

Fiction

Group 4

Lucky Charm

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Jang-Abergel, Lili – 15

“Leave Zhang Heng! Go to your mother!”

My father cried out to me as his body became limp underneath the crushing weight of the rubble. As hot tears streamed down my face, falling onto my torn clothing, I saw my mother in my peripheral, sobbing in my grandmother’s arms as they shoved their way through what had remained of our house to get to safety.

Every time I consider giving up, I remember that moment.

My father passed when I was only 10 years old, leaving me in the care of my mother and grandmother. Growing up, I didn’t really enjoy all the ‘typical’ things boys my age enjoyed; I spent most of my time trying to learn – not anything in particular, really; all I knew was that I was eager to understand how the world worked. My grandmother always told me I reminded her of my father when he was a boy; she never really told me why, but I knew it made her happy to see some of my father still in this world.

I left my city of Nanyang in the Henan province in the year 95 to study in the capitals of Chang’an and Luoyang; along the way, I spent time perfecting my fu poems. After several years of researching and meeting many notable people within the Taixue, I was offered many high-ranking positions within the government, including imperial secretary. Still, I knew that I was destined for something different. After my studies, I returned home with the title of ‘officer of merit’ and dedicated more time to my literary studies. I spent my time composing rhapsodies on the capital cities. Still, after a long time spent in the academic field and 30 years of my life later, I was eager to study verifiable things. Astronomy and mathematics is where I started, and I started publishing my work shortly after. My dedication and interest in mathematics and astronomy were evident to all those around me, and a mere 17 years later, I was named chief astronomer under Emperor An.

With that type of resume, you are probably thinking, what more could I want? I have spent all my life looking for a project that would finally fulfill me, where I could combine my desire to create and my appreciation for the facts. It finally came to me—it came to me when staying with my mother and grandmother back home, and I heard my mother’s silent cries while holding a crumpled letter riddled with minor stains from age and pilling from all the times she has cried while reading it. As a child, I tried to peek over her shoulder many times to see the contents of this seemingly heartbreaking letter, but my mother would give me an exasperated sigh and shoo me away. The only thing I knew about this letter was that it was written by my father, as I could see his tiny, inky signature that had since faded on the back of the page. Now, at the age of 36, you would probably assume I had enough self-control to contain my burning curiosity for the contents of that tattered letter.

I am sorry to disappoint you, but you thought wrong.

I knew exactly where my mother kept the letter, folded neatly in a small polished rosewood box she kept guarded safely in the dresser amid the hallway. I remember her leaving it in that exact spot as a child; I would peek around the corner as she attempted to turn the key as quietly as possible to maintain this level of secrecy she believed she possessed. For a few months after my father’s passing, she hadn’t even bothered to lock the dresser anymore as she found herself returning to that letter multiple times a day, clinging to the only words

he would ever ‘say’ to her again. But as I grew older and she began to heal, reading that letter became a once-a-week occurrence to a monthly one, and then it became something she’d do when she felt a particular moment of desolation. It is mid-day as I sit in my grandmother’s carefully tended garden; I can sense her slightly agitated demeanor as my right foot is on the verge of flattening her freshly planted amaranth. I lifted my foot above its reddish-rose-colored leaves and returned inside, where my mother had just finished securing her usual updo with the same Ji she had used since she was just a girl. She mindlessly slipped the jade clip into her hair and gave me the faintest smile; she was headed to the market to pick up more seeds for my grandmother’s garden.

At last, it was time to give in to my curiosity.

As soon as I heard the vague sound of the front door being closed, I walked guiltily towards the dresser, slightly disappointed in myself, considering I was scolded a great deal of times for attempting to pull off this exact scheme as a boy— but it was too late for that now. Somehow, I had convinced myself I was owed some connection with my father due to how limited my time was with him. That is what I kept repeating to myself as my hands neared closer to the key, which my mom had now just left in the lock; as I turned the key into the lock, my palms grew increasingly clammy, the bronze key nearly slipping from my fingers. The dresser let out a slight click sound, indicating that it was open; wiping my damp palms up and down the cloth of my pants, I allowed myself a moment to breathe before connecting my hands with the cold metal of the dresser knob. The creak and scrape of the dresser being opened seemed awfully louder than a dresser’s typically insignificant sounds; I warily pulled out the shiny rosewood box, making sure that I memorized everything about the scene in front of me as to not leave any hints of my snooping behind. I lifted the small box off the dresser and slowly walked it to my study. Placing the box neatly on my desk, I flip open the small hatch in the front to reveal what this box has been hiding for many years. When I picked it up, I realized it was significantly heavier than I had expected, but examining the contents, I understood why.

Inside the box lay two golden figures with open mouths, one dragon and one frog. I reach down in the box and run my index finger lightly over the small gold detailing along the dragon’s back. I pull both figures out of the box, slightly shocked as the weight revealed that both were solid gold; I silently lecture myself for getting so easily distracted.

As I carefully place the two gold animals on a folded cloth, I pull out the battered letter from the bottom of the box. The paper had become so weary that you could read the ink-written words from the back; a wave of nervousness overcame me as it felt like it might turn to ashes and fall through my fingers like sand. As I turned the paper around, a neatly written note had been scribed;

My dear wife,

On this birthday of yours, I knew that getting you a simple shawl would simply not do. As we reached another joyous year of marriage, I was unsure what I should give you. This past year, you have given me more than I had ever imagined: a beautiful home, the wonderful gift of your love and companionship, and, indeed, the most glorious gift of all: a beautiful son. I thought for months about how it would even be possible to repay you in the slightest, but it is truly impossible to ever give you as much as you have given me.

Nevertheless, I did not want to leave you empty-handed. These two gold animals have been my ‘lucky charm’ since I was a boy; I am not kidding when I say I took these everywhere — I used to complain to my

mother that my pants didn’t fit when, in reality, the animals would weigh my pockets down so much that there was always a 50% chance that my pants might drop to my ankles. I lived a happy, somewhat lucky life and attributed all that good fortune to my two golden animals, but the moment I met you, I packed those two animals into this box because I knew I would never need them again. As long as I live and long afterward, you will always be the most valuable charm I have ever held. You are my lucky charm.

Sincerely,

Your husband, Kan, the second

I softly folded the letter back into its shape, not even having to look at the paper as the creases in the folds were so worn out. My father was my number one role model; I looked to him for everything. I knew him to be a strict man, and I longed for his validation — so, understandably, hearing him speak in such a heartfelt emotional manner left me in complete and utter shock.

It has been two days since I read the letter and found the animals, but in those two days, I have finally decided what my next project will be; a part of me is eager to hold the objects again, feel the cold, heavy gold compared to the wrinkled, almost soft texture of paper.

So I go back; it is risky going back a second time, but again, I give myself the excuse that I need to examine it for research purposes. I make my way back to the ‘forbidden’ dresser, considerably less cautious compared to the last time, but as I soon find out, this would be a mistake.

I can feel my mother’s presence as the bronze key twists in the lock.

Even at 36, I’m sure everyone can agree that a mother’s face of disappointment is the biggest slap in the face. I braced myself, getting ready to take her harsh scolding, but she said nothing — a single tear rolled down her cheek. I suddenly feel very unsure of myself; removing my hands from the dresser, I step to the side, still silent. My mother inches closer to the dresser with the same carefulness I had felt the first time I had opened it. As she pulled out the rosewood box, I held my breath, my nails digging so far into my palms, creating little markings in the shape of crescent moons. My mother then lets out a strangled cry, “My letter is *gone*.” These four words are all I can make out as she sobs hysterically in the middle of our hallway.

I spoke to my mother, and after she had calmed down, I admitted to being the last one in the dresser, the last one that had held the letter. She understood why I wanted to find out more about who my father was and why I resorted to snooping around.

As we sat around the dinner table, my mother, grandmother, and I, eating in silence, my mother suddenly dropped her fork. She looks up from her plate, her eyes filled with urgency and fear; you can almost hear her heart beating. Before we could decipher that look on her face, we felt it, too. The ground began to shake lightly. I listened to a single book from my study drop to the ground, the water in our cups swaying and threatening to spill — but they never did.

My mother and grandmother had their hands intertwined with mine, taking us all back to the worst day of our lives.

Except it is different now, as I stare down at our hands, mine are significantly bigger than theirs, my grandmother’s hand feels notably frailer, and her veins seem much more prominent; I seem to not even recognize my mother’s hand as the strong hand that used to guide me through busy streets or scratch my head until I fell asleep isn’t there anymore, her hand is softer, with tiny dimples and wrinkles.

As soon as it started, it was over. I reassured my mother and grandmother it would be okay, and they headed to bed. I went to my study to continue working on my big project;

I decided it would be a gift to my mother since it was her birthday next week, and after the dresser incident, I was eager to make it up to her somehow. As I sat in my chair, I noticed the folded corner of a very familiar letter; there it was, tucked in the corner of my bookshelf was the letter with just my father's signature sticking out. I carefully lift the shelf as far as I can off the letter, careful not to let the weight of the shelf damage the letter any further, and slide it out until it is safely in my hands.

I wanted to run to my mother at that very moment, but I had a better idea.

In the final stages of my project, I created a machine, a contraption, whatever you'd like to call it, the seismoscope. This device was a large golden cylindrical vase with eight golden dragons circling the top of this vase and eight golden frogs circling the bottom. Like my father's lucky charms, each animal had their mouth open. Every dragon that perched atop the vase carried a golden ball in its mouth, so when an earthquake struck, the ball would drop from the dragon's mouth into the frogs, creating a loud gong-like sound to alert anyone in the *seismoscope*' (as I'm calling it) vicinity. I placed my project in a large box with my father's note tucked in the bottom.

It was the day of my mother's birthday. She hadn't enjoyed celebrating since my father passed, but my grandmother and I always insisted. As it neared the evening, I decided it was time to show my mother the creation, my project where I was able to combine all of the things I love, where I could be creative but still find a way to work in the numbers and most importantly, I found a new way to connect to my family. My invention was then passed on, improved upon, and used worldwide. It satisfies me to know that because of my creation, fewer people will have to go through what my family went through.

With glossy eyes, my mother pulls me closer and whispers in my ear, "You are my lucky charm, Hang Zheng."

The Eight Dragons and the Eight Toads

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Zagury, Annabelle – 15

They say ideas come to you when you least expect them and in a way I guess that was true for me.

I was a 54-year-old man with no wife and no kids. I buried myself in work to avoid realizing that I was miserable. My job was to report auspicious days to the emperor. I had discovered a way to revolutionize cartography, I created a water-powered armillary sphere that depicted the stars and the heaven and yet I was stuck. When you are an inventor you are expected to keep on inventing, to keep coming up with new ideas but sometimes, like a writer, you have no ideas you are stuck and thoughtless.

The worst thing that you can do to a miserable person is make them more miserable but that was what the Gods decided to do to me.

The villagers of Xi'e have always been religious and righteous, allowing them to be spared from the wrath of the Gods. However one horrible day the sound of the horses hooves on the gravel woke me up in the dead of the night and thoughts started to flood my brain. I recalled I just heard the sound of the 'first shift gong' not too long ago. Why would I have a messenger at this time of the night? Will it be a message from the Emperor? The banging of the door knocker filled the house, the sound of someone walking up the stairs echoed through the hallways and the shimmering light of the candle moved along with the sound of the footsteps. The feeling of hurriedness and urgency has woken my mind. All of a sudden my bedroom door was thrown open and the dresser was standing there out of breath. He looked at me with a face of unease and distress.

"What has happened?" I asked with impatience in my voice.

"Sir, a messenger has arrived with news from the provinces" he blurted out with a roll of script in his hand. I quickly took it and unrolled it.

"What is it, what happened?" I said while I juggled with the roll.

"A heavenly disaster struck and destroyed millions of lives."

"We have to inform the emperor quickly" I demanded as I quickly reached for my robe and began to get dressed.

"Sir, the town that has been struck with a heavenly disaster is Xi'e. The whole village was destroyed. Millions of people lost their homes and families."

I paused for a minute and said "What about my mother? Any news?"

My messenger quickly kneeled, "Unfortunately your mother was not spared". He said with his face looking on the carpet not daring to look up at my face.

I went speechless, not having a word in my head or a plan. I began to question myself. As the Chief astronomer, how would I not know this is coming? I can predict auspicious events, my job was to help the people of the country and yet I could not save my mother. Pictures of my mother consumed my mind. I started to feel lightheaded and fell on the carpet. Servants rushed in trying to help me to get up.

"Go get the carriage ready, we must head back to Xi'e and I must see my mother," I said.

"Yes sir, I will immediately go and form the men," he said as he rushed out of the room.

The remaining servants quickly got my robes ready and dressed me for the voyage. Before I left, I quickly wrote a note and passed it to my messenger to inform the emperor of the disaster. I then got in my carriage and my men whipped the horses to urge the horses to gallop.

I fell asleep alone in my carriage with all these thoughts, when we arrived my men awoke me and helped me out of my carriage. I looked around and what I saw scared me. All the houses were destroyed. There were small fires everywhere. People were crying from any injuries they bore, screaming from the loss of their houses and homes, and wailing at the loss of their loved ones. Suddenly the handmaid from my childhood came running towards me, she bowed down at my feet and started to sob.

“Master Zheng Heng, the earthquake happened out of nowhere. It shook us awake” she said in between cries and sniffles. “I ran to help your mother outside to shelter but as I started to go up the stairs the entire floor collapsed I heard her scream and then nothing. I ran in the direction of the scream I had heard and then I found her. She was still in the bed with her duvet, I assumed the bed had fallen through the floor and she had just screamed from the shock but as I got closer I saw pieces of glass impaled in her leg and a piece of wood in her stomach, there was blood everywhere, Master, I panicked I climbed onto her bed and took her in my arms and began to shake begging her to wake up. Her eyes fluttered a little and slowly she regained consciousness. She looked at me seemingly very weakly and said ‘Tell him he was perfect’ and with that took her last breath and passed into my arms. I immediately reached for a quilt and scroll and had the messenger reach you with great haste.” she finished exhausted with tears streaming down her face.

I crouched down to her and lifted her face to look her in the eye and whispered “Thank you Li Xiang Jun for trying to save my mother and informing me, for that and all the love you have shown me in my childhood I will forever be in your debt.” I wiped the tears from my eyes and continued “Can you take me to see where my mother rests and the estate in which I grew up.” I followed Li Xiang Jun through the rubble and ruins until we reached the front gate of my childhood home.

Although the plague on the top of the door had fallen, looking at the dark red half-stand columns and the wrecked stone lions at the door still reminds me of all the memories I had in this house with my family. I still remember the day I left this house, farewell hugged my mother when I was only 17 years old. I am now in my fifties, successful, and working alongside the emperor, however, have I ever been able to share my success with my mother? I slowly stepped into the remaining ruins of the house and Li Xiang Jun showed me the exact location of where my mother was buried. I bowed down and sobbed. My servants all kneeled around me to join in the grieve. The next day, I was woken up by the crowing of the rooster. I went to collect my mother’s body, and thanks to Emperor An Ti’s special arrangement, I was able to quickly process the papers and bring her back to Xi’e and live with me forever. Li Xiang Jun came home with us.

After a long trip in the carriage, we were finally home. The whole town of Xi’e stood out quietly to watch our troops marching in through the town gate. They stayed quiet, and some were even sobbing. With the community’s help, they hung white cloths all over my house’s front door and helped organize the funeral. I am beyond thankful to my people however, I felt my words stuck inside my chest. My house remained quiet for the next few days, I locked myself in my room with the shutters closed mourning. Until one morning, the sound of the horse’s hooves returned. There was a knock at my door. “Master, the messenger from the palace is here,” my servant said through the locked door. I knew I had no choice but to step out and receive the royal order. I was asked to return to the palace immediately.

“My dear Zhang Heng, my condolences for your loss.” said the great emperor An’ti the moment I entered his office whilst he embraced me in his arms. “You have been a good soldier, you are smart, loyal, and kind to the people but my child you have suffered a grave loss and you act strong, although no one can be strong after what you have just suffered. You have lost your mother and a mother is undoubtedly the most important person someone will have. My child, I ask you to go home, sleep, and rest and when you return you use the pain you have suffered today to help your country because the people need you. They trust in you and believe in you to help them so go get your affairs to rest and I expect great things from you in the future because you are indeed great.” he finished whilst looking me in the eye and tightly holding my shoulder.

I returned to my workshop and paced back and forth thinking about Emperor An’ti’s words. He reminded me that there are still millions of people out there who are living under the fear of earthquakes. A heavenly disaster that only God would know when it will happen. I knew earthquakes were heaven’s response to immoral human behavior however, I had to save these people. Yet, we have to live under this fear day and night thinking will we ever be able to wake up the next day? I looked up at the night and gazed at the stars asking for a hint. Li Xiang Jun brought in a cup of tea and almost stumbled. “Sorry Master for my mistake, I am glad the tea did not spill on your precious scripts”, Li Xiang Jun said apologetically. I looked and smiled to show my sign of accepting her apology. I looked down at the tea cup and the ripples of the tea.

“Thank you! Thank you Li Xiang Jun! you are truly my savior!” I jumped, hugged her tightly, and said.

I immediately rolled out a big piece of paper on my table and asked Li Xiang Jun to stand on the side to grind ink for me. I drew and drew. Days and nights, scrunches of paper were covering the floor. Li Xiang Jun was napping on the table. It was another quiet night while I looked at my grand drawing plan and stepped back. I knew I had completed it. I shook Li Xiang Jun and woke her up. Told her to send this plan to the finest blacksmith in town.

After a week of waiting and anticipating, the blacksmith finally brought in a bronze cylindrical canister with eight dragons attached facing eight directions. Each open mouth of the dragons points to an opening mouth of a toad that lays underneath each dragon waiting to collect the balls that were placed inside each of the dragons’ mouths. We tested and altered the directions of the dragons and toads numerous times until they reached perfection. It was time to present to the emperor my greatest invention of all time.

“Chancellors of the Council of the great nation of China in our nation and history. We believe earthquakes to be a form of God’s punishing us for our sins and we have always lived in fear of not knowing when these punishments will occur or how lethal they will be. This fear has lingered in our hearts for centuries. Affecting generations of people. Hundreds and millions of civilians suffered from deaths and destruction. I understand that we should graciously accept that these are God’s punishment but it hurts my heart that we did not and cannot do anything to prevent it. Fellow Chancellors, please take a look at my newest invention. This is called a seismometer. This device can predict earthqu-” I was paused by ear the splitting clang of one of the eight bronze balls falling and entering the mouth of the corresponding bronze frog.

“Zhang Heng what in the name of everything holy was that?” asked the first Chancellor to regain his thoughts.

“My, my it works better than I could have ever expected. That gentleman was the sound of my seismograph detecting an earthquake approximately 450 kilometers northwest of our exact location.” I explained confidently.

“Now whatever you mean we have not felt any tremors of the Gods.” countered one of the Chancellors.

“Well, sir, that is because the earthquake was too far and not powerful enough to have been felt all the way here in our city. If my calculations are correct the Gods have just punished the city of Lung-Hsi.” I clarified.

“Zheng Heng I believe that this council has concluded,” said the leading Chancellor after reading the verdict of the other Chancellors. “We believe that you, Zheng Heng, are wrong and we do not believe in the integrity of this gimmick nor in its ability to do as you say it does. You are dismissed.”

The moments that followed felt like an out-of-body experience. I bowed before them, one of my servants took my seismograph and followed me to my carriage and I went home, lay in my bed, and allowed my thoughts to carry me.

A few days later, a messenger arrived with news of an earthquake in Lung-Hsi, which was 400 miles away from Luo-Yang. Chancellors and the Emperor were amazed at the mysterious power of my instrument. I was called into the palace again.

“Zhang Heng, I have no idea how your instrument works but it worked.” The Emperor announced. “I announce that we will reproduce this seismometer and distribute it around the country. Bless these dragons, in hoping they will save our lives as their descendants.” The Chancellors all bowed appropriately to the words of the Emperor.

New Tales of China’s Inventions – Light-Bringing Slave

ESF Island School, Wong, Jemie – 15

In the dark, abandoned cellar, she crouches on the piss-stained floor. In her blistered hand she clutches a pitiful splinter of sulphur-dipped pinewood and scrapes it across the ground —

— and her hand erupts with light. Life dancing on her fingers. Immolation in her grasp.

Fei Ying thinks: there is nothing so lovely as the warmth of fire.

The maid runs up the stairs like she hasn’t in months now, the stench of sulphur hanging heavy around her — but who cares, when she is holding life in her hands? It is fire, the thing that sings on the breaths of dragons, the thing that kisses the lonely sun, the thing that might just make her lady smile.

Ying flings open the door to her lady’s room. It clatters against the wall and she winces. Too loud. Too harsh of a sound for her bereaved lady, who weeps at the slightest whisper.

Yet the moment stays serene. Pale sunlight streams through the window to illuminate the room where her lady shuts herself away. It plays in her xanthous-yellow hair as she turns her head slowly at the sound, weighed down by her elaborate headdress that is pure gold and cannot manage to gleam as she does. Ying feels something strange — perhaps reverence — as she stands in the doorway, dim and dull but for the thing in her hand.

“*Guangyou Shangpin*,” Ying greets, dipping her head. Suddenly it seems silly she’s run up to Lady Sun’s room, disturbed her, and for what? Some flimsy flame a gust away from going out? A sulphuric stench that smells of the battlefield? “I...I’ve invented something.” It’s not the right word. To ‘invent’ is something men with haughty expressions and grand robes do, not poor maid-pariahs. “A way to catch and carry fire easily. To cook or keep warm or...”

Lady Sun’s mouse-like, onyx-dark eyes reflect the pinpoint of light in Ying’s hands, glinting... dangerously. She stands up from her chair, limbs extending like a paper flower. “Say, who are you again?”

Ying bows, tendrils of hair brushing her burning neck. It is unsurprising she doesn’t recognize her. Yet it stings all the same. “Fei Ying, my lady.”

“It is quite a marvellous thing you have invented.” Lady Sun smiles, gold hair cradling the soft curve of her jaw. She is so beautiful Ying might cry. “May I hold it?”

Afraid the flame might go out, Ying shuffles towards her. Places the fragile splinter in her hand. Lady Sun holds it up to her unblinking eyes. “Such a tiny flame, and yet how long it has lasted.” She glances out the window at the bitter sky. “...It has been cold for too long. Was it difficult to invent?”

“Yes. It took me many nights.” Restless nights, of blisters and burns.

Lady Sun doesn’t press further. “Can you make more of its kind?”

Ying nods frantically before she even finishes the question. “Yes. Yes, I can. I can make as many as you like, so long as I have pine and sulphur.”

Outside, the wind howls and claws at the palace walls. Lady Sun smiles, and blows the fire out.

It goes without a whimper of protest.

“Perfect.”

Ying hadn't realised how revolutionary her invention was. After she'd talked to Lady Sun she'd felt foolish, wasting her lady's time with her useless whimsies. But the day after, she'd *personally bid* Ying make more, with the added requirement she dye and disguise the pine and sulphur. Make the pine splinters less a scientific marvel and more a proper miracle.

Now, the house is a hearth.

Ying hums as she walks down the halls. Lady Sun has been so kind to her, letting her serve her personally, giving her some time off to make more splinters. Secretly, Ying calls them *friends-of-fire*, a whimsical, silly, nonsensical name.

Even now there are a few tucked in her pockets, misshapen ones that didn't come out quite right but she can't bear to throw away. She's sure soon she will have to teach other servants how to make the *friends-of-fire*, but for now... She enjoys being special, being the only one nimble-handed and careful and clever enough, when really it is not so hard.

She strolls onward, heart singing.

The drawing room before her bustles with people: Lady Sun is entertaining guests for the first time in months. She's been far livelier lately, happier, warmer, like the fires that now dance around the palace, despite the tenseness the siege has brought. Nobles with delicate hands and elaborately coiffed hair chatter as though nothing is wrong, and Lady Sun's laughter rings as she describes... the *friends-of-fire*?

Ying creeps closer, hiding behind the door. It's wrong to eavesdrop, and her lady's business is none of hers, but...

"...nights ago I was cold, and invented a marvellous thing!" Lady Sun boasts. Ying hears the dramatic flick of her wrist, smells the stench of sulphur, hears a flurry of gasps. "Finally humanity has found a way to tame fire. At last, the miserable beast we have had coax will be at our beck and call. Because of my invention, we shall survive this siege."

It's not yours.

The thought comes unbidden in a tide of filthy fury. She clenches her jaw and brushes it away.

"Most impressive, *Shangpin* — or should I say saviour?" A man remarks. His voice is slippery, polished as a stone run smooth by the river, and velvet as the night. "Certainly very useful, especially in these turbulent times. Say, have you a name for this miraculous invention of yours?"

Ying can't help but peek around the corner. Lady Sun lounges on her grand chair, hair a golden crown, robes sunburst-yellow, eyes glimmering dewdrops. "Of course."

She smiles, sky-like, sun-like, snake-like.

"Light-bringing slave."

Ying rubs her eyes, stifling a yawn. Picks at the fresh blisters and cuts on her dye-stained fingers. Earlier in the day she'd chopped pinewood into sticks for hours. Then in her exhaustion she'd cut her finger when preparing lunch. Blood had welled on her skin, an incarnadine ruby, and Ying, transfixed, had watched it fall in raindrops towards the ground. The other maid had stared, but instead of yelling, chuckled good-naturedly.

The palace is washed in warmth and light now, even as the enemies march nearer — even now Ying works under comforting torchlight. The servants shiver no more, and no longer do they squabble and wail. The air tastes reassuringly of salt and smoke and sulphur. And hope, dusky and warm.

She hears the chink of the door opening, and Lady Sun sweeps in. She looks so out of place amongst the grime of the cellar, a creature made of sunlight distilled. Faint laughter streams through the doorway, and Ying's world, shrunken to the cellar, expands once again.

Ying forces herself upwards, legs aching, and bows. "*Guangyou Shangpin.*"

"*Chongde Furen,*" her lady corrects, almost fondly. Ying starts. She hadn't realised she'd ascended in rank. She'd been proud to serve an upper concubine; she's even prouder now to serve a madame.

"Apologies. Greetings, *Chongde Furen.*" After a few pregnant seconds, she dares look up. Her lady smiles at her, soft and sweet and predatory.

"How many have you made?"

"Two hundred, my lady."

"Good girl." She hitches up her dress and stoops down to pick up the *light-bringing slaves*. Ying grabs them all and hands them to her. She could never allow her lady to lower herself. Lady Sun smiles, firelight made flesh. "Thank you, Ying. Remember, three hundred more tomorrow."

She blows out the torchlight as she leaves. Closes the door. The sound of laughter peters out, and darkness snakes through the cellar. She is alone once more.

Too exhausted to leave, Ying holds herself tight and sleeps on the piss-stained floor.

"Can't you work harder, Ying?" Lady Sun scolds. "Everybody wants to get their hands on your little sticks. I've even relieved you from your other duties."

"Apologies, *Chongde Furen.*" Ying fiddles with the pine splinters in her hands, voice empty.

"*Zuo Zhaoyi,*" Lady Sun corrects tersely.

Ying dips her head. "Apologies, *Zuo Zhaoyi.* I'll do better." The days, devoid of sleep or nourishment, fall like ashes, and everyday Lady Sun needs more and more *light-bringing slaves*, and everyday Ying's own fire ebbs away.

"Yes. You will. And remember, tell nobody else anything." She stares down at Ying, eyes bottomless voids of black. Ying shivers. "If you do, I'll cut out your tongue." She tilts her head and beams: beautiful and bright and terrible. "I need a thousand by tomorrow. I trust you can get it done — else I'll have you whipped until you wish you were burning." She can't mean it. She can't. Ying waits for her to say something, but instead she sweeps out the room, steps soft and sweet. The tread of a predator.

But I need more material, Ying almost calls before she bites her tongue. It is Ying's duty to serve her lady, not make her lady serve her. The dye and sulphur will suffice if she uses them sparingly. But she needs more wood.

So Ying forces herself outside.

The lights sear her eyes, making it easier to ignore the stares at her mangled hands and unruly hair and empty eyes. At how the fire has melted all softness from her face.

Outside the sky cries, but men laugh as they haul barrels of precious food, and although the world is grey, the palace is gold with fire. Laughter chimes through the walls, unfettered by the news of bloodbaths. The maids sing as they used to before, and Ying remembers why it should be worth it. She should feel important, proud, that the palace is surviving the war.

Yet despair squeezes her burning heart.

I will never be free, will I? There will always be another problem to leash me to. There will always be another reason to set things alight.

...Getting pinewood is difficult, especially for a servant girl with no money and no suppliers. But Ying used to help her brothers chop trees back when the world loved her, and why should she care about her safety? Her dignity? Her mind? It's all burnt with the sulphur.

As though she's summoned it, an axe lies tiredly by the fence. Heedless of its owner, she clutches it and strides into the forest.

She hacks and hacks and hacks and hacks.

And hacks.

And hacks.

Mechanically, macabrely, maniacally.

The rains rust the axe's metal. Brushes away Ying's tears.

The sunset is pithy and the night stern. Ying drags logs one by one by one through the dark woods, through the garden, through to her self-made cage. She doesn't know how long passes. Doesn't care. Maybe no beasts attack her because she has become a beast herself: hands mutilated and splintered, eyes leaden, sopping wet. She wouldn't need the light-bringing slaves. Her breath alone could scorch the world.

When at last all the wood is gathered by the wall, she slumps by it and stares blankly.

Oh. It was all useless. Wet wood won't catch, and she is yet to dye it anyways.

It must be midnight already. Ying can't find it in herself to care. Let them whip her.

She's so tired. Can't it all just end already?

When she blinks, her eyes don't open again. Black, vast darkness falls towards a different darkness, and the charred earth welcomes her as she collapses.

The crack of a whip wakes her. Then a lash sears through her flesh.

Ying's nothing but nausea, nothing but pain, nothing but ashen lungs and dirty, repulsive suffering, the only real thing. Her mouth unhinges like a snake and she howls like the animal she is and the lightless world is agonisingly indifferent.

I'll have you whipped until you wish you were burning.

She writhes there on the floor, a moth that was too reckless. She'd thought herself a beast. She'd only ever been docile as a dog, a pliant plant pleased to be trodden. Fury rises; she swallows the flame and burns. Her teardrops are sparks. Her heart is wax and melts away. The whip cracks over and over and over again.

"Poor Ying," Lady Sun's silken voice sounds. Ying tries to force open her eyes but they're swollen shut, sealed by blood and pus and brine. So Ying imagines her, smiling her soft, sweet, terrible snake-smile. "Poor light-bringing slave."

Crack. Crack. Crack.

Oh, Ying burns. The light-bringing slave burns.

But there is no fire. Not yet.

She's in the cellar, quiet as sunlight. The floor cold. Two torches dying, their light pitifully illuminating the rain-torn logs. Her breath thick and caustic.

Ying crawls up the stairs. The door is locked, of course. She bangs against it with her broken arm and screams.

Poor Ying. Poor light-bringing slave.

She screams until her voice is hoarse, and then she screams and she mourns and she screams. She mourns what could've been, what won't be, what she can't save. She screams for what she can. But the world holds her hope by the throat, and the torchlight is dying away.

Poor Ying. Poor light-bringing slave.

"ZHAO—" She coughs and scarlet jewels batter the door. Oh. How that halcyon day seems an afterlife ago, that day when she cut her finger and heard her heart sing. "SUN!"

Miraculously footsteps come. Soft, sweet, the footsteps of a haughty, always-hungry predator. They pad close to her door and stop.

She's listening.

"Sun. You power-hungry snake." Ying growls. "You fool. In your greed to hoard knowledge and your laziness to never learn yourself... When I die here by my own hand, so will the secret of the *friends-of-fire*." She means it completely. She died when that whip hit her — no, she died soon as she found the fire, flew too close, spoke to Sun. Her death here will be a mere formality.

Her voice hitches on the syllables and she clenches her fists so hard her knuckles go bone-white. "I won't be your light-bringing slave any longer, and all will starve and suffer and die in this frigid, hungry war, and it'll be all your fault."

It is a monstrous thing to say. She tells herself it is not so bad, because surely somebody will manage to recreate the *friends-of-fire* before the palace falls — but she also knows aside from bidding Ying disguise the materials and forbidding her say a word Sun must've taken great means to ensure nobody else would ever figure it out, at least not until Sun snatched all the power she could.

But Ying cannot endure another day.

"You are the true inventor of the pine splinters, aren't you?"

Ying starts. It's not Sun, but the man from so long ago with the night-velvet voice.

It stings, somehow, that Sun hasn't come. But what did she expect? For her to grovel, beg Ying's forgiveness?

"Yes. I am."

"Then as an inventor, will you really be happy letting your invention be lost to time? Especially when it will harm so many? Especially when your fires are the only reason we survive the siege?"

"Well, what else could I do?" Only a noble would have the luxury of considering altruism. "To live would be torture. I'm not so selfless."

"You could teach me how to make the ... the *friends-of-fire*."

"You'd be just like Sun," Ying snaps. Her vision is blurry, the torchlight dimmer than ever.

"I am better than her. I will set you free."

"I'm not your servant, and she outranks you."

He sighs. "If the *Zuo Zhaoyi* were standing here, she would have you labour eternally, watched and imprisoned. If you wanted freedom, you should not have called for her."

He's right. It was sun-bright lunacy.

Poor Ying. Poor light-bringing slave, light-bringing slave, light bringing slave —

"Tell me your secret. I promise I will not hoard it. Then you can die however you want, and I will tell the story of the girl who befriended fire. Sun will lose her standing, and everyone will remain warm and well. Is that not what you want?"

The torchlight peters out.

In the end, Ying never could've refused him.

"Yes," she whispers. "But open the door."

It swings open. Ying's vision is too blurry for her to make the man before her's features, nor does she care to.

"Listen," she croaks out, and much to her surprise he sits on the grimy floor so their gazes meet easily. His eyes are flame-amber, so unlike Sun's bottomless black. Ying whispers into his ear. "They're splinters of pinewood, dipped in wet sulphur that's then allowed to dry. That's all. There's no secret. It's simple."

"...What a miracle then, that two such simple things can birth fire." He pauses, considering. "What is your name?"

“Ying. Fei Ying.” She laughs a tattered laugh, and there is nothing else left to say. “You said you’d tell my story, right? Make sure to tell them about this.”

From her torn dress she whips out a single misshapen *friend-of-fire*, hand shaking, heart a drum. The man says nothing.

She strikes the *friend-of-fire* against the ground, and it births a single, tiny, flickering flame.

“Goodbye, friend of fire,” he murmurs, and Ying realises she’s glad he’s here.

“Goodbye.”

Ying smiles wanly, and lights the way to oblivion.

Her bones are bundled for kindling. The flames caress her skin shyly, and she lets them embrace her completely.

As she burns the light in her eyes doesn’t dim, but rather burns brighter than it has in years. She is lit up from within, vein by vein by vein. Oh, how could she ever have thought her lady like the sun?

Perhaps death will be a field of blushing flowers blooming wild and beautiful. Perhaps it will be a false repose, another hell of pine and brimstone. Or perhaps it will be nothing at all.

She wets her lips. Smiles.

She is the moth no more, but the flame.

Fei Ying thinks: there is nothing so lovely as the warmth of fire.

Echoes from a Flowing River

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Chen, Flora – 16

Four months since cancer took my father’s life.

Four weeks since the funeral.

Four days since the last time I was told: it’s going to be okay.

This is the lie that has kept the pieces of me from falling apart. I have been choosing to live this lie for a year.

Wind rises, signaling the return of a cooler, less forgiving season. Summer foliage succumbs to this most undesirable cold, their green withering away as youth into old age. Leaves dance from their branches to the musical chill of autumn, finding new homes in the soil which would go to become their graves.

My feet tread careful steps as I hasten home. Wind tousles my hair, devoiding me of what little warmth the thin flannel shirt offers as it slices between my bare limbs. I continue my journey hunched over, seeking warmth, finding none.

The winding road soon comes to an end. The journey, though only a short ways between home and school, has syphoned me of my energy. As I address the house with weary eyes, I feel the knot in my chest tighten; soon, I’m not feeling at all.

‘Lya! You’ve been gone awhile.’ I can’t bear to look into my aunt’s smiling eyes, full of hopeful expectation I can’t satisfy. ‘Have you decided to take up my suggestion on joining an after-school club, after all?’

‘I-’

My tongue feels like sandpaper, my throat the sieve in which all semblances of cohesive speech are unstrung.

‘No. I- I’d gone to the wrong house.

‘You know... Dad’s.’

A pause. Then: ‘I think it’s time I returned something to you.’ She proceeds to reach for the paper shoebox that, for some reason, has been kept by her side since her brother’s passing. ‘I’d thought a reminder of him might have been too painful, but it seems now the only thing to assuage your grief.’

Alone in my room, curiosity gets the best of me and I extend my hand for the box. Flashes of past trauma threaten my conscience as I tear, with wild abandonment, the lid from its body.

What I’m greeted with could not have been more of a pleasant surprise.

To the untrained eye, the sight of moth-eaten paper would have seemed an extraordinary anticlimax, a story’s disappointing end to months of anticipation. But I, having been under my calligrapher father’s expert teachings since the age of six, knew treasure when I saw it.

Slowly, gently, I ease out the age-yellowed sheaf of crumbling parchment.

A ten metre long river and folded into the size of an A4 brochure: this was *xuan*, fine calligraphy paper formed from the smooth fibres of hemp and mulberry, regarded as a luxury since five thousand years ago and reserved for use in only the most refined of tapestries.

My mind is quickly becoming riddled with questions. I find myself pondering possibilities, to why my father, who always worked with cheap paper and regretted its lack of caliber, would have had such an heirloom in his possession; why, in all our years, months, weeks, days together he has made no mention of it to me.

Yet, I never once seek to lay the obvious answer out before me, nor spare my mind long enough a thoughtless recess to address the loosening knot in my chest.

There is no certainty to why I'd refused a look into the tapestry that day. Perhaps, it is as my aunt fears, that reminders this intense of his life would only lead me to further grieve his death; though even now, weeks later, I doubt that to have been the case. The hesitance came from an intrinsic place. I was afraid of what I would find, afraid of confrontation by the consequences of this half-life I've barely managed sustaining, afraid to feel again after wallowing in months of isolating numbness.

But also coming from within, is the desire to mend what has been broken.

Bracing for the tidal wave of emotion to come, I pick apart the *xuan* paper's fraying corners and spread the tapestry as far as the confines of my room allow it to unfold.

The next few hours coalesce into a supernova of memories, in which I am the imploding star.

My first day in primary school, dressed in frumpy second-hand clothes from some thrift store— shy, unconfident, hiding amongst the thick crowd, afraid to draw attention to myself.

My dad did his best in trying to raise my spirits, but nothing he said deterred my awareness of the fact that I was the only kid there with half the number of parents and none of the pretty toys, I think.

The days to follow, I was naive in my ignorance, pestering him with demands for an answer to why it seemed I was always one parent apart from the rest.

The time when I was seven, when I was deemed ready to learn Chinese calligraphy. My first dabbles had been most unsuccessful, when I'd shattered an ink stone and spilt fresh ink over his newest work of art.

He was livid. As he should have been. But I can't help the whispers of a smile now spreading across my face. The laughs we shared while cleaning up together were worth more than any tapestry.

Me, stood atop the first-place podium on a stage, arms laden with the accolades my calligraphy had won me.

'Good to see that ten years of tutoring from the world's finest did not go to waste on you,' my father said with a smirk.

I'm laughing now. It's so much like him to try and play it off cool. He'd been so proud of me that day.

Finally, our trip to Sichuan, China — it had been Chinese New Year's Eve, and I would be seeing my grandparents for the first time, my father, for the first time in twenty years. The well-meant force feeding, festivities, and trip to see the giant pandas had accounted for the happiest time of my life thus far.

All of this and more, chronicled in shocking detail with calligraphed sentences, captured in lifelike vividness through beautiful watercolour studies. Each sweeping stroke of a Chinese character and every shapeless splotch of paint is evidence of my father's legacy — that, prior to his incapacitation, he too had once been a living, breathing human, filled with quirks and passion and love for his daughter. Looking through this tapestry, I can almost hear his hearty chuckle, the humorously snide remarks he would make in his rough, accented cadence.

I move to re-fold the parchment but am stopped when I notice a small square of paper pinned to its back, much too crisp to have been initially a part of the tapestry. Unsticking the note, I'm allowed a closer read of what it says:

My dearest Lya,

As I write this, I'm afraid my time left here with you is limited. This tapestry is something I have kept since your birth. I had hoped that, by the time you came of age, I would've been able to gift this most treasured heirloom to you. But, seeing as that is now impossible, I wish for you to have it now, in hopes that it will remain your guiding light in the difficult times that are sure to trail in the wake of my inevitable leave.

Love always,

Dad

All of a sudden, I feel as vulnerable and raw as I did on the day of his passing. Time slows to a snail's pace, and I am left undone on my bedroom floor as wave after wave of tearful emotion shakes my body.

There comes a point when I seem to have exhausted all my tears, and no despairing thought could trigger the flow of even just one more drop. It is at this point that something in me awakens: a passion, a desire, a longing to become more than I am, and live up to be worthy of my father's love.

I make quick work of folding the tapestry back up — I replace it in its box, and set it gingerly over my nightstand, where I also keep a picture of my father and I on our trip.

From that point on, as if awoken from a year-long stupor, I slowly begin to regain control over my life.

An autumnal gale sweeps through the streets, colouring the lush green landscape a deep amber that foretells the end of summer. For a split second, this nondescript suburb seems imbued with an unusual, artful beauty — a painted scene straight out of Dad's tapestries.

I'm in especially good spirits today, and there is a jump to every step I take as I navigate my way back home. The launch of my Shu Fa, or calligraphy society, was more successful than I could have hoped for.

It's only a small step, but I feel glad for any chance at sharing our passion, I whisper, though there is not a soul by me to hear. One day, I'll show your art to the world.

The Unsung Requiem

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Lin, Henry – 15

The darkness shrouded over the night-time landscape, almost like a blanket. So thick, one couldn't see more than five steps ahead. The piercing wind did little to help, penetrating the mind with endless waves of banshee-like wails. The night was cold, reflected not only just in the physical discomfitures of the body, but in a far more subtle, yet far more agonizing tearing of the mind too.

The streets of Luoyang were empty, for it was too deep into the night for any activity other than indulging in the oblivion of sleep. Even the Imperial Palace, with all its regal colors during the day, had a layer of black splotched onto its surface. Not even the moon or the stars remained, devoured by the sea of black ink that is the celestial dome above the world.

There was a single source of brightness under the starless sky; only the dingy flame from the rusted oil lamp remained, a last beacon warding off the shadows. The faint spark could only illuminate the rough silhouette of an archaic hut. Its wooden walls have withered over the years, groaning and creaking with the crashing of gales against them. The air around it reeked of a vague, yet sickening stench: the stench of decay only found on the dying and the dead. The scent of death was absent, however, in any other corner of the soundless city, almost as if it didn't exist at all, almost as if it was from another world.

Time itself seemed to have abandoned the night, with only the ever-changing intersections between the dark wisps and the pale light an indication of its passing. Their intertwining sung an inaudible symphony; a silent requiem that seethed into any wandering souls and forced them into an eerie tranquility.

“It is time.”

As the voice rang, the wind fell silent. The source of the flame gradually started moving, until the door of the hut slowly opened.

Two humanoid creatures emerged from the hut. One, dressed in white robes, had an equally pale complexion. He was tall, almost three meters in height, and atop his head was a white hat, worn by high-rank officials in the Imperial Court. The creature was frail, too. His outstretched hand that grasped onto the handle of the rusted oil lamp was nothing more than bones enveloped by leathered skin. His grin threatened to split his face in two, and an obscenely long, blood-red tongue slid its way through his teeth, out of his mouth, and dangled limply near his waist. In where his eyes were supposed to be, there was nothing. Only two hollow sockets remained, piercing the surroundings with their non-existent gaze.

The one that followed the white creature was his opposite: a short, round silhouette dressed completely in black. He, too, wore an Imperial hat, painted to blend in with the night. His height stood at only half of the first creature, and the size of his scowl mirrored the first figure's smile. No tongue rolled out from his mouth, but his skin was the same shade of unnatural white as the one before him. His eyes, too, were replaced with the same hollow sockets.

“We have three hours.”

Another voice rang out. Strangely, neither figure had opened their mouths. The disembodied voices seemed to have no source, appearing only in one's mind.

Silence befell the two once again. Without another word needing to be said, they made their way to the east of the city, the flickering flame lighting their path. Although their

movements were swift, no sound escaped from their trail, and they left behind no trace. The scent of death stopped plaguing the hut, and briskly followed the two figures on their journey.

Moments later, the two found themselves in front of another house. The state of it was far better than the withering hut before. The walls were new, the air was fresh, and the house itself emitted a soothing aura. No light came from within the house, yet the two figures, although seemingly blind, could still sense the man within.

He was hunched over a table, the brush of his pen furiously dancing on the paper in front of him. It wrote, crossed out, and wrote more, as if it held within it some revolutionary scripture that must be recorded, lest it be forgotten. There was not a single pause in the man's hands, and the speed of his thoughts were immeasurable. His focus on the paper was so immense, that he had completely forgot about the bowl containing the failed alchemy products whose formula he was recording on his right.

Without any hesitation, the two figures rushed straight towards the walls of the building, passing through it as if it was nothing. They stopped only a few meters in front of the man and the table, and void-dark chains suddenly appeared on their hands.

The man stopped writing, and slowly turned his head to face the aggressors. He was an old man, considered almost an antique for his times; his hair, which fell to his shoulders, was bleached by the unrelenting cruelty of Time. The scythes of Age carved wrinkles into his face, and the fangs of Years have drained most, if not all his strength.

Yet it was such a man, who smiled at the heinous monsters before him.

“The Dark and White Wuchang, to what do I owe the pleasure?”

The old man spoke, his voice not sharing the weakness of other men his age, but a sense of power only found in men at their prime.

“Wei Boyang, come with us quietly, and all will be well.”

The first voice rang again, and still neither creature opened their mouths. Upon hearing this, the old man, Wei Boyang, merely shook his head, and turned to the creature dressed in white, referred by him as the White Wuchang. Evidently, it was the white figure who spoke. His gaze moved from the Wuchang's face, down to the oil lamp he was holding, and back up again. His eyes locked with the phantom's sockets, and the White Wuchang could almost see the raging fire within his pupils.

“And if I don't?”

Wei Boyang asked. His voice was soft, but brought with it a deadly edge.

“Your life should have ended two years ago, and it is only because of your pathetic alchemy that you are able to linger on for breath.” The second voice spat, as a look of disdain found its way onto the Dark Wuchang's face: “You've already committed a felony against the Celestial Mandate by prolonging your life, so you better come before you're sentenced to suffer in even more layers of Hell.”

Wei Boyang turned his vision sharply, studying the Dark Wuchang intently. The smile that he wore on his face has now vanished, replaced by a stoic wall that no malice could penetrate.

Softly, the old man spoke again.

“I am the master of my fate, and I am the captain of my soul.”

Two things happened at once: the sudden extension of the Wuchang's chains, attempting to skewer Wei Boyang's body, and the materialization of a wall of fire from thin air, incinerating the chains into ash. For the first time, the White Wuchang donned an expression of surprise.

“Your level of cultivation is impressive. Very few cultivators in your era could achieve this height. How did you do it?”

Only the cackling flame, and the conjuring of fiery spears answered him. The White Wuchang sighed, and summoned more chains to his aid. Without another word, the three engaged in another round of combat.

The battle raged on for several more minutes. Intriguingly, the bursts of fire, the clinking sound of chains, and the crashes of projectiles against wood did little to affect the neighboring houses. No alarm was raised in the nearby civilians, and no light escaped from the battlefield to the outside world. It was as though the house was sealed off from its surroundings, so that fighting as severe as this could be dismissed by the ordinary mortal.

At the end, both sides were in the verge of collapse. Wei Boyang's face was a hue of sickly white, and a line of blood slowly dripped from the corners of his mouth. The two Wuchang were not any better, either. Their originally solid apparitions have become translucent, a symbol of their weakening clutches onto the mortal realm. The battle had turned from one of skill and prowess, to one of endurance and attrition. All three were heavily wounded, and neither side dared to start another offensive, in fear of being the first to die.

“This is your last chance, Wei Boyang. Come with us, and all will be well.”

The voice of the White Wuchang rose again, this time significantly weaker.

“Never.”

In fear of losing his breath, Wei Boyang could only utter a single word as the answer.

Upon hearing this, the White Wuchang sighed: “Your qi channels are almost depleted. Stop this hopeless struggle immediately. Can you not see it is futile going against a God?”

In a final act of bravado, Wei Boyang grabbed the bowl of the failed products on his table, and hurled it at the White Wuchang, imbuing the last of his qi into it. The qi quickly burst into flames, like it has done before, and set the bowl alight right before its impact with the phantom.

For a second, all was silent. Until suddenly, a great thunderous roar was forced out from where the flaming bowl touched the failed alchemy products. The once dying fire rekindled with more strength than ever, and the White Wuchang's screams were suddenly cut off when the flame had burnt him into nothing. Only the rusted oil lamp remained, its flickering flame the only symbol of him ever existing at all.

Both Wei Boyang and the Dark Wuchang stood silent, appalled and awestruck by the scene that was just before them. Finally, the remaining phantom broke the silence:

“What... What was that?”

Wei Boyang, too astounded to lie about his efforts, replied: “F... failed products of alchemy, I was trying to make the elixir of immortality.”

The Dark Wuchang's face suddenly contorted with disbelief: “You dare call that a failed product? That substance has enough power as a dragon's breath!”

Before Wei Boyang could respond, the Dark Wuchang suddenly asked: “Wei Boyang, how much do you know about the War of Fengshen?”

Wei Boyang looked at him confusedly, and replied: “Isn't that the last war between the Gods supporting the Shang and Zhou Dynasties? What else is there to know?”

The Dark Wuchang forced out a pained laughter, as if mocking Wei Boyang for his ignorance: “No, there is much more.”

“See, in the beginning, there were three realms: the Heavens, the Earth, and the Underworld.

They used to be separate, each with their own ruler.

What you know today as the Fengshen War was not the famed overthrowing of the tyrannical Shang by the Zhou, but a despicable scheme by the one you call the Jade Emperor.”

The Dark Wuchang paused, and saw the horror in Wei Boyang's eyes. His face formed a faint grin, and continued:

“The War did nothing to help the Zhou Dynasty and only got rid of all the Gods standing in the Celestial Court's way. After the Fengshen, Earth and the Underworld were no longer autonomous, reduced to mere slaves to the new Sovereign of the Three Realms.

But you could change that, Wei Boyang.

Your invention, the Dragon's Breath, could arm the legions of your Han Dynasty, and provide them with the power to conquer this realm. The Underworld would receive an insurmountable influx of the dead, and our power would grow stronger than ever before.

Together, we could overthrow the oppressors of the Celestial Court, and be free once more!

All you need to do, is to show your invention to the Han Emperor tomorrow morning.

In exchange, the Underworld will wipe your name off the Slate of Life and Death, and you will be granted the eternal youth you desire.

The choice is yours, Wei Boyang.”

At the end of the Wuchang's speech, not even the steadfast mind of Wei Boyang could resist the temptation of the immortality he searched for his whole life. The old man turned around and grabbed the manuscripts he laid on his table. Yet just before he handed them to the Wuchang, Wei Boyang suddenly froze.

His soul exited his body.

It flew a day further, where he followed through with his promise, and presented the Dragon's Breath to his Emperor. He was awarded with great glory and honor, earning himself the place of Grand Duke of the Empire.

It flew three months further, when the structure of the first bomb was perfected, and used against the western invaders. He saw the brutality of his creation firsthand, and saw the decimation of innocent lives.

It flew two centuries further, when the formula for his invention, now called the gunpowder, was stolen by foreigners. He saw the Far West, where the power-hungry nations developed the art of slaughter to heights never seen before via his invention, and used it to build Empires forged in blood and bones.

It flew five centuries further, when the first firearms were built and filled by gunpowder. He saw the merciless slaughter of soldiers by enemies they could barely see, and the horrifying apathy that haunted the killers. After all, how could they feel remorse, if they haven't seen their victims?

It flew a millennium further, when all nations across the world knew of his invention. He saw the world enveloped in war, and the dead amount to millions over the course of mere months.

Was this the immortality he wanted?

Wei Boyang did not think so.

His consciousness returned to his body, and immediately a spark escaped from his fingers onto the manuscripts. They caught light instantly, burning into unrecognizable ash in seconds.

The Dark Wuchang's face flushed with rage. He opened his mouth to speak, but Wei Boyang was faster.

The balls in the bowl were only half the ones he made.

He reached down towards the ground, and picked up a floorboard with all the remaining strength he could muster. Inside, there laid a variety of gadgets, failed prototypes, and alchemy materials. His eyes darted from one pile to another, until he finally found the gunpowder balls identical to the ones he just threw. Without hesitation, he picked them up, set them alight with the last of his qi, and charged towards the Dark Wuchang.

Another thunderous roar occurred, and the Dark Wuchang was nowhere to be seen. Only Wei Boyang and the rusted oil lamp remained. There was a hole through his chest, and his right arm, which he held the gunpowder, was reduced to a charred stub.

He was dying.

In his last moments, the old inventor stumbled clumsily towards a nearby wall, seeking a last shred of support in his waning grip on the realm of the living. He collapsed onto the now broken floor, leaning against the wall to save what little strength he had left. Visage after visage passed before his eyes, showing him the life that he had lived. As quickly as they came into Wei Boyang's fleeting mind, they all left swiftly, fading silently into the fabric of night that enveloped the old man.

All but one.

It was the face of the Dark Wuchang, just before his defeat. His furious gaze locked with that of Wei Boyang, uttering one last vengeful curse at him. The Dark Wuchang's words were silent, yet the inventor understood him all the same.

“You insolent mortal! You cannot stop the inevitable! Your sacrifice is worthless!”

Was it worthless?

Suddenly, the figures of those who were supposed to be killed by his invention swirled before his eyes. To Wei Boyang, their numbers were as vast as the stars in the night sky, a number beyond human visualization. As if it had been rehearsed for countless times, they smiled at the old man, bowed in his direction, and silently dissipated.

Wei Boyang smiled, too.

The future might be inevitable, but he could delay it.

As darkness began consuming his mind, Wei Boyang's eyes somehow found their gaze on the rusted oil lamp, which sat atop the broken floor, unscathed from the intense battle between him and the Wuchang.

An instant after they did, the flame in the oil lamp extinguished, shrouding the room in darkness.

Before it died, however, the flame burnt brighter than ever.

Still smiling, the old man let out his last breath, and the darkness washed over him.

But his soul glowed brighter than ever.

Fireworks

Heep Yunn School, Wan, Hei Yiu Hailey – 17

Bundled up in blankets with a cup of hot chocolate between my hands, I disapprovingly shake my head as my family sprints around like they're recreating a circus show. With a soft blow, the surface layer of whipped cream twirled off and into my brother's hair, who sprawled on the floor before me. “Hey! I did not spend an hour doing my hair just for you to mess it up! It has to be perfect in time for the fireworks!” He throws his arms around, rolling his eyes, exasperated. A loud snort reverberates across the living room as my mother attempts to stifle her laughter, which results in a pillow to the face. My father and I gasp involuntarily while awaiting the eventual pillow fight and I cover my ears due to the sensory overload from all the hysterics. Just as we brace ourselves for the imminent force of cushions, a boisterous cheer echoes through the air and we all turn our full attention to the television, watching in anticipation whilst the countdown begins. “10! 9! 8!” We shout along as the numbers tick down, “7! 6! 5!” I chuckle out, seeing my brother frantically ruffle his hair amidst counting, “4! 3! 2!” I subconsciously scoot closer to the edge of the couch, eager to see the multi-coloured firework display, “1! Happy New—”

Han Dynasty, 142 B.C., Chang'an.

“Wei Boyang, take it easy, you've been working on this for an entire day.” A soft-spoken lady utters dejectedly. The man, presumably Wei Boyang, continues to bury his nose in various chemicals and blatantly ignores her, disregarding her concern with a wave of a hand. “Emperor Wu Di will have my head if I don't create a miracle now.” He heaves a sigh, “He wants immortality and an eternal reign, who am I to deny the Emperor of his ambitious desires? Besides, imagine if I succeed, you and I would live comfortably, forever.” Wei Boyang reluctantly places his chemicals down and clasps the woman's hands, fondly carressing to provide reassurance which makes my heart flutter with warmth. A warmth that I currently lack due to the absence of my family. “Oh.” I croaked, thoughts of this unknown location and situation paired with my family's whereabouts muddle my mind, causing me to subconsciously fidget with my necklace which was a birthday present from my family. Having been too engrossed in the conversation between Wei Boyang and the lady, I failed to realize that I was no longer celebrating the New Year with my family, but watching the life of some person called Wei Boyang.

Boom! An abrupt explosion pulls me out of my inner turmoil and I snap my head toward the blast. The white and yellow powder that was on the table now scattered the room, covering the walls with specks of dust that resembled the fireworks I had hoped to see just a few moments ago. Wei Boyang jolts backward from the shock, then gapes with a mix of confusion and awe. Stepping out of the corner, I try to explain the phenomenon to Wei Boyang, yet he reaches for the chemicals and his arm passes through my body. I try to stay calm by clutching my necklace and tracing the delicate lines, processing the fact that a hand just went through my body like I was a mere ghost. I still have no idea why or how I am in ancient China, and the only feasible explanation is that I'm lucid dreaming... A dream too vivid and too real... “I knew sulfur and potassium nitrate would do the trick, perhaps this will be enough to satisfy the Emperor despite not being immortality.” Wei Boyang said under his breath while cleaning his desk, sweeping all items to the side which accidentally created another spark right in my face.

Tang Dynasty, 718 A.D., Liuyang.

After a mild headache, I mumble a string of curses directed at Wei Boyang, irritated that his explosions bear so much semblance to fireworks that I could not see as a consequence of this mystifying dream. Swerving my head around, I notice that I'm not in the cottage of Wei Boyang anymore, but am being shoved around in the bustling streets of a midnight Chinese parade. There is no sensible reasoning as to why I would be here, for me to be transported into another place and time. The feeling of dread weighs heavy on my body as I'm bumped on the crowded sidewalk and my heart aches for the warmth of my family. Yearning for a familiar sight, I raise my head in hopes of finding comfort in the starry sky, yet what lies before my eyes is something I have been raving for: fireworks. Unlike the usual vibrant, picturesque sparks I've seen on television, these fireworks, or should I say firecrackers, are what I imagine in my wildest dreams. Grandiose, extravagant, powerful, as if the scarlet sparks were lightning strikes descending from the heavens. Awestruck, my body weaves through the maze of giddy individuals, making my way to the nearest firecracker.

The salesperson's face lights up with a radiant grin when she sees me approaching with a few Kaiyuan Tongbao in my hand. How did these hefty coins emerge in my palm? I am as clueless as a fish out of water. However, I set aside the question in favour of returning a courteous nod, offering three coins in exchange for a single firecracker while I silently mourn the empty area on my left shoulder that is reserved for my father's rough, calloused hand when we shop together. The salesperson swiftly seizes hold of the money and thrusts ten firecrackers into my chest, his bright eyes narrow into a troubled wince. "Child, please take all my firecrackers, I feel the negative energy surrounding you, this horrible, horrible sha chi. These firecrackers will undoubtedly assist you in casting away the evil spirits that haunt you now, which will rid you of your worries and sorrows. May you and your loved ones stay joyful and prosperous all year round." Blushing profusely at his unexpected, yet sincere words of good fortune, I experience a fleeting sense of warmth course through my veins. "Your blessings are deeply appreciated, kind sir, but I simply can't accept your generous offer, not when I can't pay you what you deserve," I whisper in a hushed tone while I return the firecrackers. In an instance, the salesperson slaps my hand without delay and declares steadily, "Nonsense. As the inventor, I have plenty of profit and stock left. I insist you take the firecrackers and lead a serene life." The salesperson then nudges me away from his stand and into the open grassfield, though stops in his tracks without a moment's notice. "Oh, I apologize for my forgetfulness. My name is Li Tian" His laugh resonates around my ears, "If the evil spirits unfortunately continue bothering you, you know the right person to find. Now, quickly light these firecrackers." Li Tian remarks in a light-hearted and genuine voice which I'm sure will linger in my mind throughout the years to come.

Wandering around, I stumble across a secluded area, one where the night sky is laid bare in its full glory and thousands of lucent celestial bodies. In spite of the sublime view that I would never see in the city, I find myself wishing upon a shooting star to return me to the densely populated town and air-polluted sky with no stars in sight. A reunion with my family and the distant fireworks on television fireworks the next time I open my eyes. With my eyes still tightly closed, I light the firecrackers and graze the cool of my necklace, awaiting the sound of my brother's constant chatter.

Yuan Dynasty, 1232 A.D., Kaifeng.

Lightning-speed sparks penetrate the gloomy sky. I stagger backward and plummet to the ground in distress. A sheen of cold sweat appears on my neck as piercing howls of terror ring deafeningly in my ears which is then followed by an appalling stench of rust. Accidentally,

I drop a firecracker from the bundle wrapped up in my arms, setting off an explosion that protects me from incoming attacks for a brief moment. Scrabbling to collect my thoughts, I try to make sense of all that has happened. This is supposed to be a dream, but the gruelling shrieks sound too pained to be imaginary. My dreams have never felt so real...

With every new thought, I crawl quicker to the nearest ditch to take cover while copious amounts of smoke infiltrate my nostrils. Fatigue creeps up on me like a soundless tsunami, consecutive waves of cramps torment my abdomen and a serious throbbing headache furthers my urge to collapse. Another firecracker ignites from the friction of the dry grass and shoots up into the air, fending off the attackers near the ditch. An agonizing scream is all I hear before the soldier above me lurches forward with a firework aimed at my forehead. I desperately wriggle away and fist my necklace, wanting to feel the warmth of my family one last time before exploding.

"Soldier! What in tarnation are you doing? Get up and defend our country! Do you want us to be invaded by the malicious Mongols?" The sense of grave shame overrides the feeling of impending doom as my savior towered over me, shielding me from the gruesome battlefield. Shaking like a leaf, I carefully stumble out of the ditch and pat away the dirt stuck on my elbows. His veiny hand pats my back in a consoling way as a sympathetic smile greets his face. "I know you miss home and would rather not be here, I understand this feeling all too well. But as your lieutenant, I demand that you cease your daydreaming and pay full attention to your surroundings now." The lieutenant declares with assertion and leaves my side, along with the sense of short-lived solace.

On the ground, I spot a short tube of paper with a few crumpled areas on the head and tail. Curiosity gets the better of me as I squat down to acquire it, all the while keeping the remaining firecrackers tightly secure in my grasp. Once lifted, it becomes evident that the tube has some kind of material inside. Thus, I shake it vigorously, hoping to identify the substance by its sound. Unfortunately, a sharp hissing noise surrounds me before I could decipher this odd tube of paper, leading to my instant panic. I fling the paper tube as far away as I can and watch the tube detonate like a bomb. A blaring thunder shatters my ears once again and gunpowder residue disperses around me. Mortified by the destruction I inadvertently created, I bolt off in the opposite direction, squeeze my eyes shut and never look back.

16.02.2007, Lunar New Year, Hong Kong.

The unbearable ringing in my ear proceeds while my leg gives out, resulting in me falling face down on a cool, hard pavement. Not realizing the change of setting, I sit up and exclaim at the familiar view of Victoria Harbour. Rubbing my eyes to get a clearer view, I scan and match the skyscrapers within sight while comparing them to those in my memory. Ecstatic to have confirmed that this is my homeland, I flop onto the ground and heave a sigh of relief. At the same time, a loud bang sets off and triggers my traumatic memories of the recent past. Instinctively, I prepare myself for the worst, but to my surprise, red fireworks cover the sky followed by pink fireworks in the shape of cartoon pig noses. A rainbow of sparks paints the black background and various intricate patterns brighten the twilight sky. The fireworks display is simply breathtaking and may be the most spectacular thing I have ever laid my eyes on. Naturally, I expect myself to be over the moon when seeing these fireworks since I've been yearning for them the entire venture, yet the joy never comes. Instead, a hollowness manifests within me.

Laying on the empty, dimly lit sidewalk, I admire the fireworks while the void in my heart continuously expands. Out of the blue, the lone firecracker in my pocket falls out

and rolls down the slightest slope. I rush to retrieve it and accidentally bump into the baby stroller of a young couple. Embarrassed by my own clumsiness, I apologize profusely and bow my head several times. “It’s not a problem dear, I believe this is yours?” The lady says in a sweet tone as I raise my head to thank her. Yet, I was not prepared for the all too familiar faces that are in front of me. My parents.

I suck in a sharp breath as I constrain myself from leaping into their arms, sensing that something is different from the laughing ball of sunshine that is my mother and the father cowering behind the couch from a pillow fight. They look younger, more relaxed. Even so, the air of warmth they exude is still the same, lulling me to a sense of ease. As another flamboyant firework reaches the sky, I watch the younger version of my parents stroll off into the distance, with myself in the stroller, contently enjoying the coloured sparks dancing with the faraway stars.

A ray of gold and maroon sparks appear in the sky as I reminisce about my family. With regret and guilt consuming me, I wish in desperation for a way to leave this dream and turn back time, craving for the life where all I knew was warmth and love, when I took my family for granted.

31.12.2023, *New Year’s Eve, Home*

“—Year!” The voices of my family. The fluffy duvet. The scalding hot chocolate. Home. I’m home. I am home. Tears well up in my eyes as I take a moment to bask in the comforting scene. Seeing all my family members has never felt so relieving. The genuine laughter and once overwhelming chatter are music to my ears, like tranquil melodies and symphonies. My eyes crinkle with a fond smile whilst observing my family’s antics, snickering along to every dad joke, over the top laugh, and horrendously angled selfie.

“Ugh, how underwhelming.” My brother scowls in annoyance, “I stayed up till midnight for nothing, the picture isn’t even flattering nor impressive.” Confused by his reaction, I turn my gaze to the television screen. Sure enough, the sight is indeed underwhelming since the traditional fireworks are now replaced by light drones drawing simple patterns over and over. Be that as it may, I can’t bring myself to be disappointed. The horrible dream transported me away from this very moment for so long that I couldn’t bear letting a lackluster firework display dictate my enjoyment. Although the previous fireworks display I just saw was much more entertaining and pleasing to the eye, this firework show with my family in the foreground made all the difference. I intuitively reach for my necklace to fiddle. However, a sense of dread pours in as I feel several pointed edges lining the circle instead of my regular round-shaped necklace. Afraid of potential damage to the necklace, I promptly remove my prized possession and examine it. A firecracker. It has the same shape, same pattern, and same indent as the firecracker Li Tian gifted. How is this possible? The only explanation for this change in the necklace, as improbable as it sounds, might be that what happened in my supposed dreams was reality...

A pillow smacks my face and breaks my reverie. I simply huff a puff of air and raise a judgemental eyebrow at my father’s childish action, shaking my head as I ingrain this moment in my mind for keepsake. Caressing my firecracker necklace, I thank the creator of fireworks for protecting me throughout the journey, and for opening my eyes and heart to cherish what’s truly important when fireworks light up the night sky.

Everything to Live For

Hong Kong International School, Cheung, Vanessa – 14

“Yuze.”

Darkness claws at my eyes.

“Yuze. Please.”

I shift awake with a gasp. Barely noticeable, Māmā’s sickly hand stretches for me. I rise with weary feet from my place by her bedside. The candle hasn’t been lit, yet the paleness of her face glimmers like a beacon for the lost.

“Māmā,” I whisper.

“My child. The light strains ever closer.” She rattles in her sheets. “Don’t listen to those monks. They try to bring meaning to life with their heartless lies, but in the end to live is to suffer and death is the end to all suffering. Do you hear?”

I feel the trembling of her ribs, and I am afraid.

“They prolong life with their stories of reincarnation.” Māmā coughs up spurts of painful red. “They wish to instill suffering in us all.” Suddenly she sits up and takes hold of my sleeves. “My child, listen, my child! Refute them in my name!”

“Māmā,” I murmur, and my voice shakes. “Go back to sleep.”

Money runs out coin by coin. The onset of starvation edges closer.

Nighttime is especially hell. In my makeshift bed, I shudder from hunger and think of my mother’s death. It happened on a moonless night, swift and silent. In the two weeks following, my life was subsequently cut apart and tossed to swine.

My memories constantly wrench me from sleep. Tonight is no exception. Outside a storm howls. Between its thunderclaps I hear Māmā’s voice, healthy and a stab in the chest.

“Do not fear the storm. Take refuge in my arms, dearest, and never feel threatened.”

The wind kicks up. The walls creak, wooden beams vibrating. I light a lantern and leap from my mattress.

The ceiling shakes. My eyes widen— death is a doorway of light I do not dare cross through— so I draw up adrenaline like a drug and I rush out of the house to hover in the dirt road. Bursts of lightning and crystal rain punctuates the darkness of the storm.

My home, already worn from age, has a rather anticlimactic crumbling beneath the muscles of this angry maelstrom.

The sun climbs over the moor two hours overdue and reveals The remnants of my home that lie damp behind me, hardwood planks and rugged earth.

I clutch the edges of my qipao and shake. Hunger has morphed into a beast that growls viciously within my stomach.

To live is to suffer. To suffer is to live. What difference separates the two?

I bury my face in my knees.

Suddenly, footsteps alert my attention, their volume growing as their owner nears.

A monk arrives. These venerable figures are easily recognisable, even to the poor, by their shaved heads and colored robes, light loads for traveling. This one is no exception. He blinks puzzledly at my haggard form.

“Child, are you well?” he asks. “You are the only human I’ve seen for miles.”

“No, I am not well.” I shuffle uncomfortably. “Everyone else in the village left. Growing crops on this land is not possible.”

“Why do you remain?” the monk continues. He looks at the pile of rubble that was my home. “Was that once your dwelling?”

I nod, rather pitifully. “I didn’t move because my mother was ill. And yes. Violent winds knocked our house down.”

The monk’s expression starts to morph into something akin to sympathy. “Your mother isn’t here, child. Have you no money? No more family to turn to?”

“No.”

He pauses, as if contemplating what to do with me, an orphaned girl with no food and no money to her name left to fend for herself. Worthless, no more than a stray dog.

“Would you like to come with me?”

I startle, running back his words. Monks could do such things as invite penniless children on their treks?

I weigh my options. Stay and perish where I was born, or follow a Buddhist monk with presumably enough coin to feed two mouths in his pockets.

Māmā’s voice pulls me from my thoughts. *Don’t listen to those monks. My child, listen, my dearest. They instill suffering in us all.*

I swallow down my regret. I loved my mother, and I still do, but the voice of starvation rings louder than hers.

After traveling with the monk for a handful of sunrises, I shall relieve him of my presence.

Māmā’s warning for monks. Baseless in its message, but true in its despair. My mother truly thought nothing of the world.

I draw myself up and begin the trek.

“What is your name?”

The sun beats heavily on my back. “Yuan Yuze.”

“A boy’s name, no? But a nice one nevertheless,” says the monk. “I am Shi Qinyang.”

We are closing in on the closest village, the monk informs me, where he will buy me food. I thank him profusely for his kindness, although I am aware such large debts cannot be repaid with gratitude alone.

The inn at the village serves sugary millet. I wolf down two bowls and revel in the sweet goodness.

That night we do not sleep in any establishment. Instead, we camp on the ground. The grass is a deep green, and the sky is wide and whole. It is unlike the barren fields I’d once lived, where both rain and shine thawed into sorrow.

“Where are you going?”

“To Xiangzhou,” Mister Shi says. He smooths out his bedroll. “A recently deceased public figure will have her funeral there, and I am to oversee the rites. They have given me the task of introducing a fresh means of making sure the dead are happy in the temporary afterlife before rebirth.”

“Have you thought up a new means, then?”

He nods. “Yes. Currency is vital to those who have stuck to society, and so I shall bring faux money to the funeral so the dead will have enough to fund their time in the afterlife. People should hang this money up during the burial so as to display their importance. Or they can toss it up in the air, perhaps to signify the money reaching the heavens.”

I thread grass through my fingers. “And what will this money be made from?”

“Why, bamboo, of course,” he responds instantly.

“That is uncommon in this province,” I say with a frown.

“Yes. But I will nevertheless hope for the best.”

Mister Shi glances toward me. “At Xiangzhou I shall find you some means of work, so you can support yourself. It is a big city. Would you be interested in learning how to create fine cloth?”

I haven’t thought much of my future outside of caring for Māmā. “I would not mind learning.”

Mister Shi nods in approval.

Silence falls. I reminisce. Once, as I was handing Māmā her medication, she fed me a tale of the largest bamboo plantation in the province.

It was beautiful, Yuze. I went once as a child. Bamboo stretching toward the sky, full of life, acres of green. Every meter of it owned by the Xiangzhou Bamboo Company.

I have decided. Unbeknownst to none, I will steal from verdant plains. In doing so, I will repay my debt.

The next morning, I excuse myself as Mister Shi makes preparations for his morning prayer. Afterward, we have breakfast at the same inn, and continue the journey. An hour helpless from the sun’s wrath slips by before Mister Shi unfurls his map.

“We are here,” he tells me, pointing to a thin strip of darkened map. “By ten sunsets we should be at our destination.”

My eyes flit away from his finger. *Xiangzhou Bamboo Company* is written, in crisp writing, near the end of the strip.

With one foot after another across damp soil, we enter a village; in front of us lay groups of ridged roofs, and we can hear the calls of clusters of fowl. Before us unfolds the scene of life still being lived. Children chase after each other, shaking with peels of laughter. Elderly citizens hobble on crooked canes. Women hang laundry to dry.

“We can stop here.”

A food cart strolls around the village’s outskirts, operated by a good-humored man. He grins when we move to him; the distinct aroma of chicken baozi snakes from his cart.

When Mister Shi drops coins into his hand and asks for two baos, a small child peeks his head from behind the cart. I presume that he is the owner’s son— a round-faced boy with bright eyes and chubby hands. He looks at me curiously.

In response, I wave tentatively, and offer a grin.

His expression breaks into a large smile. Warmth fills me like fire on a wintry night.

I follow Mister Shi and sit with him by the edge of a wide field. Squinting through the haze of bright sunlight, I can see colors abounding.

“This is a flower meadow,” I say.

He nods. “It’s beautiful. You can smell the remnants of morning dew in the flowers.”

He hands me a bao, and I bite into it. Rich poultry fills my mouth.
The wind threads fingers through my hair. I drop my chin onto my palm.
“What was your life like?” Mister Shi asks.

I had run through life simple and dreary. “I was born in that mess of wood. I stayed with my mother there my entire existence. When she fell ill, I cared for her. Then she passed.”

Mister Shi looks ahead toward the horizon. He waits patiently for, perhaps, some sort of addendum that might indicate a sliver of positivity within my being. My silence says it all.

He sucks in a breath. “My life was one of peace, excluding my father’s demise. My mother supported my monkhood. My time at the monastery was serene. And now I find myself here.” He finally turns to me. “Our lives differ greatly, yet we are both here. Find peace in the grass and the dew.”

What strange words. I shift my gaze from him to the horizon.

Night falls and engulfs the wide blue yonder, bringing with it the moon that now swims in the dark night.

Mister Shi murmurs the last of his prayers, kneeling toward the sky.

My voice comes out stagnant. “My Māmā said— she said— that to live is to suffer.”

Mister Shi lets go of his bedroll, and a thoughtful look enters his eyes. “Life is an endless cycle of suffering and rebirth. But I suppose we, as mere humans, survive to find meaning in that suffering.”

The meaning of my life: feeding pills to an ill mother, witnessing a small boy’s smile, or witnessing light bear down on acres of red flowers on a fall morning? Is it all of them? Is it just some of them?

How confusing survival is.

Xiangzhou is now four kilometers away; the bamboo farm is only one.

“Tonight we’ll sleep at a proper guest house,” Mister Shi says, and drops a handful of coins into my hand. “I’ll go find one somewhere along the road. Will you purchase lunch?”

I curl my fingers around the money. “Yes. I’ll be back.”

The nearest guest houses are a good distance away. If I am to find the plantation, it must be now.

The moment I feel the sensation of his gaze slipping completely off me, I begin sprinting. My sandals kick dust off the roadway as I race away into promises of freedom.

A bird cuts through the sky. Its plumage is as red and fierce as fire, and it trails light across the clouds. I keep my eyes locked on the creature in a rush of reverence. It soars into the distance until it is all but a dot, one that’s enkindling the heavens.

Something grabs at my arm and tugs me back.

“Are you trespassing on purpose?” a voice asks, lithe and murmuring.

I look to my right. A man scowls at me, his silk tunic scrawled with the word *bamboo*. His inky hair is tied up in a tight bun, a long-standing symbol of the upper echelons. The surname *Lian* is painted not far from *bamboo*.

Then I sneak a glance behind me. By my back is a large sign warning wanderers to keep from encroaching.

“No,” I say, and try my best to shield my heightened anxiety. “I was traveling to my grandmother’s house.”

“She doesn’t live with your family?” Lian questions, raising a skeptical eyebrow. “Such an old soul residing by herself?”

“She lives with my aunt,” I quickly cover. “We have a big family.”

His suspicion wanes, in all likelihood due to my unthreatening appearance— a young, peasant girl with dust-dirtied cheeks. “Leave.”

I nod quickly, and continue on.

The land owned by the Xiangzhou Bamboo Company stretches for miles. I clamber up the fence encircling the boundary, and wince as the aged wood creaks beneath my weight.

Tall shoots of bamboo, each many times my height, tower, casting green silhouettes across the wet soil below. Sunlight clamors above, straining to enter, blocked by the forest’s eaves. I slip into the darkness and stalk further in.

A jagged stone lodged in the ground becomes an impromptu knife. With it, I carve at the bamboo, taking chunks out of the tall, proud verdure.

Soon I have amassed a stack of bamboo bark. I load the strips into the folds of my tunic, cautiously tending to the plant material.

“I knew you were a thief,” hisses a familiar voice.

I whip around, and curse. Lian.

“So I followed you.” He smiles. In one smooth motion he lifts a handgun, stationed tight in his grasp. A warning bullet is fired; it ricochets off the ground. I can smell death in the smoke drifting from the weapon’s nozzle.

There is no other option but to run.

I weave between towering stalks with my heart pounding— the threat of pain is one of man’s greatest anxieties— slowed by the mountain of bamboo stowed by my ribs.

Lian shoots, shoots, and laughs. He doesn’t mean to murder me. He only wishes to scare me off and toss me back into the wild, as if I was a troubling animal.

The fence gets closer each bound I take. With one hand I balance myself and leap over it. Too slow. His bullet catches me in the side— it rips open a seam, and blood sprays from the cut.

His second takes me in the liver.

I crumple on the other end of the barrier, searing pain shooting up my chest, hacking up wishes of a painless adieu.

“Goodbye, girl,” Lian whispers. He melts back into the rows of bamboo.

I lie on my back, looking straight up. Eventually, my view of the sky is swallowed by a swollen cloud with an extended corner, little puffs protruding from its bottom— a dog. I laugh lightly, a sound pressured to the brim with forlorn pity for my present predicament.

With a groan, I tug my body upward, wobbling as I attempt to stand firm. The notion of throwing up grows more and more enticing.

I grimace as iron clutters my tongue; with such an injury, I’d only be retching waves of red.

I hobble along the path as it snakes forward, one hand clutched to the gaping wound on my right. Orange-pink creases the sky. Sunset glows and children slumber. The black of my hair, I notice, as strands are thrown across my face, has been lit a somber red.

I come to the realization that completing the staggering walk back to the town from the afternoon is a nigh impossible task.

I strip away the front layer of my tunic, leaving but a thin sheet of white cloth to shelter my torso. The stolen bamboo, every thin, messy sliver, is wrapped carefully.

Once, Yuze, after cutting myself on my knife as I slid it through a fish, I discovered that blood is indeed thicker than water. Māmā’s voice is soft and melodic and makes the whole world spin.

An especially large slice of bamboo is withdrawn, and with it I dab red characters onto its flesh. *Shi. Qin. Yang. Monk.* My vision blurs as my finger stutters.

I heave myself to my feet. Each ragged breath is a final grab for life. I don't make it past the closest shrub before I collapse.

In a stroke of luck, I am on my back once more. It's nearly dark now. Constellations are repopulating the sky.

Perhaps Mister Shi's paper invention could be used for my funeral to wish my postmortem journey luck. If I'd even get a funeral at all.

A feeble smile, a weary finality.

Oh, how beautiful this world is.

A girl, no more than twelve years of age, strains to reach a packet over the counter.

The cashier notices quickly and passes her the item she desires. It's a wrapped pile of joss paper— faux money meant for festivals and funeral rites.

Outside, in the streets, people clamor, talking and laughing and lighting lanterns to fill the night. The night's annual Zhongyuan Festival in full swing, dedicated to honoring

"Is this paper for tonight?" the cashier asks. "Lots of customers are coming in just to get some in order to properly honor their ancestors. Are you planning to honor anyone?"

The girl stares up at him with wide eyes. "Oh, no. This is for my Māmā's funeral. It's today."

The cashier's face is sorrowful, and the sigh he lets out is low. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay," the girl comforts. "The paper will help her soul in the heavens."

The cashier opens his mouth, wishing to reply, but a car's horn sounding outside the shop cuts him off. The girl turns to the noise, then back to the counter. "Sorry. My uncle's here."

In a blink she's out the doors, bounding towards a white Toyota. The driver's window rolls down, revealing a balding man who greets her with a smile.

Creative Writing
Fiction

Group 4



Paper – a Mixture of Old Rags, Noodles, and Bamboo

GT (Ellen Yeung) College, Lam, Athena – 16

Cai Lun woke to the cold yet familiar smell of sandalwood incense. He groaned, burying his bleary eyes under his sleeves. They were the standard eunuch robes: loose-fitting and just enough to keep one warm in the winter and cool in the summer, adorned with ornate embroidery interwoven with the finest gold threads.

Back in his hometown, Leiyang, clothes with intricate patterns fit for the imperial court could be found in every corner. Up until twelve, Cai Lun was raised in a small textile manufacturer under the name ‘Zhulin Bufang’, meaning Bamboo Forest mill. Silk robes were quite the luxury in 60CE and sold at a good price, but every day his father would return home with yet another debt. Their revenue was never enough to offset the costs, their clothes were never enough to keep them warm, and they were constantly on the lookout for errands. Like the rest of the province, the Cai household was barely scraping by.

Cai Lun despised himself for not being able to support his family, especially his poor mother, who had suffered the most but gained the least, enduring his pa’s ill temper and bouts of angry, filthy words one would expect to hear from an uneducated brute. Ever since five, Cai Lun was brought up knowing his way in and out of prosperous residences and striking deals with vendors. He mingled with beggars, scholars, and the occasional cultivator, all alike solely for the chance of a better living he could provide for his mother. He, unlike his father, was a smart, diligent youth who had never gotten a proper education, yet still managed to survive and adapt in an unlikely environment like a boulder in counter currents. Teaching himself how to write Han characters by himself from studying old, worn bamboo scrolls he had found in the cellar. But he could never quite master it, as bamboo and wooden slips were arduously ineffective and costly. A single piece could only allow him to write at most four characters, hindering his process.

Cai Lun would have never expected the great turn of events on his twelfth birthday: his father deemed him a waste of space and food. “That little brat is reaching manhood, and his appetite is growing with him.” His father had shot him a scornful glare. “We cannot live with an extra mouth to feed.” His mother didn’t dare to object, and that was how Cai Lun was kicked out of his house.

Wandering without a destination in mind, he drifted northward and reached Luoyang, where Emperor Ming resided at the sprawling imperial court. At this point, Cai Lun missed the smell of the sea dearly. While in Leiyang, the wind carried a pinch of sea salt accompanied by the never-ending rustling of fabric and rice stalks, Luoyang was bustling with haughty riches and hollering merchants. It was harsh and suffocating compared to his agricultural-based coastal hometown—unfamiliar with his bearings, he ended up joining a calligraphy contest for a handful of meat buns and ended up catching the Emperor’s eye. Due to his ability to read and write, he was quickly promoted to the Emperor’s chamberlain.

His daily routine starts by overseeing servants, from the palace’s one-hundred and seventy-five cooks to lowly maids who brush the shelves and sweep the floor, and ends with an abacus and a tabletop of scrolls. He woke at mao, when the first sliver of light could be

seen from the sun peeking out from the multi-layered clouds, and rested at hai, an hour before midnight. He was cold and unassuming, he was obedient and cultured, he was strict and serious, but underneath that was a human soul, suffering solitude in silence.

Cai Lun shook his head, reminded himself of his duties, and quickly composed himself, flattening his robes, and setting out.

“Nangong Jie.” He clasped his hands together in front of his face and bowed respectfully. “I am here to inquire about the latest expenses of the palace.” The woman in charge of the Tianlu pavilion, the imperial library, returned the gesture, slightly amused. Emperor Ming was an unconventional ruler indeed—he was one of the very first to employ a female officer in charge of the imperial library.

Her features carried a scholarly essence, with furrowed yet determined brows, slightly sunken cheeks, and pale lips that curved upwards when she replied: “Isn’t this Cai Lun? There’s no need for the formalities.” She turned around, her finger tracing shelves to locate the exact scroll of bamboo slip. “Is the emperor giving you a hard time again?” She asked after a deliberate pause.

Cai Lun remained impassive. “It is my duty.”

Nangong Jie sighed as she reached for a thick scroll and placed it firmly into his hands. “Here are the records for the past week. Take care, Cai Lun.”

Cai Lun dimmed at the sight of the scroll. He remembered that when he was young, his mom would sometimes pause sewing and drape a worn blanket over his shoulders while he was studying calligraphy on crudely made bamboo slips. The clothing his mother worked on was a rich fox pelt, complemented with golden hand-sewn patterns. A mouldy blanket was all the Cai household had for the winter.

Cai Lun sighed. “I miss home.” He blurted. He rarely let his true emotions show, but Nangong Jie was not surprised. “A break might do you good. Take your time and revisit your hometown.” She advised.

Cai Lun thanked her again with a bow. Little did he know that Nangong Jie shook her head in his direction when he left. He may fool others, but he couldn’t fool one of his oldest acquaintances in the imperial court. Nangong Jie knew he had no plans of returning to Leiyang. He was way too proud and adamant to listen since he learned that his parents had met their end in the hands of angry loaners shortly after Cai Lun was cast out.

Nangong Jie’s eyes followed his retreating figure until he grew smaller and smaller, eventually disappearing into the distance. “I hope he changes his mind one day.” She sighed.

After Cai Lun left the pavilion, he delivered the scroll to Emperor Ming directly. He contemplated before deciding not to bring up the topic of returning home. In a few years, Emperor Ming was no more, and in his place was Emperor Zhang. Cai Lun’s position rose, and now as a message relay, he delivered scrolls day to night. Others had offered their pity, but he found it enjoyable. Each scroll carried a different message, unspoken feelings, Cai Lun understood, and he found conveying messages between the sender and the receiver to be meaningful and almost magical, whether it was a surly business inquiry or a passionate love letter.

On a particular day, he had finished his morning duties and went to the servant’s hall for lunch. The receiver of the scrolls had given him a hard time, and he had completely exhausted himself. Depleted of energy, he hardly paid any attention to his surroundings when someone passed him his meal. He found himself staring at a bowl of way-too-familiar noodles. *Rice noodles*. They were common food for moderate households in Leiyang, but Cai Lun only had a few tastes of them on special occasions when his mother had saved enough to buy him some. He had watched the vendor ladle the spicy soup, then the thin noodles, and sprinkle a generous

amount of chopped onion. And then there were days when his mother couldn't afford a bowl, and they would stare from afar as bowls of noodles were ladled and served, imagining that they were the ones sitting in front of the table consuming the noodles in big gulps.

As the still-hot noodles steamed, Cai Lun felt tears stir in his eyes, and something he hadn't felt for so long surfaced like a ripple in still waters. It had been so long since Cai Lun felt hungry that the foreign sensation sent him smiling from ear to ear before he knew it. He wolfed down the bowl, etiquette forgotten. Then he asked for another.

Years passed in the blink of an eye after that. He had served two Emperors, and he was considered a veteran in the imperial court. Everyone treated him with the utmost respect, some going as far as to bow with their hands above their heads as he breezed past the corridors in his long silky blue robes, a gesture of courtesy. One could be pretty content—but not Cai Lun. He felt empty inside, he felt like he was never complete without seeing his hometown one last time. Yet he still refrained from asking, for he had many important matters to attend. Emperor Zhang had passed on, and the new Emperor, Emperor Ming, assigned him a workshop in charge of the production of weaponry and instruments. While Cai Lun was often praised for his youthful face, his age finally caught up to him, and he zoned out more often than he used to.

“You miss home, don't you?” A gentle, weathered voice snapped him out of his latest reverie. Only now did he realize that he had been staring at the bamboo shoots outside the window for some time.

“Madame Ping. This humble one offers his sincere apology.” Cai Lun, despite his bafflement and surprise, hurried to apologize. It has become more or less of a habit now that he had been doing it for years in the imperial court.

“I remember when you told me stories about your home. *Zhulin Bufang*, was it?” There was not a ripple of change in the lady's creased face or hunched back, but she stopped next to Cai Lun to peer out the window, hands clasped behind her back.

Cai Lun nodded, his gaze lowered in embarrassment. As usual, the old lady has seen through him.

“I will talk to A-Ming.” No one would have had the nerve to refer to Emperor Ming with endearment one would use to refer to their son, but Madame Ping was the Emperor's midwife – practically the Emperor's second mother.

He felt his heart clench. “Oh no, that's okay. It'd be too much trouble for you-”

Madame Ping cut him off. “Let me talk to A-Ming. You've worked hard for all these years, the least I could do is make sure you get the rest you deserve.” She was too petite to reach his shoulders, so she settled for a pat on his upper arm.

After an uneasy sleep, Cai Lun got consent from the Emperor. A few weeks later, he arrived in Leiyang. He was surprised to find everything was more or less the same. A strange emotion grasped him when he faced the wreckage that used to be his home. He wandered in a daze, noting the destruction of the braw. The loaners had miraculously spared the small bamboo garden at the back of the shabby house. *Bamboo...* Cai Lun mused, gazing at his hand, grazed and coarse from the labour he underwent years ago as a messenger, and before that, a chamberlain. He could almost feel the weight of a bamboo-and-wood scroll on his hands.

That was when inspiration struck. He got to work immediately, using the bamboo shoots growing in the yard where he used to play as a kid. All those days he spent delivering scrolls and nights he spent holed up at the weaponry workshop at night paid off as he chopped off the bamboo with ease, and instead of making them into slips like he had as a kid, he chopped them into smaller pieces—he had no idea what he was doing, and he was

trusting his instincts to guide him. Then, he soaked them into the pond in the yard. A glance and he could tell he was about to create something extraordinary, something that could turn Eastern Han upside down.

“Cai Lun? You're back already? I thought you wouldn't be back for another month!” Madame Ping was disappointed, but wind-swept Cai Lun, who had travelled nonstop for a week, hadn't had the time to explain. He brushed past her and went straight to the Emperor. The Emperor, a bit annoyed and put off by his request to return home, was already in a foul mood. Upon hearing Cai Lun's request, he was furious. He had requested the construction of a highly intricate structure, but he hadn't told him what it was for.

“Who do you think you are!” The Emperor roared.

Madame Ping scuttled into the room. Seeing her, the Emperor snarled. “See? Give him an inch and he'll take a mile.”

Madame Ping pursed her lips and did not speak.

Cai Lun continued without blinking an eye. “My lord, this...structure will not be futile. I cannot tell you what I'm planning to make just yet, but the results will be promising. I can swear on my workshop and my lowly life.” He joined his hands in front of him and bowed low, not daring to move an inch, until he felt ants crawling on his back and his legs numb.

The Emperor stroked his beard, three parts angry and seven parts thoughtful. “Fine. Do as you wish, but only if you keep your word.” Even so, the Emperor never brought up the incident again, much less pressured him about his passion project.

Having narrowly escaped death, he got to his workshop and instructed workers to construct a rectangular frame. Then, he told them to chop bamboo from the imperial garden and asked them to boil it. Workers had no clue of its significance, they only did what they were told and boiled the bamboo into a pulp. The result was a dry, sandy mesh.

Cai Lun had no time to be disappointed. He repeated his experiment, each time tweaking a bit of the process. First, he tried adding salt to the mixture. With that not succeeding, he remembered how fabric was dyed back in his childhood in Leiyang-inspired, he added water to the next batch, and voila! He created the perfect mushy pulp. He poured them in the rectangular screen he had asked the workers to construct, and workers were to press and dry the sheets of bamboo mush.

There were days when he worked until he fell ill in exhaustion, and there were days he was plagued and clouded by a failed experiment, but he never let them deter him. He would patiently try and try again until he got the right formula. He was often seen dozing off in his room with a worn blanket, confusing maids and bureaucrats all the same—only Cai Lun knew how precious the old rag was to him. Even when he was bedridden, this blanket from his hometown had kept him warm.

Of course, there were also days when he was immersed in joy after a successful experiment, days when a discovery could keep him up all night, and there were days he felt so content that he could forget his sorrows and burdens.

After three months he decided to publicly announce his creation. People came from everywhere just to hear his speech. As he scanned the crowd, he caught a glimpse of Nangong Jie, who arched her brow and folded her hands in front of her chest as a greeting. The Emperor was seated on the throne, laden with ripe fruits and gold. He now plopped a grape into his mouth, slowly chewing and revelling in the sweetness: “You can start whenever you like, Cai Lun.” He said languidly, lounging in his chair.

Cai Lun took a deep breath and started: “Welcome, everyone. It is my honour today to present a refined bamboo scroll.” He held up a needle-thin sheet.

Murmurs and whispers immediately drifted among the crowd. Some of them were intrigued. Some of them were uninterested. Most of them were doubtful. Cai Lun knew what they were thinking: just what can this nearly transparent sheet do? It was half the thickness of the bamboo slips, and twice the size.

At first, the Emperor was delighted – he had no doubt of Cai Lun’s ability. His brows furrowed as someone questioned the authenticity. “Silence. Let him finish.” He ordered.

Without batting an eye, he invited the Emperor to try writing on the bamboo sheets. The Emperor picked up a brush and found, in astonishment, that when he moved his brush, strokes of ink were as smooth as flowing water and he was able to write at least a hundred characters on one single sheet.

“...amazing.” Emperor Ming marvelled, shock and joy contorting his plump features. “We will have the imperial palace mass-produce these bamboo sheets...no, from this day onwards, they will be called paper!”

Word spread like a wildfire, and Cai Lun was soon known as the inventor of this miraculous thin sheet across the continent. He has been praised and worshiped up until this very day. His tale was passed on to many, who continued to share and spread this wonderful, life-changing story to future generations. But no one else except for Cai Lun and his closest companions understood the hardships he had gone through, the hard work that went behind that single piece of paper.

After the production of paper was stabilized and Eastern Han seemed to be headed towards a bright future, he visited his old household again. He stood in front of the ruins for a long time. Reminiscing the past, Cai Lun whispered a few words, words that were lost in the wind. It was a short toast. “I did it, mother.” His eyes reddened as he remembered his difficult journey. There was a bitter tang in the air, lodging into his throat when he inhaled: “I-” He hacked, coughing blood into his handkerchief. “I did it.”

He closed his eyes. He could almost feel his mother’s warm embrace, a blanket of warmth woven from bamboo, old rags and noodles.

The Embers We Leave Behind

Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Tong, Carrinna, 15

“And this goes here...”, Shih placed a matchstick next to a splintered piece of rope, the glow from the flames illuminating the unabashed pride on his face.

“There. Now, we run and hide behind that rock.” Pointing a finger to a large boulder obscured by night’s shadow, Shih smiled at Jing and grabbed her hand. They turned and crossed a thin flowing stream and hopped over pebbles, towards the faint flickering yellow aura from their home’s candlelight. The child waddled over the little bits of rock, tripping from time to time but never falling, always pulled upright by the big, warm hands she could unwaveringly trust.

Crouching behind the boulder, they waited. Giddy giggles bounced off the rock and the wooden planks of the house, obscuring the crackling of flames that burned closer and closer to the device...

Bang! Bright streams of light shot up from the mist and the night sky erupted into clouds of confetti.

Jing jumped, leaning back into his father’s torso. Shih wrapped his arms around her and hugged her close: they looked at each other, smiled, and directed their gaze to the night sky. Incandescent eruptions painted the darkness with streaks of fuschia, gold, ruby, and emerald. The air shook in the fire’s ebullience as the fiery torrents soared upwards, erupted, and flared; only then fading into a trail of fizzling smoke.

Shih’s face changed tinge with each crackling explosion, his eyes reflecting the dazzling spectacle of his own creation-- he had harnessed the power of nature and turned it into something nothing short of magical.

This was an inadvertent discovery, yes, a trivial side-product of his grand quest for scientific research and seeking the key to immortality. Yet, it was impossible to ignore the vibrant sparks that emanated from the powder when heated.

Sure enough, word, and sound, of this explosive spectacle spread across the Kingdom and bursts of colour were soon seen all across the night sky. Eventually, flowers and dragons were painted right above the grand palace.

“Shih...”, the emperor voiced:

“I am at a loss for words. This is an amazing invention, and we are proud to see such scientific progress in our land. We are truly amazed by these scintillating images. Thank you for giving me such an extravagant display on the day of my birth, it is such a symbol of prosperity and glory.”

Prosperity and glory. Shih’s heart pounded at these high-flown praises: years of experimentation and dedication to scientific research, finally culminating in recognition, finally enabling him to create something of use, something that leaves a mark on society: even if it just brings the most minute amounts of peace and joy. Finally-

“Shih, could you provide us with, say, ten boxes of these, ‘sky flowers’, five days later? Any colour would suffice. The nation would benefit very much from this.”

Shih did not appreciate this: ten boxes in five days, whilst he was the sole producer? Let alone giving away his own invention for no profit, no fame, no elevation in status, just for altruistic self-motivation? This did not sound appealing-- not to any rational person. But it

was the solemn tone that made this question a demand: this was the country, the government, the highest power. Shih could do nothing but oblige.

Five days have passed since Shih reluctantly handed over days and nights of hard work to the emperor: ten wooden boxes, carefully sealed off, full of hand-crafted powder that became magic when ignited.

Three days have passed since the Huang Chao rebellion took a turn for the worse and civilians became harmed amidst the violence.

Crouching behind the boulder, they hid. Rapid and muted breathing concealed itself from behind the rock whilst shouts of violence echoed all over the village, obscuring the crackling of flames that burned closer and closer to the device...

Bang! Bright balls of a blinding glow shot up from the trenches and the air erupted into another wave of raucous screaming.

Jing jumped, leaning back into his father's torso. Shih wrapped his arms around her and hugged her close.

"It's fine. It's fine. We will be fine, Jing... We just... We just need to run from this boulder, back into the house", Shih reassured.

We will be fine. This time, Shih did not let Jing run across the pebbles herself. He hoisted Jing onto his shoulder, and, finding the moment, sprinted towards the wooden plank door and flung it open.

We will be fine. Shih put Jing down on the floor, his eyes glazing over the stained wooden table and the flasks of chemicals perched innocently on the shelf above. A bottle of crimson lay at the edge. As if possessed by a demon, Shih walked over, staring at that bottle of red.

Will we be fine? The sound of this explosive was too familiar to suggest otherwise. The fizzling. The bangs.

The bottle falls over the ledge, shattering into a pool of crimson that begins to seep into the irregular wooden grains.

Shih's breathing became heavier: so did his heart. This wasn't his intention. He had hoped to bring joy and hope. This spectacle was a happy accident from his endeavours of science, of extending life. Yet, it had become the opposite: terror and bloodshed; abruptly ending the lives of breathing souls, tearing bodies into bits of flesh, only for it to splatter anonymously onto the already blood-washed ground. If life is so vulnerable, what is the purpose of trying to extend it?

Red drips off the edge of the table onto the floor, the striking hue starting to spread to its surroundings like a symbiote, staining the chair the floor the air, Red.

In his pursuit of Science, Shih did not ever stop to think about what Science is: all he had was his passion for it, his wish to leave a legacy behind. But as realisation came crashing down, Shih saw a part of Science that he so carelessly neglected, concealed by his relentless acceleration that left no room for contemplation of consequences. He had neglected the duality and the power of Science, and how dangerous this could be, when Science lands in the wrong hands.

This was not the legacy he wanted to leave behind... But it was already too late to salvage.

The Red had already spread uncontrollably, colouring the entire room in a monochrome red.

Jing stared at the back of Shih's head, now buried within his arms and rapidly heaving up and down.

Perhaps in an attempt to cheer him up, she asked in a weakly cheerful tone, "Daddy, are they all playing with our sky flowers outside? Can I join them? We haven't played in so long, pleeeeeease?"

Join them? Join them and face death? Face the wrath of fire; the scorch of my own science?

The red grows, becoming more and more viscous... Until it starts to climb up Shih's feet, suffocating the Scientist...

Shih is in a barren land. He turns around, turns back, eyes desperately searching for his eight-year-old, searching, searching...

"Jing?"

"Jing!"

All he hears are echoes, voices that sneer and scorn at him when he realises that these sounds are from nothing but the manifestation of emptiness, not Jing.

"Jing?"

Shih starts to run, the dried, wilted grass crunching under every step he takes. He spins his head around, to the left, to the right, up, and down, catching sight of their bare skin patched with splatters of red and brown, catching sight of them, covered with shrivelled up pieces of guts-- intestines, livers, brains.

He tries to avoid them, but there are far too many. Clusters of them everywhere.

"Jing?"

Silence. Then a meek, struggling noise that somewhat resembles: "Dad--"

"Jing!"

Yet, relief instantaneously turns into terror. Jing's previously unblemished skin is covered with cuts and slashes and blood... As her eyes begin to droop.

Shih drops to his knees, scrambling for Jing's hands, shaking them vigorously.

"Jing- No, no no, stay with me!"

Jing lets out a faint mumble, a muffled sound, as her eyes close into a silent surrender.

Bang! The world flashes white.

"Mister Shih, I am here by the name of the emperor. He demands to see you at the grand palace."

Shih turned around, oblivious to his surroundings. His head pounded as he was pulled back into reality.

My daughter could die from this.

"Mr Shih, I am here by the name of the emperor. He demands to see you at the grand palace." The guard enunciated every syllable.

She could die from Science.

Closing his eyes and shaking his head to bring himself back to the present, Shih mumbled, "Uhh.. Sorry, I didn't catch that. You said?" He struggled and crawled up from the ground, wiping away the tears on his face.

Why is this happening?

“The emperor demands to see you. Follow me.”

Timidly, Shih traced the steps of the guard. The cold man’s face was masked by the shadows of the towering palace, making it impossible for Shih to discern his true intentions.

The Emperor exclaimed once he saw Shih step foot into the uncannily barren palace, “Ahh, Shih. How much you have done for our country. I would like to thank you for your generous supply of sky flowers. It has been of great use: just look at how many battles we’ve won.”

Furrowing his eyebrows at Shih, who was silently looking down at the marble floor, so sterile it reflected his troubled face, the Emperor said nonchalantly, “You look dishevelled: has life treated you harshly? I hope you haven’t been bothered by the war. We could provide you with accommodation... If you require it.”

Shih looked up and stared blankly at the Emperor, the glint from his eyes gone: “Oh- No, no. I’m alright. Thank you for the... appreciation.”

“That is good to hear. Anyway, Shih, I understand how hard it can be to deal with science. I know there is a lack of funding, recognition and whatnot: so perhaps, it would be beneficial for both of us if you gave us the list of ingredients that are needed to make this sky flower. We can help you scale up your production, increase exposure... Whilst we, we... Could go on to win so many battles! Don’t you love this win-win situation?”

Shih took a deep breath. “I’m sorry... As much as I love science, I do not support our country’s use of violence. What my sky flowers have turned into wasn’t my intention and has caused much inconvenience, which is why I will have to say- ”

“Naïve morals don’t work in real life.” The Emperor’s voice seemed to lose some of its pompous undertone and morphed into a deep, unembellished rasp, “It is never this simple: sometimes, violence is justified. Violence is justified because we are not the ones who started it. Do you think we are going to condone this trampling of our land, this massacre of our citizens, this violation of the inherent rights we possess? Sacrifices have to be made. Those barbarian outsiders instigated this: we are merely defending our homeland. You call this unjustified?”

“I think I’ll have to refuse this time, your honour.”

The emperor’s eyes darkened into a menace. He glanced around the room as if searching for evidence that something had collapsed from the marble ceiling, something he had never thought would collapse. But the heavens did not give him an answer: so he gave himself one:

“If you say so... Death it is.”

A man, apprehensive, turned to the indignant emperor and said, “Your honour, are you sure you would like to kill him? The dead do not speak words.”

The Emperor whispered menacingly, “Insolent and insensible youth! Do you not see? Since he does not comply, just *kill* him. He is merely a pawn: it’s the ingredient list that matters. We will search his workshop afterwards.”

His eyes were now clouded by a dark grey murk.

Farewell presents itself in the most unlikely corners: partings that would be unknowingly permanent. This parting, for the innocent child, is one concealed with forced smiles and haphazard excuses.

A soldier, more than a head taller than Shih, very roughly escorted him back to the once safe home, walking past them, the bloodshed, the screams... to allow Shih one last exchange with his daughter, as requested.

“Peasant, go spend time with your *precious*: be quick. Don’t you *dare* touch anything on your table. I’ll be watching.”

Shih crouched down and grabbed those small and soft hands, as he smiled and whispered, “Hey, Jing...”

“Papa and this uncle are on our way to find a new workshop for us to make... prettier sky flowers. You know, make more sky flowers for you...”

Had Jing been any older, she would have picked up on the carelessly constructed optimism Shih tried to display.

“Hooray, Papa!” Jing cheered; it was always her contagious smile that melted Shih’s heart.

“Shh... Well, mind helping me clean up our current workshop after Papa and the uncle leave? Just... dump all the things into the river. Don’t burn it, you’ll hurt yourself.”

“Okay, Dad! See you soon. Love you!” This time, her smile melted Shih’s heart into a puddle of blood, Red.

Shih turned away, unable to look straight into those innocent eyes.

“I love you too, Jing.”

Standing upright again, Shih backed away from his daughter and looked around, desperate to capture the last frames of his quaint workshop, eyes squinting from the flasks of chemicals to the stained table and to Jing...

Until the guard scuffled Shih away from it all. He turned and allowed the lone drop of tear to fall from his eyes, as they walked away

Forever.

The cold iron bars of prison contain the physical body but cannot prevent the spirit from hearing the strident sounds of the gunfire and explosions from outside. Shih’s eyes are closed, contemplating...

In what ways does he deserve this sense of security whilst people were out there suffering from his Science?

It is as if he is looking through a window, and finds that he is locked outside: so much he wants to do, but so little time and so little power...

Shih finally opens his eyes: they are filled with an unearthly glare.

The next morning, there was no sun. Blue-black rain clouds loomed over the land as the guards escorted Shih from his cell to the execution grounds, tying him firmly to a boulder with splintered, coarse pieces of rope, as other hostile guards roughly threw hay around his legs. Shih watched the growing pile of tinder and the pieces of cotton rope: how often had similar piles fueled his firework displays?

As the torch was let down to ignite the mound, Shih breathed deeply of the smoke that so uncannily resembled the smell of fireworks. How he wished he could see the evanescent glory blossoming across the heavens one final time...

Yet, he had one more task. One last thing to do, one last mark to leave on humanity, voluntarily. Bending his wrist, he tugged on a pale yellow piece of paper: on it were priceless notes, words that unlocked a new realm of chemistry, lines that would otherwise have been the birth of death.

Closing his eyes, he let it go. The piece of paper drifted down, to the left, then right, left, right; ultimately touching the flames, its edges turning immediately into a dark, muted brown, shrivelling involuntarily, as it became smaller, smaller, smaller... Finally becoming embers that were soon consumed by the wrath of the fire.

While the flames became bigger, bigger, bigger. As the blazing red-orange closed in, so did science, lamenting the loss of a passionate soul. So did the ire of war, wailing for the loss of a could-be victim. And, as the flames crawled onto Shih's skin, he regained a long-gone sense of comfort and resolve. The fire was devouring his body, but with that, it was alleviating his guilt.

I couldn't decide how my legacy started, but at least, I can decide how it ends. I've obliterated the only chance for the gunpowder to be produced: and so it ends, with me.

A small sacrifice for so much more...

Least, Shih would never live to see the day, where another brilliant mind would tread his path again, pushing himself

Into the depths of suffering.

Fiction

Group 5



The Weaver's Tale

St. Paul's Co-educational College, Cheung, Hau Yin Chloe- 14

Sunlight trickled in through the canopy like liquid gold, heralding the start of a new day. Dewdrops glittered amongst the trees and bushes like little diamonds. The lotus flowers rested idly upon the lilypond, nestled between giant jade plates of lotus leaves, and goldfish sporting vibrant scales the colour of glowing embers could be seen frolicking beneath the crystal-clear depths. Melodious laughter like a chorus of tinkling bells floated into the picturesque palace gardens, as a procession of ladies entered, all of them members of the imperial court. The most striking of all was the lady at the front of the procession waited on by all the others, who were her maids. She had silky, raven hair woven into an elegant bun atop her head, with loose strands framing her delicate features. Her eyes, which rested appreciatively on every beautiful blossom in the garden, glowed with the lustre of black pearls. Her willowy figure made her look all the more regal – fitting for a woman of her stature.

Her maid-in-waiting, Yinsi, brought her a steaming cup of tea, bowing respectfully. “Your imperial highness, please have a drink.” The woman, Empress Leizu, accepted it, “Thank you, Yinsi.” She took a seat below a mulberry tree and raised the cup, breathing in its soothing herbal aroma, and raised the cup to her lips, taking a sip, closing her eyes and letting the earthy notes take over. Mornings like this were heavenly for her, as she took a break from her worldly duties and took a moment to unwind. Leizu was the wife of the Yellow Emperor, who ruled China from 2698 to 2598 BC. As the empress, she worked by the emperor’s side and had to attend many court rituals and ceremonies. It proved tiring occasionally, having to be perfectly poised all the time, but Leizu found solace in her inquisitive mind, and the gentle, familiar aroma wafting around her, diffusing into the morning air.

“Empress, Your Imperial Highness! there’s a cocoon in your tea!” Her maids’ startled cries jolted Leizu from her reverie. “Oh! There is!” Leizu watched the silkworm cocoon, which had tumbled down from the branches of the mulberry tree she was seated under, drifting around her tea. It bobbed about in the hot water. The Empress attempted to lift the cocoon from her tea. She fished around slightly clumsily, trying to get it out, while her maids panicked, worried about the hot tea scalding their empress’s hand. As she wrestled with the cocoon, she found it beginning to soften and unravel into a long smooth filament. The slender fibre felt soft to her touch. A sudden idea struck the ever-thinking Leizu, and her arm froze in mid-air, the thread suspended above her tea. She gazed thoughtfully at the thread, lost in a string of thoughts. She glanced at her maids’ garments – functional, but rough and not that comfortable – then at the fibre again. “What if...what if we used these fibres for weaving?” she murmured ponderously.

She took her idea to her husband in the evening when she was having tea with him. “Using worm cocoon strands to weave clothing?” the ruler furrowed his brow. The very idea seemed completely ludicrous. “Yes, I’m sure it’ll work somehow! It truly is the softest, smoothest thread I’ve ever touched.” Leizu gestured emphatically. The emperor had his doubts, but he was an inventive soul himself, with many inventions having been introduced under his reign, including carts, boats, writing and wooden houses. He sighed, “Well, how would you like me to help you?” “Just let me have a grove of mulberry trees. I’d like to learn more about these worms and the intriguing material they produce.” Leizu pleaded. The emperor agreed – the determined glint in Leizu’s eye was enough to convince him.

A couple of days spun by, and to Leizu’s utter delight, her mulberry grove was ready. Along with her maid-in-waiting Yinsi, she took her first stroll around the grove. “Excellent, there are many worms here!” she exclaimed rapturously. “Your imperial highness, these are ideal conditions for silkworms!” Yinsi remarked happily, lightly amused at the normally composed empress’s excitement, but pleased as well, for she also saw the potential in the silkworms and silk cultivating. “I must get started right away!” The empress declared, “I’m certain that my innovation will benefit the empire.”

Her heart ablaze with determination, the Empress set her sights on perfecting the silk production process and transforming it into a material. Instead of taking leisurely walks in the gardens, Leizu would head to her mulberry grove. At the break of dawn, when the just-awakened sun first casts its warm glow upon the earth, the empress could be seen in the grove peering into tree branches and walking from tree to tree, diligently observing the silkworms in the trees. She learnt to domesticate silkworms and experimented with making silk, collecting cocoons, and using different methods to obtain the silk from them. She spent her days absorbed in her task and earned valuable knowledge about the silkworm’s life cycle. She would trek in the grove, rain or shine or snow, till the last rays of sunlight faded away. Only then would she retire to her chambers, exhausted yet satisfied by her newfound knowledge, and note down her findings on rolls of bamboo strips. By the time she’d written down all she wanted to write, it would be deep into the night, with no soul save for the moon awake. Sometimes, she would be so exhausted by the end of the day, that she would fall asleep while writing and get scratched by the bamboo. Months later, she had amassed an extensive collection of notes, which were kept in her chambers, and shared only with those closest to her. Leizu soon found that collecting the cocoons and boiling them caused the threads to unravel. These wispy threads could be woven into a smooth fabric through methods carefully developed and perfected by the empress.

She also formed a hardworking team of people who helped her with this project. Most of them were devoted members of her court, along with some interested scholars in the imperial court. Her team enlisted the help of farmers to help them with rearing silkworms. The farmers worked in the mulberry grove, taking care of the mulberry trees and silkworms.

Meanwhile, news of the empress’s research spread like wildfire within the imperial court. Bitter courtiers, who bore petty grudges against Leizu, grew resentful of Leizu and her team’s work. They whispered behind her back, deviously plotting to improve their reputation with the emperor by bringing her down. They argued that the resources the emperor allocated to her team, such as the mulberry grove, were too much. They also stated that silk was too extravagant and impractical a material. They spun elaborate webs of lies, which they craftily fed to the emperor, hoping to tarnish Leizu’s reputation. “Empress Leizu is using that mulberry grove as a place for idle entertainment, wasting our precious resources, and she lounges around all day doing nothing...” “Empress Leizu is splurging on custom-made jewellery with the money the emperor granted her; soon enough, she shall plunge the imperial court into debt!” These deceitful whispers echoed endlessly within the palace walls. The courtiers also snuck into the mulberry grove when the empress and her workers were absent and would use swords to hack away the branches and leaves of the mulberry trees, harming many of the silkworms and cocoons, as well as the trees themselves. Leizu and her team were positively boiling with indignation at this, but as they didn’t have solid proof, they were forced to bear with it. The courtiers also tried to turn the maids on Leizu’s team against each other, goading them into squabbles about petty matters like stealing possessions, making it impossible to maintain healthy group dynamics. Yinsi often begged Leizu to punish the courtiers, as she was getting gossiped about too, “Your Highness, those courtiers have been

driving us all apart!” Despite this, Leizu, ever the diplomat, decided against acting on hot-headed impulse and devised a plan to cool tensions.

The empress decided to host a special banquet at the palace dining hall to unveil her now-perfected invention. She sent out invitations etched on ornately carved stone tablets, emphasising how much of a momentous occasion it would be. The emperor, high-ranking courtiers including the bitter ones, and even the highest-ranking ladies of her court were invited. At the high-profile banquet, she proudly presented her method of manufacturing silk fabric to the guests. Using a loom, a machine she had designed especially for weaving, she carefully wove silk threads into a smooth fabric and presented it to the emperor and his guests.

The emperor was enthralled, beaming like an enthusiastic schoolboy. “Well, I must say that this is the smoothest, glossiest, most luxurious fabric I have ever seen! The sheen, and the texture, show plenty of promise. Who would have known that worms could do such a miraculous thing?”

“I agree with his imperial majesty. Truly, this new textile is amazing!” Some of the courtiers nodded in agreement, “If I may suggest something, perhaps embroidery or dyes could be added to decorate these fabrics? Some colour, along with some intricate needlework, would work wonders.”

Leizu’s eyes shone with inspiration, “Yes! That would be a splendid addition, thank you for your input.” Other courtiers also expressed their ideas, which were carefully noted by Leizu’s team for later review.

However, the bitter courtiers took it upon themselves to drag the empress into the mud. “Your imperial majesty...” the ringleader of those courtiers simpered to the emperor, leaning towards him, “The empress’s success in making this material is astonishing — I’m sure none of us expected her and some lowly servants to finish the job; however, we have spotted various worrying problems regarding multiple aspects of the silk-making, and we felt that it is of utmost importance to raise it to your immediate attention.”

“Indeed, Your Imperial Majesty,” another courtier drawled. “A fact that deeply concerns us is Empress Leizu’s mulberry grove and her extravagant spending.”

“The sheer amount of money flowing out is staggering. Surely an entire grove along with her allowances is too much since all that is being done, if it’s even being done, is the questionable practice of...raising and boiling worms?” another courtier leered slyly, drawing venomous looks from Leizu’s team. Leizu’s lips were pressed together in a tight line as if to prevent a torrent of daggers from spilling out.

“Oh, do forgive me, your imperial Highness, but these practices seem more like witchcraft than weaving,” he added unctuously. At this, gasps came from the other guests, and some scandalised whispers of, “How dare you!” “The audacity!” escaped from those on Leizu’s side. The emperor glanced uncertainly at Leizu; his face conflicted – he did not want to be accused of meddling in black magic.

“Do permit me to clarify that the process of silk making is very time-consuming and meticulous. My team and I employ farmers to assist us in rearing the silkworms, who are paid workers. As for the mulberry grove, it is where we rear the silkworms. As for witchcraft, Minister – frankly, I’m afraid your imagination might be just slightly too vivid.” Leizu replied patiently.

“With all due respect, your imperial Highness, I can hardly see how it is time-consuming. Also, your proposed price for selling this material is so high, although it is a very impractical material requiring delicate upkeep. It’s a luxury that can hardly be afforded by the majority of the population, who work in agriculture and need functional clothes that can withstand wear and tear. What benefits then, may I ask, can they reap?”

“The silkworms are first cultivated in the mulberry grove. They consume mulberry leaves as they grow, and soon they get to the stage where they spin protective silk cocoons to pupate in. Then, we and our farmers harvest the cocoons once the pupation is complete. After that, we have to boil or steam the cocoons to soften the silk fibres and remove proteins. Then we unwind the silk filaments, a delicate process requiring a lot of care, and spin them into threads using a silk reel – another device I invented. After that, we interlace the silk threads on the loom and weave them together to create fabric. It’s all very labour-intensive.” Leizu explained.

“That may well be, although I believe that process is overcomplicated; but how is it supposed to benefit our economy? It’s not as if we can sell it to the commoners. They’ll never afford such an ostentatious thing,” a courtier scoffed sceptically.

“Allow me to explain this, Minister.” A scholar on Leizu’s team piped up, “This material her Imperial Majesty has invented, silk, is indeed expensive, but that is a benefit. It could be used to trade with other countries along with tea leaves and porcelain. We can keep the silk-making procedure a secret so that we’ll be the sole producers! It could rake in huge amounts of money.”

“Additionally, producing silk could provide job opportunities for many commoners! Our farmers are benefitting already, and many more could be employed. Women could also participate in the weaving process, so they can earn their income too.” Yinsi added.

“With such a complicated procedure to make as you described, how is it supposed to be mass-produced? It can’t possibly be mass-produced! Is Your Highness simply planning to keep it to yourself?” another courtier questioned snugly, thinking this would floor Leizu. She was not floored.

“As we just said, we will be employing more people to help us with mass production, and I’ll be improving the design of my loom and reel. You are welcome to help out with this procedure if you wish.” Leizu said pleasantly. The courtier grimaced. “No, your imperial Highness, I find worms unpleasant creatures, and working around them very unbecoming.” He retorted pointedly. At this, several of the maids opened their mouths, insulted, but Leizu silenced them with a look. Drawing herself up, she summoned up all her courage, and in her most regal manner, began to speak.

“Over the past months, my team and I have been toiling hard, and we’ve gleaned a vast web of enchanting knowledge of silk and its making,” she began, her dark eyes sparkling with genuine ardency. “Not all of you appreciate this new material, which is understandable; yet I hope in time you do recognise its potential. The way I see it, we must kindle innovation by harnessing the power of nature. The threads produced by these tiny, seemingly insignificant worms are untapped jade deposits; it’s a fact that’s impossible to disregard. We’re just scratching the surface of this vast abyss of natural wisdom. It is yet another way of living in harmony with nature. Regardless of what happens to my invention in the future, I want to try doing all I possibly can to develop silk. I know that now, it’s far from flawless, but with the invaluable support of the court, I’m sure that it shall metamorphose into something unimaginably spellbinding; something that will bring significant prosperity for centuries to come.”

The room fell silent. Heads swivelled, and the emperor found dozens of expectant eyes locked onto him. Those on Leizu’s team held their breaths, their hearts racing wildly, desperate to know what the emperor would make of her proclamation.

The emperor nodded approvingly, a smile breaking out across his amiable face. “Yes, I do hope it does. I shall look for ways to integrate silk into the court, and I shall find ways to let our people reap the benefits. It’s a tremendous invention, it is, and we ought to treat it as such.” Leizu’s team was in seventh heaven after hearing this, though they managed to compose themselves long enough to thank the emperor with profuse bows. The guests – some

earnestly, some with a begrudging reluctance – acquiesced to the emperor’s words, their heads bobbing up and down either vigorously or stiffly. Silk was soon introduced into court rituals and used for ceremonial purposes, and gradually worn by people. It was traded as a precious commodity to people all around the world, bringing prosperity to the Chinese Empire.

The noble art of silk-making soon spread throughout the Chinese Empire and weaved its way into human history. A tale of serendipity, ingenuity, and innovation, Leizu’s invention of this coveted fabric brought progress, knowledge, and power to people for centuries and continues to do so today. Seamlessly weaving together traditional skill and modern ingenuity, the invention of silk remains a testament to Leizu’s, and many other Chinese inventors’ innovative spirits.

A Lesson in Flight

St. Paul’s Co-educational College, Tso, Si Ling – 15

You are made of wood in your first lifetime.

At the moment you are an uncarved piece of wood. You are laid flat on a carpenter’s workbench, heavy in your unshaved bark and unchipped features.

Fingers — calloused, telling of their power of creation -- run across your body and pausing on your midriff, as if in contemplation of the possibilities that they can spin out of you.

You cannot help but vibrate in anticipation, wondering what these hands will make of you.

It takes the logician three years to complete your creation -- three years spent mooring over countless blueprints and designs, consulting other scholars of his calibre, and chipping away at the finest details.

You take shape slowly, but definitively.

Your wings, once flimsy attachments to your midriff, now extend past your sharply carved head as if they are outstretched arms. You are broad and flat, wide yet thin; day by day you come to resemble more and more of the birds that come and go by the branches next to the workshop’s window.

A friend of the logician once stopped by, curious to see the progress his friend had made thus far. Upon setting his eyes on you, he sighed deeply and left but one word.

Madness. A word that may have been a more accurate descriptor for some of the logician’s more outlandish blueprints, but it is accurate in its description of his vision for you still; a man-made invention capable of flight — a device capable of a function known to be exclusive to nature’s creations.

The logician is determined to prove himself capable of replicating miracles yet. *Wooden bird*, he calls you, the streamline of your head and the outstretch of your wings reflections of nature’s unfathomable forces in designing, yet products of his human ingenuity. *Wooden kite. Someday you will fly.*

(Fly for me, is what goes unsaid.)

His gaze drifts to the clouds, bringing with it your thoughts -- you want to soar, soar above the clouds, up and away from the workshop -- but a comet-like streak of yellow drags your stare back to ground-level.

A bird lands on the windowsill of the workshop, its claws flexing to clamp onto the wood, solid in its landing. The bird cocks its head at you.

Poor thing, trapped inside a human’s workshop, it chirps. Your wings look practically unusable!

Struck by its words, you are all at once aware of all the flaws present in your body; the weight of wood a heavy anchor to the earth, and your carved wooden boards but a facsimile of the bird’s beautiful, feathered wings.

It was not long until you experienced your first flight.

The bird was right. Your wings are flawed, and to conclude the mishaps in your design with that one simple line is to scrape the tip of an iceberg. You were made to mount the winds, but it is the winds who push and pull at your flimsy, boarded body.

It is not impossible to make it to the sky at first — but of course. Even a simple leaf can experience a short period of flight if thrown with enough force into the air. What is impossible is to remain airborne, dragged down by the ever-present weight of your materials and the cutting resistance from the air.

As it turns out, all of your difficulties serve as a stark reminder of what remains as impossibility for those destined to dwell on the earth. The heaviness of wood pales in comparison to the weight of your creator's sadness as you spiral down, down, and down, as the peak of your altitude morphs into the limits of where human ingenuity could take him.

It had not been long since you experienced your first flight.

(It had not been not long since you experienced your last.)

You are made of paper, in a later lifetime.

The memories of your first flight have lingered, and will always linger. You remember the first touch to the ground after failure — a strangely soft embrace from the earth; yet you also remember that there was no rebound, no recoil.

You are sure that you will never fly again — a belief solidified by your distrust in your new vessel. The hands that piece you together from a combination of paper, wood, and glue are not so calloused as your first creator, nor so experienced; hands that speak of handling fine materials, silk and paper; hands made smooth from the nurture of this more-developed society, where writing is no longer inscribed upon bones nor bamboo scrolls.

The eyes that follow those hands are sparkling with anticipation as they review their own blueprints. You catch a glimpse of versions of your old blueprints, scribbled and remarked upon with ink extensively. You wonder if it makes a difference, this revision and consolidation of an invention already proven a failure from lifetimes past.

In an instance, tools that were yet to exist before your first flight fill into your field of vision. You let these hands tailor your edges and smear glue onto your sides, all the while without an inkling of how the runny glue will cement your materials together.

All that you know is that you are paper-thin, large yet lightweight. Fragility upon fragility. How will you mount the winds if you cannot withstand even the slightest drafts, or the stronger breeze?

... You lie still on the workbench. There is nothing to anticipate when all that awaits must disappoint.

The wind is mild near the workshop today.

Paper bird, paper kite. The young inventor ushers. *Fly!*

And with that, he lets go —

The first gust of wind catches you directly in the midriff. The thread tethering you to the spool in the inventor's hands loosens, before you ride into your newfound flexibility, mounting the wind as you would on waves in the ocean.

Your journey lasts more than a blink this time.

You wonder what the logician, the first to dream of a wooden bird, would think of this sight in the skies today. You wonder what he would think of the failed product of his dreams, now renewed into an invention that fulfills every expectation that has been placed upon its fragile body.

But for now you revel in the young inventor's joy, joy so overwhelming that it floods even your paper vessel, capsizing your body --

The reinvented thinness of your structure allows you to rebalance in the air.

Birds take two wings to fly.

— For you, it takes two wings and two generations to fly.

You have been made of wood and paper, and you are made of dreams, each rendition of you painstakingly crafted with the intention to capture the beauty in nature's flight, time after time.

Legacy is passed from the experienced to the inexperienced, from the old to the young. Refinement after refinement is made across generations, until you finally take off and remain connected to the heavens,

resonating with the skies.

Remain airborne.