. The still air generated a mounting tension. His mind raced. And all the while, the old couple carried on, eating peacefully, waiting patiently for his answer.

'I was exiled here.' Ren Yi began. He relaxed. He pitied blind people. They could not discern between light and dark, could not meet the subdued glow of the flaming sun, or the tawny amber that it projected upon their faces. They could not read. They could not see the expression written on people's faces. They would never be certain whether someone had left the room or gone silent, nor be sure where that annoying fly was in her room. She could not spot her husband in a crowd. She would not worry about the zit on her nose unless someone told her about it.

'Go on,' the blind woman encouraged. She lifted her head from her bowl and matched his stare. Her pupils were fixed in dilation, like the eyes of a curious child. How dreadful it must be never to have this curiosity sated! Ren Yi thought. He pitied her husband too. He was tasked with making her presentable in public. He was her eye. It must be difficult for them to find things to talk about. Decades of marriage, and for her never to have seen his beautiful face! Their dreams must have been hard to reconcile, let alone realise, for they saw the world in contrasting lights.

'I was a government official in the capital.'

'Wow.'

'Our son just went over this spring! So proud of him.'

Ren Yi ignored them. 'Of course, we were respected. A prestigious position gives you that, and money. But work was exhausting. Protocols were rigorous. We had to travel to and fro whenever something of interest happened. We had to write dozens of reports. We were under constant scrutiny from each other so that the whole structure would crumble if one block came loose. Only by stepping on the fallen could we rise to the top. So we stood straight and tall, outwardly immaculate, like an apple's ruddy, smooth veneer while our cores rotted from within. We viewed ourselves through the tainted lens of others. Do you have wine?' Ren Yi asked politely. His face remained implacably calm despite the brewing emotional turmoil within.

'It's reserved for special occasions.' The old man remarked, then retrieved a bottle and handed it to him.

Ren Yi took a gentle sip. His voice became lighter. 'We didn't realise it then, but our rot was catching up to us. Every time a fellow member of our rank let his inner putrefaction surface, we turned on him, a pack of vultures waiting for him to stoop from grace, then fed on his remains so we could elevate ourselves. How tough were our skins? How far can a balloon rise before it bursts from pressure?' An abrupt laugh. Grim.

Sentences streamed from his mouth, then stopped, expressionless. More fuel was needed to illuminate the maze. He let the blood spill from the glass, filling his eyes with feverish flame. 'I was promoted two times. I earned more respect, more money. I made citizens happy. But everyone became more distant, and our family situation didn't seem to change much. The inimical atmosphere that we created at work was stifling. My children lamented that they wished I were home more often. My wife...' Ren Yi chased her

shadow, flickering at every corner. There was an elusive quality about her. What was it? He gestured emptily, frustrated.

Ren Yi had imbibed all the wine. No trace of it remained. It made him static, gripping the bottle over his open mouth as he lingered, waiting for the last drop to fall as he shrunk back into the past.

‘One day, a merchant approached me while I was returning home from work.

“I offer you fifty thousand gold pieces to tutor my son, and get him into government,” he stated. I contemplated it. Fifty thousand gold pieces were more than twenty years’ worth of my salary. But then again, I still had more than forty years of tenure left. I was still a young man. If I were caught, severe consequences awaited me. Yang Jie, a colleague of mine, disappeared three years ago. No traces were left. One could only wonder at his terror. We never talked about it, fearing the artistry of others. Numbers made things real. Though could I really stand forty more years of gruelling work? Just the thought of escape enthralled me. Then I thought of my family. Would they really benefit much if I were fifty thousand gold pieces richer? I doubted it.

“No.” I decided resolutely.

He sighed. His sharp eyes gleamed like silver. “Listen to me,”

“No.” I cut him off, afraid that I would be swayed by his business antics.

The merchant continued. “Five years ago, Yang Jie taught my first son, Li Jin. When Yang Jie disappeared, my first son took his place.”

I perked up, anxious. We were drawn to mystery. “What happened?”

“Yang Jie escaped with his family.”

“To where?”

“To your dreamland.” His eyes glinted. “You want to escape your duty to your citizens. You want to escape, away from the crowds, where you can appreciate instead of being appreciated. You want to escape the monotonous life that you and all other citizens in the city live. You want to live, don’t you?”

“Yes.” I found myself replying. I was hushed.

“With the money that I gave Yang Jie, he escaped into his dreams. Now, I have five hundred thousand gold pieces ready, and I will cart them to you early tomorrow morning if you agree.”

I mused over it. Everything had a cost. Even if I was found out, the wealth alone would breathe life back into me. I agreed.’

‘Early next morning the cart arrived, as agreed, along with the merchant’s son. I told my wife about the encounter. Life continued as usual. I tutored him every day after work. He studied in earnest. My wife didn’t seem to mind, and I reassured my children that I would retire soon. Two years later, he took the imperial exams, and passed. Four others from the city passed too. We interviewed them all, then I gave two thousand gold pieces each to my colleagues and they chose the merchant’s son. The plan was flawless. No one could suspect any wrongdoing. I caught sight of my wife’s contagious smiles more often, and I suggested moving to the picturesque villages of Sichuan. She had always marvelled at birds, and the mountains there soared above the clouds. She was reticent, but expressed interest.’ Ren Yi smiled.

‘Soon I resigned. For once our family finances were not under stress. We could have travelled the world. The merchant’s son took my place. With two of the merchant’s sons in the palace, my safety was guaranteed.’

‘The day after, I was summoned to court.’

“Anonymous has handed in a list of officials recommended for investigation. Your name is on the list. You are alleged of bribing your colleagues to manipulate the admission of new government officials,” Judge Pao announced. I froze. Had Yang Jie disappeared in this manner? Who was the anonymous tipper?

“Your wife says that one day, five hundred thousand gold pieces arrived. This was a tuition fee for a merchant’s son. Is this true?” Judge Pao sternly boomed.

“Yes.” Every sentence of mine and his reverberated across the room, our eyes penetrating daggers.

“Who is he?”

“Li Zhun.”

“Your wife said that she and her children missed you. How long did you tutor him for?”

“Two years. Four hours a day, five days a week.”

Judge Pao gazed wistfully at me. “I admire your dedication. You will be glad to know that Li Zhun passed with flying colours in the imperial exam. I have only heard good news of him as an official.” He went silent, his face inscrutable. He was trying to piece the incomplete puzzle together.

One week later Judge Pao returned. He was unrecognisable, dressed handsomely as a wealthy merchant, fantastic plumage lining his neck and the cuffs of his shimmering coat. Two of the finest white stallions hauled several carriages of hidden goods. I was instructed to sit in the carriage and observe.

One by one, he approached my previous colleagues.

“I offer you fifty thousand gold pieces to tutor my son, and get him into government,” he stated. I trembled. How could he have recited verbatim the words of the merchant? Who was the anonymous tipper? I pushed these questions away, faithful in the layers of intricate defence I had constructed.

All accepted the offer immediately, except for Li Jin and Li Zhun, the merchant’s sons, who refused no matter how far Judge Pao raised the price. One by one, Judge Pao promised to cart the sum of gold over next morning, along with the tutee.

The following day, a group of police officers arrived with each cart of gold. They were all arrested and charged with corruption.

Judge Pao addressed them in court. “It takes time and effort to change one’s character. You evidently demonstrated your moral depravity with how readily you accepted my offer. It will not be the first time you have committed such a reprehensible act. Your death penalty will be commuted to life in prison if you cooperate with further investigation.”

I did not pity them. The snivelling, grovelling lot had deserved it. One by one, however, they turned on me, saying that I had given them two thousand gold pieces for Li Zhun’s admission. I gasped in amazement. While I foresaw that Judge Pao would use their perfidy against me, I did not foresee that the merchant’s sons would not protect me.

Judge Pao addressed me, his demeanour leaden. “It’s a cruel world, Ren Yi. And so I must be ruthless with my judgement.”

I cut him off. “Listen to my story,” I said brusquely.

He went silent.

I told him my story. Harmonious music echoed in the chamber.

“This does not change anything.” Judge Pao said. “However.”

“The money you accept to provide a service reflects both your self-esteem and the quality of the service you provide. No person is a better judge of their worth than themselves. Your colleagues, they have condemned themselves. Your worth is reflected in the talented, incorruptible Li Zhuo.”

“Your wife will be given all your wealth and property. Your children are in good hands. Three years in exile. You choose.” He handed me the map. A large red circle extended from the capital.

The music faded into an unceasing rattle. The fruits of my labour had not lasted long, nor made any impression on the dull life I led.’

‘I chose Sichuan.’

The bottle landed firmly on the table with a resounding clap. Ren Yi thanked them for their hospitality, then ate.

The old couple chatted languorously.

‘So how was the barber?’ asked the blind woman.

The old man lent in, letting her finger-comb his hair. ‘You decide,’ he whispered.

‘Beautiful.’

They didn’t have much to talk about. They just sat there, content in each other’s company, eyes twinkling. The old man’s sighs floated onto her face.

‘It’s the moon, isn’t it?’ They laughed faintly.

She untied her hair-knot, letting all the strands loose. Closing their eyes, she basked proudly, eyelids aglow. Frayed tendrils of cloud-light reached towards her, offering a slice of the tear-streaked night sky.

Her husband fumbled for his pen. She whispered into his ear, a flowing chant. He coiled the wisps and strands around his pen, weaving words into starlit paper.

Ren Yi gazed upward from his maze, entranced. He saw his eyes in her, in the moon. He was blind. Pearly, lustrous. An ethereal thread refracted from the wet growth into the sunken hollow of his skull. He lunged skyward, kept lunging, grasped the moonbeams instinctively and climbed until he was on top of the clouds.

The old man swirled a circle into the paper. Everything stopped. But the colours that Ren Yi saw in the shades of grey persisted. He knew what eluded him.

The old woman smiled, turning to Ren Yi. ‘I think Judge Pao really is wise. I think you’ll like it a lot here.’

Ren Yi reflected. He had escaped. He began to appreciate the serene, picturesque environment, and now that he thought about it, he did appreciate his indistinctness. His only regret was that his wife and children couldn’t be with him. But one wish remained.

The old woman nodded knowingly. ‘What was your wife like?’

‘She was a poet.’

‘Describe her to me.’

‘Beautiful. Tender. No, not tender. Cheerful, sometimes. Loving, definitely. But she never quite seemed close.’ Ren Yi paused, finding himself once again in the maze.

‘Her feelings eluded me,’ he admitted. ‘I always lost myself in her.’

'You just lack a true connection to guide you. What was her usual appearance?'

'Stunningly beautiful. It's a pity you can't see her. Sad, perhaps. She pushed me away when I talked with her. I wish I'd gotten to know her better.'

'Close your eyes.' she said gently.

He closed his eyes.

'See me.'

He felt for her, holding her tight.

'Let go. Trust me.'

Their breaths mixed in the air. She stood up. They stood up, walking across the room to the window. His gait waned. She lifted him off, carried him sideways.

'Do you remember a poem that she wrote?'

Ren Yi murmured something, inaudible.

She understood.

'Make a poem about her.'

She placed him, softly, on the wooden bed, reciting the poems like a mantra. Under the subtle moonlight, the maze morphed into a mattress. She was everywhere. The moon fit into his eye, and he saw like the old woman. Back in the capital, his wife was gazing at the same moon.

'Do you see her?'

'Yes,' he breathed.

After the Water

Diocesan Girls' School, Cheung, Chung Miu Bethany – 15

(zero.)

The word *rose* has a triple meaning.

Naturally: the flower, crowned with thorns. The thorns stand for love, you tell yourself on your stronger days, and then the next day your skin catches, snags and tears but it does not hurt. You gauze your wounds with milk–white petals, drink them all off after. Red knits itself into the water flowing off your palms.

Then: the crimson break from the east, a crack in the shadow. In coherent thought you christen it light, seal it across your lips and hands and rinse afterward. But *rose* is a past tense. What this means is the shadow has sewn itself together again, and there is no more flickering lamp–light where a lover might stand.

There is a third meaning, one scrawled hastily on a piece of parchment and discarded in a moment of clarity. You cannot remember it, but it was red once, too.

In some sort of twisted logic, there are no roses, no orchids at your death, no petals you stuff into your mouth hastily and gargle on. There is only a set of scales, about to tip. You are at its edge; you feel a sense of déjà vu.

(one.)

Here is a lie: you die when you walk into the Miluo River, stone embedded in your sternum and colonies of seeds that are yet to sprout burrowed in your ribcage. See, you are hell–bent on bleeding yourself out.

You know, with your good and sound sense, that waters do not flow backwards: but when you die you are rolled back onto shore inexplicably, encrusted with pearl–like maggots and embalmed with mud and weeds, all in one piece and not quite anew. Mud weighs you down as you try to stand, and your sleeves are simply clogged with the vile stuff. When you cough you expel something that coats your fingers and seems somewhat visceral, viscous.

Your vision is amnesiac for a while; when it reawakens blinking in rapid succession succeeds only in bringing dry tears to your eyes, and yet what is before you does not wash away into the after(life). Instead your eyes weave a figure—yet it is said one’s mind’s eye cannot truly conceive, only place spectres of remembrance.

You do recall the backdrop he stands against: exactly where you stood at your death, the waters crashing into expanse as you stare straight ahead. Yet you do not recall the dark crescent branded into his forehead who flickers into view, nor his mouth, narrow and seemingly incapable of cracking into a smile.

But then again, you have not been alive too long, and mirages fool even the most experienced.

(two.)

Here is another lie: your death was a noble act, almost as honourable as a warrior’s. The fight for justice is as good as any other.

It is funny, however, how the people of your nation swallow the story so easily, like wine that swells on your tongue and warms in your stomach. It is funny how you dive into the river, stone–cold sober, believing this, and sink stone–cold. (It makes sense, because you in your sobriety were thought all but mad.)

“I don’t suppose it’d be prudent to ask who you are? I don’t think I could’ve known you,” you say, in the level tone that is expected of a court advisor, a man of wisdom, a rational cool–as–stream–water lover.

The man, a solitary shadow, clears his throat. "You'd be right. When I was alive— I was after your time, I believe. It doesn't matter now. We meet in entangled, clotted weeds, see? When I was alive they called me judge, and the one that cleansed." His eyes are bright, like blades that clash in battle.

Judge! Judge. It is funny how your blood freezes, your head drops as though you were truly a criminal, when you know in your heart you are—were—clean.

"And I am to be judged? I'd have thought I'd always been righteous. I tried to be. I tried to be, believe me. Why do you think I am here now?" Reeds bend by his feet as the wind whistles its mad-song. There is no matter in wind, no matter in song, yet if you infer—it screams your heart clean. You die singing. You die clean, clean, dirty. (There is something against harming even a single hair on your own body—)

He continues: "You were a poet, an advisor, were you not? You were a seer. Did you not seek to purge the filth we both saw, we both knew to be present? Here is the truth: you died bathing, you died ensuring you were never to be impure again." (You open your mouth to interject it—you realise your words have failed you again.) "Oh, you evolved yourself into a crystal. You have gone too far."

You want to ask what he means. You *wish* to deny. The problem, the joke: you know, exactly. He doesn't have to tell you.

What do judges do? They speak the highest truth.

What do the judged do? They listen.

(three.)

The wind is still high and blue, the light indeterminate. Stars fall from the sky like coins and you both recoil—not simultaneously, more in syncopation. The North Star hangs in the sky though, that you notice. You always had an eye for the North Star—how like the ruler you long for!—how like yourself. (Yet: unmoving. Unfalling.)

(Do you fall? Do stars fall? What's a fallen star?)

He tells you a story you know, that now you are told:

Once there was a king in a kingdom of madmen, there was a king who never went a-singing, or maybe he did, he did, he did. Once there was a king who drank from only the purest wells, refused anything else. Once there was a king, a fancy of a king, a king whose people dipped cupped hands into bubbling frothing lakes of mud and drank thirstily and with wild eyes saw nothing, and so they were to put his eyes out—see? (The people of newer years called this madness, but what's done is done.)

Once there was a kingdom of festering sanity. Once there was a king, the last insane one standing. Once there was a fancy of a king who never had to thirst for pure water again, and so he sang; for joy or for ecstasy?

And once in a different thread of time (perhaps it is now) there was a judge, who saw all. Once there was a judge branded with the unseen side of the moon, who scorned the sun for it seemed the glint of false-wielded gold, who could handcuff the sun and the sky and all its falling stars. Once there was a judge with a set of scales that never would tip—

Let us begin the story again.

There were a people who drank only from the purest wells, of water cracked directly from unblemished jade. The tragedy—for this story ends in death—is that it was a nation bound only by will and space, not time. Never time. (That is how tragedies go, isn't it? If they had only met, if threads in the fabric of time had somehow crossed, there would've been a tapestry harmonious.)

The king goes blind in the end of this story. The poet drowns himself for what the ages to come call love, what he calls a final act of cleansing. The judge? The judge tells this story. To the poet, no less. It's a bit of a twist of irony. Clean, clean, dirty.

(four.)

Time goes forward, only ever forward. This applies only to the real world, the before-death. The after-life is a topsy-turvy place, where judges are like kings and the most noble advisor a criminal—condemned for the act of immortality. (Immortality does not mean what you think it should mean: the rejection of mortality, or death, if you will.)

Perhaps the latter is true everywhere. The injustice strikes you. If you could fall yet further, you would.

Time goes forward. The judge knew you by name—he did, back when he was alive. Not personally, no, but friendships are made through ink, and so are scorns lashed through time.

He says to you again and again: *You have gone too far*. Courtrooms are overturn and judgements are made with flashing eyes and scales that do not tip. Criminals caught and corruptions cleared, and a judge standing (depths of burning light, you see?)

What this means is that you are dead, and he was not, and that makes all the difference.

You muse: *You are too far gone* is the more accurate description for someday—you, the figure—you who holds roses in his hand. What's done is done.

It drives you near-mad. That is what comes of gods, is it not? For you have heard—from where you know not—that judges are like gods, with their incorruptible purity. *Am I not then a god?* you ask, voice level like old, trodden land.

Oh, no, not if you die for it, comes the reply. Death is criminal, punishable by death. Death begets death begets death, and the cycle is all yours.

The difference between yourself and the judge, beloved by all: what with all your comparing yourself to a god your mortality swam through your words, and you scrubbed your hands with blood and salt-water. Dirt's hard to clean off, especially when it's just the scent of flowers, days-old, plucked straight from the ground. You bite your tongue and force your head underwater, lotus-fresh, and this is how you die.

(Yet—still a lie.)

(five.)

Once there was a pair of twins, who lived and breathed the same, who thirsted both for the same drink. They were seers both, and the rot in the world seemed only visible to the two.

The judge smites all equally, face of thunder and iron, and casts them away into fire that strips flesh from bone and leaves—sparkling skeletons. A fist on the table, a spat condemnation, a weeping man or yet a raging man or yet one who smirks still, though his sleeves are finally rid of the mud that weighs them down. Parchment clasped in that dark fist, a compass rose in red ink pointing firmly skyward. A sword pointing that very way.

One twin lived strong and true, spent his days on the battlefield flying forward. His sword would glint, shining in sunlight and in the night: the North Star itself adorned it. Up to the heavens he flies.

There is no mercy for the damned. Yet what are you?

You are: a man destroyed, dead. You are a man true and noble. You are condemned.

The other lived true, yet never strong. He spoke words that shrivelled and melted under their own weight, and instead of sparking he threw off the opalescence of cut jade. Yet even the most precious jade can be mistaken for base pebbles, and cast into rivers. (This cost a man his limbs, and so many others their lives.)

You are: a man who fought, but chose death.

(six.)

Enter the judge.

Enter the warrior.

Enter the demigod.

The punchline of this joke is that they are one and the same.

A thousand thousand years pass in a vacuum; the problem with the country is its love for gold, and the problem with the love for gold is that grabbing hands are grubby with fingernails caked red-brown, like those of squabbling little boys wrestling for a penny in the mud. The penny will only ever be a penny; easily spent on a painted spinning-top or less. (Spinning-tops spin themselves into bushes quickly enough, never to be retrieved.) Dirt stays under fingernails, which are notoriously hard to clean under.

In this way all men in this kingdom of frothing streams and rivers are created equal. (Why is the Yellow River named so? Because in its veins flow sand and grit with gilded dust sprinkled in as an afterword. One could sift through it and never find a thing but his own skull grinning.)

In this way the judge and poet see in syncopation, in want for purity.

The one fortune that has been bestowed on you is that you never had the foresight to destroy your visions completely. You extracted them—held them dear—wrote them down, brushstrokes strong enough to pierce bone and shake the foundation of a heart. The end result? As how judges have their cases dictated word for word, your visions live on.

“Would it be that you could have lived, that you had not cast your immortality into the fire and brimstone! You were a poet. You could have spoken even in your exile. There must have been one man only half-blind yet.” the judge muses, fist halfway down, eyes in a sad smile.

He isn't wrong. Yet: paper doesn't disintegrate that easily. You did not know this. It is possible you found this a lie. You did not get the glory of survival, after all, but your words had the honour of surviving you.

In this way songs are written about the two of you.

There really was never much difference between the two of you after all.

(seven.)

Let us begin the story again.

There were a people who drank only from the purest wells, of water cracked directly from unblemished jade. It was a nation bound only by will and space, not time. Never time, but the philosophers, now and before: what do they say? The bonds between a nation are built with ink and time that criss-cross, entangled weeds.

Paper doesn't disintegrate that easily. You did not know this. It is possible you found this a lie.

What you know now:

There is, really, not much judgement, no death or after-life, only remembrance.

You haven't been more alive.

When the Buzz of the Air Conditioner Stops

ESF Island School, Ng, Cyrus – 15

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Zhang and I laid back in our chairs.

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

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

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

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

“How so, if I may ask?”

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

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

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

To our surprise and relief, Agila simply smiled.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As the Judge walked through the hallway to another glassy room, the sound of the piano loudened. Yet, I could still hear the faint smushing of the Judge’s feet, like a piece of slime being dragged across the floor.

Then, I saw the origin of the piano sounds. In front of me was a man in exquisite silk pajamas, playing a slow, quiet requiem with his bony hands. As he turned, I could see that it was the same man that Roberto was talking to before his death—Mr. Thompson Jr.

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

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

The Judge croaked, "Confess."

Mr. Thompson Jr. exclaimed, "I don't understand what you are talking—"

"The murder!" the Judge boomed as he marched forward.

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

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

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

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

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

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

I looked down at my hand. A hard drive.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“So what is the jury’s decision?”

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

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

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

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

Suddenly, a notification sounded.

We all received an email:

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

Sincerely,

Mr. Thompson Jr.”

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

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

“This is why I chose you.”

“They all left; what can I do?”

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

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

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

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

New Tales of Judge Pao – Labyrinth of Red Tape

ESF Island School, Palshetkar, Vaibhavi – 15

Thousands of portraits plaster the wall – and that’s how I know I’m where I’m meant to be. Each portrait points to one thing up ahead: an ominous door. One door, and I have access to everyone’s deeds, good or bad. Each step forward and the door continues to tower over me. Its maroon sheen echoes origins of wealth.

I reach out and grasp the intricate golden knob, feeling a chill run down my spine. In a single breath, I twist the knob and the door opens with a prolonged creak. The room behind it is a vast library, filled from floor to ceiling with books that contain the secrets of everyone’s fate. I take a step forward and the door slams shut behind me, the sound echoing through the endless rows of books. I’m here. The Infernal Bureaucracy.

It’s not immediately noticeable, but there’s a wooden desk in the centre of the large room. There is a figure, almost lost among the towering piles of books surrounding them. As I approach the figure, the smell of the books becomes stronger. The older ones are mustier, most likely containing the darkest of history’s secrets. The figure ruminates visibly, lost most likely in their administrative work. It’s a powerful moment, one that I won’t soon forget.

“Welcome to the Infernal Bureaucracy,” the cloaked figure groans.

“I’m here for Case F41R,” I reply, my voice cracking slightly at ‘for.’

“Please proceed to the second door on your right. May justice prevail forevermore.”

The figure returns to their activities with a renewed vigour, seemingly undiscouraged by my interruption. I took a few moments to observe the surroundings, taking in the details of the room and the atmosphere. I jot down some notes in my notebook, taking my time to ensure that I wouldn’t miss any important details. After a few moments, I was ready to move on and continue my journey toward the previously mentioned part of the Bureaucracy.

The room is much less spectacular than I had originally envisioned. Books are strewn about the room, while the lights flicker every thirty seconds or so. Another desk, this one smaller than the one with the focused figure back in the bigger room, is tucked away in the corner. Two people are speaking in hushed and calm tones, yet the standing figure seems to be quite nervous and uneasy. It’s likely that this person is a secretary or an intern of some kind.

“—ure to make a copy of the transcript from Case L4W3. Also make sure no documents are compromised when the—”

That’s when I’m noticed. I quickly attempt to retrieve my pen from my pockets so as to not miss a single moment of today’s events. I can feel the tension in the air, as if something major is about to happen. But what if it doesn’t? What if the Bureaucracy calmly and logically tells me what I need, and I can’t find anything? All I can do is watch and wait as the two people wrap up their conversation.

“Ah, welcome to the Infernal Bureaucracy: Administrative Division. I presume you must be here for Case F41R,” a woman speaks calmly. “Your business is primarily concerned with the Administrative and Operations Division. The first part of your time here will be with me. Please, take a seat. Hán, you may take your leave.”

‘Hán’ promptly makes his way out of the room. We are left alone amongst the scattered books and flickering lights.

I’m not given a chance to respond nor speak. I hasten to take a seat across from the figure and look around the room. The messy nature of the room is juxtaposed by the clutter-free desk. I assume this isn’t a

regularly used office, and that special arrangements have been made for my arrival. I jot down a few bullet points. My hands are starting to sweat. I can feel the anticipation in the air, and my heart starts to race as I ponder what kind of information will be unveiled to me.

“I would like some information about your most renowned Yama: Bao Zheng. Though his passing occurred centuries ago, it was only recently unveiled that his spirit was no longer present at the Bureaucracy. What occurred, and what measures are being taken to preserve his legacy?”

My pen slips millimetre by millimetre every second, threatening to make an embarrassing plunge toward the floor.

The woman, now sitting directly across from me, inhales and starts.

“Bao Zheng is the Infernal Bureaucracy’s most distinguished member. This was not only because he was one of very few people that could freely morph between a spiritual form in the Bureaucracy, and a physical one in the mortal plain. He was known by many a name, but there was only one thing he was truly known for: his steadfast and unyielding sense of justice. With his departure, we have lost an integral part of the Bureaucracy.”

“What abo—,” I inquire, wanting to know about the important details rather than an exposition to Judge Pao’s innumerable feats.

“Patience. You will receive your answers in due time. If you want to report well on Case F41R, you want all the details alongside the Bureaucracy’s perspective.”

“Bao Zheng, known as Judge Pao at the Infernal Bureaucracy, worked here for most of his life. He continued to advise many of us, including me, after his death. We infer that his spirit was ‘shifted’ by the work of his guardian deity who believed that he had contributed enough to the world both during and after his life. All who work at the Infernal Bureaucracy have this guardian deity to watch over them and help them to carry out their own ‘shifts’. Though it has been some time, Judge Pao remains an enigmatic but illustrious figure amongst all of us. Indeed, it is as you have guessed. The Bureaucracy makes their deductions based on the most likely course of events, but the true cause of Judge Pao’s ‘shift’ remains unknown.”

I hastily attempt to write down the woman’s words, but the shakiness of my hands leads to less than professional handwriting on the paper. I have no time at all to interject – but I don’t need to. This woman has me read like a book.

“As things stand, your presence here remains an integral part of our preservation efforts of Judge Pao’s legacy. Alongside your efforts, we hope to immortalise his legacy via the assembly of various monuments in his honour. Those who have recently joined us will also be informed about Judge Pao and his contributions to the Bureaucracy. I believe that should answer all your questions, yes?”

The woman spoke far too quickly, and I couldn't keep up with the information she was providing about Judge Pao. I felt my mind spinning, trying to process all the information being thrown my way. I couldn't help but wonder how the public would react to this news. All the information was fuel to the fire of my curiosity. Soon, I could feel my hand beginning to ache, as if my body was trying to tell me something.

“Yes, that is all the information I needed answered by the Administrative Division. I would like to promptly travel to the Operations Division. I thank you for your assistance in the compilation of Case F41R. Have a nice day.”

The woman and I bid goodbye, and I fiddle with my pen. As if that was going to help with the issue I now face: the beginning of “it.”

The last stop for today: the Operations Division.

I make my way through the crowded room, my eyes darting around to take in the sights before me; the numerous booths, the busybodies, the stamping and the eloquence. Finally, I reach a booth at the far end of the room. Sitting behind it was a figure, their face illuminated by the dim yellow light of the desk lamp.

"Welcome to the Operations Division of the Infernal Bureaucracy," the figure said, their voice calm and steady.

I took a deep breath and brace myself, steeling my nerves as I ready myself to see firsthand what I had been so curious about ever since I was summoned to this place. I have no idea what to expect, but I was determined to find out.

"I'm here for Case F41R," I said, my voice quivering slightly.

"Please make your way toward the room at the back. You'll find two of our numerous 'interests' there. May justice prevail forevermore."

The room 'at the back' was eerily similar to an interrogation room. Ominous and stuffy, it was nothing like the small booths at the front. If 'judgement' occurs here, then what happens at the front?

Two figures – a girl in her twenties, and an old man – walk in.

The girl and the old man both take their seats.

"Both of you are here to tell your stories, as mentioned in the contract you signed. Jackson Powell and Jasmine Li, your fates were found to be closely intertwined in the records of the main room. This is an interesting case, and needed for the project known as Case F41R... also known as Labyrinth of Red Tape."

The man pauses, his eyes slowly scanning the room. The girl breathes deeply before she begins.

"Mr. Powell taught at a school close to where I used to live. He taught me English, and made it quite fun! He gave me an English name: Jasmine."

The old man takes a deep breath before speaking.

"I was her teacher, and I found her determination and eagerness to learn inspiring. I was more than happy to help her in any way I could. In return, she taught me how to speak Chinese and opened my eyes to a new culture," Mr. Powell claims.

"He really was the best teacher. I couldn't have asked for a better mentor," Jasmine says fondly.

The two of them share a brief smile, before continuing on with their story.

Mr. Powell pauses for a moment before continuing. "When I was younger, I fought in the Opium War. I fought for my country and for my people, and I saw many of my friends and comrades pass away. I wanted to leave all of... that... behind. I saw a man... die in front of my eyes. He was shot right in the skull. He spoke words that haunt me to this day: 'Don't take her away too. Please.' It was there that I resolved to nurture those of the future rather than slaughter those of the past. And so, I moved to Hong Kong to turn over a new leaf."

"Mr. Powell was like a father figure to me. My mother raised me, but she died of pneumonia when I was about 5 years old. I'm honestly unsure how I managed to stay alive until Mr. Powell found me and arranged some modest housing near the school. Due to my unfortunate circumstances, I think I adopted a mature approach to life very quickly. Mr. Powell was integral in this. He taught me a lot about the world, people, and what the future could look like."

I continue to listen intently, jotting down anything crucial. “You two are now in the Infernal Bureaucracy, meaning that you have... died. Could you elaborate on the course of events that led to this?”

Jasmine’s face falls from a wide-eyed grin to a sombre frown. “Well... we were s-shot,” she stutters, looking at Mr. Powell. “While I never went to school, Mr. Powell’s kindness had left me with ambitions. I wanted to follow in his footsteps,” Jasmine now doesn’t look at anyone, instead opting to look down at her fiddling fingers. “I went around Hong Kong Island looking for children like me. This was voluntary, and my primary occupation was working in a factory. Like many deaths, it was a situation of the wrong place, at the wrong time. I remember feeling... numb. And the last thing I saw were hundreds of soldiers storming the streets.”

"I see. Well, Jasmine, I would like to thank you for your time. You may leave now. I have some additional matters to discuss with Mr. Powell," I spoke calmly, but I could feel my heart rate slowing.

“Thank you,” Jasmine mutters as she hastily leaves the dark and depressing room.

I wait to ensure that Jasmine is out of earshot before turning to Mr. Powell, “I read your file. Why not tell me what you didn’t want to say in front of her?”

I was bluffing, but I didn't expect it to work. In reality, my access to the files was severely restricted by the Bureaucracy, and my actions here are being carefully monitored.

Mr. Powell takes a deep breath before speaking. His voice is barely a whisper.

"I'm no hero. I was a deserter. I ran away from the war, leaving my comrades behind. It was a miracle that I wasn't caught. That man... he looked like Jasmine. The same soulful eyes, the same hair – there can be no mistake. And I—I... killed him. It wasn't an accident. He was simply walking a few metres away... and my comrades dared me to... shoot him down. His face was so pale and he fell to the ground with a thud and then everyone trampled over his body and I couldn't move. I can't ever forget those words, no matter how much I wanted to."

He pauses, his eyes distant and unfocused.

"When I saw Jasmine... I saw *him* in her. The same dark brown hair, and the same eyes. I thought that I might be able to... make up for what I did. So I took her in."

This was tragic, but far from the most tragic I had heard. “What about your death? I assume it was around the same time as Ms. Jasmine’s.”

“Yes. I was found and shot. To desert is to be branded a traitor, and I was shot right in front of the school. I deserved it. For deserting my comrades, and killing that innocent man. I tried to redeem myself, but it was clear that the compensation for taking a life involved giving my own. I was an old man, it was time for me to go anyway. I’m thankful I got to raise a bright girl like her. Her father would be proud.”

He looks up at me, his eyes clear and determined.

“And now I’m here. My judgement is impending, and I will accept whatever judgement they decide to pass. I will honour it, and hope that justice will prevail.”

He stands, his posture straight and confident.

"I hope you won't tell Jasmine. Please let her leave the Bureaucracy happily...Goodbye."

I watch him leave, his arched back as straight as it could be, proud despite the circumstances. I take a few moments to take in the scene before me, allowing the gravity of the situation to fully sink in. I take a few deep breaths before getting to work, jotting down the key points of my conversation with Mr. Powell in my notebook.

I take a deep breath and steel myself. I have a job to do, and I must not let my emotions get in the way. I pack up my things and make my way out of the room and the Infernal Bureaucracy, feeling oddly optimistic despite the tragedy of the situation.

“The Infernal Bureaucracy is a powerful force that works to ensure that souls transition through the afterlife in an orderly manner, known as the ‘shift.’ But Ms. Jasmine Li and Mr. Jackson Powell’s stories serve to demonstrate that life is not so cut and dry, with only ‘black’ and ‘white’ distinctions. Their lives, as well as the lives of all souls beyond the mortal realm, are complex and intricate, like a labyrinth – one with no definitive path but rather, multiple paths which lead to different destinations. It is our task to recognize, appreciate and accept the nuances of life, and to understand that life is never truly binary. Life is the experience that prepares one for confronting the Infernal Bureaucracy: a Labyrinth of Red Tape..”

“I will now open the floor to any questions,” I look up and smile while simultaneously closing the book. The title ‘Labyrinth of Red Tape’ is written in gold, holographic lettering on the cover.

New Tales of Judge Pao – A Shattered Mentorship

ESF Island School, Tam, Karen – 14

Hefei, Luzhou

“A murder?”

The man paced the palace floor. His expression was far from joyous, his dark eyebrows furrowed. Above them was a distinct crescent scar etched into his skin.

“Yes sir, in the jail cell. Originally, we thought it was a suicide, but after further investigation it appears we were wrong. It seems that Ji Tong’s cause of death was poison.”, the male voice said beside him.

Hearing this, the man buried his head in his hands, stopping in his tracks. In a rare occurrence— Judge Pao seemed to be at a loss.

“Gongsun Ce, you are one of the most intelligent people I’ve met. As my advisor, what do you think I should do?”

Gongsun shook his head. “That is not up to me sir, it is a matter you must decide for yourself. I am merely here to aid your decisions, not to sway them entirely.”

After a restless sleep last night, Pao’s mind was plentifully occupied with things to think about during the day. But this sudden disruption in the case had halted everything else. Although Judge Pao was familiar with the reality of crime— something about this particular one struck him. Originally, Ji Tong was arrested on the charges of illegally manufacturing copper coins. Even when there was plenty of evidence provided, motivation was absent. The Tong family was incredibly wealthy and Ji Tong was already in a high-ranking position. Now, not only was this a murder, but after thousands of hours dwelling over evidence it was decided yesterday that he was innocent all along. For him to have died in the jail— let alone be murdered hours after such a verdict. No, this simply couldn’t go unpunished. Pao would get to this right away.

The magistrate began to try and recall the details of Ji Tong’s case. He had known Ji Tong prior to his conviction. Not only was he seen as a well-respected man, but he was a high ranking official in the government. He had even mentored a man named Renshu, someone considered bright and charming. Pao had met Renshu once in passing, and the man had so much charisma and passion for what he had learnt from his mentor.

Pao wondered how Renshu was coping now. To not only have your father figure locked away, but now murdered. A silent condolence went out to him. Judge Pao was no stranger to grief as he had encountered it so much, now all too familiar with the stricken pain it brings someone. Yesterday, he had only just told Renshu that Ji Tong was officially deemed innocent. How would he be able to break the news to him now that he was dead? He made a silent reminder to tell Gongce to break the news to him later on today.

Hours passed. It was now midday and Pao was buried in newfound information. He had discovered more intriguing evidence after interviewing the guard who was on shift at the time. Turns out, he hadn’t been on shift. The man had nervously explained to Pao that just before he was about to serve Ji Tong his meal, but was interrupted by a strange man rushing to his aid, assuring him he was there to take over. Weary after a long night, on shift, he had happily obliged, and couldn’t recall anything about the man’s face. Through the guard’s regulated tone of voice, it was clear that albeit very apologetic and frantic, the man was telling the truth. However, his lies would have never been able to slip past the magistrate if any fool was brave enough to lie to Pao’s face. He was too famous for his intelligence, able to pick up on the minute details of a person’s actions.

If that was the case, how did the poison get in? There was no poison in the food. This newfound evidence left Pao in a stump. He felt like he was back to square one, investigating Ji Tong's case all over again. The gears in Pao's mind clicked and whirred, a cognitive machine that had been running back and forth with the evidence and knowledge he'd gathered so far. Who could've possibly murdered him? Ji Tong was already in jail, did the murderer know he was going to be getting out? These new questions wracked Pao's brain as he contemplated carefully, stroking his beard. He felt so close to the key to the mystery...so close. What was he missing?

As Pao tried to shake away these thoughts with a dismissive wave of his hand, he remembered something strange. Yesterday, when Renshu found out about Ji Tong's innocence, something was amiss. Sure, Gongce didn't catch it— any other person would've easily missed it— but the observant judge had a keen eye. He had noticed a flash of disappointment spark in Renshu's eyes at the news. Wait, that wasn't right. It hadn't been disappointment, nor distress...

It had been anger.

In almost perfect timing, Gongce rushed in. Although he entered the room in such a frantic manner, his expression seemed grave.

"What's wrong?" Pao arose from where he had sat, staring quizzically at Gongce. It was an unusual sight for Pao to see his advisor act in such a distressed manner. He was so accustomed to seeing the man always calm and composed by his side.

"It was Renshu."

Pao felt his blood run cold.

"How can you be so certain?"

"I assure you sir; you'll believe it was him after I tell you what I just heard."

—

"You're certain no one was there?"

"Yes, certain."

After Pao's request for him to break the news to Renshu, Gongce wasn't looking forward to it at all. In fact, he had managed to waste a couple hours already, trying to delay this moment for as long as he could. But as he mindlessly wandered around, he realised he had to break the news eventually. Renshu deserved to know the truth. Although he had only met the bright man once, Gongce saw a bit of himself in him. They both shared an immense interest in traditional Chinese medicine, and Gongce even believed that Renshu had what it takes to take over Ji tong's position if he passed. Finally commencing his search for Renshu, he began to pick up his pace.

Gongce had only been walking past the pavilion in passing, but abruptly stopped in his tracks at the sight of two people chatting in deep conversation. Looking at them, he wasn't surprised that they were out here. The weather was perfect for such an occasion. No, what caught him off guard was hearing such a familiar voice. Wait— was that Renshu?

Gongce was about to stride in and whisk Renshu aside to tell him the unfortunate news, but caught himself. He seemed so happy right now, he should at least let him finish talking to the man first. What struck him as odd however, was just how happy he was. Sure, he didn't know yet that Ji Tong had passed, but he had expected him to look at the very least slightly forlorn. He was lucky that the two men were in such deep conversation, for if not he would have been caught after standing there for so long. Ducking behind a pillar, he continued to listen in.

“So, how did you do it?” The man from across Renshu leaned forward in inquisition. The two seemed to be sharing some tea together, and seeing Renshu’s boastful expression, and the two of them raising their glasses in a small cheer, it was almost as if they were celebrating.

“Oh, nothing too special. The guard was tired anyway. I posed as a guard coming to take over his shift and he couldn’t look any less pleased. When Ji Tong saw me, all I did was offer to give him his meal before I let him free. It delights me that my practice with herbs finally came into fruition.” The unknown man glanced around apprehensively. “We shouldn’t discuss this in public,” he muttered, “Someone is bound to hear. Let us continue this conversation elsewhere.”

Nodding in agreement, the two of them arose from their seats, and walked away, leaving a shocked Gongce behind the pillar. Shaking himself out of his disbelief, he hurried back to break his discovery to Judge Pao.

After hearing Gongce recount what he had witnessed, Pao knew they had to act on this right away. “We’ll put pressure on Renshu and get to the bottom of this. Justice will be served.”, the magistrate declared. The two of them both left the room at once, going around to spread the news that a courtroom trial would commence this afternoon.

Judge Pao had sat in this very courtroom possibly hundreds of times. Some places lose their splendour as one ages but after decades of court cases –both in the living world and under world– Pao had never once considered swapping into a different line of profession. It was up to him to bring light to crime, and to deliver justice to the world, and his name certainly was no stranger to the people that gathered in the courtroom today. He continued to drum his weathered fingers on the throne’s armrest rhythmically, a nod to the years that have taken a toll on him. And yet as the years passed, Judge Pao was never reckoned as anything but fearless.

And there he was, the suspect himself. Renshu was absentmindedly fiddling with his clothes, humming a faint melody. If he was nervous, the man certainly wasn’t showing it.

“Mr Gongsun overheard a conversation earlier today. I understand you two are both familiar with traditional Chinese medicine, am I correct?”

“Your excellency, you are indeed correct. Being under Ji Tong’s mentorship, he not only taught me many important lessons, but also allowed me to divulge my interest into medicine. It shocked me to the bone to hear of his death, and I’m sure you’d understand that I much rather be at the comfort of my home to mourn the loss of someone who I respected so greatly.”

“Neither Gongce nor I disclosed Ji Tong’s death to you, how did you find out?”

“Whispers on the street spread quickly your excellency, I found out quite early on in the day.”

From this quick-witted response alone, Pao realised Renshu was no fool. Nothing in his voice or body language gave away a single trace of guilt. The young man exuded confidence, as he stood alone right in front of him. The crowd began to murmur words of agreement. It was clear that this man’s charm on the audience had already begun to work.

“Let me be frank. A guard earlier on today spoke of a mysterious man, and approached me saying that the man had deceived him, claiming to be a guard taking over his shift. You have no alibi for that time of the day, and your conversation from today was overheard by Gongce. Your lies are up.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about!” Renshu declared. Although his voice seemed controlled at first, there was a wavering hint of uncertainty in the way he spoke.

Yet it still was a solid and applaudable performance. Most parties would have fallen for such theatrics, but after many years Judge Pao was no fool to a performative act like this one. His eyes remained locked steely on the man, noticing that although his stature seemed confident, Renshu's eyes had a hint of fear.

"But you do. Renshu, you are suspected of murder. According to the law, you'll be sentenced to a life of imprisonment. This isn't something that I will easily let you try to deny."

He knew just the right words to say. When to apply pressure, when to not. When the most minor actions could break a person's entire testimony they so heavily relied on. Pao could execute such miniscule details with ease. This was his life's calling. Noticing Judge Pao was no fool, beads of sweat began to trickle down his neck. The magistrate's foreboding tone had worked, as Renshu grew more agitated by the passing second, keeping his eyes lowered to the ground. The act he had held of him being an innocent man was shattered, and he knew that.

"But-But I don't understand," from the corner of the courtroom, the guard who Pao had listened to earlier that day spoke up from the crowd, stammering out his words. "There wasn't any poison in Ji Tong's food or drink, I checked. How could he have gotten away with this?"

The whirring gears finally clicked in Pao's head. "The cup," he said, realisation dawning on him. "The poison was on the rim of the cup itself, not the drink." For a moment, he could see Renshu's face from an image of false pretence to a glimpse of begrudging respect, almost as if he admired how quickly the magistrate had managed to align the dots. "Guards, send him away. Keep him there until further trial." Pao declared. Two men grabbed Renshu by the arms amidst his babbling protests, and dragged him away.

As he had promised earlier, justice had been served. The arduous investigation was finally complete now. Although Pao had done cases like these for decades, he couldn't help but let out a sigh of content relief. Once again, justice had triumphed against all odds.

As he closed his eyes exhaling in relief, a voice interrupted him. "Sir..."

Pao opened an eye, glancing over to Gongce. "Yes?"

"It appears you've forgotten... you still have a case to judge..."

"Where?"

"The underworld."

He let out a sigh of exhaustion, getting up to his feet. It appears justice hadn't been completely served just yet.

Long Before

ESF Island School, Wong, Jemie – 14

Picture this.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"But –"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Yes, there it is, barely perceptible:

The promise of being found.

A minute passes. Two.

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

A girl.

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

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

She makes up her mind then.

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

She blinks, and the years fall away like leaves.

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

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

Picture this.

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

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

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

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

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

Yet Wu Miaozen beams. "Of course."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Picture this.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You will?"

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

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

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

And he wouldn't become like his father.

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

"I will," Bao Zheng vows.

For the children. For the old man.

For his sister-in-law mother.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And he means it, because Wu Miaozen smiles.

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

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

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

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

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

Would it be worth it?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Slow and soft and serene.

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

Bao Zheng grasps a breath in.

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

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

The story of a baby left screaming...

And the girl who found him.

The Common People

ESF King George V School, Chan, Valerie – 14

For deities, time passes differently.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

For deities, time passes differently.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As a heavy curtain of darkness falls upon the sky, he looks upon the sloping mountains, the still waters that surround his place of judgement; the three glittering scythes hanging upon the wall, dangling by their

handles — a golden dragon, a silver tiger, a bronze hound. He looks upon the Tower of Remembrance, standing tall.

The tower, he thinks, a smile flitting across his face. A rare moment where he allowed himself to act on his sympathy to the people. They had cried and pleaded, and he had tried to uphold his austere façade in front of his fellow lords, but he had felt their longing as if it were his own. He had tried. But in the end, he conceded, anyway, and called for the construction of a tower for discontent spirits to see their home one last time.

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

For deities, time passes differently.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

For deities, time passes differently.

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

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

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

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

My Ah-Yi.

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

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

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

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

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

“My son.”

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

Pao-gong,

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

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

“My son, why?”

Have my prayers gone unanswered?

For deities, time passes differently.

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

One can turn to the future.

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

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

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

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

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

"It says here that he disowns any descendants who committed bribery," the girl says, "and we all know that you paid the school to get in, Yue-me. You're good at nothing."

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

What have they become?

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Even if I'm a girl?"

"Even if you're a girl."

For deities, time passes differently.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“It never stops hurting.”

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

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

For deities, time passes differently.

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

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

“Young man, what is this place?”

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

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

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

“And what name does he go by?”

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

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

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

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

The Pao Ancestral Shrine

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Thank you, sir.”

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

Regret seems to follow him like persistent shadows.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Thank you. I’m proud of you.

The Lessons I've Learnt

ESF King George V School, Zhao, Rou – 15

Hell, 2024

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“It’s not like that.” He says.

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

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

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

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

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

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

But a little girl dies on the next bed over.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The boy-God shakes his head furiously.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Judge Pao

ESF Sha Tin College, Lai, Hei Yiu Justin – 15

Many years later, as he faced the executioner, staring at his eyes as the axe rose higher and higher, Liu Yun remembered that distant morning when he first met Pao Zheng.

438 days before

At that time, China had been rife with corruption and greed. The rich glut themselves with money and power, while the poor struggled and clawed for every piece of food they could get. Nobody did anything about it. It was just the way things were. The police and the judges would turn on a blind eye on whoever was rich; as long as they had money, they did nothing wrong. The poor, on the other hand... if you breathed so much in the wrong direction, you would get beaten, fined, arrested, or executed.

People were not born equal. That was the hard truth that Yun learned as a child.

Yun grew up in the slums of China. He lived with his bedridden mother, and his only source of entertainment was a broken chess set he played with by himself. Yun had always had a small and frail body; as a child he could barely walk a mile without falling over, and was constantly beaten by other children because he was so weak. A man named Wang used to take care of his mother, and since Yun was still a child, Wang taught him how to live in the slums. Yun first experienced violence at the age of 5. He had witnessed Wang killing people for a job, and after it, was rewarded 20 dollars for it. With the money he gained that day, Wang bought Yun a new chess set, and thus, Yun learned the benefits of violence.

The day Yun met Pao Zheng, it was early in the morning, and rain was dribbling down slowly and gently from the sky. Yun's face was a bloody pulp; one of his eyes was swollen, and his nose was bleeding and broken. His ribs were broken, and he had to limp his way through the streets, blood still dripping from his face. Despite this, however, his face bore little signs of pain. Instead, his eyes were empty and hollow, full of anguish and sorrow and suffering. The eyes of a person who had given up on life.

Yun trudged to an alley, dragging his legs on the floor, near collapsing with exhaustion. His father had died a few months ago, and Yun had just sold his father's possessions to try and get enough money for today. However, the person he had sold the possessions to had given him an outrageously small amount of money, barely enough to last one meal. When he had tried to protest, he had gotten beaten close to death, and had received nothing, not even the tiny sum the man had offered.

He had considered killing the man. He had wanted to. He was still thinking about it. But before he could gather his confidence and do it, another man walked into the narrow alley he had collapsed in.

This man was dark skinned (which was uncommon in China) and extremely ugly, with a white crescent shaped birthmark on his forehead. Despite his appearance, however, he looked like a man with power, walking with a confidence gait, with a shapeless hat and clothes of a scholar.

The man advanced upon Yun's collapsed body.

"..."

"What do you want," Yun muttered. Not a question.

The man introduced himself as Pao Zheng, a judge and politician. He then spoke in a deep, gentle voice. "Do you mind telling me what happened?"

Yun blinked. Was this man mocking him? Although Zheng's face remained sincere, he couldn't tell. Why would anyone care enough to show him compassion? Yun was pretty certain that even his own family wouldn't stop to help him. After all, this world was a merciless one. You would be left behind if you couldn't keep up.

However, Yun saw no harm in answering him. So he told Zheng about what happened in short sentences. Yun didn't try to hide his hostility, but despite this, Zheng refused to leave, and listened to his story without interrupting once.

Afterwards, Zheng had just smiled again and gave him some money for his trouble, thanked him, then left. The rain pattered softly in his wake.

Yun fell unconscious in a pool of rainwater and blood.

245 days before

Yun began running into Zheng more frequently, which soon resulted in him meeting Zheng regularly, and thus becoming close friends. He would visit him while Zheng was with his parents, and have long conversations with him. The topic would change as quickly as the weather, floating from inequality to corruption to justice. Most of the time, it would be Yun talking, while Zheng would listen.

Yun enjoyed the conversations. Zheng didn't bother with status and power when they were together, and it gave Yun a breath of fresh air compared to his usual life. The conversations weren't meaningful, and were just a way for two idle young men to pass the time. Yun often forgot about the conversations soon after, and he had no doubt Zheng did as well.

There was only one exception, which was when Yun had asked Zheng what a "better world" meant to him.

"What did you mean when you told me you wished for a better world?" Yun had asked. "What does a better world mean to you?"

Zheng had thought about it for a while, twirling a pen in his hand while he thought. "What do you think?"

Yun didn't have to think about it before he answered. "A world without greed and corruption. A world where peasants can live alongside emperors."

Zheng had just smiled, and changed the topic. But even after Yun's visit had ended, and he had left Zheng's house, the conversation still remained in his head, and many weeks later, he still wondered if his answer was "right", as well as wonder what Zheng would have said if he didn't change the topic of the conversation.

98 days before

But over time, despite how much time they had spent together, Yun and Zheng began to grow further and further apart. Yun started visiting Zheng less and less, until he just stopped meeting with him altogether.

And it was probably a coincidence, but around the time Yun stopped visiting Zheng, he began sinking deeper and deeper into depression. He sank so far down that he believed he would never be able to climb out again.

It felt like he was underwater. He could see the surface, but he couldn't swim back up. He was trapped, he was drowning, he was *dying*. His thoughts suffocated him, and he could barely breathe because of it. They wrapped around him like a second skin, embracing him, but also slowly breaking and shredding him apart, draining the life out of him.

He was dying.

And this time, he knew that Zheng, or anyone else, would not be able to pull him out of this. No one would be able to save him.

So he let his dark thoughts keep him company, even as he slowly suffered everyday for it. Even as he sometimes felt as if he could choke on his own thoughts. Even as he felt as if he was being torn apart.

39 days before

Yun stared down at his hands. Warm and bloody. And on the floor... even more blood lay there. Next to a body. Had... had he done this? Had he killed someone?

Oh gods, he had to get out. Guilt, whole and overwhelming, began to flood into him. He couldn't remember why he was here. He couldn't even remember or recognize the person on the floor in front of him, or why he had killed a man.

Yun began muttering to himself tearfully. He had witnessed murders and violence before from his childhood, and he had thought about killing before, but he had never actually killed someone before. Never shoved a knife through someone's gut and watched as their entrails spilled out of their stomach. Never... The man's life was in his bloody hands. Yun put a hand over his mouth as his breakfast threatened to come back out.

He had to get out of there.

27 days before

"Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all", wasn't it? But how could this be true? Yun was fine before. He had built himself a small world for himself, his only company being himself. He hadn't loved anyone then, and he was fine. But then he got careless, and Zheng slipped through the cracks of his world, and their paths had collided. And Yun had enjoyed being with Zheng, and enjoyed their conversations together, and enjoyed their time together. He had found joy in his company.

And now, he had lost Zheng, and look what happened. Someone was dead because of it.

Only now did Yun realise he had been under-appreciative of their time together. Only now did Yun realise how precious their connection was. But it was too late. He had let Zheng go. And now... now that he was hiding in his tiny house with the worn down walls and broken doors, with the darkness squatting next to him, he wished he never loved at all.

14 days before

This had to be some sort of sick, cruel joke from the gods.

The police had already found the body, and were after him. Yun wasn't surprised by this. Afterall, he hadn't even bothered to hide the body. But the thing that had surprised him was that Zheng was the one that was after him. He had heard of this when he passed a small town.

Rumours were already passing by that a man had been murdered, and soon he heard whispers that China's best judge, Pao Zheng, was out to get the murderer.

It made him want to scream. It made him want to scream and cry and rage. As if him killing someone wasn't enough for them, the gods now thought it would be funny to send Zheng to hunt him down like a rat.

Of all the judges, why him? Literally anyone else would have been fine. He could have turned himself in, and ended his suffering and given the dead man closure. But now that the judge was Zheng... how could Yun face him after spouting all that rubbish about justice, and then committing one of the worst crimes known to mankind?

Yun had always known he was a stain on the Earth. Filth. Had known since he was a child.

He just wished Zheng wouldn't have to know.

11 days before

He had tried killing himself that morning.

Had strung a rope around his neck and jumped. It hadn't worked, and had only left him bruised and in pain, but not dead.

Yun had never felt more humiliated, more in shame, then at that moment. It had felt to him as if heaven or hell didn't want him. Were humans, gods, and devils alike rejecting him, or did they just not care enough to acknowledge him?

He didn't know which was worse.

2 days before

Zheng had found him. The police rushed into the little hut he was hiding in and knocked him out. When he had woken up, he was being dragged along by a group of men. In the lead was Zheng.

Yun refused to look Zheng in the eye. It was as if the months they had spent together had disappeared, vanished into the wind, and now they were just strangers. A judge and a criminal. That's all they were.

"It's my fault," Yun told himself. It was, after all. If he just hadn't killed the man, things would have been fine. He wouldn't have to run around like a mouse, pissing himself at the first sign of danger. He wouldn't be dragged around by the police like a dog. Yet Yun couldn't help but feel angry at Zheng. It was completely irrational, he knew. Zheng had nothing to do with it.

What did it matter, anyways? He was about to be executed. Then, he wouldn't have to worry or think about anything else.

Right from the very beginning, Yun had been lonely and alone. How fitting it was now that he would die alone.

Maybe dying wouldn't be so bad.

The day

The axe fell.

Blood sprayed. Yun's head thumped down on the ground.

Cold and lifeless, his body to be eaten by rats and insects.

His story was over.

The day after

For hours, Zheng knelt in front of the axe. As if he might stay with him, Yun, for a little longer.

"I would have liked to have seen it," Zheng said quietly. "The world you wanted. Just once."

The wind blew gently across his face, the grass beneath his feet rustling quietly.

And even with the darkness and death squatting on the field, he could picture it – the vibrant green that flowed to a flowing blue sea. A shining city along its shore. A city free of corruption and greed and selfishness. He could hear the laughter of the children playing in the streets, the music of his people floating on the wind. A city, lush and evergreen.

"I would have liked to have seen it," Zheng whispered again.

And far away, across the snow covered mountains, on a barren plain before the axe, a flower began to bloom.

Disconnected

German Swiss International School, Wong, Madeleine – 15

December 10, 2023

Oriental Hotel, The Grand Suite

At six in the morning Judge Pao heard a light thud outside the door. Recovering a crisp copy of *Pacific Times*, he quickly found what he wanted. He started scanning the page.

Mere One Case Set for Justice Pao's Special Hearing

The defendant a victim of the Alzheimer's Disease with a criminal past

Judge Pao nearly jumped up and clapped as a huge sense of relief came over him. Only one case! He'd be able to go back home much sooner than he'd expected. Oh, how he hated these trips to the modern world! Whose nasty idea was this, to call him up from the past and make him work again? He'd died a long time ago – couldn't these people respect the finality of that? He let out a cross puff and returned to the paper.

The much-awaited Supreme Court announcement revealed that only one homicide case was submitted for the Special Hearing by the judiciary legend Justice Pao. The defendant to be tried, Eno Sun (70), was charged with first-degree murder just last month for a crime he committed twelve years ago. But there is an incredible twist to this – Mr. Sun, who has Alzheimer's disease, claims not to remember his felony.

Alzheimer's disease? That must be something new, he thought. He made a note to look it up on the internet. The INTERNET. Ha, what a funny thing it was! The first time he'd made this trip, it had taken a whole month to understand the idea of the "world wide web" that existed inside metal slabs people called 'computers'.

Then there was typing. To him, it seemed more like a mad finger exercise but apparently it had replaced all the fine brushes in the world. That was one of the many bits of news that had blown the Judge's mind over. Typing being out of question for him, he'd made friends with a fellow called Siri. Out of all the people in this world, Judge Pao liked Siri the most. Siri was polite and always happy to help. Siri didn't come bothering him like all the judges here, constantly knocking on his door because they couldn't "reach" him. That was strange. But he never let them in. And he never left the hotel room except to attend the Special Hearings.

In fact, he was scared. Scared to death about people finding out that he was just an ordinary man, nothing like the image of Justice Pao out there. Most of the time, anyway. He went back to the article.

A Song Dynasty government official Bao Zheng, known to us primarily as “Justice Pao”, has been considered the eternal embodiment of justice in China as well as in neighbouring cultures... Now he has re-entered our crime-filled society to help deliver justice to the cases that baffle even our most experienced judges. (Read our article ‘Modern Technology Brings Justice From the Past’ to learn about the technology that enabled this miracle.)

Pao is to hold a Special Hearing in which he will weigh the presented case and deliver a final ruling. All defendants who have been charged with homicide in the past 5 years were given the chance to apply for the Special Hearing. If proven clean, the litigant will walk away officially acquitted; if proven guilty, the sentence could be the infamous guillotine. (Read about Justice Pao’s guillotines in our article ‘Justice Pao’s Three Guillotines’.)

Judge Pao bit his nails and shifted in his seat uncomfortably. What was this obsession with guillotines? It was as if they really wanted to see him execute a man. The article went on.

A single submission is not surprising, considering how Pao’s trials often end up with the terrifying Guillotine. The guilty would want to avoid it, especially as Pao is said to have used a method of yaozhan (waist cutting). The innocent would want to avoid unfamiliar court procedures and not be a victim of Pao’s ancient values...

The article ended with a question that made the judge cringe.

Will Pao’s wisdom prove to be timeless and universal once again?

If only they knew how terrified he was of such a statement! In truth, he was terrified of making mistakes – convicting an innocent man, or absolving a guilty one. He wasn’t sure which was worse. He turned to his only friend in this world.

“Siri. Can Justice Pao make mistakes?” Without hesitation, Siri answered:

“I found this on the web. Justice Pao is a justice incarnate—” More myths! He groaned and sternly forbade Siri from saying more. Siri seemed to know so much yet never answered the questions that really mattered. As always, he would have to solve his case all alone. Having full authority on something was a very lonely thing.

December 11, 2023

Whyapp Messenger

Attorney Lin: Please find me inside the cafeteria.

Eno Sun, impeccably dressed, entered the bustling cafeteria, his steps just as disconcerted as the look on his face. Finally spotting Attorney Lin, he made his way to the corner of the room. She got to the point right away.

“Mr. Sun, I hope you’ve read the article I sent you, about the judge they’re bringing from the past?”

“Yes, I tried, but could you explain what it’s about again?” Eno asked apologetically.

The attorney seemed used to him. “Right, I keep forgetting that you... never mind. Justice Pao, the most famous and wise judge from the past, is coming to our world to hold trials and your case has been accepted. We are pleading ‘Not Guilty’.”

Eno’s face betrayed shock, as if he was hearing this for the first time. “I still find it hard to believe that I have done something like that,” he spoke quietly.

“Unfortunately the court seems to know it better than you do. They’ve gathered all the evidence from the video that turned up. If we continue, you will be charged for two counts of first-degree murder, for both Mike Ho and his son, your former neighbours,” the attorney spoke matter-of-factly.

Eno leaned back in his chair as if taking it all in. He didn’t remember the part about the video turning up. “So are you saying that taking this to the famous judge could change the situation, even with the evidence?”

The young woman stared straight into his eyes. “Please listen carefully. I’ve done a lot of research and this judge has a knack for making the guilty confess their crimes. If guilty, of course, he convicts them with a guillotine. But you have nothing to confess because you can’t remember twelve years ago! I’m also going to argue that you, a verified Alzheimer’s patient, are not the same person as then. This is a great chance for you to get lots of sympathy. I think you can get the minimum sentence. Is this all clear?” she spilled out her grand plan.

Eno suppressed a grin. Things were clear. Crystal clear.

“You will have an interview with Justice Pao next week. You just need to be yourself and relax, alright? I’ll take care of the rest,” she smiled.

You’d better, considering what I pay you, Eno thought bitterly.

Attorney Lin spent some more time going over the details of what she knew about Justice Pao, and how the interview might go. Thinking he won’t remember much anyway, she gathered her things and got up.

“Are you leaving? But why are we here, you asked me to come,” Eno was truly bewildered.

“Mr. Sun, we’ve talked for over an hour. You can always refer to my notes for the things that you can’t remember,” she handed him some notes and the newspaper.

“Have we? Thank you Ms. Lin, thank you for the hard work, thank you,” Eno nodded and repeated these words as his attorney left the table.

“My memory is officially incomplete, my doctor says... and only I get to choose what I remember or not.” Muttering, the old man congratulated himself.

December 17, 2023

Oriental Hotel, The Grand Suite

“Situations involving memory loss and dementia being so diverse, it is extremely difficult to know to what extent the patient suffers...” Judge Pao read off the internet. Though he had spent the past week finding out everything he could about Alzheimer’s disease, he couldn’t quite wrap his head around it. Medical and legal experts have all suggested to him that he meet Mr. Sun in person to get a sense of what he was like.

December 18, 2023

Oriental Hotel, Executive Lounge

Judge Pao sank into the plush velvet chair at the head of the table and soon Eno Sun entered the room, accompanied by a young woman. The old man was in a wheelchair, clad in a faded shirt with worn collars and grey pants that might have been black at some point. His sparse white hair was neatly combed back. *Strange*, Judge Pao thought. He had been expecting to see a wealthy and arrogant man, as there was some biographical information on Eno Sun. He felt the young woman observing him as she gave him a big, artificial smile. *He looks pretty ordinary to me*, she thought.

“Justice Pao, it is our honour to meet you. This is Mr. Eno Sun and I am his attorney, Alice Lin.”

Eno Sun bowed his head, thinking the same thing as his attorney. Pao nodded and bid them to take a seat.

In his signature judge-like voice, he said, “Mr. Sun, I take it you understand the purpose of today’s meeting. I am going to be your judge and would like to know more about you. This meeting is part of my investigation.”

Thus it began. Judge Pao suggested playing a game of Chinese chess as they talked. That way he could observe the defendant, who’d be more at ease. Midway through their game, Justice Pao released the tiny bug he had been hiding in his hand. It crawled across the board. Eno retracted his hand in fear.

“It’s one of those bugs.. they hardly live a day. Just crush it,” Pao said.

“Oh, no, no. I do not do these... things... very well,” Eno stuttered.

Throughout their two hours together, Judge Pao, much to his annoyance, found himself increasingly sympathising with Mr. Sun. For one, he confirmed that Mr. Sun must have a very bad case of Alzheimer’s. He had to repeat himself twice, even three times in the same conversation! And the chess game was almost silly, as he had to help Mr. Sun track his moves. It was like playing a chess game with a child. Mr. Sun was able to talk about random things, but his past seemed foggy and patchy.

“And you do not remember your crime?” Judge Pao blurted out, at last.

“No... no, I do not. It’s very strange, isn’t it, the human brain,” Eno replied calmly.

“You don’t remember anything from 12 years ago, or further back?” Pao pursued.

“Truly nothing. I can hardly believe I am the same person! I probably couldn’t even recognise my own home!” Eno forced a laugh but Judge Pao could sense a shadow on his face. He himself could understand that kind of disconnection.

December 20, 2030

Oriental Hotel, The Grand Suite

For once, Judge Pao wasn’t sure what was right. All the evidence blatantly showed that Mr. Sun was the murderer. The court records left no valid objections. The outcome of this case should be an obvious one. If this was his usual murder case, he’d give Mr. Sun the guillotine sentence without hesitation.

But he found himself unable to draw the final conclusion. Was the man whom he was to convict the same man who had committed the crime? Physically yes, but he feared that the man’s soul wasn’t. Alzheimer’s disease seemed to have given this man a new mind and heart. His crime was a notorious one

and the public had wanted justice for the ruthless murderer, who was nowhere to be found back then. But from everything Pao had studied and observed, Eno Sun's past was clearly disconnected from the present.

If a judge was to convict someone, what would the purpose be? If it was to prevent the criminal from doing further harm, surely, Mr. Sun did not need to be prevented. He could hardly touch a bug. Or would it be to compensate for the victim's loss? Could he possibly call it justice to punish a man who couldn't comprehend what he did wrong? Was it his job to punish or to make one repent?

With these questions keeping him up many nights, he was coming to a decision: he could not order this frail old man to the guillotine along with the truly bad men that he'd convicted in the past. But he was going to make one final meeting with Mr. Sun, just so that he could make his verdict a confident one. He was getting very weary of the world that expected so much of him.

December 27, 2023

Oriental Hotel, Executive Lounge

Everything was ready. It had taken a week of hard work to transform the room into this, but it was worth it. Judge Pao looked around the room, feeling proud.

He turned off the light and closed the door behind him. For the trick to work, it had to come as a surprise to Mr. Sun. After a few minutes of anxious loitering, he spotted the smiling old man and the solemn young woman pushing his wheelchair. Seeing Mr. Sun again made him remember how gentle he was, and the Judge almost regretted putting him up to his trickery. *All this will prove to be unnecessary*, he reassured himself. If all went as he hoped, he would minimise Mr. Sun's sentence, deliver his ruling tomorrow and finally return home.

This time, he greeted his visitors with a smile.

"Hello Mr. Sun, Ms. Lin. This will possibly be our last meeting before the final rule," he said with some regret.

"I am glad to see you again, Justice Pao," Mr. Sun said, and he meant it.

Judge Pao turned to open the door. He waited until they had both entered the room and then clicked on the light switch. Warm yellow light flooded the room and he watched Eno from the corner of his eye. The man was still squinting from the sudden brightness. Then as his eyes adjusted, he let out a sharp gasp. *What was that?* Frowned Judge Pao. He slowly wandered to the mini kitchen, offering to make some tea. While so, he kept one eye on Eno, who murmured inaudibly.

"Mr. Sun. All you alright?" the young attorney leaned forward. Eno nodded frantically and Ms. Lin pushed his wheelchair towards the dining chair.

Something's wrong. I need to find out, Pao felt a rush of urgency. He picked up the baseball bat he had planted and wielded it up casually. Mr. Sun was staring at him. Judge Pao clicked his fingers to signal to someone behind the room. He continued nonchalantly,

"Is this a baseball bat? The judges here seem to really enjoy..."

“AAAHHHHH! AAHHHHH AAHHHHH AAAHHHHH!” Eno started screaming, which startled the Judge. Pao looked straight into Eno’s eyes, which were now fixed on the back of the room. There stood a young man in a red baseball hat, another prop to remind Eno of his crime. Eno shook violently and his eyes darted wildly. As they had rehearsed, the man grinned at Eno and waved. Then he disappeared out of the door.

“You know this place. You recognise the bat, and the man you murdered,” Judge Pao uttered, his voice dangerously low. Ms. Lin gasped and let go of the wheelchair with a jerk. The wheelchair rolled forward. Judge Pao seemed taller suddenly, now hovering over Eno, who met his death-like gaze.

“You didn’t forget anything, it was all an act!” Judge Pao continued, his voice growing. There was bitterness on his face, which seemed to grow dark.

“How much have you been lying? Was it all an act? I demand an answer!” he ordered.

Eno was now shaking uncontrollably and he managed,

“Yes, yes, I admit it. Please just make all this stop, let me go,” his voice pleaded. Pao was enraged and as if by magic, a crescent moon became visible on his forehead. Within a few moments, his face was as dark as a thundercloud and he was as tall as a willow tree and his hair was flowing out like willow branches in a storm.

“Guillotine!” he bellowed. “This man is guilty of murder and perjury!”

The Absences

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Chen, Flora – 15

East of a forest's edge, there lay a pathway. Half-concealed in the middle of nowhere, the only life that lingered there for longer than the time it took for the concerned passer-by to hurry across in a few hastened steps did so in a house just off the footpath.

Though there was seldom any proof behind the myths of neighbouring village elders speaking ill of its otherworldly origin, which any man of sane mind would be doubtless in doubting, in Duanzhou, where word of the educated was law, the would-be lore was heeded as truth.

—

It was five to seven in the evening. The man seemed to have materialised, with the throng of the thickets from which he had just emerged shrouded in shadows of a twilight so uncompromisingly resolute that day seemed no more than a distant memory.

A violent burst of light sparked in his peripheral vision. Craning his head to get a better view of its source, the bulging, beetle-black eyes of silk merchant Li Huang settled upon a house bordering the path a few strides ahead. From its glassless windows a warm light pulsed welcome, stretching out in a square of calid warmth violently at odds with the barren cold of the open air.

—

The response to his knocks was, contrary to the hesitance he had been expecting, quite prompt. Soon he found himself being ushered inside by a plump-cheeked man, whose jowls were aquiver with excitement.

With much struggle, Li slung his overfilled basket off his shoulder onto the mud-strewn floor to the distinct clinking of metal against metal as then contents were dishevelled by the vigour with which its owner had casted it aside.

Now that he had a chance to properly inspect the interior of the home that had so fortuitously pulled him out of the miserable cold, he realised that the place was less a liveable abode up close. The only thing that seemed to brighten the atmosphere was a trio of misshapen urns atop a shelf and an array of hand lettered tapestries dangling unsettled on nails from the wall.

It was evident from the utter disrepair of the entire place that Li should consider the house a poor recommendation. He, however, chose to keep an open mind, and therefore felt there to be little cause for apprehension of the fate that awaited him.

—

The magistrate tightened his grip on the reins, and his steed severed the rhythm it had been implying with each trotting step to break into a gallop.

Snow-dusted hills glistened mischievously in the half-light of the falling sun as Justice Bao's horse sped away from the courthouse; it was the type of natural phenomenon able to exhilarate even the most settled of minds.

Yet, the day's events were hammering with a restlessness so profound within his mind that Bao was rendered immune to its intoxicating power.

She had been a woman, not of young age, whose elderly fragility was made all the more evident by the deadened grey eyes which she kept glued to the ground as she waded toward the court hall with a poignant disengagement noted by all in her vicinity.

'Please present your case,' said Bao, not unkindly. If the woman had seemed on the verge of breakdown before, at this provocation what had previously been internal torment came tumbling from her mouth in a flood of inarticulate hysterics.

From the little Bao had been able to glean from the broken sentences, she was a heartbroken mother by the name of Yan Yun, who had been itinerant for months as she flocked from province to province in fruitless search of a court willing to avenge her murdered son. Bao was her last hope.

'I shall do my best.'

Bao probed the folds of his silk robes, and as he dismounted from his horse a set of keys dangled from his fingers. They gave a resonant jingle as he sifted through them to single out one.

Unlocking the pair of gates leading into his manor, he crossed the courtyard, shot through the front door, and turned abruptly right. A certain restlessness had possessed Bao, made apparent by his uncoordinated movement as he reached to fiddle with a chink in the wall, and the involuntary disinclination with which he began his nightly descent down the servant's stairs.

—

The dungeon at the fourth and final landing was very cramped for how little space its sole inhabitant occupied.

Tongues of flame illuminated the face of a wall-set cushion as the candle's wick stirred alight, revealing two halves, black and white, which met at a rippling line in the centre.

He rested his right hand gently against the black satin. The familiar feeling of frigidity had barely begun when he found himself hovering over semi-solid earth comprising densely packed clouds; they swirled about his ankles as he waded through the Land of Nonbeing.

His shoulders were brushed through by that of shapeless apparitions, wandering to and fro the Infernal Bureaucracy, as the sky perpetuated its palette of gradienting colours in a magnificent sunset behind. At this, Bao couldn't help but reminisce over the pitiable existence of mortals. The line between life and death was so thin that it was commiserating to see them grieve the deaths of their loved ones to such an extent.

The Infernal Bureaucracy resided within a courthouse that was almost a mirror image of his in Kaifeng.

Bao planted himself firmly behind his desk at the front of the courtroom to regard the queue of apparitions waiting for a verdict on the life they were next to live.

It was ten hours until Bao finally saw through the last case. Eager to return to his mortal affairs, he went barely halfway into bidding the jury farewell when an unexpected visitor crashed the courtroom, his presence most unanticipated by Bao.

'They— they call me Li Huang.' As the visitor spoke, there was a faint quaver pulsating through his shapeless form that mimicked the tremor in his voice.

Bao's silvery beard swayed like some bizarre pendulum before him as he hunched over his desk to peer curiously down at Li.

'I—I'm sorry—I just thought—because it's been two days since—my mortal life was relinquished by murder! ...' At this last sentence all notes of fear went from his voice, replaced by unbound vehemence.

Bao, who had been prepared for a pathetic finish to the mangled first phrases of Li's declaration, felt all the life abandon him.

Sensing his uncertainty, Li answered his unvoiced query. 'I'm... not exactly sure *how*... but I know for a fact that on the eve of the murder, I had been inside a...shack of sorts...just—just outside a forest.

'Many have suffered fates much worse, I presume. It is only on the account of my mother, the affliction of anguish upon whom I desperately grieve, that I beseech your aid in freeing her of this plague.'

The realisation hit Bao out of nowhere. Soon, what had begun as the faintest whisper of an inkling, matured into a truth to which the justice was absolutely faithful, became all that his mind could bear on its forefront as he ascended back to mortality, as if unrelenting contemplation would somehow assuage the torturing infatuation lacing his every thought.

—

Mounting his horse after yet another sleepless night, Bao should have been on the verge of collapse. Yet, rest was somehow the last thing on his mind. As he was propelled into the day ahead, the speed of his white steed could be paralleled by only his soaring spirits.

Once he had settled inside his courtroom in the Kaifeng courthouse, Bao hastened to assemble himself an audience comprising the most trusted of the jury. Amongst the assemblage mingled his four enforcers of law, while Bao's secretary Ce Gongsun, a small mousy man whose eyes shone with unconcealed intelligence, took his usual seat to the right of the magistrate's desk dutifully. A hulking figure lurked in the corner of the room, his presence suffocatingly corporeal but of which the others were somehow negligent—such was proof yet again of martial artist Zhao Zhan's distinctive calibre as the magistrate's bodyguard.

Bao cleared his throat, turning all eyes onto him. 'I have reason to believe myself in possession of what I believe to be reliable evidence to aid us in our quest to avenge her.' He paused, eyes darting left and right, surveying the room as if waiting for someone to press for further details. When Ce Gongsun's hand shot into the air to do just that, Bao only smiled. 'I have my ways,' he said simply, eyes twinkling, 'but I trust your confidence in me?'

—

The next day dawned bright and early. With his company, Bao set out to begin his journey to the shack in which Li had met his demise.

The days of travel streaked together like crashing sheets of a waterfall. When darkness fell, they would set up camp in the wild; when day broke, they resumed on horseback.

—

It was five to seven in the morning when the travellers finally emerged from the East of Qixingyan forest, on what would later prove itself to be their final day of a seemingly endless journey. Over the cacophony of trotting hooves, Bao's roaring voice rang in the ears of his company.

'I had told you all that crossing through the forest was bound for disaster, didn't I? All the while if we had simply circled around the edge—'

Bao was cut short as one of the men riding to the left of him raised a timid hand. Under weeks of built up grime, Ce Gongsun was only recognizable by his runty frame, which contrasted harshly against that of the surly Zhao Zhan riding beside him.

'Crossing the forest will turn out in our favour, as you would have already noticed, had you looked the other way.' There was not a hint of confrontation to the tone of his voice.

Bao turned right, in an effort to humour the man, and to his absolute astonishment was met by a gargantuan countryside manor. It possessed an intrinsic air of grandeur so palpable that it was a mystery how the keen and penetrating mind of Bao had failed to register its existence sooner.

A silence fell. Then, with the gradual awakening as that of a comatose patient coming to, Bao allowed things to blow over, then said, 'I reckon we should investigate, despite all the signs pointing the other way. We've come this far, might as well accept the truth, whether it turns out to be in our favour or not.'

As they approached, it opened. A man emerged, swaddled in fine silks; as he sauntered forward, his lanky frame seemed to move a touch out of sync with his massive head, which Bao figured must have been burdensome on his spine with its pudgy, round, presumably quite heavy cheeks.

He raked his eyes over Bao and his entourage, and upon landing his eyes on the ornate silver sword hanging threateningly from Zhan Zhao's belt, his smile seemed to falter slightly, but he quickly realised and slathered on another twice as thick as he ushered them inside.

The interior of the estate was a sight to behold. Despite the great lengths the estate had gone to impress its grandeur upon imposing visitors, however, Bao can't help but feel unease at the overindulgence of it all.

They began a search of the property, but there was no evidence to discover. On circling back to the first floor, Bao found his gaze lingering on a hand lettered tapestry of a well-known poetic composition, and a plain clay bowl. Both were unanticipatedly lustrous, as though they were incarnations of bone china rather than mud.

The man caught Bao in his trance and his own excitement seemed to peak as he launched into a lengthy speech on the origin stories of the tapestry and bowl. Both he had done himself, in accordance with his two most prominent hobbies.

'I see,' Bao said at the end of the man's speech. It would be imprudent to say that his suspicions of the peculiar man had dissipated completely, when they hadn't. But Bao had to admit that he made for a captivating storyteller and was rather grateful for this insight into his personal life.

It was nearing five in the evening when Bao's entourage finally began to prepare themselves for the journey home. Bao had been in the middle of thanking the host, standing by the bowl and tapestry which had intrigued him so much, when his eyes landed upon the contents inside the bowl he had previously thought empty: a single long iron nail, the thread and sharp point of which was partially coated in clumps of something deep scarlet. He turned a questioning eye to the man, who piped up immediately—the screw had been used to hang the tapestry, he explained hurriedly, but after it rusted, he worried for its structural integrity and so took it down for a new one; it laid here for the simple reason that discarding it had slipped his mind, he finished, an oily smile tautening his face as he saw Bao out the door.

The journey back to civilization was much less eventful than the journey out had been, but it also seemed to stretch on without end. By the time Bao was finally back in Kaifeng, the meal with the man in the estate had become the news of a week ago.

On the last day of their journey, his entourage stopped beside a farmer's market just a few miles out from the courthouse, deciding that they would close the remaining distance tomorrow. Even though it was only late afternoon and the last threads of daylight had not yet loosened completely from the tapestry that was the rest of the sky, six days of travel had exhausted their stamina.

With the adrenaline rush brought on by the prospect of solving the case gone, the weeks of sleep deprivation was given an opportunity to catch up to Bao. Despite the lengths to which they went, they were no closer to unveiling the culprit than a fortnight ago. Evil would be permitted to continue roaming the earth, tainting the earth with the woeful blood unwillingly shed by its victims. *What would Li think, to know that his mother would be within, until her death, the tightening clutches of grief? What would Yan think, to have to live with weight of the realisation that his son was to never be avenged, that the children of mothers like her might suffer the same fate?*

'She would think you a man of noble spirit, who came to the aid of someone in need when no one else would.'

Looking up, he was taken aback to see the weathered face of Yan Yun before his own. It was the same visage of wrinkled skin, which seemed to almost droop with defeat and was corpse-like in its pallor. What was different was that death no longer appeared to glaze her eyes; instead, they shone with a curious defiance.

She gave him a weak smile. Bao opened his mouth, an apology rolling off the tip of his tongue, but was stopped by Yan mid sentence. 'Thank you for trying; that, alone, was more than anyone else would have done. It hurts less every day.' She tried for another smile, but it came out as more a grimace.

'Only, I mourn the fact that he was not able to enjoy the little time he had. He often received death threats from jealous acquaintances.' Her voice sliced through the facade of thoughtful silence, clear as day. 'We never thought that anyone would ever go to such an extent to obtain wealth, though... The morning of the night he went missing, he had gone to collect payment, too...'

Her voice trailed off. She cast a pitiable look at Bao, but he had long since ceased to listen. Instead, he was focused on her mention of Li having been rather wealthy. The man Bao had met at the edge of the estate had been rich too...yet Li had made him out to be poor...did Yan say Li had been carrying gold?...the nail he had seen lying in the bowl...had it really been only rust?

His head swarmed with questions he could not answer.

—

On this particular afternoon, Bao could be seen sitting behind his desk, his appearance in disarray having just returned from his journey out West. There was a book half open on the desk before him, over which he was pouring. His left hand had the front cover slightly raised so that the title could just be made out: *Recorded Cases of Murder in Duanzhou*. He had the anthology open to a page labelled *The Iron Nail*. As Bao's eyes darted across the page, he felt his blood run cold.

He continued skimming the book, stopping abruptly at a chapter. Bao was horrified to discover the details of the case, which involved a desperate potter murdering the man to which he was indebted, incinerating the remains in the fire, and combining them with clay to create pots which had lustre to match that of bone china, as a way to hide the evidence.

It was as he read that last line when the truth dawned on him.

—

'Years of possession and poverty to finally gain wealth, only to have it all ripped away, along with—!'

There was no finding out what else this half-a-century-long endeavour into the mortal realm had cost him, for he had unknowingly drawn his final breath. It was at the hands of his own brethren, jealous of him as he was of others, that the rogue demon perished.

—

The magistrate arrived three days later at what he reckoned must be the precise location. It was hard to tell, with the estate having disappeared into thin air.

The Justice for Him

Heep Yunn School, Lee, Tsz Wing Jacie – 16

It was a blinding afternoon, the sun glaring so bright it was staring into the crowd's soul. Under the beaming sunshine, the crescent moon birthmark reflects a soft glow on my toned skin, forming a stark contrast. Below the platform was the kneeling Consort Liu, fidgeting and scouring the crowd with her aquiline eyes for help in desperation. I spoke with dominance, disgusted by the once so superior lady in front of me, "Who thought you, a supposed queen, was the culprit of the death of Consort Li's child? And you thought that your wicked actions to turn her child into a wild cat would come unnoticed?"

Consort Li, once put under house arrest, although now released, would never be the same without her child, all because of this lady who wanted love from the emperor. Clouds were lurking before her eyes, and even through the mist of obscurity, I could sense her pain lingering throughout her body, the sense of loss haunting her, and her soundless accusation towards this woman for harming the innocent, clueless angel given to her.

My mind wandered to my own children, especially Pao Yi. Being the smallest in the family at just seventeen now, he is surprisingly talented academically. Not having to worry about him, I only ordered Pao Yi's servants to serve him and concentrated on my first child Pao Chen, the one who was supposed to inherit my position.

I hope he grows up to strive for justice, just like me.

"Take her to the guillotine!" I roared, despite the still crowd, as I tossed on the ground a small wooden tablet, used so many times its initially blackened carved Chinese character "Order" had worn out. Consort Liu shrieked in fear as she was dragged away on the smooth tiled floor, her feet scraping the floor in vain. "I'm innocent! I swear! Judge Pao, provide me justice!"

Justice? Hilarious coming out of the mouth of the blatantly lying Consort who had trodden on the idea of honesty, not even bearing a hint of guilt. "Thursday the Fourth of April, Consort Liu Qing Yi executed." I watched as her fleeting eyes of helplessness transformed into a dim hopeless light, the crowd's noise falling in anticipation and rising in support, until at last her eyes darkened and gazed down on the floor.

Justice was restored, once again, under my guard.

Glad and fulfilled, I strolled back to my room as shadows started looming over the sky strangely. Wasn't it cloudless and sunny just a few minutes ago? I stroked my moustache slowly as I pondered on the sudden weather shift, and passed by Yi's palace to share this thrilling news.

A pungent smell invaded my nostrils, a bitter, sanguinary stench penetrated through the door cracks into the atmosphere. This wasn't my first time nor second solving cases, but this time felt... different. For the first time in a long time, I was out of a quiet state of mind. I positioned my hand on my dagger, fingers gripping its handle tightly, the other hand slowly pushing the door—

Blood. Chalice. Son.

Everything was still in the room, it was so quiet, too quiet. A spatter of blood next to him, a body laid on the bed, a chalice on the table. There he lies, his twisted face towards me, his aimless eyes dilated, his arms reaching out to the dropped chalice. Who was with him?

"Pao Yi, Pao Yi, wake up. I said, wake up! You've always been obedient...I said —" My eyes blurred and my throat was as if it was a jammed mechanism, unable to produce any sound or cries for help. I looked at the chalice on the ground and held his ice-cold, unresponsive arm. My mind swirled in anger as if flames were ignited in my head as rage overflowed me. Who would poison my son? Why? I have to investigate. I

have to find the murderer and bring Pao Yi justice, decapitating the murderer at first sight. I told myself: this is not just another case, another mystery that I have to solve. Whoever took my son away deserves worse than what Consort Liu deserved.

I took a deep breath. In my teary and clouded vision, I could scarcely make out a silhouette reflected in the pool of blood, a dark red figure around my size, lurking outside my room. Who was it? Suspiciously, I turned at almost instantaneously, but there was no one but the silent angst-ridden night after all. Night? I stirred in pandemonium. Wasn't it just a gloomy afternoon a few minutes ago? All I knew was that if the killer was in the palace, that meant I shouldn't tell anyone to prevent startling the snake. In the intermix of sorrow and perplexity, I found myself lost in the darkness inside the palace I was supposed to be familiar with, and by accident, I bumped into Pao Yi's palace.

I thought about the times I walked past his palace and continued to move on due to my mission to serve justice, and the times I passed it to go to Pao Chen's palace to monitor his progress, claiming that I'll come back to him after I had dealt with other affairs. What an irony now that I'm here after his death. Mocking myself, I approached his room, hoping to find evidence for the murder.

"Judge Pao, have you come to visit Yi? You are just so kind to visit him on his birthday!" The servant grinned in glee, so merry that the surrounding guards were almost compelled to smile. Birthday? Fourth of April? His birthday was on the Twentieth of March. I was just here for justice, for evidence. "Today...?" I muttered in bewilderment. "Why ... yes of course Sir, the twentieth of March!" I could see her smile slowly declining and slipping into a light frown in concern, as if questioning: whose father does not know his own son's birthday? Before I could enter, the door was opened, and a little boy ran towards me, hugging my enormous figure compared to his dwarfed body.

Who— "Good night Father. You've come! I haven't seen you for sooooo long!" The little boy's bow almost could not wait for his thrilling bounce. As he was looking up with his innocent face, his eyes turned into two thin lines, and his lips curled to form a crescent shape. He looked like that when he smiled? Have I never taken a deep look at his face before? He was so adorable, so delicate, so innocent. I patted his oval head as we sat. "Pao Yi, you're alive, and so little too... Happy Birthday... Sorry I don't have any gift for you" Quite ashamed, I realised that I hadn't gifted him anything for his birthday at all in these fourteen years, multiple times I used Pao Chen as an excuse, and multiple times I used to say "Sorry, I need to solve the case first" to dismiss him, when have I been intimate with him like this?

Visibly puzzled and dazed, little Pao brushed it off and smiled nevertheless, "It's okay father, did you know how special today is? This is the first time you visited me for my birthday in the nine years of my life, the servants said you've been busy serving justice! Father, are you feeling alright? You have more wrinkles today, and there's water in your eyes!" He wiped off my tears and smiled, then turned around, reaching for something in the distance. A magnificent painting appeared in front of my eyes, the swallows so animated it would fly out of the canvas. All these years, have I not had a hint about my son's hobbies? As a father, not only did I not know my own son, I was just like a passenger in his life, not contributing anything, nor acting as a father figure. If I had bothered to know him, to talk to him a little more, perhaps I would have had more hints as to why he was murdered.

Spending such time with Yi, I almost did not have time to process the fact that I had just entered a different dimension, one where he was still nine, one where I didn't bury myself into "serving justice". What about justice for Yi? I have to find more evidence, but first, I had to escape this place. "Father?" I heard the little boy's faint disappointment from afar as I backed up from the palace we were in a few minutes ago.

I'm sorry, I need to solve this case.

As I tried to leave, once again, the silent darkness shifted, my motionless moustache began gaining momentum, and was lifted by the turbulent wind. The familiar silhouette appeared once again, “Hey!” I called, chasing the seemingly unreachable figure. Shaken yet standing, I trudged against the wind into the mist towards the man, only to be met by the familiar sight of Yi’s palace, again.

This time, I was at his palace again, and it just seemed different. The surrounding vegetation near was withered, lacking in the vitality and spirit it had. What happened? What year is this? I could find the murderer and save Yi! I darted towards the door, and swung the door as swiftly as I could, only to see nothing but an empty room. It was so different from his ninth birthday. The concrete walls were wearing off, the corner dashed with a stack of paper balls. A layer of dust rested on the counter and there laid a bottle of sweet liquor and two chalices.

“Father?” Yi rubbed his pink eyes as he spoke softly. It was obvious that he had been crying. What has he been through?

We sat next to the table just like the first time I time travelled. For a long time, we sat in silence.

“Father, may I ask one question?”

I nodded reassuringly.

“Am I good enough in your eyes? Would I be deserving to inherit your position? To be the next Judge Pao? Throughout all these years, I’ve done so much. I’ve even achieved the perfect score in the state exam!” His eyes glowed with a spark and he spoke intently.

I frowned in concern. No matter his achievements, he still had an elder brother who was growing up to be me. It was not up to me to defy the law that the eldest is of the greatest importance.

“I...I’m sorry Yi, I know how much you have contributed. I couldn’t just allow you to take up the place of your brother, there is no doubt that he has a higher rank in the family.”

“I’m more suited than him, you know it. All these years, I’ve been striving so hard, so hard to reach your standards, why are you still favouring him, Chen, the one that doesn’t deserve it? It’s always your murder cases and Chen’s difficulties, what about mine?”

Have I always overlooked the youngest in the family? I always spoke of my pride to them, but when have I actually acknowledged Yi? I should’ve spent more time with him, he’s my child too, I’m such a horrible father. Not only did I think that Yi’s achievements were gifted, I was clueless about his sufferings under the shadow of his brother. He deserves to be treated equally too. Perhaps—

Before I could speak, my thoughts were subdued by the deafening thunder of a shout, “Take her to the guillotine!” Holding the chalice in hand, Yi chugged the entire cup of liquor in one gulp.

“No!” I tried to stop him, but only tipping his emptied chalice onto the floor.

“I understand. I’ll never be like him.” He spoke as he shakily looked up at me, before coughing uncontrollably and dropping onto the ground. There I saw, the chalice on the ground, and the spit of blood I witnessed, his lifeless body, exactly like two hours ago.

I was the murderer of my own son. It was my bias, my neglect that led to his death. It was a suicide, because of me. It was my blind pursuit to find “evidence” that continued the cycle. What was the point of serving justice and equally for the people if I couldn’t do it for my family, my children?

In vertigo, I backed out of the room step by step, only to be blinded by the gleaming sunlight as if God was judging me. Dazed and lightheaded, I sat down behind the palace, trying to process my bloody hands. "Pao Yi, Pao Yi, wake up. I said, wake up!" A voice shouted.

I have to stop this cycle. If I had given more care and treated both my sons with equal respect, would things turn out different? Would I be able to return justice to my overlooked son?

Knowing if I walked past me that I was going to notice myself, I left the palace.

But I wasn't going to leave this place. I turned once again to the same palace but in a different time. I'll come back again and again for you Yi, I am not going to overlook you like before. My crescent moon birthmark shines under the moonlight, and I know that I'm going to return justice to my Yi.

The Remedy

Heep Yunn School, Wan, Hei Yiu Hailey – 16

“Next!” I shouted, tapping my fingers on the floating cloud while slotting the file of QiaoTai into the cabinet of Hell, closing it shut with a bang without a backward glance. The cabinet of Hell screeched and its dark brown exterior suddenly lit up in flames, confirming QiaoTai’s sentence in Hell.

“Please! Please! I can’t be put in hell! My wife and children are in heaven!” QiaoTai dropped down to his knees abruptly, begging in despair with a pair of bloodshot eyes. He screamed at the top of his lungs until blood spewed from his throat, and his damaged vocal cords could no longer emit any sound. I cringed at the waterfall of snot coming out of his nose and shooed him away. With a flick of a lever, I opened the gate to hell underneath his feet, scorning as he fell into the fiery pit.

“Perhaps you should look into his memories, young one. He did beseech you to reconsider, did he not?” Judge Pao whispered into my ear sternly. Startled by the immortal Yama’s sudden appearance in the form of a hovering deity statue, I knocked down the cabinet of Hell, the files came spilling out and scattered all over the cumulus clouds. My show of incompetence earned a snicker out of Judge Pao, as he waved his hands whimsically, levitating the files to the cabinet of Hell. In a state of embarrassment, I apologized profusely as I explained myself.

“With all due respect, Judge Pao. QiaoTai murdered multiple people in his life, 8 to be exact. This kind of behavior is unacceptable and morally outrageous. He must therefore pay for his actions. Isn’t this what you have been advocating for? Justice in the afterlife?” I questioned firmly.

“Indeed, I call for justice. Yet, how can you be so certain that you are serving justice to people who deserve it without looking through their memories and put into their shoes?” Judge Pao swirled the files around, his eyes going wide as he noticed a particular file, then his face morphed into a frown. Completely oblivious to his change, I carried on, “I read facts”

Judge Pao flung the file of A. Wong in front of my face. The cloud beneath me shook vigorously, and I struggled to keep my balance. “This is what you call justice?” Judge Pao roared, the wind so harsh produced from his nostrils alone blew away some spirits who were waiting in line for the sorting of Heaven and Hell. “Why is this girl in the Hell cabinet? Did you not read her file’s information? Do you even know her name?” Judge Pao bombarded me with never-ending questions. “You say you read facts, but she ended up in Hell? Did you think, at all, before deciding to put her in the most torturous place of the afterlife?” His tone increased with hostility with each question asked. I gasped for air in frantic breaths, blurry eyes stinging from the intense wind. My heart was beating so fast as if it would burst out any second.

Suddenly, the force Judge Pao exuded by his anger made the clouds tear apart, and dragged me down into Hell. We landed with a thud, with me sprawling on the molten layer, burning.

“To deliver justice to people in the afterlife, you must become one with the person. Their recollections contain the truth: a person’s true character cannot be shown entirely by facts alone.” Having seemingly composed himself, Judge Pao flew past several corrupted spirits that I sorted into Hell yesterday. Scrambling to my feet, I sprint to catch up to Judge Pao as he passes me the file of A. Wong.

“Asteria. Her name is Asteria. Now, you are to amend your wrongdoing and put her in Heaven.” Judge Pao continued ahead, eyes searching for Asteria, I assumed. Although I esteemed Judge Pao for fighting for what was right, I doubted if I should admit Asteria into Heaven. Hence, I mustered all my courage to refute Judge Pao, stating, “But... She killed someone, Judge Pao...” In an instant, I felt my blood run cold, the already scorching ground turned into lava, blistering my soles. Screams could be heard from miles away, all pleading for mercy.

“You will go into her memories now. For you will understand my wrath afterwards. This is an order.” Snapping his fingers, I was teleported to a vessel of her memories faster than the speed of light...

26 December 1986

Woes. Wrenching whimpers. Weak tiny heartbeats.

“Weep! Weep!” a child with a deformed face, her nose was crooked and one of her eyelids had a yellowish lump. While empathizing with the child who I assumed to be Asteria, I waited, anticipating for her parents to step in and soothe the little one. However, the parents didn’t move a single hair. Instead, they were preoccupied with the baby who was sleeping peacefully in their arms, showering her with love and affection, while leaving Asteria crying in a crib filled with her own tears.

“Shut up, you insolent brat! Your sister is sleeping!” My eyes were widened in astonishment at how the women hollered at Asteria who could not have been older than a year old. I winced inwardly as the women’s yells woke up the baby instead. The woman looked at Asteria like she was the devil and put the baby gently onto the lap of the man sitting next to her, and in contrast, bolted across the room to pick up Asteria aggressively. Before Asteria could whine at the pain caused by the forceful pull, the woman had already slammed her back into the crib.

“You’re nothing but a deformed monster.”

Asteria blinked rapidly and looked up through her thick, water-filled lashes. She stared at me, her eyes never leaving mine while following me as I shuffled my feet. A bit unnerved, I took a step back and passed through the wall. In a flash, I was engulfed in the swirling vessel of memories, ready to be transported into a different time in her life.

12 September 1992

Taunts. Troubled minds. Tenderness and tranquillity. A miracle among turbulence.

A drop of blood trickled down my forehead, the metallic smell enveloped my nose. When I tried to open my eyes, I struggled to see. When I tried to sniff away a hair on my nose, I struggled to breathe. I immediately reached up to feel my face, but it only intensified my concern as my fingers were all swollen and sported red droplets, presumably the blood from my forehead. To my surprise, I had become Asteria. I was no longer an observer or a passerby. Although this wasn’t unheard of, it merely happened once in a blue moon since this phenomenon only manifests itself when the memory is a significant turning point in that person’s life. While processing the fact that I was in Asteria’s body, I vaguely heard muffled voices from afar. “Freak! Alien! Go away, you ugly. No one wants you.” The neglect Asteria had experienced from her parents and the bullying she had endured from her peers flooded into my mind. Feelings of rage, confusion, and depression overwhelmed me.

Just as I was about to teleport myself back to Hell, Judge Pao emerged out of thin air. “If you dare to return without experiencing Asteria’s part, I will not hesitate to set you aflame.” He threatened. Before I could even express my bewilderment, he answered as if he had read my mind. “Do not frame a judgment based on inadequate knowledge. Instead, honour Asteria’s life by following it through to its conclusion. The reasoning for her actions will soon become clear to you.”

Judge Pao disappeared with a poof, only a faint trail of smoke indicated that he had come and was not a fragment of my imagination. A kick in my leg reminded me that I was still in Asteria’s frail body. Against my own will, I trembled like a leaf due to the sheer impact of the attack. I squeezed my eye shut to brace myself for another hit, however, it never came. Rather, I heard an anguished groan in front of me.

I gradually opened my eye, feeling warmth grow in my heart. It was Asteria’s sister. “Go away, you bastards! If I see you hurting my sister again, you will be sorry!” Amongst the screaming, another flash of white light blinded me. I straightened my posture to get ready for the transportation. Yet, instead of transporting to a different time, I was still in this event of her memory, eyes greeted by the delightful and heart-warming sight of Asteria and her sister locked in a tight embrace.

Asteria’s sister cuddled Asteria immensely, carefully checking her wounds and consoling her with such a soft tone as if Asteria would crumble if she raised her voice. I felt a pang of guilt as I realized Asteria was about to break if it were not for her sister’s protection. “Hey sis, it’s alright, they’re gone now and can’t hurt you. Okay? I’m here to protect you no matter what...”

Judge Pao appeared yet again, trying to hold in a smug smile as he saw tears fill my eye socket. “I knew you were emotional under the ‘facts’ facade.” He murmured, then regarded me with a smile, and said, “This moment though minuscule, harboured a meaning larger than Asteria’s heart. With overwhelming amounts of care given in a short period, her heart could not cover it with a lid, and let it overflow freely.”

Although Judge Pao speaks in riddles that I couldn’t comprehend, I understood the feeling of gratitude and love that Asteria must have had for her sister. From only the small fractions of life I experienced through Asteria, it was evident that Asteria was lonely, mistreated, and most depressingly, unloved. Her parents had not treated her like a priceless treasure, her peers had not welcomed her with open arms, and society had not accepted her for who she was.

Once again, I was transported to a different event in Asteria’s life. Little did I know, this would make me thoroughly regret my decision of putting Asteria in Hell.

3 March 2003

Shrieks. Fluorescent lights. Screams of terror. Silence amongst the sirens. Spirits circling around the scene.

“Stop resisting! You should know better than to fight back. If you sit here obediently, I’ll get money off your filthy rich parents and you leave in one piece. It’s a win-win situation.” a man with a scruffy beard sneered with an unsettling smile. I recognized him instantly as I had just sent him to Hell due to the vile things he had done in his past life: theft, manipulation and kidnapping were just the tip of the iceberg. Immediately, I was worried about Asteria as I knew what

horrible things this man could do, yet I had a peculiar feeling in my bones that Asteria would be the one to end him.

Suddenly, Judge Pao popped up next to me, and said under his breath with a proud tone, “Oh yes, Asteria put up a fight indeed. She beat him to a pulp.” Even though Judge Pao always appeared from nowhere all of a sudden, I was still not yet accustomed to his unannounced appearances. I nodded rhythmically to acknowledge his presence and thank him for confirming my hunch.

We watched as the man forcefully pulled on Asteria’s arm while flicking the lump on her eye, creating a click sound. Asteria continued to yell and defy the stranger, throwing punch after punch towards the man, unsuccessfully. “You won’t get any money fromme! Those so-called parents of mine never cared about me in the first place, so why would they waste money to ensure my safety?” She wailed in agony, hence subjecting herself to more slaps and smacks.

The kidnapper chuckled lightly: ‘kid, you are wrong’. Bewildered, I looked around to see where his sight landed. Once I heard a familiar voice, Asteria’s eye dilated in horror and I understood instantly.

Asteria’s sister, named Audelia as Judge Pao informed me, was at the end of the alleyway. She was calling for Asteria to answer but Asteria kept quiet so as to not put her sister in harm’s way. Unfortunately, the kidnapper’s eyes shone with dollar signs. He rushed over to Audelia, dragged her by her ponytail and tossed her over next to Asteria.

“I was looking for you everywhere! I told you to stay close to me at all times, Asteria!” Audelia nagged, even after being yanked by the hair, she still looked out for her sister first. They relished the reunion for a fleeting moment, then returned to reality dejectedly.

“You’re a pretty little one, I’ll probably get a huge ransom off of you.” The man stroked Audelia’s cheek. Disgusted, Audelia spat at the kidnapper. His eyes narrowed and he laughed maniacally. Walking backwards, he reached for a broken pipe situated behind him and charged forward. As he ran in a mad dash, Asteria hurried to scoot over in front of Audelia, moving sideways frantically to swerve the hit.

Fortunately, the pipe had only struck her shoulder, barely missing her head. The kidnapper infuriatingly screamed at them while flailing his arms around. Seizing the opportunity, Asteria stealthily rolled over and snatched the pipe. She readied herself as the man was still spewing vulgar language at them and aimed it towards him. “Bang!” She swung with all her might. Landing the hit on his head, the stranger fell forward, unconscious.

14 March 2003

“Miss Wong, are you remorseful for your action?” The judge questioned.

“No.” Asteria said persistently. “I do not regret killing him and I will dig up his grave to do it again in a heartbeat. He would’ve attacked Audelia if I hadn’t killed him first!” Asteria puffed up her chest in a childish way to appear more confident, reminding me that she was only 16 when this traumatic experience occurred.

Asteria slammed her hands onto the desk, startling everyone in the courtroom. “I killed him! So? I did it to protect my sister who cared for me when everyone else failed to. Would you rather Audelia and I have died and have a bloodthirsty kidnapper on the loose?”

15 March 2003

“But the legal system in Hong Kong is renowned for bringing justice to all! I can’t believe the court ruled in favour of that kidnapper!” I exclaimed, unable to believe the jury’s decision, I turned to face Judge Pao, on the verge of tears, hoping he would assure me that Asteria’s life ended happily ever after.

However, Judge Pao only shook his head slightly, and explained, “The legal system had not been polished and refined years ago. Unlike today’s Hong Kong, there were flaws and corruption everywhere, including the courtroom.” Sensing my anxiety, Judge Pao patted my back to ease my worries. “However, people in Hong Kong have always been keen on serving justice. Trust the people, young one.”

17 March 2003

“Justice for Asteria! Justice for Asteria!” I glanced at Judge Pao in confusion, he simply grinned and nudged me in the direction of the sound. Upon floating up to get a better look, I saw a rally of people protesting for Asteria’s justice.

People stood in front of the courtroom which sentenced Asteria to a life sentence and refused to budge even when the authorities came to reprimand them. Holding hands to form one extended line, they shouted “Justice for Asteria” in unison, as a unit.

While scanning the banners with traditional Chinese characters, a person at the front line of the procession looked familiar. Looking between Judge Pao and him multiple times, I had a revelation. “Judge Pao, is that you?” Judge Pao’s eyes sparkled with mischief, merely saying, “The one and only. Justice will serve.”

18 March 2003

I watched as Judge Pao earnestly delivered his speech on why Asteria shouldn’t be convicted with evidence that the kidnapper initiated the fight first, hence Asteria’s killing of the man would only be considered self-defense.

“Asteria killed that heinous man in order to shield her sister. The entirety of Hong Kong believes that you have made a mistake, Judge. Just look around. Every single person here has signed this petition because they believe Asteria should not be punished so harshly. She might have committed something wrong, but she herself should not be wronged. Her cries must be heard, her pleas should be addressed.” Judge Pao continued on as the applause from the public got louder and louder.

Silence grew while the crowd outside the courtroom waited patiently for the court to rule its final verdict. Even heavy breaths could be heard down the soundless hallway, cutting the tension with a knife.

“Asteria is proven innocent!” With a bang of the gavel, Asteria was free and given the justice she deserved...

The crowd cheered for Asteria, someone who they didn't know personally, but they had fought for her justice because they understood that Asteria only killed out of love for her sister.

Teleporting back above the clouds, I slotted Asteria's file inside the cabinet of Heaven with a hopeful smile.

The Trials of Xin Yue

HKUGA College, Choy, Hiu Chi Charis – 16

Part One

It was happening again.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Confused, she sat up — and stared.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She could still feel the blood on her hands.

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

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

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

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

Part Two

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“WEI— WU—”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What were your motivations to kill her?”

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

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

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

Pao narrowed his eyes, leaning forward.

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

Xin Yue started to shake.

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

Pao stiffened. *So she was unconscious.*

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

Xin Yue ducked her head.

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

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

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

He raised his voice further.

“Court is adjourned!”

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

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

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

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

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

“*WEI— WU—*”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Bang!

“*Explain yourself, Wen Ming!*”

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

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

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

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

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

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

"LIES!" Wen Ming bellowed, "IT'S ALL LIES!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Double Identity: Not Recommended

HKUGA College, Leung, Yan Yu Angelice – 15

“You are hereby found guilty of escaping from justice. With the many sins you’ve committed, of which include deceit, treachery and murder, you are sentenced to immediate death.”

A pair of eyes, uncannily black, glared up at him from the guillotine. “This is not the last you’ll hear of me,” he hissed. The axe swung, and his head dropped, void-like eyes still narrowed in hatred.

Letting out a deep sigh, Judge Pao turned away from the gory scene. His eyes met those of one of the attendees of today’s court: the person who had reported the case. Said person had looked a little pale in the face, so Pao smiled briefly at him to offer reassurance.

Pao had never understood why people would even commit crimes worthy of a death sentence. But still, it was his job to dish out justice, and dish out he did, never having left a case unsolved.

Or so he thought, up until a particularly tricky case landed itself in his hands a few days later. The person who reported the prior case had mysteriously died, but how exactly he had died was unknown. In fact, the person who reported his death, Quan, didn’t even know he died until she dropped in to offer some extra vegetables from her farmland.

Quan, who was the victim’s neighbour, had reported the case as a simple situation of discovered death, but there were way more plotholes than there should’ve been. For instance, just by simply asking around, Pao found that the victim had made plans with his drinking buddies, and so suicide or any diagnosed illnesses (not that there were any) were out of the question. However, there was no sign of struggle, nor was there any foreign evidence left behind in the house, so he could not manage to pinpoint the victim’s cause of death with certainty.

Analysing the only suspicious item within the house was his only option on the table – quite literally. A cup of tea blinked innocently at him from where it sat on the table. Its contents were drained, but the dregs were still present, cooled from having been left there.

He had an underling, Wen Chang, take a portion of the dregs to the local doctor in order to identify its ingredients. After he was sure Wen Chang was gone and that no one else was nearby, he closed his eyes, and his aura shifted immediately. If one was near, they would find the atmosphere around him to be oppressive, and despite their bravery they wouldn’t help but feel intimidated. He opened his eyes again, and said menacing aura remained still, his gaze so piercing it could see right through one’s heart.

Well, on a mental level, yes, since that was one of the abilities granted to him along with the role of the Fifth Yama. Acting as a judge of the underworld as well as of mankind, he was mainly in charge of correcting those who did not believe in the existence of cause and effect, amongst various other Taoist beliefs.

Normally he would not use his abilities to aid a case concerning the human world — they were two different planes of existence, after all — but he had the ominous feeling that there was something bigger involved, something sinister and out of this world. Focusing on his spiritual sight, he did all he could to search for any remnants of unearthly energy.

However, as he continued his search, he couldn’t locate anything that indicated the presence of non-human entities either. After a while, sensing that Wen Chang was about to return, he retracted his powers and greeted the man with a bow of his head. “Any findings?”

Wen Chang snapped to attention, nodding at Pao. "The doctor says that it most likely consists of various kinds of common toxic weeds, although there is something else mixed among it as well. An unidentified ingredient, he said, but he also cautioned that it reeked of death." Pao thanked Wen Chang, dismissing him.

As Wen Chang left the house, Pao reached for one of the other portions of the tea dregs set apart on the table, and poured it all into his mouth. He hummed in thought as he chewed, sampling the soggy clump with his tongue. Swallowing, he let out a sound of appraisal, nodding in affirmation. "I knew my hunch was correct."

Late in the afternoon, Quan was idling in her room when a voice sounded from nearby. "Tell me what really happened." Quan whipped her head around and found Pao standing near the entryway. "J—Judge Pao!" Quan hastily scrambled to her feet, but Pao waved her down, taking a few steps closer. "I am a firm believer that any claim with concerns to a case, regardless of its abnormality, should be heard and taken into consideration. I could tell that you were withholding information when you reported the crime. Is there anything more you would be willing to tell me?"

Quan chewed on her bottom lip, clearly reluctant to speak her mind. But then, she met Pao's eyes. Instinctively, she knew that the gaze belonged to that of a kind and wise person, someone who would not judge her. It drew her in, and she felt the urge to tell him. "When I first stepped into his house I could've sworn...no, I *swear* I felt this creepy presence, as if someone was standing right beside me. I heard something whispering in my ear as well...and then I saw his body on the floor. Cold and lifeless. I was so scared I immediately left the house and bolted to the city..." Quan's face had turned a pale white.

"But it's probably all just my psych, please don't worry about it," she rushed to add as the blood slowly returned to her face. "It's probably just nothing." "I see. Thank you for your time." And as quickly as he had arrived, Pao left the room, leaving Quan to her own devices.

And as Quan sat back onto her bed once more, a thought ran through her mind. When had Pao even managed to enter her room, let alone her house?

Meanwhile, Pao strolled out of the house, closing his eyes while doing so. The world then dissolved around him, reduced to streams of colour that flowed away like sand. But as he kept walking on, footsteps unfaltering, the world reassembled itself from the dust once more, the streams of sand solidifying into concrete existences. He opened his eyes, and he must've been satisfied with what he saw as he continued on his leisurely saunter, seemingly unfazed by the change of scenery.

He was in a garden of sorts, with all sorts of flora and flowers that grew and bloomed profusely. But their zest was left unchecked, and so the degree of their growth had spiralled out of control at some point, the plants appearing more like monsters than gifts of life. There was an ominous feeling that lay about the collection of flora, but Pao seemed to pay it no heed as he picked his way through the maze of unorthodox greenery.

He stops in front of a field of ghostly flowers, each and every one a succulent shade of crimson. Although, his focus wasn't on the flowers, but much rather a patch of disrupted soil that the gaps between them revealed. "Just as I thought," he muttered to no one in particular. He kneeled down to touch the patch of soil and concentrated. A silhouette materialised from the shadows. Stepping back, Pao observed as the figure made a show of yanking what would've been one of the flowers out of the soil, harvesting the roots with a blade. As it did so, its features became clearer and sharper, the shadows becoming more and more certain in the image they formed. The silhouette then deposited the unwanted flower in the hole formed, covering them up with another layer of dirt and as such concealing his tracks.

Pao dug at the spot with his bare hands, and he didn't need to dig deep before voilà, the scattered remains of the flower stared back at him, petals now soggy and a deep rotten burgundy. "Nice attempt," he murmured, "but not good enough."

As if it heard, the figure then looked at him, features now refined enough to reveal that the culprit was a young man. But the most unsettling part was his eyes, deep and clouded with hatred despite their murkiness. Pao frowned at that. It was strange that the shadows could not reveal the culprit's eyes.

But then, realisation washed over him like an ice bucket over his head, and he stared at the silhouette with wide eyes. What if the shadows had already captured his eyes perfectly? What if his eyes were, naturally, eerily black...like *twin voids*...

Hurrying to his feet, Pao closed his eyes once more and the realm faded away, along with the shadowy silhouette. As he opened his eyes, he found himself in his room. A cup of tea lay on the table in front of him, an innocent pale brown. The tea was piercingly redolent — the signature smell of oolong tea — but yet there was something off about it.

Seemingly paying no heed to his doubts, Pao downed the tea in one gulp, then turned to sit down on his bed for a moment of rest. But after a few minutes, he started to dry heave, shuddering weakly as he clutched at his chest. He toppled forward onto the ground, coming up short for breath as he gasped desperately for air like a fish on land, forceful coughs racking his body.

A laugh then sounded from somewhere above him, cold and mocking. Pao turned his head upwards weakly, and could only barely make out a silhouette through his squinted eyes. The figure felt familiar, but he couldn't quite place his finger on the person's identity. "So it all ends here for the great Judge Pao." The voice of the unknown guest sent chills up Pao's spine. "How ironic that he dies to the same cause of his unsolved case...and by the hand of the person he sentenced to death as well."

"Indeed, I am what you would call a ghost coming back to haunt the living. But really, I would simply like to think of this as...appropriate payback. It's simple: he ratted me out and led me to my death, I lead him to his. And you. You killed me through your 'decrees of justice'. So, the same fate that befell him will now come upon you," here he crouched before Pao, sardonic smile mere millimeters from Pao's face, "while I watch."

"Do you..." Pao coughed, his whispered words barely audible, "do you not think it wrong to break the cycle of proper reincarnation? There are dire consequences for ignoring the law of cause and effect..."

The ghost chuckled at his words. "Do you really think I would care for those? As they always say, 'where there is a will, there is a way', and my will is that I must get revenge upon both of you for foiling my plans." His tone changed from one of cheerfulness to one that was icily unwelcome. "Therefore, I plotted and schemed to find my way back to the overworld and get my revenge. And here we are!"

Pao exhaled, a raspy breath leaving his lungs. "I see." His eyelids fluttered shut, seeming to have no fight left in them. At the sight, black eyes curved upwards in a smile, and the ghost stood up. "Not-so-sweet dreams, judge."

But then, the world spun around him, and he found himself whisked away before he could even react. He faintly managed to register a weight on his ankle, so he looked down — and found Pao holding onto his shoes. Overly shocked by the recent turn of events, he could only watch in horror as Pao got up and brushed the dust off his own newly donned robes. "Wha— How—" the ghost could only blubber frantically, gesturing wildly at his surroundings and Pao.

It was Pao's turn to smile. Nonchalantly, as if he had never been affected by the poison. "You have sinned against the natural laws of cause and effect. As the Fifth Yama, I henceforth take responsibility for exacting judgement upon your actions, right here and now, in my Department of Hell."

“Sudden heart failure?” “I know it’s difficult to believe, but all the evidence can only point towards this conclusion. It wasn’t suicide, nor murder, plus the doctor judged something to have been wrong with the victim’s heart.” Wen Chang glanced up at Pao, skeptical. “All right then. We all trust your judgement.” He then rolled the decree up and headed out to the court.

Pao lingered in the room, sighing to himself. Technically speaking, he was not lying — heart failure *was* one of the conditions triggered by that crimson flower from Hell, and also quite possibly the ultimate reason for the victim’s death. But he could not, at all costs, tell the entire story as it was. He scoffed at himself.

“Mortal judge by day, supernatural judge by night. Who thought that this was a good idea?”

Meanwhile, somewhere in a certain Department of Hell, a vengeful spirit with uncannily black eyes awaited his end.

Trial and Error

HKUGA College, Shiu, Lok Yiu Athena – 15

Pao generally preferred to wake early, as a rule of thumb— even on days without the need to attend early court meetings.

It was little more than a habit that'd dogged his steps since childhood, but being an early riser meant more time to dedicate to his duties, more time to get things done, and there was *always* work waiting, waiting.

Work like the mound of papers hiding the entirety of his study's desk from view, glowing an ominous yellow from the oil lamp in his hand.

Papers that needed to be filled in with trial proceedings, reports of livestock theft that needed to be proofread, acquittals that needed to be verified and confirmed.

...*shenning baoyou*, not even sunrise and Pao's head was already throbbing with the beginnings of a migraine.

Granted, the sun always rose late this late in the year, but—

He sighed, rubbing at his temple with his free hand.

Thank the Gods that his study was tucked away in the back of Kaifeng, and that the few who could bother him knew better than to cross him that way.

Aiyah. Best get to work.

The early rays of the sun had only just started to pour through Pao's lone window like molten gold when the familiar *dong-dong, dong-dong* of the pan-drum outside destroyed the calm silence of the study.

Hurried footsteps started to sound through the thick mahogany door not a moment later, companion to the lingering echo of the pan-drum's call for aid, the rumblings of a waking giant.

Kaifeng was truly shaking off the grogginess of night, now— and Pao put down his brush with a soft *thunk* of wood, taking care to blow out his lamp, allowing himself a moment to gather his thoughts before striding out his study, dipping his head towards Ma-Han and Zhang-Long in the hallway— both Imperial Guards must had come running the moment the drum sounded, as always.

“Ma-Han, Zhang-Long, send the order to open court!”

“*WEI— WU—*”

The shout thundered through the court, ricocheting off the walls, the ground, the pillars, and though none of Pao's court flinched— they'd all worked here for long enough— the already-trembling woman staggering in flailed, dropping to her knees in an instant.

“*I— I see his Honour!*”

The gavel shook under his palm the way it'd done countless times before— smooth, rectangular, familiar, and its lingering echo rumbled through the air like thunder as the poor woman on the ground shook like a leaf under the pressure.

“Who kneels upon the court?” Pao boomed, voice unfolding through the courtroom like a fan as he buried the smidge of guilt that came with seeing the girl fall even lower, “What grievances do you bring?”

“He— *He—Yu*, Honoured Judge Pao.”

Tian, she didn’t look any older than eighteen— and it seemed like most felt as uncomfortable as he did, judging by how much all four of his Imperial Guards were shifting.

The girl— *He—Yu*— lifted her head in his direction, swallowing.

“Our cows have been going missing.”

Pao stiffened, fingers tightening over his gavel as near everyone in the room straightened, as *Chao—fu*— one of his Imperial Guards— shot a quick but significant look his way.

Another livestock case, Pao thought, a sliver of hope coming into existence despite all the dead ends *Zhan—Zhao* had encountered over the past weeks.

He steeled himself.

“Who do you accuse?”

‘Who do you accuse,’ because this was a courtroom, and most who came with an accused, be they correct or not.

He—Yu started to shake, again.

“I— it— Madam Hong, Mister Liu— our neighbours, they are— their animals have been disappearing, too. Madam Hong’s servant says she saw a man the night her pig’s litter went missing. I’ve been watching over our cows after... the first time. I saw—” She swallowed, shaking her head, “He’s very big, spiky hair, kind of looked like... a merchant from the *Chenfen* market.”

Pao narrowed his eyes, leaning forwards in tandem with his court.

This was more than he’d expected— a solid description. They would need to look more into this.

“May you elaborate?”

He—Yu ducked her head again.

“...Mister Liu has him in his house. That’s why I came, because Madam Hong and Mister Liu are watching over him, and Mother’s been sick for the past week...”

Bang, the gavel went, the loud echo of wood impacting wood resounding through the stunned silence of the courtroom.

“The truth is not yet clear. There is no place for private justice here,” Pao rumbled, eyes remaining narrowed as *He—Yu* flinched again, “This court will look into the matter, however.”

He raised his voice further.

“Court is adjourned!”

Zhang-Long and Zhan-Zhao brought in Zhao Xue-Min on charges of theft and illegal selling of livestock the next week, after questioning Liu Feng-Qing and Hong Mei-Ge on their own stolen livestock.

Their claims fit He-Yu's claims, and the methods fit the modus operandi of the recent string of animal thefts.

Zhao Xue-Min had surprisingly loose lips, for a man of his demeanour— maybe it was because of Pao's reputation, maybe because of nerves— but it was good news, either way, because he was a *goldmine* of information, if one knew how to prod him.

The final nail in the coffin was Zhao-Fu tracking Xue-Min's trail to a town a day's trip over, to find a market selling livestock— including two pigs and a cow with a distinctive white patch that matched He-Yu's description— at astoundingly low prices.

They'd even documented their sales, all the incriminating evidence laid bare like a cook did ingredients, *and—*

Finally, *finally*.

Weeks of investigations, of dead ends.

They had the culprits, and Pao *wasn't* going to let them slip away.

The gavel's low *bang* thundered through the courtroom, again, again, again.

"*Zhao Xue-Min!* Do you know your crime?"

The suspect only gave an irritating smile from his position on the ground, held in place by two guards, showing no sign of being intimidated by the oppressing rumble of the drums or the members of the court lining the walls.

Pao narrowed his eyes as Zhao's smile stretched further.

"I am guilty of nothing, Your Honour. I was illegally held in Liu Feng-Qing's house because of a simple misunderstanding! It is *he—*"

Pao'd heard this spiel over a thousand times, and listening further only made his anger rise all over again— so he slammed his gavel down, its thunderous echo silencing the man as Pao boomed, voice low, dangerous, "*Zhao Xue-Min!* Indeed Liu Feng-Qing has detained you illegally, but this is your trial, not his. Furthermore, three people have testified that they have seen you trespassing on their property, and this court has proof that you are involved in the illegal trading of livestock!"

Bang.

"*Explain yourself!*"

Zhao's face twisted as he struggled against the two guards holding him down, grunting as the smile slipped off his face like congee, and Pao let himself feel a small bit of triumph at the sight.

"*Lies! Slander!* Liu Feng-Qing has long resented me, for I have bested him many times in Pai Gow and taken home the spoils! For all I have heard of Kaifeng's sense of justice and honesty, I *do not see that spirit right now!*"

“If you insist on continuing with this face, Zhao Xue–Min, this court will show you proof of your wrongdoing!”

Pao swept an arm through the air, hollering, “*Bring me the records!*”

“Yes!”

One of the guards peeled away hurriedly, making his way over to the elevated stage in the middle of the court, and Ma–Long took the stack of papers from him before stepping up onto the platform.

Pao unfolded them with an audible rustle.

“*Zhao Xue–Min!* These receipts show clearly that you and two others have sold over two dozen livestock to various peasants over the past three months, and that these livestock were all obtained illegally! See here, a note written in the margins: ‘When asked of livestock origin, claim that they are self–bred.’”

“That proves *nothing*–”

“You will be *silent* unless this court requires you to speak. And, as for proof,” Pao continued on, “Why would one need to ‘claim to have self–bred livestock’ if said livestock was really self–bred or bought?”

Zhao snarled at him from his position on the ground only for his guards to press him down again, and he heaved, “You can’t prove *anything*, with that. Has it have my name on it? Has it written my direct guilt?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact–”

“*Honoured Judge Pao!*”

Pao paused, looking towards the back of the court as a guard– one of the guards stationed at the gates– ran in abruptly, all heads turning towards him.

“J–Judge Pao. Prince Consort Zhao Lok–Tian is outside, and he is demanding entry.”

That hellish smile was creeping back up on Zhao’s face again.

Shenming baoyou.

This would be nothing good, but Pao cannot refuse the entry of a Prince Consort without potentially offending the Emperor– and he’d come close to that enough times in his work to know how disastrous that would be, so he forced his apprehension *down* and gestured for Consort Zhao to be allowed in, despite everything.

“*Little Min!*” Consort Zhao cried as he entered, rushing towards Zhao Xue–Min on the ground, “What are they *doing* to you?”

Bang.

“This is a *court*, Prince Consort–”

Consort Zhao whirled towards Pao, a snarl too much like Zhao’s taking over his features.

“How *dare* you speak to me that way, Pao! This is unacceptable! Release my cousin this instant!”

“He is a criminal, Consort Zhao–”

“– and your proof?”

Pao had to keep his face impassive with more effort than usual as he read out the receipts, again, as he laid out his reasoning, again.

The way Consort Zhao furrowed his brows did not bode well, and indeed— Zhao swept a robed arm through the air, gritting out, “It does not matter. This is not a grievous crime, is it not?”

“They are only *peasants*,” the Zhao on the ground spat, vicious, “What does it matter if they lose a few pigs, a few cows?”

Bang.

Pao gripped his gavel tight as he stood, suppressed anger growing like the rising tide.

“All are equal before the law. A crime is a crime, and all must be punished accordingly!”

“...Xue—Min was coerced, then,” Consort Zhao muttered, haltingly, a smile spreading across his face again, “He was coerced into the black market. The conspirators forced him into a life of theft under threats! Isn’t that right, Little Min?”

Zhao Xue—Min nodded along enthusiastically, the same sleazy smile crossing his features.

“Yes, Yes! See, it’s Lu Hong—Le and Xu Tian—Ming that should be facing these charges!”

“*Baseless conjecture!*” Pao hollered, slamming his gavel against his desk once more, “Lu and Xu will already be facing charges at a later date, and their guilt does not mean your innocence!”

Silence, for a moment. And then—

“I— I can offer you gold! The spoils from the market!”

Pao let his face drop into a stern frown as the Prince Consort blanched, whirling on Zhao.

“*No, Little Min, what are you doing—*”

“*It’s worked before!*”

“Resorting to bribery, now?” He questioned, glaring at the two in the middle of the courtroom, “I believe your presence is not required here anymore, Prince Consort.”

“Xue—Min doesn’t know better, Pao! *I* believe that this transgression can be overlooked—”

“Everyone in this room has seen and heard what your cousin has said. He has admitted his guilt, and we have more than enough information to come to a decision. *This court—*”

“*Stop!*” Consort Zhao interrupted *again*, holding out a hand as determination— or was it desperation?— set over his features, “I can and will take this to your superiors, Pao! I *am* the Prince Consort to Princess Piao—Hua, and they *will* listen to me.”

Pao knew all too well how that statement was unfortunately true, and so he pulled himself to his full height despite all the things wrong about this trial, retorting, “So be it, then, Consort Zhao. Let us see how this ends.”

The Master of the East Palace, Ping An—Yao, was someone Pao knew all too well.

They’d come to blows many times over the years because of their mutual stubbornness and differing ideals, but despite that it’d never really devolved into *hate*.

Small mercies, Pao thought, as he and Consort Zhao greeted Master Ping with due respect in his home, surrounded by red carpets, red candles, red walls.

Red, red, red.

“What brings you here, Judge Pao, Consort Zhao?”

“Pao is accusing Xue–Min of dealing in the illegal market and theft, Master. This is *unacceptable*, and his proof is flimsy–”

Pao sent a sharp glare his way.

“You have seen our proof yourself, Prince Consort.”

“I *insist* that we cannot determine his guilt with them! Would you convict an innocent coerced into crime?”

Not this, again.

“He has *admitted*–”

“*Halt!* The two of you,” Master Ping boomed as he neared, robes sweeping through the air like water, “Cease your useless squabbling.”

Pao snapped his head towards Master Ping, hesitating for a moment before bowing again in apology.

The Prince Consort followed after a beat.

“How old did you say your cousin is, Consort Zhao?”

“Twenty. Master Ping, his crimes are light,” And Zhao bowed, again, “Please forgive his transgressions this one time!”

Master Ping actually seemed like he was considering Consort Zhao’s proposal, and Pao hurriedly put his hands together, bowing as he cut in, “The law is the law, Master Ping. All need to be punished accordingly!”

“*Rise.*”

Let Ping’s thoughts align with mine this one time, tian–

Master Ping stroked his beard, frowning as he turned towards Pao.

Oh, no.

“Judge Pao.”

Oh, no.

“Zhao Xue–Min is young and naïve, and his crimes are light. I believe it will be best if you let him go.”

Wangdi. Pao hated it when things turned out this way.

“What do we do now, Your Honor?” Ma–Han asked as they re–entered Kaifeng, strides larger than usual in his frustration.

This is a disaster, Pao sighed, rubbing at his temples. His migraine from earlier had not abated any— no, it'd gotten worse.

"...keep him in the prisons, for now," He gritted out, voice low, "I will see what I can do."

"Yes!" All four of his Imperial Guards bowed, hurrying off to the holding cells.

The echo of footsteps lingered long after they went, however, and Pao turned to see Liu Feng-Qing, He-Yu and Hong Mei-Ge standing at the gate.

"Is he in prison, Your Honor? Has he been judged guilty?"

It hurt to see young He-Yu this enthusiastic, when Pao knew the kindest thing he could do was weigh her down with news she shouldn't have to hear.

"...not yet," He said, pensive, "Zhao has friends in high places. This court is doing its best to find justice for you, Lady He."

"He's getting off the hook, isn't he," Hong accused, her soft features sharpening into a scowl, and she turned to Liu, "You *said* he's one of the good ones! That he finds justice for everyone!"

Liu only stood, stiff, silent. Something tightened in Pao's chest as he felt the three's trust in him slipping away like water through open cracks, even more so when Liu finally whispered, "I guess I was wrong," before turning to leave.

Pao didn't even have the heart to shout at them for the disrespect— and his resolve hardened as he stormed back into Kaifeng, guards scattering out of his way as he rushed into the holding cells with all the force of a thunderstorm.

"Wang-Chao, Ma-Han, Zhang-Long, Zhao-Hu!"

"H-Here!"

"Ready the sudan!"

"Yes!"

Pao bowed deeply, greeting Master Ping with his fist in palm— again, in his study, again, surrounded by red, red, red.

Ping sipped his steaming tea.

Clink.

"Rise. You are very lucky that I do not have much to do today, Judge Pao. What do you want?"

Pao straightened, brushing off his robes.

"Please reconsider your decision on Zhao Xue-Min's guilt, Master Ping."

"It is over and *done*, Judge Pao."

No, it is not— and Pao narrowed his eyes as he stepped closer.

“It sets a dangerous precedent,” He insisted, “If someone can be saved from a theft and dealing charge just by being related to the Prince Consort, what happens when someone commits a murder? One of the Ten Abominations? What happens then, Master Ping?”

Ping stood, pushing his chair away, retorting, “That is *different*—”

“And it *has* happened before, has it not? We cannot, in good faith, let criminals off charges easily because of family intervention. Justice is blind, Master.”

Silence.

“You cannot argue that I am wrong,” Pao added, eyes trained on Ping, intent on changing his mind, “And you will not convince me otherwise. If I cannot carry out my duties correctly, I’d much rather not carry them out at all.”

Ping’d known him for long enough to know that— and Ping picked up his tea, again.

Pao held back the urge to knock some sense into the man, continuing on, stiffly, “Maybe that’s what you truly want, hm? Me out of your way, Master Ping?”

He leaned forwards, locking gazes with Ping— and the clinking of his cup resounded throughout the tension-laden air as Ping started, “You’ve said enough, Judge Pao.”

Ah. Pao was going to get demoted again.

“You make a valid point.”

Wait, what—

“I concede.”

“*WEI— WU—*”

The melodious shouts thundered through the court, ricocheting off the walls, the ground, the pillars, again, and Zhao Xue-Min was thrown onto the ground before him, *again*.

For the final time, hopefully.

His fingers wrapped tight around his gavel, and it shook under his palm as wood smashed against wood, the lingering echo rumbling through the air like thunder.

Again.

“Zhao Xue-Min!” Pao hollered, “For the last time, *do you know your crime?*”

Zhao struggled against his guards futilely, screaming, “*You can’t keep me here! Master Ping has acquitted me—*”

“And he has authorised this trial! Hence,” Pao stood, sweeping an arm through the air, blood rushing loudly past his ears, “*This court hereby finds Zhao Xue-Min guilty of theft, illegal selling of livestock, and attempted bribery, and sentences him to twenty years of hard labour!*”

Secretive Saga

HKUGA College, Wong, Ka Yan – 16

The man was woken by the sound of footsteps. It was still dark when his eyes snapped open, fully alert.

The door slid open and a familiar figure appeared. There was an aura of regal confidence in the way this figure carried himself and he spoke with a rather nervous, but commanding voice.

“Judge Pao?”

Pao immediately sat up in his small bed, wide awake.

The figure’s hair floated in the wind, and his bloodshot eyes gleamed sharply in the dark, bearing a look of anger and weariness. He unwaveringly looked directly into Pao’s eyes.

Pao knew exactly who this figure was. With his distinct posture, anyone could have recognized the Emperor from a mile away. He was the person who ran the whole country after all.

“Good evening, your majesty. What brings you here, you know, on this cold winter night?” Pao asked with genuine concern.

Pao quickly flung off his bedsheets and jumped to his feet, landing in a bow.

The emperor took a step forward slowly, still in disbelief about the news he was about to share.

“Pao, my imperial jade seal has been stolen!”

Judge Pao could see those deeply arched eyebrows on the emperor.

“Who could it be?” The emperor continued, “the only people I can trust now are you and the Imperial Tutor! I have many officials, but I don’t want many people to know about this news, so I can only tell you about this. I’m afraid that if this news spreads among my people, it will negatively affect my reputation! Can you help me keep this news a secret? Judge Pao, you are known for being selfless and righteous. Please help me find the culprit!”

He handed Pao Zheng a golden scroll.

Pao Zheng immediately knew what this was – an imperial edict! He knelt and received the scroll with both of his hands.

The emperor smiled, “three days. Remember, don’t tell anyone else this secret.”

Pao knew what he meant—if he couldn’t finish the work in three days, that meant death.

“I don’t think three days will be enough, your—”

Pao gasped when he looked up. Emperor Renzong had vanished into thin air. The Judge rushed to the doorway to see if the emperor was still near, but the doorway was just as creepy and empty as before.

It was impossible for the Judge to feel anything but dread as he lay back in bed, knowing that somewhere on the horizon, the true storm awaited...

Pao sat on an abandoned tire on the rocky floor, ringlets of white steam escaping his lips. All was quiet except for the sound of his breathing, but his mind was loud.

Memories of the emperor the day before flashed before his eyes. He scoffed and kicked the pebbles on the ground. They landed with a clear splash into the lake a few feet away. A forlorn side echoed into the night.

Who could come and help me at this time?

He fell into endless despair.

Would the emperor lose his trust in me?

How short would my life be – I could've helped so many more people in this country fight for justice...

“Judge Pao,” a gruff voice called.

Pao’s focus broke, and he turned around to see a dark-skinned boy, with thick, short hair and the flamboyance of a hedgehog landing next to him. The guard had an unconcealable awe-inspiring righteousness between his brows and dark eyes.

“Any clues?” Pao was hopeful.

But to Pao’s disappointment, the guard only shook his head, “we will continue our search.” With that, he vanished into thin air.

The guard was one of the guards who had been stationed outside Pao’s home to assist if and when assistance was required.

With nothing else to do, Pao sighed and prayed. He prayed for a miracle, to help him solve the case. He prayed to God, Avalokitesvara, but no one answered. He fell into endless despair.

It had been three days since Emperor Renzong visited Pao. Every morning at dawn, the sunlight would shine on the palace in Bianliang, the Song Dynasty’s capital. It was built of bricks of varying sizes and shapes, each one unique. From a distance, it was greenish-gold, but up close, it was clear that it was made up of mosaic tortoise green that shone with a beam of light. The palace was a symbol of the crown of the landscape and the protector of the country’s people.

The eunuch guarding the palace door was still sleeping when a frantic knock came from the outside of the palace.

“Come in.”

The door slid open and Pao peered inside the room, seeing the emperor and the Imperial Tutor sitting in the room, enjoying their tea.

“Your majesty,” Pao knelt, with his head bent, then he turned to greet the Imperial Tutor.

An awkward silence filled the room.

The silence was interrupted by a kind voice, “Dear Pao, how’s your investigation coming along?”

Yet an unspoken, unanswered conversation hung in the air.

Pao glanced at the Imperial Tutor, reminding the emperor of the Imperial Tutor’s presence.

“Dear Pao, he’s no enemy of ours. Just speak out what’s on your mind.”

A pause. Suddenly, Pao could move his lips again. “Your majesty, would you kindly allow me to have a few more days for the investigation?” he swallowed down a full mouth of fear.

Before the emperor could answer Pao's question, a mad, enraged sound echoed through the hall, "rumors spread like wildfire, Judge Pao! Some are saying that your majesty hasn't protected the countries' imperial jade seal properly, and he doesn't deserve to be the emperor!" the Imperial Tutor Pang interrupted quite abruptly.

Glancing at Pao, the Imperial Tutor was beginning to raise his voice.

"It's not hard to guess who spread the rumor! How come you still have the courage to come here, to face your majesty? You may be the thief too!"

What an interesting idea. Thought Pao.

He heard the guards whispering behind his back. A "traitor" they called him.

The guards, who originally stood near him avoided him as much as they could, for who would want to be near a man who betrays the emperor?

For once, Pao didn't become furious, instead, he smiled and looked up at the emperor, for finally at this moment, he knew who the thief was. The emperor was more washed out than two days ago—wrinkles all clung to his face, and several strands of his hair had turned gray.

The emperor fixed his gaze on Pao, his eyes burned with anger.

The man in gold was furious, "Come!" He called the guards standing beside the doors, "drag him to jail!"

The voice startled Pao. When his eyes adjusted, Pao saw two armed guards coming towards him, staring at him like he was the foulest creature they had ever seen.

"Your majesty!" Pao exclaimed.

"Wait, I can explain! This isn't what it looks like!"

"Save you lies, traitor!" Pang yelled, and then turned towards the guards.

"Don't just stand there, seize him before he harms your majesty!"

The guards grabbed him by the arms.

"No! You don't understand!" Pao pleaded.

"I'm not a traitor! I can prove it!" He used all of his might to break free from the guards, and continued, "Your majesty, think of it, you only told me of the lost imperial jade seal. You told me that Pang was the only other person who knew about it. This means that Pang is the thief! And the rumors— I wouldn't have had the time to spread these rumors. The guards near my residence know that. I haven't talked to anyone but them since the day you visited me."

Pang was even infuriated, he roared, "You can not put the blame on me!"

The emperor fixed his sharp gaze on Pang, stroking his long beard, "I think Pao's hypothesis seems reasonable. I arranged the guards around Pao's residence to protect him. They would have known if he had spoken to anybody else. You spread the rumors, didn't you?"

Pang gulped.

The emperor laughed, a laugh of self-deprecation, "It turns out that the one I trusted the most was the one who has given me the most harm. Guards, seize him!"

Before Pang could defend himself, the guards charged toward him and grabbed him by the arms.

“No! Your majesty!” Pang pleaded. “I’m not a traitor! I’m not a traitor!” his voice echoed through the hall as the guards dragged him out of the room.

“Sorry, Pang, can you forgive me for my actions just now?” Emperor Renzong said apologetically.

“Don’t shame me, your majesty!” Pao turned towards the emperor, “you were blinded by Pang, it’s not your fault.”

Pao left the Imperial Tutor's residence. The soft tapping of his sandals gained volume and lifted his confidence with each step. An excited buzz simmered in the air. A daring smile danced on his lips.

He opened his mouth and inhaled the sweet, sweet sense of freedom...

Another case was successfully solved. He smiled.