

# Fiction Group 5

# Blindness: 畫(恐)龍點睛

Canadian International School of Hong Kong, Wei, Izzy - 16

The windows open, a blade of wind blows. A naked laugh dies from across the river and is buried as memory. Occasionally, it rings, a sound without a source. Before long, it's gone. History's folds swell open. And shut.

Like a water lily, the past expands with time, its fibres first a cluster, then a recollection. The records grow: paper—making, moon landings. A restaurant opening down the street. Every day, newspapers are released as if by clockwork, and every past day is sewed into some distant biography.

The transience of the present seems at once an impossibility, a gasp between one breath and another. When does what has passed become what is past? After a minute, a millennia? There is a pause in the air and, almost instantly, breath switches tenses, falls back into breathed. Falling itself bends into fell then bends again into fallen in just a sigh.

Down in the city, that's what they call Wang Shizhong. A fallen man. A sigh.

It's a shame, the mothers and mothers' mothers murmur, in trains, behind shops, at salons and schools and huddled around lunch parties. He was the greatest painter. All light and colour. We went to him for everything.

Everything?

Well, everything to do with art, which, if you look closely, is in very nearly everything.

They're right. The streets overflow with his work. Iridescent road signs, wall hangings. Trams and roof tilings in shadowy greens. Between the houses, which are plump and yellow—bricked, there are long suspended rods, like clothing lines, only they pin up photographs instead of laundry. Anyone walking by can stop to admire them, to sniff them like flowers. When they do, they'll realise with a jolt that these are not photos at all, but paintings so fine they feel as palpable as life. More alive, even, than the birds perched along the skyline.

Below, on the city's narrow, cloven streets, tram cars rattle, grating the earth. Inside, dawn comes through the gaps between curtain and frame. A man in a grey suit leans his head back, cranes his neck to watch the passing fields. There are rows upon rows of peonies, white plum blossoms, wasps, and knotted shrubs. Walking alongside the tram, an uncle points them out to his niece, saying, "Those are the new winter buds. They're all white now that Shizhong's not here to paint them."

A sigh sweeps across the city. It is a muffled one, dampened by the cold and the snow. Everywhere, hues are emptied out. Everywhere, people claw at the same name, the same question: where?

As it turns out, Shizhong had disappeared two weeks earlier. It was so abrupt no one had seen it coming. One day he was there and the next he wasn't, as though he'd simply dropped out of space and time.

Some make up stories for his departure. Others look to the past. He'd fallen into a bit of a craze, a man on the tram tells another, to make conversation. The other man nods. Dinosaurs, wasn't it? Quite peculiar if you ask me.

Months fall away. The whispers don't. There are more speculations. He'd been killed while fossil—hunting. He was eaten by a dinosaur. Perhaps, one woman says, he *is* a dinosaur.

Soon, everyone has an explanation for Wang Shizhong's disappearance. Each version is different and more bizarre than the last, a knitting of hearsay and chopped—up memories. Nevertheless, they are shared, they are published. Explanations appear in the news and in journals. They are written off as history. And then they are forgotten about, left to discolour like cents in the sun.

Time works this way, fathers say around dinner tables, it's like a wet brush on paper. The edges soften and the sheet grows pulpy and malleable. You can pull it apart with your hands. You can reshape what you remember. Or what you don't.

Nobody is expecting it when the flyers come. They fall snow—like from the sky, slips of white collecting in the drains, the water pipes. Wang Shizhong's name is, once again, on the tongues of every man and woman in the city — have you heard? Do you know? The flurry is intense. Households shine gold deep into the night. Shizhong's coming back! Shh, don't wake the kids. Sorry, darling, but Shizhong's coming back!

On the tram the next day, the man in the grey suit reads the news with wide eyes. There is scattered conversation among the passengers. Can you believe it? I wonder where he went... maybe he needed a holiday...

People all around share the news, savour it, like hard, indulgent candy. It is mesmerising.

Every day for a week, new flyers drift in, like a blizzard. They choke the roads, the rooftops. They pollinate scarves and shoes and sweaters. Soon, they're as common as cash. More, perhaps.

By now, everyone knows the news. Wang Shizhong is coming to paint the square for the city's hundredth anniversary. Days pass in a giddy haze. His arrival, however, is much too quick and much too quiet. Nobody sees him when he enters the gates. It is only in the morning, when the houses warm, that they catch sight of him – head bowed, elbows bent, already at work in the square.

Standing in front of the first wall, Shizhong appears almost minuscule. His sleeves flutter loosely in the breeze. Pigeons swarm overhead, gathering in the E's of the sprawling WELCOME banner. Shizhong smiles. The birds please him. This is the age when life becomes suddenly more detailed, he thinks. And when the body begins to silver.

A great crowd forms around him at noon. From far away, it is a forest, everything in unanimity – the masses are describable, a collective. It is only up close that the image splits, boughs and limbs coming into focus. Light pours in through the leaves, and suddenly, there is a porosity to the crowd: individual bodies, sounds, cats fleeing, hair in many shades of brown, small children sitting on shoulders, above flowers, pebbles, footprints.

Throughout the day, people continue to pile in, throngs of them, climbing over one another and pushing deeper into the mob. Some come wanting to prove Shizhong's eccentricity. Some come hoping to kiss him. Others come to prove their stories, to report to the news, to tell their kids and grandkids. One woman comes in with a camera – to catch him transforming into a dinosaur, she says when asked. Whatever the motive, the whole city is at the square by late afternoon. Chatter and commotion swish heavily. The air buzzes.

Wang Shizhong does not speak. He works in silence, his back to the crowd. Underpaint. Layers of white. A streak, then another streak scars the wall. Gradually, these markings begin to take shape. Thin cartilage, a shadow of a claw. Then scales, hundreds of them. The crowd stirs, squinting hard. What is it? A lizard, perhaps? Or a snake? A middle—aged couple turns to get a better view. Others do the same. He should've painted flowers... it's certainly a strange animal... where are the colours?

The walls grow packed with such enigmas, slants and umbras, everything grey—scale. New lines slam together like cymbals. Shizhong's hands move quickly, sharply; umber strokes appear and unbranch in a flash. Bones are sketched, one after another. They are curved and meticulous. A spine smoothes into a pointed tail. Ribs. Serrated teeth.

"A dinosaur!" Someone exclaims suddenly.

Loud shutters scatter. A woman, the one with the camera, is grinning. The sound is carried off through the crowd, leaving behind a silence that rakes over like a chilling wind.

For the first time, Shizhong looks up, his expression calm. "Yes," he says, and goes back to painting.

It is severely quiet after that.

Dinosaurs continue to fill the wall, small ones first, then larger ones – ones with necks the length of oak trees. They are striking against the white, floating blithely, hunting, laying eggs, their scales reflecting the wind and light. Sometime before sunset, the camera woman leaves. Narration begins. It's not clear whether it's Wang Shizhong speaking, or if it's the language of his paintings, or something else entirely. Regardless, people lean in to see, to hear. When it's quiet, memory stirs.

In the distance, gastropods and fish, among other aquatics, are made alive by watercolour along the southernmost wall. Shizhong's arm casts a moving shadow, which undulates like a worm. The dinosaur that emerges from the sketch is the size of a large dog, with a long tail and jutting neural discs. The dorsal vertebrae is an accordion. A quick stroke forms a ridge, then a ring of scleral plates. Behind leaves, the dinosaur's front limbs are short. A three—fingered hand angles down. Still, the painting is without hue; its contours are a pale brown, and the shades within them even fainter. Someone in the crowd cries, "But where is the colour?"

There is no response. Just a feeling and a name that swoops overhead: Sinosauropteryx.

Unnerved, the audience shudders. Heads shake, rustling, a cascade of leaves. Who is speaking?

Up ahead, Shizhong continues with the wall. There is a slosh of water, then a flick. At once, hair—like feathers cover the dinosaur — the sinosauropteryx — and wisp up along its neck, its back, its tail. Above the square, a dozen pigeons flit away from the banner. The crowd below thrums. Feathers and more feathers... just look at the fuzz... it looks a bit like peach skin to me... um, he still hasn't answered my question...

Silence returns when Shizhong glances back. Even the breeze grows flat and subdued. But he doesn't speak. Instead, he starts another painting.

The creature this time is smaller, the size of a chicken. Its legs are slender and feathered, and it sits on a tree branch in an inky thicket. A second one follows suit. Winglike limbs, a curved claw. It is depicted in motion, gliding from one bough to another. Then another.

Again, everything is monochrome. Again, the audience demands colour. Again, there is no answer but the name blown in by the wind: *Anchiornis huxleyi*, meaning Near Bird.

The Real Birds, the ones in the sky, begin to coo. Lowly, sweetly.

On the northern wall, between brush and water, another dinosaur surfaces in broad strokes. It is compact and four—winged, a feathered glider iced by time. Each feather is an eyelash, a blade of grass. Shizhong's lines grow calligraphic. They link up into arms and claws. Then a rod—like tail, which thrashes like a heart. *Microraptor*, the wind says. Below, a duck—sized dinosaur lies in scuttling brushwork. Its crest billows. *Caihong juji*.

At last, Shizhong stops. A silvery marsh settles over the square, the day's warmth long gone. He sets down the brush in his hands and looks out at the crowd. A single white flyer falls from the archway – a newspaper clipping, which flaps in the evening gust. It reads: Discovery of the Dinosaur Palette.

What follows is a torrent, a wordy maundering: pigment—filled melanosomes, fossil feathers, colour patterns and ancient birds, modern birds, chemical signatures, some place called Liaoning. The crowd, deep in the unwinding of it all, is engulfed by it, the rush, the discoveries, the altering of what was and is known. Shizhong's voice slips away; people are plunged into the past. Things there reshape, they grow feet and wings and new hues. The browns of

textbook microraptors are erased. *Update*, reads the caution tape. *They're not actually brown. In fact, they're glossy.* 

Everywhere, colours erupt. Shizhong swings pails of paint, which bend the way water runs from the showerhead, a phantasm of light. The sinosauropteryx is at once a rust red, its tail striped white and copper. Up north, the microraptor, which glitters a smooth blue—black, glides among the lined branches. Another pitcher of pigment is tipped, then thinned. It washes the anchiornis on the eastern wall, its wings black—tipped; red—brown feathers gather at its head, miming woodpeckers. On the opposite end, the caihong juji shimmers like a hummingbird, its plumage prismatic. Sighs, soft ones, rise from the crowd. Chatter picks up again, and there is a rush of delight. The colours mollify, they placate. They are powerful in the burning moonlight, and they make the drawings hum, like marquetry.

From afar, something shutters; the woman with the camera is back, though now empty—headed. Her voice cuts through the praise. "Blind," she says, and jabs a finger at the walls. "All of you. Can't you see? They're all eyeless."

People swivel. It's true. None of the dinosaurs have pupils. Just skin over bone. A pause lengthens time – or seems to, at least. Finally, Shizhong speaks. "The eyes are dangerous things to paint."

This does nothing to quench the crowd, which grows suddenly electric. Eyes! Pupils! That's exactly what these paintings need. Chanting begins, first a tumbleweed, then a tangle of heads and hands, nodding, leaf against leaf, a grazing of limbs, a sway. Eyes, goes the chant. Give them eyes.

Wordlessly, Shizhong concedes.

He walks around the square and, wall by wall, dots the eyes of each dinosaur. It's done in less than a minute. Ink gleams a mineral, searing black. For a moment the paintings stare in lurid unity. The yolks of their new eyes flash. Staring back, the crowd claps, is triumphant; people snap photos, people point. *That one's the best. See its irises?* You can see the whole city in them.

The scene in the square is rich, like that of an oriental bedspread – woven with lives and plants and rain, with wavelengths and songbirds, with a kind of weightlessness, loom and embroidery. Clothes brush against each other. Bags graze.

For a moment, all is busy, all is normal. Then, a scream.

Darkness. It crowds the crowd and drowns the figures in the weaving, inking the square. From the walls, eyes glint like candle flames.

"A dinosaur!" Someone shrieks for the second time that day. This time, no one takes photos.

Bodies dart and shimmer everywhere, like scales. The first silhouette, four—winged, rips free from the wall and turns the city around its wing. Limbs thunder, trees split apart. Bones and flesh emerge. In the ghostly night the four dinosaurs shatter their paintings like screen prints. Their colours explode, visible, seen by the crowd as astronauts see meteors. Run.

Whistling noises charge the air. The cloudless sky is oblique and filled with wings, both of birds and of dinosaurs. Feathers cover the moon, thick, like butter on toast. There is chaos on the streets. Doors slam shut, windows are locked. Blinds and curtains close. The city disperses in wails and cursing, though there is, in fact, no real danger – the dinosaurs don't attack; they don't do anything. Mountainous, they simply retreat up the trees, into the darkness, into the forest beyond.

It all dissipates in a flash, all of the screaming, the inking, the drawings clawed into life – everything halts the way a camera halts the world.

Within minutes, the square is empty. Quiet. Nothing stirs but the eyes in the leaves.

The next day Shizhong is nowhere to be found. MISSING leaflets are nailed onto trees and traffic lights. This is, until people find the square's walls blank, sand white, as if they'd never been painted on at all. Alarms are raised. Police gather. They hush the crowd with handsome, soothing language.

It is decided at last that the whole thing had been a dream. A non-event. Flyers are burnt. They're tossed into fires and stovetops; within moments, they don't exist. The clocks are turned back a full day. Time rewinds. Today is now what was yesterday, meaning, once again, it is the city's hundredth anniversary.

Reporters and townsfolk gather in the square, like clockwork. The crowd is a great mass. They shed their colours. They wear only shades of grey. Everything in the city is made black and white, like film. On a raised platform, the mayor stands in the square with a microphone. Art is declared a nationwide lull, a fantasy. Bans are enforced. These are printed in the daily papers. There is no mention of dinosaurs.

People clap, people are happy. Yes, this all makes sense. They go about their happy lives. No one notices the birds circling overhead. No one pays them any mind. If they did, maybe something would change. Maybe they'd notice the sheen, the rainbow feathers. Or the fact that none of these birds flew. Maybe they'd spot the signature on the wall. Maybe they'd rub it out. Or maybe, if they looked closely, they'd see the words beside the signature – *death* and *Death*. Twins, except the first deals with history and the second with memory.

If they lingered long enough, maybe – just maybe – they'd remember it all: colours, paint, the sound of musketry, permineralisation. The unspooling of time. The word *dinosaur*.

But the city moves on, moves forward. People wade through time like water. The day of the dinosaurs is painted over and rewritten. A moving company occupies the square, then a bank, then a jazzy diner. Neon billboards are put up. Swivel seats. A drive—through. The police never find the message, even as the walls are torn and rebuilt and torn again. If only they'd look up, look around. But they don't. No one does.

# Hubris

Canadian International School of Hong Kong, Yuen, Stephanie – 16

Petrichor lingers on the rot of dirt. This is the wild. The lands of which farmers plow and overturn, the lands of which farmers know not to look too deep into the woods, too far into the ground, too high into the sky. There is no knowing what hides where one cannot see.

But man remains man.

The canals of history are like the void. Ceaseless hunger and emptiness that lost to the apathy of time. Perhaps this is why history takes and takes, maybe this is why history is nothing more than a concept and collection of puzzle pieces that don't quite fit together, glued only by interpretation, found only through relentless curiosity.

China is ancient. China is large. Certain things are terrifying—the incomprehensible vastness of Earth, and the imperceptible passing of time. Combine the two. A simple addition, one plus one equates to two—you understand, certainly.

You understand, terribly, how vast the peaks are, how deep the gorges are, how wide the sky is, and how dark the oceans are. You know that some things shouldn't be whispered let alone be spoken of.

Do not think of the old sky, do not think of the ancient earth, do not think of the abyss that is the ocean. Do not even dare have that flicker of thought of what if. Do not tempt what should not be tempted.

Do not think of whatever roamed these lands. Your ancestors have done it for you. Wyverns and dragons, wyrms and drakes, ancient glorified lizards that are feared and to be slain. Wise beings that only exist in imagination, fierce monsters that only exist in dreams.

But man remains man.

As the old fairytale goes, "Once upon a time." This 'Once upon a time' is not so far backwards to bend back and touch the era beyond humanity, but it is close. There are only two seconds in which humanity exists.

So, once upon a time, a man dug into the earth and defiled her corpse. He was rewarded for the discovery of something new, he was given riches, and he contributed to the development of science in his country. He lived happily ever after.

A boring tale. Bland. Tasteless. A chicken broth without chicken, soup without salt, cupcakes without tea. Whichever works.

So think deeper. Wrench your hand into the wrinkles of your brain, tear apart that gelatinous fat and bring out that soft lie.

You are asleep. You have been asleep for eons. The ocean has risen and sank. The dirt has been your friend. Worms wriggle in your gut, a pleasant warmth as they aid the fungi that grow upon your calcified bones. The soil is soft mush on your face, moss your only friend.

You are buried, embraced in your grave by Mother Earth. Your time has long passed. You do not wish to be awakened. Countless trees have withered and grown to become your gravestone.

Yet you are. So you will be. You understand-certainly, the power that curiosity holds over everything.

In everywhere and every time, it is the most consistent thing to exist.

You are dug out. Like Tutankhamun, like amber, like potatoes from your grave. Your skull, broken, cracked, dull gray and soot, is caressed with cloth and placed delicately into a wooden cage. Strange limbs, and sticks of peach grasp that cage, what strange limbs the future has—and jostle you as lightly as possible away.

You look from empty sockets.

Your grave is defiled. The nature that fed off you—barren, rolled over, a gaping hole in the middle of the ground. The worms wiggle where your spines were. The dirt echoes a loss, mourning for your return.

Your kind ate their prey. Your kind remembered death as the ever—looming thing, time as the inevitable destiny if not death. Your death was not normal. But it was... natural.

You were devoured. Just not in the way you hoped to be.

You are carted, brought and shuffled on the strangest of grounds, placed atop a strange sort of rock that is too geometric to be formed naturally—and you are poked and prodded, wiped clean of Mother Earth, wiped clean of what was *yours*.

It doesn't take long for the Earth to start screaming as your place is filled up, a scabbed—over infection. It doesn't take long for you to return that with screeches played through strange black rocks as you're dragged onto a pedestal that emits sunlight from below.

You hear chitters, growls and mutterings— The language of these strange creatures. What you understand is what you understand. It is simple.

To these things, the body is a temple, it cannot be defiled.

You are a skeleton. You are bone. Your feathers have moulted for the last time. You would have become rot. You are a corpse, decayed beyond measure.

To them, you are a relic, a symbol, a sign of the times before their two seconds.

Ask another way, turn to Janus' other door. What is a relic to a symbol? What is a symbol to a sign? What is a sign to a deity? What is a deity to *you*?

You, whose ancestors have risen from the abyss of the ocean, who have walked upon the ancient Earth, and you who would have turned to the infinitely vast skies eventually—who are these creatures to you?

Your body is your temple. The decay your priest. The bottom-feeders your devotees.

Your skeleton, placed atop the sleekest of display cases, illuminated by the false suns that have been created by humanity, puppeteered to form the fiercest of displays, wiped clean of decay, the broken replaced by plaster (that of which is made by your rotten flesh, fossil fuels as such irritating creatures call), is sleek in aged ivory and yet—blighted.

You are infected by the cleanliness of man.

Pause. Rewind.

Take your hands out from that crevice of your brain, remove your nails that claw at that fat, remove your eyes from those creases, and return to the state of being a man. Return to that soft lie.

Do not remember your chipped skull, for it certainly wasn't you, do not remember the fungi roots that stretched into your bones, those were not yours, do not remember the blight of mankind that has scraped your marrow to see what you were, and certainly do not remember the scraping skid of scalpels against the remnants of your scales.

You are human.

You are the mere two seconds. Not the six minutes.

Think of the time when the trees were taller than mountains when the sea was deeper than the skies and the skies vaster than the cosmos. Think of the rustle of larger—than—life foliage as you prowled through them. Think of the calling of those that fly and those that cannot, the chittering noises of gargantuan dragonflies and mantises.

Think of how it feels to be desecrated.

Your existence is temporary.

You will die twice.

Yet one of those deaths can be undone.

Far in the future, when the last of the two-legged have walked upon Mother Earth, when the sun has grown just a bit larger, just a bit hotter, yet not so red as it would become—

Thwack. Thump.

Soil shuffles aside and shifts from your skull, sifting through the gaps of your loosened teeth and the sockets that once held your eyes.

Limbs, rail-thin and eerie, eldritch and strange, lift you from your grave.

Your gravestone has long been destroyed.

Your femurs and tibia, toes and ribs are brought into a metal crate, stored in a space you cannot comprehend as you are broken into a thousand million pieces.

Whatever remains of you is scraped apart and put together.

You are placed upon a platform.

Your body, a temple too tiny, too insignificant, is desecrated and then discarded after a million ticks of 'oohs' and 'aahs'.

Your two seconds are nothing to the six minutes.

You are put on display. A spotlight of great intensity that never wanes.

You hurt in your shame.

Alas.

Your history has been churned into the void and spat back out unformed, your body a mere speck of the entire puzzle.

(Seven going on eight billion to share two seconds.)

History is put together, glued by interpretations and specks of puzzles that continue to drift. Time marches on, eating all of his children. Mother Earth remains, though she would be consumed one day. So does the sky, forever vast and incomprehensible. The sea drifts and churns.

Curiosity flickers about in the conscious mind.

Man remains man.

## A Prehistoric Manifest

ESF Island School, Chan, Hing Ho Jeffrey – 18

Transcript 1: The Dino Underground: New 'giant' fossils in China leaves scientists confused (6 October 2025)

At the end of September, in Northeast China's Liaoning Province, an extraordinary fossil of a possible new species had been unearthed in the Yixian Formation, home to discoveries such as the first known non-avian dinosaur with feathers, the Yutyrannus, bringing revolutionary insights into life from the Early Cretaceous period.

This fossil, a skull and parts of the spine, show similar traits to the Yutyrannus such as its large, deep skull and relatively short dorsal vertebrae. However, the skull reached a staggering length of 265.3 centimetres; almost 3 times larger than the skull lengths of the species' fossils found in the formation.

This has sparked discussions of whether to classify this fossil as a giant variant of the Yutyrannus or as another species entirely sharing the same genus: "This is an unusual case," Said Zhang Ge, a paleontologist from China's Institute of Vertebrate Paleontology and Paleoanthropology, "We have never seen a fossil sharing such similar traits to a pre–existing species yet somehow evolving to be 3 times larger. We don't know whether it is just a unique variant of the Yutyrannus or a new species altogether. And if it's a variant, what type of environment did it adapt to in order to evolve to such a size?"

But as its investigation continues, this case shows there is much to look forward to with China's role in paleontology especially within its untouched lands, promising future discoveries, speculations and theories of life in prehistoric periods.

**Transcript 2:** The China Times: Unexpected plant fossil deposit found in China amidst budget cuts in palaeontology research (2 July 2026)

In June 30th, 2026, an unprecedented discovery of over 100 new plant fossils happened in China's Yixian Formation: The same formation that brought about the still highly debated 'Giga-Yutyrannus' fossils last year.

The Yixian Formation is known to once be covered in extensive forests, with plant life growing around a series of freshwater lakes: This type of environment would naturally lead to a great biodiversity, with fossils well—preserved from a possible lake overturn, leading to what palaeontologists believe to be a 'treasure trove' for insights into Late Jurassic to Early Cretaceous life.

However, this discovery of 125 new plant fossils, with around 65% still unidentified, had brought further characterisation into the biodiversity of Yixian. The fossils found included new specimens of the extinct seed fern trees and rare primitive flowering plants, with even some found encased in amber, making them the most—well preserved fossils of these botanical species.

Some of these plant fossils were also found to be several times larger than others in the same deposit, similar to the previous case of "Giga-Yutyrannus' fossils, where a Yutyrannus skull was found around 3 times larger than other skulls of the same species. This has again sparked discussion of how this 'gigantism' phenomena occurred, especially across different species, and what has necessitated this variation. Therefore, a research station has been built near the formation for further investigation.

Unfortunately, research is likely to be hindered from funding cuts of projects across various historic fields, including palaeontology, by the Chinese government as tensions with the U.S. have risen significantly; from the on—going trade war as well as the increased stationing of U.S. troops on the Taiwan Strait, leading to the nation's increased focus on military development, especially with the announcement of mandatory conscription for Chinese youths over 18.

These developments have caused concerns surrounding the continuation of research into the Yixian formation, potentially even leading to the abandonment of this project from insufficient personnel and resources. Although this discovery had ignited significant inquiries into prehistoric life, the fire might soon be snuffed out.

**Transcript 3:** WHO report on reported emergence of undiagnosed disease in Northern China and Alaska (16 February 2028)

On 29 November 2027, the local government of Liaoning Province as well as members of the Liaoning Medical University reported to WHO an alert regarding increased deaths from an undiagnosed cause within the province.

Between 19 September and 8 December 2027, under discreet WHO investigation due to travel bans, media and internet blackouts across all of China, local hospitals and clinics in Liaoning Province have recorded 51,616 cases of an undiagnosed disease with symptoms of headache, bodyache, breathing difficulties and inflamed sk, with polyphagia in severe cases. Among the cases, 1,256 deaths have been registered (Case Fatality Ratio or CFR of 2.4%). These deaths do not correlate to age or gender during initial investigation, with the only characterisation found being abnormal corpse bloating.

On 18 January 2028, cases of the same undiagnosed disease were reported in Alaska, United States. Preliminary investigation traced the origin of this disease back to 8 people who visited an abandoned research station in the Yixian formation of Liaoning Province from 2 to 8 July as a tourist group before the travel ban on China, with symptoms emerging around 4–6 months after return. 7 of them were forcefully admitted to local hospitals by family members and associates on 10 December 2027 after the disease reached a severe level, with 1 reported dead from choking on food. Among the tourists, 4 brought back 20 amber specimens left on the research station. Upon investigation, unidentified pathogens were found encased within the amber, with speculation of the unintentional inhalation of small particles from the amber being a possible origin of this disease.

As of 4 February 2028, there have been 21,345 recorded cases in Alaska, with 680 deaths registered (CFR of 3.1%). WHO has made an official request to both China and the United States for detailed information and their coordination in response to the disease. While WHO seeks cooperation, we recommend people in affected areas follow measures to reduce the risk of contracting this disease, which include keeping distance from people who are ill; staying home when ill; getting tested and medical care as needed.

WHO will continue to provide updates.

**Transcript 4:** An open letter to the Department of Health and the government from the Division of Infectious Diseases. (7 April 2030)

Dear President Maxom, Vice-president Kanses, and the corporations and shareholders behind The Department of Health and Human Services:

We are 120 American physicians, surgeons, nurses, paramedics and medical assistants who have worked with patients infected by Ogromnivirus across the United States since February 5th, 2029. As of now, we have spent 309 weeks combined working in clinics and hospitals alongside various non—governmental organisations, including local charities, volunteer associations and hospices. We have experience working in past pandemics, such as the Coronavirus pandemic. Some of us have even volunteered in the brutal invasion of Ukraine from Russia, the Gaza Strip, and the current Sino—American war. We urge the Department of Health and the government to recognise the Ogromnivirus and make efforts to investigate and find treatment before it is too late.

The Ogromnivirus, speculated to be predecessors to the Onco— and Retroviruses, is **still considered as an 'unrecognised disease' by the Department of Health** as of this writing. Yet, it has already spread across the entirety of the United States and beyond, causing an estimated recorded death toll of **25 million Americans** according to combined reports from various local governments, almost 10% of the American population. We believe these deaths are due to the negligence of the United States government, who despite pleas from medical professionals and doctors, had continually ignored calls for recognising the virus, increasing funding for all U.S. hospitals and clinics and declaring a national emergency. If any state border closing, flight suspensions and even virus screenings were enacted during 2029, this entire situation could have been prevented.

To emphasise the importance of recognising the Ogromnivirus, here is the summarization of our understanding of the virus' stages, symptoms and effects on the patient: As the patient is infected by the virus through air—borne pathogens or contact, they would experience head and body aches as their body slowly starts to grow. Requiring more nutrients, the patient would overeat, consuming 2 times the daily calorie intake. Digestion would accelerate as fat is abnormally built, leading to a rise in body weight as well as violent disposal of waste through vomiting, sweating and diarrhea.

After around a week, the virus would reach stage 1, the body would rapidly consume stored fat as growth escalates, enlarging to 2–3 times its original size. In this growth, the body would adopt a sludge—like quality: the flesh and muscle mass would increase and eventually outgrow the body, tearing apart skin and capillaries and crushing their bones and internal organs, with the human form becoming non—distinct. Patients during this stage show abnormal regeneration as the body's tissues, capillaries, organs and even bones attempt to aggressively heal to match its growth, no matter how deformed the body has become, keeping the patient alive for 1–2 months to even a year. During this process, patients are subject to constant agonising pain, preventing them from sleep unless anaesthetised. However, for most cases, the body's regenerative processes couldn't keep up with its growth, leading to the patient's death as their vital organs are destroyed. Then 2–3 hours after death, the deceased show abnormal decomposition processes: as the body cells are deprived of oxygen and break down, the skin could no longer hold in muscles undergoing violent rigour mortis, resulting in the corpse exploding in unrecognisable gore, spreading pink mist composed of the virus' pathogens and liquified body matter left from stilted growth. 90% of patients die in this stage.

Rarely, if the body manages to regenerate fast enough for its constant growth, the patient would survive stage 1. The growth would slow down and stop after 2–3 days. However the body and lungs have grown to the point that it would require oxygen in concentrations non–existent in traditional oxygen tanks and natural air, essentially leading to the patient suffocating to death. The virus currently has a 100% death rate, with no foreseeable cure or treatment.

We have all witnessed emergency departments overwhelmed by patients tortured by their own inflated bodies as they were pushed into the hospital doors. We have helped clean hospice rooms covered in the unrecognisable gore of the recently deceased. We have observed children of all ages crying as they sat across from their parents, hearing their muffled groans as their bodies break and regenerate, even suffocating as their chests became too heavy for the ribcage to support, slowly crushing their lungs as we lack enough anaesthetics to provide a semblance of comfort for everyone. We have sighted how as their bodies continue to grow, it would wrap over furniture and medical equipment, oftentimes being fused into the body. We have faced shortages on quarantine equipment and seen our fellow healthcare workers we interact with daily be infected with this virus, **becoming another patient.** 

To the Maxom administration, who declared martial law in late 2028 and took over the nation as a one—party state: In your first 2 years in office, you ignored us as you enacted spending and budget cuts on US healthcare, you ignored the people as you pushed forth the privatisation the Department of Health and Human Services; Assigning pharmaceutical and insurance companies, television personalities, and even family friends into key positions as well as allowing the re—issuing of patents of essential drugs necessary for the livelihoods of millions in America such as aspirin, ibuprofen and penicillin as well as various antibiotics, and not to mention the congressional approval of the department's functions to be transitioned to private entities, shareholders. **However, this national issue has grown too big to be ignored.** 

If you still need to be convinced, Maxom, Kanses, or anyone in the administration or the Department of Health and Human Services, please consider walking down to the streets of any once—populous cities, and watch the dire state of America, where inflated bodies are strewn across the ground you walk on every few blocks. By then, would you still ignore this virus?

Sincerely,

[List of the 120 healthcare workers with their signatures and occupations]

**Transcript 5:** Soldiers return home to find loved ones dead: The devastating effects of the Ogromnivirus pandemic on the United States (6 May 2034)

After a 4 year long war in the Taiwan strait, the U.S. calls for a ceasefire against China and has negotiated a withdrawal of forces for the handover of Taiwan, ending this brutal conflict. Yet, what awaited U.S. troops upon return was a plague—stricken nation; with many being told their lovers, family members and friends died from the Ogromnivirus, not even leaving behind a recognisable corpse.

Soldiers returned to grieving homes, seeing almost half of their families and communities gone. "The silence when I opened the front door still haunts me," said Lt. Charles Dawson, a navy SEAL returning from the Strait, "I hadn't even noticed the smell at first, but when I saw my decomposing mother lying on the bedroom floor, the stench just hit." He further added, "I thought she was fine when I received letters from her just 2 months

ago, telling me not to worry about them. I felt so sorry for not being with her as I learned about my father and sister's death, which she silently mourned for 6 months."

The ineffective response to the Ogromnivirus by the U.S. government throughout the 2030s had caused 60% more virus—related deaths compared to other 1st world countries like Canada and the UK: Local hospitals and clinics had experienced heavy overcrowding from Ogromnivirus cases, with healthcare workers going into constant all—day shifts without break due to the influx as well as private hospitals refusing treatment for the virus fearing it's spread among other patients. Funding for these medical institutions have also remained low since the 2028 cuts, facilitated by the increased military spending and the on—going war economy, leading to the lack of necessary medical equipment and quarantine gear needed to restrict and contain the virus.

Sadly, this situation is unlikely to change soon as the U.S. recuperates its loss both politically, socially and economically, with faltering local businesses and large gaps in employment causing all time rises in income inequalities across the country. This has led to the growing anxiety among Americans about the future of the country, awaiting response from the Maxom administration.

See also: Insurance companies restate denial of claims related to Ogromnivirus as 'illegible' upon increased appeals.

**Transcript 6:** Leaked government documents about Ogromnivirus brings nationwide riots in America. (16 October 2034)

The aftereffects of the Sino-American war as well as dissatisfaction for the insufficient response to the Ogromnivirus has erupted into wide-scale riots across major U.S. cities as leaks of actual virus statistics and documents surrounding military human experimentation have sparked outrage to the actions of the current U.S. government.

Recent leaks of over 1.8 TB of government documents have surfaced online, such as the raw weekly reports of Ogromnivirus statistics by state, which showed significantly higher death tolls compared to public reports by the DOH. The leaks also feature confidential documents surrounding 'Operation Bigfoot', a failed military project aimed at creating so called 'super soldiers' through experimentation of Ogromnivirus mutations seen in chicken on human test subjects. According to the documents, subjects were taken among Stage 1 Ogromnivirus patients, falsely declared as 'officially deceased', and returning soldiers from the Sino-American war, who volunteered to pay for their families' medical debts.

The outrage surrounding the contents of these leaks have sparked intense criticism and raised serious questions of the government's actions and responses towards the Ogromnivirus and its victims, erupting into violent riots and protests across major U.S. cities such as Seattle, where demonstrators are calling for the overthrow of Maxom and his administration, demanding reinstatement of an 'actual democracy'.

See also: New billion dollar 'terrarium' estate project isolates residents from the Ogromnivirus.

**Transcript 7:** Public Service Announcement (204X)

If you see PINK MIST: Remember the 3 "P"s:

Pop the cyanide pill. Prioritise isolation. Preserve your dignity.

Protect your neighbours, family, and humanity.

**Transcript 8:** Diary of a dying person (205X)

If anyone is reading, this entry would be my final farewell to this world. I have been infected by the virus and my right arm became nothing but flesh. My time is limited.

In studying how the 'Pink Mist' had wrought our near extinction, I believe the virus is an embodiment of a 'prehistoric nature', an old and rotting nature that shouldn't exist in our times and lived until now. Just like those past oligarchies and tyrants and their callous hold onto power, prehistoric nature clinged onto survival, disregarding

needed change. This nature eradicates, forcing conformity on anything that is within 'modern nature', creatures of the Holocene, to return to its own normalcy and belonging, dooming both: The new from the old, the old then dying without a host.

But look at those autocrats now, dying as their 'Arks' run out of air; *their* pursuit of normalcy has led to this. The virus will follow the same fate; at least I'm glad our executioner would follow us to hell.

This shouldn't have happened. The virus shouldn't have spread to this extent. There were various times where all could be prevented. Yet, the generational conflict we had with each other, the unhealed war and abandonment between who's the taker and the taken *blinded* us of the chance we had to enact a single change.

We deserve this extinction.

Looking back, I resent those with ability and agency, for living too comfortably to progress. I resent the outdated systems we created for better lives, for damning us to a wheel of suffering. I resent myself for my inability to do anything, before life rots away in front of your eyes.

If you had read through this entire thing and could hope for a better future. I would like to tell you not to make the same mistake as we did, yet cycles could only repeat themselves.

# Luoxia's Heart

Good Hope School, Tes, Maegan - 17

Luoxia's heart belongs to the mountains.

It should not be, her father insists. To run off into the wild when you should be thinking of marriage.

And a rural village girl like her— it is not her choice to make. She belongs to her father, then will be passed on to her husband, then her son.

But Luoxia is adamant. Her pride is too great for her to yield to a man.

So each morning before dawn, when all is quiet in the village, she slips out of bed and runs off to the towering peaks of Fenghuangshan, where the flowering trees sprout blossoms rich and red as fire. She'll eat ripe fruit from the trees and breathe in the summer breeze, smelling of rain and light, free as the wind that goes through her hair.

This, she thinks, is life. These mountains are the only thing she will ever truly love. And in return, the mountains love her and wrap her in its crimson—petaled embrace.

Luoxia is thirteen when she finds the injured bird, high up on the mountaintops of Fenghuangshan.

It's a sorry sight, if not mildly gruesome. Its beak is open in a severed half—scream, wings torn as it thrashes amongst twisting branches. Luoxia refrains from flinching at its choppy movements as she gently pries it out, offering muttered reassurances that she is fairly sure is not helping matters.

"I will not hurt you," she says quietly, rocking it in her arms. She brings it down, turning to the little brook that bubbles through the hills.

"There, baobei," she whispers, lowering its wing into the water and flicking droplets onto its crooked wing. "Does that feel better?"

The cries of plight cease momentarily as crimson trails run into the water, staining its clear surface. She soothes it as it bleats, then lays it down on a patch of fallen petals.

Luoxia gets a fire started and sits before it, the bird resting on her lap. Its chest beats weakly under her touch, but it seems better now.

"Let me tell you a story to pass the time," she says.

She weaves a tale of a strong and bold young woman, destined to be the Emperor of China. She gets so into it that she barely notices when the sun sets and she comes home to her father's frustration, which she brushes aside for thoughts of birds and sunlight.

Early the next morning, she is back to nurse the bird.

It becomes a ritual, of sorts. She cleans the bird's wounds each morning and makes up a tale to go with it. In return, it perches on her shoulder, feathers tickling her cheek, and keeps her company as she hikes up the peaks of Fenghuangshan.

Yet at home, she is deemed nothing but useless. Lang fei, her father calls it. A waste of a beautiful girl. It is why she runs away for longer each time now, sometimes spending nights away from the miserable shack she calls home, then returning to sit through her father's anger with tightened lips that suppress insults.

It is too late for any sort of rage to dictate her. Her soul does not belong here anymore. But her father does not know that.

Luoxia turns sixteen, and all of a sudden there are village boys, chasing after her with beast—like hunger in their eyes. There come admirers, calling at her door with poems and flowers in hand, but she takes one look at the crude language and rotting blooms and turns her nose up at them.

The unfortunate bird, it turns out, is the only receptor to her tears.

"There is nothing in this world that can make me marry that," sobs Luoxia one day, head buried in her hands.

"Do you want to hear a story?"

A voice, airy and soft, penetrates her thoughts. At first she thinks she may be exhausted and hearing things. Then she turns to the bird on her shoulder, hovering beside her, its stare intent.

Luoxia just barely refrains from letting out a scream. Instead, her voice comes out a gasp. "You talk."

If birds could look exasperated, this would be it. "Yes. I am aware."

Luoxia thinks for a heartbeat that this might be a hallucination. The bird lets out a deep sigh. "Come with me. I have something to show you— that may very well change your future." The girl stands there, rooted to the spot with her eyes wide. The bird turns back to look at her.

"Call me Yanyi, by the way. I do not answer to those degrading nicknames of yours. Please kindly refrain from calling me birdie again. Now make haste and follow me."

Somehow, it is the insult that brings Luoxia back to her senses.

She huffs, folding her arms. "Well, birdie, it is a term of endearment. I am sorry you have never experienced love in your life."

And just like that, she is back to her usual self, tongue tinged with amused sharpness as she hikes up her skirt and runs along the path after the bird.

"Here we are."

Up ahead, Yanyi stops in front of a thick patch of undergrowth. Luoxia squints cautiously. "What did you want me to see?"

"Come."

A flutter of feathers. The fronds part to reveal a backdrop of leaves, surrounding a grotesque sight. Pieces of cracked white jutting out from soil, like old porcelain, and rotted leaves that form a canopy above the clearing.

There's a rustling as she brushes her way out of the undergrowth and kneels to examine the rocks.

Hand touches stone. It sears, red-hot, and a cry leaves her lips as a sharp tip of white pierces through her palm. Her arm jerks back reflexively, eyes fixed on the now crimson-capped stalks of white, not just rocks, but—

"Bones," she breathes.

"Phoenix bones," comes a voice from behind her, and Luoxia turns to find the bird perched on a rock. Bold, shining red, like the sun before dusk.

The girl's breath catches in her throat. "You are...one of them."

"Yes," says Yanyi. "And I will bestow upon you this gift. Touch them, Luoxia. Hear my message to you."

Luoxia shakes her head at first, backing away from the grave. What is she hearing? This has

to be a dream.

But Yanyi is insistent. And she ends up obeying.

A kind of clarity sweeps through her as skin breaches fragile bone, an understanding that transcends time.

She is the only person who has ever loved this place so dearly, breathed it in so much she has become part of it.

So she sees.

She does not know if it is magic or just a figment of her own imagination, but all of a sudden there are scenes flaring up in her mind, of a world overrun by scaly beasts.

And in the crevices of that world, small birds, with feathers red as ripened fruit, flitting between trees.

Yanyi's voice is soft as she narrates her past in vivid splashes of color. "I lived in a world that giant replies lorded over."

"Like dragons?"

"Close. Phoenixes— as you most likely know— play second fiddle to dragons. They flitter about, living in trees, while the dragons walk the earth and cross the skies. They play their roles, cruelty and gentleness, like what they call man and woman, two halves of a whole. As the myth goes."

A pang rises in Luoxia's chest. The feeling of inferiority. "What changed?" she rasps.

"In the wake of the extinction, wings unfolded."

Shadows dance before Luoxia's eyes, shining red silhouettes rising from flames as all else burns to ashes.

"Because while all the other beasts burned and left behind only bones, a fire is the hearth from which fenghuangs rise. They are reborn in destruction, children of ashes.

And they live on."

The bones are searing hot beneath Luoxia's hands, but she holds on, cheeks flushed in wonder as she looks up at the bird.

"But what does this have to do with me?"

"You." Amidst visions of fire, eyes flash. "Your future is bright, if you choose to leave behind the world where you are suppressed, and encase yourself in flames. You can be reborn. No longer live in mediocrity, the way you have always wanted."

The images before her dissipate.

Luoxia's gaze turns from curious to stunned. Never has someone proposed anything beyond marriage to her. The prospect of freedom? Unthinkable.

"This place is your fate," Yanyi says, her feathers fanned out behind her as she perches on a stone, pecking at the patterns of bones that are forever sunken into it. "Your heart already belongs to the mountains. You will thrive here, Luoxia."

To run to Fenghuangshan and never come back. For a brief moment, a world of flowering trees and endless sunsets crosses her mind. She lifts a palm to the air, as if it's a wish she can catch, a shooting star of fate hovering upon her cupped hands. No more marriages. No more old men that think they deserve to take her prized youth.

The thought should entice her. She opens her mouth, a yes curled around the top of her tongue.

Then stops.

Emotion flits across her face— a divide between excitement and fear.

Because as her heart lives here, her body belongs at home, where she must care for her aging mother and then fulfil her duty as a good wife.

She is a coward, always drawn to the warmth of the flame, but too afraid to touch it.

For there is no going back from rebirth. She cannot play both sides forever. She has to commit, make a choice between the dread of being mundane, or to put her heart first and live the way she has been drawn to for years.

"To walk into flames headfirst," whispers Luoxia. "To turn my back on the world as I know it?" Yanyi senses the palpable hesitation in her voice.

"Then go," she says sullenly. "Go and live your life of hiding, forever safe. If you do not step into fire, you will never truly behold its warmth."

The voice is layered with frustration.

"Just know— you are barely fulfilling your duty as it is. You are unhappy here."

Luoxia wants to open her mouth and object. But she knows Yanyi is right. A dutiful daughter would not be here at all. She should be at home, cooking for her parents, working in the fields from dawn till dusk until her hands are marred and her eyes sleepless, a youth dissipated and gone.

I am selfish, she realizes.

A wave of shame washes over her, touching her cheeks red. If she remains selfish, she will only bring pain upon her family. "I cannot take the risk," she blurts out in a rush.

She does not stop to look at the expression on Yanyi's face that she knows will be disappointment.

She turns, dust erupting at her heels, and runs.

How can a girl of the mundane bear the weight of this existence, when she has been exposed for so long to the beauty that makes up life? How is she to focus on earthly things and gowns and greedy men when she has bore witness to love that is above all that?

But she does, oh, she does, and her mornings are no longer ones where she dances in forest clearings, but ones filled with toil and labor. Luoxia learns to cook, to clean, to kneel in dirt—covered fields and harvest crops until her hands bleed with cries of protest. And these same dripping hands are the ones that accept the advances of the village boys, flowers, kisses that run down her cheek in stains that she rubs vigorously at afterwards in attempts to wash them off.

Where is her dignity, now? Where is that unbreakable spirit of hers? Her father is pleased, of course. But her heart is not in it.

Then comes a day when Luoxia finishes work in the fields. The bright porcelain of her skin is dulled, curious eyes faded to ashes with no trace of fire in them. But she stays silent as she enters and sits at the dining table, where her parents are waiting with bowls of rice set down before them.

"Nu'er," proclaims her father, with an approving nod. "We have something to discuss with you."

By discuss Luoxia knows he means that he will talk while she nods and agrees, but she does not press the matter. Her father takes her silence as compliance and slides a piece of parchment across the table.

Luoxia spares it a glance. Then a second, closer look. A layer of frost descends over her heart.

A contract, signed in blood-red ink, sealing her equally bloodstained fate. Luoxia is to marry the high official of an emperor.

"This is an honor," her father proclaims. "You will bring us endless wealth." But Luoxia does not want luxury of this sort.

A young girl destined for the skies, held down and imprisoned in a gilded cage. Is there a larger pity than that?

Yanyi is right. Her father does not care about her. Luoxia doesn't think he ever will.

It is on that night, as the moon stares down at her, its gaze ever—pitying, ever—soulful, that she runs to the mountains and up the winding path, in hysterics all the while. There is no oil lamp to guide her way, so she blunders through the darkness, sobs loud in the stillness of the wood. It feels like hours before she finally collapses in front of a spring of flowing water and weeps. Thin ribbons of crimson unspool from her scarred hands.

Reminders of the life she does not want to live.

A shadow falls over her— momentarily she mistakes it for Death. Chokes out tears, lifts hands in surrender. She will let it claim her if that is what matters. Anything but a life of servitude.

Then the shadow moves aside, in a brilliant flash of feathers.

Luoxia looks up, face flushed, red as phoenix-flames. Eyes hued against dusk firelight as she catches sight of the figure.

Yanyi.

"You can say I told you so," she tells the spirit. Her chest heaves, in, out, in, out in devastated breaths.

Yanyi's feathers graze her cheek. It comes away glowing. "It is not too late. You can still be free. Run when you can."

A light enters tearful eyes, resolute. A smile, across chapped lips. "Yes. Yes...maybe I should."

The eve of her eighteenth birthday dawns in a tragic kind of beauty, with gold filtering through the windows, light rain pattering on the fields outside.

Luoxia has barely slept, but her eyes are bright. All is quiet in the house as she tiptoes out of bed and folds up a pair of robes to take with her. Her eyes slowly lift themselves to the wedding dress, hanging behind the door, dyed an auspicious deep red. It stands out against the gray and brown walls as if drenched with blood.

She turns away. There is no room in her new life for the things that cage her heart. Behind her, the door opens. She freezes mid—air, a chill passing through her.

A woman stands in the doorway. Luoxia notices, for the first time, the soft brown eyes and round cheeks they both share.

Mother and daughter exchange glances.

Luoxia looks at her pleadingly. Her mother shuts her eyes.

Because she knows all too well what it is like to be destined for a life of servitude.

She was once a bright young girl, with a love for poetry. She would have made it as a high official if she simply were not a woman. The soul of a writer, trapped in the body of a wife. "Go," she says quietly. "Go before your father sees."

There is no time for tears, or goodbye. Her father will be awake soon. Within seconds, the door clicks shut behind Luoxia's lithe form.

She is gone.

The rain kisses Luoxia's cheeks as she hikes up the paths. The trees part ways for her. Her skin is haloed in splashes of gold from the rising sun.

She is home at last.

She steps headfirst into flames and burns.

And she walks out of it alive, a bird on her shoulder, her smile shining as she stands on the cliffside.

For a split second she looks over the edge, at the desolate human world at her feet, shrouded in lonely fog. Her hand itches to go back, bring color to it, save it from its fate.

But those who are unwilling to be saved shall not be. So she turns, and never looks back.

Back in the village, the wedding parade marches up to Luoxia's door to take her away. Her husband—to—be lifts a knuckle and raps on the door confidently. But when the door creaks slowly open, all he finds is a wizened old man, flushed in rage, knuckles bleeding as he stares down the dent in the table that he made.

And then a woman, silent in the corner, wiping her tearful eyes. Her father and her fiance send out a search party. It is fruitless. No man of the mundane will ever be able to touch her.

But if you believe, if you look to the dawn skies, you will see a maiden on top of the highest mountain, dancing amongst clouds, hands outstretched against the blazing sun. She is gold, like her namesake, luo and xia, a falling summer whose sunset fades from red to pale yellow against the cover of the sky. She arches her neck, smiling, eyes filled with love and laughter and life as she twirls swords and scales peaks and does everything the world did not intend for her to do.

She is a fenghuang herself.

A roaring monster and elegant bird, in tandem.

Her heart belongs to the mountains. And now her body does too.

# 'Mortal Qualms'

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Chen, Flora – 17

### Prologue

Sihetun Village, Beipiao City, Chaoyang, Liaoning, China October 2003

The last whispers of daylight play amongst reluctant stars as sweeping twilight slumber lulls their soft hues asleep. Soon the moon has torn a shy crescent between Night's thick dark folds, and its glowing presence urges the stars out of their hiding places and into an easy liquid scintillation that falls, irrigates the rolling fields and winding rivers of Sihetun village below with heavenly half—light. Not a soul evades Night's reach—with nimble fingers aglow it enshrouds all Sihetun's earthly entities within comatose rest. Satisfied in the work it has done this evening, Night retreats into a slumber of its own, content in the knowledge that tonight, as is the case with any night, all who presently lie in dreamland below have once again succumbed under the warbling tremors of its lullaby.

All except for one.

In the remotest corners of Sihetun, tucked amongst the tangling foliage that springs inevitably in places humanity has neglected, obscured by curtains of unkempt ivy from the dough—faced men and women who come tramping up wearily beside it after each long day's work out in the fields, lies a hidden cave.

The cave, though no one in the village could possibly testify, runs deep and spiralling into history's rocky chasms, and from its depths, though no one in the village has seen, glitters the promise of life.

### ~

### Meimei

Some six thousand miles away the air hangs stifling and stagnant over Arizona's Sonoran Desert. Here the land is barren, save for the stalks of saguaro that rise towering and unfriendly all around, and the earth thirsty, beaten dry under the unrelenting sun, sapped of all nature's bounty by the sweltering desert heat. Buried deep below ground are the remains of the once all-powerful dinosaurs, permineralised by time to stoke a paleontologist's murderous craving for discovery. One would not be predisposed to fathom the image of a half-Chinese, half-Caucasian fourteen-year-old girl in such a place, standing amidst her parents' flurry to move house to 'someplace in China', incongruous against the backdrop of monotonous terrain that stretched for hopeless acres about her.

'Meimei, I've told you to keep all your things together in one box,' her mother chastises from where she loads a bizarre array of probes, chisels, and hammers into the back of the moving truck. 'You'd hate for them to get lost in transit.'

Meimei grumbles but knows no other complaint to issue. She is all too familiar with this course of action—her career—oriented palaeontologist parents would uproot them from each new location into which they settle the moment their deranged fossil—search for a new dinosaur species proves unsuccessful. The routine disruption of her life every few months—not to mention years of social—isolation under homeschooling—has gradually led Meimei's parents to become her subject of loathing. Still, Meimei has long since resigned to the unalterable truth of her life, and so does nothing but brood in silent discontentment as her last home shrinks into despairing obscurity behind her.

~

### Jiang

The morning's first light catches seventy—six—year—old Lao Jiang toiling away amid Sihetun's fertile farmlands, resolve shining against the deep hollows of his eyes as his brown back curls under the efforts of labour.

Down in the fields, Jiang Yunxian has once known life differently than the perpetual hardship and impoverishment by which he knows it now. Taking a brief pause in his work to straighten out the kinks along his spine, he finds his gaze drifting towards the sky, as Day's sparkling jewel—blue beauty in its pure, unaffected passion spurs a torrent of recollections from deep within his past.

May 23rd, 1945. The date marks an unrelenting turn in centuries since, but the scenes embossed upon Jiang's memory have not aged a second. Against shimmering cerulean heaven, the smiles of Jiang and his seventy graduating peers flashed all the bliss in the world, radiant, carefree, imbued with the exhilarating vitality of adolescence beside Peking University's impossible grandeur.

From then on, he would be a real scientist. Many of his peers had wondered and some had even plucked up the mettle to ask Jiang directly: 'why palaeontology?' To which Jiang would answer with mischief in his eyes, 'what could be better?' To him, the exploration of prehistoric Earth was a form of art, one that held answers to uncovering the greatest truths of the universe. He had been prepared to devote the whole of his life to palaeontology.

Somewhere in the far distance, a voice from another life shouts in coarse vernacular. The sound feels scathing against his eardrums, awfully out of place amidst this scholarly and soft—spoken university assemblage. It snaps him back into reality, and soon his vision is once more a collate of fresh countryside green and Day's blinding blue. 'Lao Jiang!' His wife's sun—speckled skin glints beneath its sweaty sheen. 'What have you been doing, staring off into space all morning? It took calling you five times before you finally looked my way!'

One thing is clear: it does him no good to recall these past times now—better to not waste any more of Day's precious nourishment in pointless reminiscing and churn this earth some more; after all, Lao Jiang does not suppose he could bear to see hunger upon his family's already malnourished frames for yet a day longer.

### ~

### Taryn

Taryn's life should not have fallen to disaster.

After all, she has done things *the right way* her whole life—spent her most infantile days in tutoring and the prime of her teenage years buried beneath crippling academic expectation. She has grown up cherishing like priceless treasure each piece of praise bestowed upon her—upon her exceptional arithmetic skills, her effortless talent for the arts, her long—standing linguistic prowess.

Thirty—something now, she stands alone at a London crossroads, the imposing brick—and—mortar facade of the publishing house behind her. It has been nearly a decade and a half since she first left her family and past behind in Beijing. Taryn's fingers grasp tersely at the spine of the manuscript in her hands, its flimsy pages stirring in the wind, every now and then catching on a lapse in air flow and flashing a few broken phrases to her newest rejected novella.

'We're sorry,' they'd said, 'but it's just not quite what we're looking for.'

The wind rises, frigid, unforgiving against the sooty cobblestone path.

'It's a great story, really. Dinosaurs and fantastical such...'

Overcome with sudden melancholy, Taryn finds herself swept down, down, down a tide of remembrance, back to the time of her Oxford days, back when she was still a carefree, happy—go—lucky eighteen—year—old Literature major roaming the sacred halls of Bodleian Library, her passion enshrined and protected under the gilded roofs of scholarly splendour.

How would her past self, brimful of confidence in her destiny to become an author, feel, to see the worn adult Taryn has become, beaten hard by the years as a consistent authorial reject, left to crave and yearn for everything and nothing gain?

All of a sudden, light as feathers upon a fallen angel, evasive of man as if a fury's child—it falls from the sky. Tentative and shy to begin, as though afraid of overstepping the shapeless boundaries of a stranger, the flyer first grazes the top of Taryn's ebony hair, searching for a place to land, then the soft pads of her fingertips as she reaches up to smooth the bizarre poster between her hands, and read:

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'The British Museum, in collaboration with Beijing Museum of Natural History, proudly presents

Dinosaurs: The Lost Children of Mother Nature

featuring fossils of the Sinosauropteryx classification

First unearthed near the village of Sihetun in China's Liaoning province, 2003, we invite you to view these prehistoric gifts of nature, exhibited here for the first time outside China.'

~

### Meimei

Night is fast approaching but Meimei, being the daughter of a pair of overzealous palaeontologists, has long since grown accustomed to the ways of nature and the wilderness to allow them hindrance against her nightly excursions. Alone with nothing more than the flashlight between her teeth, she forges on ahead upon the narrow, moonlit lane, vowing to explore Sihetun past exhaustion in just the way she has managed to scavenge the depths of all her previous places of abode.

Night's blanketing presence is especially potent this evening, but to unsuspecting village newcomers like Meimei—call it beginner's luck—it might as well still be brilliant Day for all their susceptibility.

On climbing her seventh consecutive incline, Meimei stops to catch her breath; three days in her new town has been nowhere near enough time for Meimei's desert—dryland—oriented centre of mass to acclimatise itself to Sihetun's hilly mud terrain. Although, from what plenty mundanity Meimei has seen of this agriculture village thus far, it won't be long before her parents call off their stay; as to what possessed them to make the move to such an unlikely place for fossil—hunting success in the first place, she can only begin to fathom.

Seeking to tease out the strain in her muscles, she makes to lean against the wall of mossy sediment beside her and—

—falls straight through into a hidden crevice.

She lands hard on one side onto a muddy path declining sharply downhill, the wind knocked out of her; strangely, the mud feels moist and slippery under Meimei's skin. The flashlight slips from between her bite and extinguishes on impact against something hard beneath her, plunging Meimei into total, instantaneous darkness. Struggling to quell her panic, Meimei claws about the claustrophobic cavity, and, once she feels to have located a strong enough foothold, makes a tentative gesture to shift weight onto her feet—

—losing her balance in the split second it takes for her to realise that *this is how she'll die* before she plunges deep into the chasm's gaping mouth.

~

Behind closed eyes, a piercing light sears across Meimei's retinas as she struggles to come to. She recalls the complete darkness of the chasm and feels her disoriented conscience strain against this glaringly bright new reality of her present. On opening tentative eyes, Meimei's squint is quickly widened into a look of utter astonishment, as she casts her disbelieving gaze from the sheer expanse of grasslands dressed in nature's first green before her, to the trunks upon trunks of towering Carboniferous pine and soaring conifer all around, to the white puffs of cloud swimming in endless blue and the dinosaurs, the dinosaurs; they were everything, everywhere all at once, soaring pterodactyls silhouetted impressively before gleaming Day, the beating trill of a microraptor's feathers against airborne current, the thump—thump—thumping of scaly, stampeding limbs as it stirs up mountains of dust over the gravelly terrain and evokes a primal musicality that penetrates into the deepest threads of Meimei's being.

### Where is she?

Her eyes catch upon a scene unfolding beneath the shade of a particularly great pine. Approaching with curiosity, the dinosaur nestled there around her egg looks like none Meimei has seen in all her years trailing her parents' expeditions. No bigger than the average large dog, with an unusually long tail and short limbs covered in thin, splintery feathers, Meimei's tentative footsteps stir the dinosaur's attention, who twists her slender neck back to address Meimei with reciprocating interest whilst clawing continuously against an invisible ditch in the ground. Just then, the tiniest of crackles rents the air—the egg is hatching! Holding her breath beside the delicate thrill of new life, her eyes sparkle as she watches a whisper—thin pink fuzzball emerge stumbling and clumsy from between the eggshell's shards.

On closer inspection, Meimei notices the discrepancy in earth at which the mother dinosaur has been pawing—a glinting opalescent pebble that Meimei... is to have. A present.

Warmed by this gesture of miracle, and warmed by the sun's rays, Meimei and the baby dinosaur both feel their consciousnesses lull. Before long, though it is still Day, she and the newborn have both come upon Night's slumbering train, leaving behind a perplexed mother dinosaur to stand guard over her young.

~

### Jiang

Finishing the workday, Lao Jiang hastens up a mud-path home, *douli*, a conical farmer's hat, slinging limply across his body. Desperate to rest for at least a few hours before tomorrow's work, his desire for sleep mingles inextricably with feelings of guilt at once again returning home empty—handed after having traded much of today's harvest for oil and soap and other such essentials. Engrossed in his thoughts, Lao Jiang's absent—minded fiddling with foliage growing on the wall along the path leads him to plunge a fist straight through ivy and wallflower into the cave's opening.

Parting the curtain of fauna with tired fingers, he retrieves a flashlight found sitting dented and caked with mud at the mouth of the cave; to his surprise, it switches on with ease. Shining its light down the chasm of darkness, he discovers a downward—sloping path, not an unmanageable climb for the experienced miner but certainly a risk to undertake between the moistened cavern walls and muddied flooring he now notices with a start. *Hadn't his professor at school said that damp caves were where fossils formed, shielded from solar radiation and entrenched within consistent humidity? He has never known a cave like this to exist here, of all places.* 

An unquenchable thirst for discovery reignites inside him, finding Jiang Yunxian lowering himself carefully down the cave opening, inching his way through the chasm, startling to discover the sleeping form of a small girl at its bottom, and beneath her, an impossible dream, enough to send the old man into shock—two perfect halves of fossil, chronicling two unrecognisable dinosaur forms, scattered with a terrifying disregard across the rocky cavern floors.

~

### Taryn

Roaming the hallowed halls of the British Museum makes Taryn feel as if she were a high school student again, on her first organised trip from Beijing to visit the United Kingdom beside teachers and classmates.

Fifteen years later, and the pillars of the entrance pantheon still stand with full majesty, welcoming wandering souls like herself who now find themselves amidst the crowd for a buzzing new exhibit. The pamphlet in her hands guides her to one artefact on display in particular—a fossil stone, split in miraculous perfection down the vertical axes to showcase the miniscule forms of a pair of dinosaurs with tails stretching curiously long.

'Sinosauropteryx,' the sign beside its glass encasing reads, 'a recent accidental discovery of a new dinosaur species made in a remote cave in Sihetun Village, Liaoning Province, China, this fossil stone was found and retrieved by local farmer and palaeontologist Jiang Yunxian and Meilin Lee-Clarke, who claim to have stumbled upon the artefact in its present state of separation. Though experts are still uncertain as to how this improbable phenomenon occurred, perhaps its ambiguity in origin can be considered an origin story in itself.'

So it can.

Met with a sudden stroke of inspiration unfelt by Taryn for over a decade, she turns decisively to leave, though not before stopping at the travel agency on the neighbouring street and arranging transit to Sihetun in Liaoning, China for tomorrow—it was time for her to go home. Perhaps not in the sense one would anticipate, but to Taryn, the pursuit of literature has always been its own form of sanctuary.

~

### **Epilogue**

Sihetun Extinct Organisms Fossil Institution, Sihetun Village, Beipiao City, Chaoyang, Liaoning, China August 2005

The new morning dawns bright and early. Day's light, shining splendidly as ever, cascades down from fiery heavens and pierces through the glass structure of the new Sihetun Extinct Organisms Fossil Institution, pooling in crepuscular slivers upon Head Palaeontologist Jiang Yunxian's office desk.

Now a full-fledged researcher dedicated to uncovering mysteries of prehistoric life all across China, Jiang has used his half of the wealth and fame obtained from the jointly discovered Sinosauropteryx fossil to fund the establishment of a palaeontological research institution right here in Sihetun.

Taking a short break from his morning spent working, he traces his line of sight across the view unfolding outside his office window. Down below, sixteen—year—old Meimei skips across the Institution's entrance pavement alongside her parents, here for a final weekend internship before returning to boarding school next week. A small jewel—like pebblestone adornment in her hair catches the shifting sunlight as she dances her way down the path—to this day, Meimei is still uncertain of what had happened that night in the cave; all evidence points to it having been no more than a dream, but the discovery of the opalescent pebblestone in her pocket the next morning yet remains a complete and beautiful mystery.

As Jiang shifts his attention back to the day's timetable on his desk, he finds himself smiling.

But never mind. Now is no time for reminiscing. There will be plenty for that in the evening, after the author visit the Institution is hosting today; Jiang flicks his notice to the event poster pinned onto his wall—hmmm, bestselling author Taryn Chen, with her novel The Jurassic Awakening. Isn't it true that she'd written that novel right here in Sihetun before skyrocketing to fame? Now that Jiang is thinking about it, he feels he has seen her in passing through the fields a fair few times throughout the years before.

 $\sim$ 

Oh, he definitely has. Up in the sky, there is not a soul beside to hear Day's chuckling remark. Maybe it will tell it again to Night later, but for now Night remains woefully ignorant, imposing darkness upon the other half of Earth's hemisphere. And for just a few hours longer today, Day's radiance will continue to reign the skies supreme, the very exaltation of its presence torn between impossible myth, indivisible fate, and invisible magic but felt below by Sihetun's flurrying creatures all the same.

# The Last China Dinosaur

HKUGA College, Fung, Caleb - 17

Sunlight, melting through trees and onto grasses that hung drooping with dew, brought the village to life in a pale glow within a mountain range so great; it was unspoiled, where man had kept others from disturbing their method between fruits perched on—season crops licking tales while sitting around morning fires. A place where people lived in balance, tending their fields and spending nights telling stories around fires. Throughout generations, stories swirled through the village; the creatures in the forest, or the beast dwelling inside that cave.

But none of those stories prepared 12-year-old tom for the revelation that would change everything.

Tom was a shaggy lad of curiosity who liked to stray into places none meant him to be. He lived with his grandmother above all, but she got him in his tracks for straying too far from the village. "That forest is older than any of us," she would whisper deep in her throat. "But there are not the kinds of things that belong in our time."

He loved his grandmother but every time she warned him it only fueled the curiosity. What secrets could be hiding in those woods? Despite having climbed every tree and scoured every stream for more than the most standard rabbits and birds. But a cool autumn morning, tending to his Grandmother's garden one day incidentally led Tom right into his first discovery—the—world—has—yet—to—heard—from—type—invention.

### Discovery in the Garden

It began with footprints.

When he saw an area that had been dug up at the edges while Tom had been putting holes in the ground for new vegetable seedlings. As he knelt, brushing off the soil I froze. He brushed off a handful of dust, and there, stamping into the fine soil was a footprint.

It was big—bigger than anything an animal he knew walked on, and all three toes looked like just plain old claws. The depression was clear and relatively fresh; the creature had left only hours ago. Tom's mind raced. Bear? A wild boar? None of which left behind prints along these lines.

He got closer and lower, feelin' along the rim of the print with his fingers then a slam to his heart followed loud Soon after then was running. And what had to make this track was not an object he knew. A secret, that no one in this village had ever talked about.

And so, Tom tracked the prints into the garden edge and they vanished among the dark woods. He was about just a second stopping when he snatched up his coat and went for the woods.

### Into the Forest

The forest was all talk of birds and leaves rustling, but it seemed oddly silent to Tom. The further in he got, the thicker and colder the air seemed to get. On the surface, some could tell how the light filtered weakly through its canopy casting ever—shifting shadows to the forest floor.

These footprints flew him over streams and thick brambles, somehow creating a non—linear maze for which there was no destination. Tom might as well have been walking in his boots, drenched from crossing a slough. All that was going on in his head was making things up about weird stuff and ancient worlds.

Hours seemed to pass before the trail actually started to incline, up the side of a steep hill. His legs were on fire and yet descend he did. Hidden in the ferns and moss at the crest of a hill was the mouth of a cave.

It's dark, and dark is something my grandma had told him to stay away from. There was something about it that pulled him towards it though, the feeling of what he was hunting being there.

### Cave of Secrets

The cave was damp and cool on the inside with a pungent odor of something wet and metallic. The light from the mouth dimmed as he went further, and Tom's footsteps echoed. He dug an emergency flashlight from his pants, its light slicing the black.

The cave walls were uneven and dangerous, Tom saw this farther in but then it started to look a little strange. And the stone had scratches and grooves that looked so...programmed.

They started out looking like tools at first for the young adolescent, but closer inspection showed he was wrong about them. They were carvings, the rock smooth but for their presence and how sharply drawn they were.

It showed animals — some, recognizable (deer or birds), but others so completely alien. There were bizarre feathered lizards and long—tailed ancient marvels that appeared as if they escaped from the pages of a history book.

Tom was so wrapped up in the drawings that he missed the creature resting in the shadows.

### The Last Sinosauropteryx

A lot smaller than this, perhaps about a large dog, full size with softer feathers glowed a little in the subdued light. Its body was long and slender, bird—like in appearance almost with extremely sharp claws and a long tail edged with feathers.

Its head was narrow and had a beak-like snout full of tiny teeth.

Tom just stood still flashlight spinning in his hand. To begin with, he thought the animal was dead; it lay so perfectly still. But after that chest rose and fell, and its eyes snapped open.

Gold and blinding, an intelligence so profound that Tom blinked at them. He locked eyes on the beast for a split second, and neither moved.

A myriad of thoughts rushed through Tom's head as his heart slammed against its cage. What the f\*\*\* was this? How had it made it? And where was it, stashed away in this cave that no one bothered clearing out anymore?

Hiss little chirrupy—growl, parting the creature's fur and letting out a faint mewing that I had never quite managed to place. It was but the slightest bit menacing .... slowly, his hand reached up towards one dactyl palm and indicated a wall of the cave.

Tom swivelled his gaze towards the direction of the creature's outstretched limb, and his eyes landed on further illustrations etched into the stone. Those images weren't just arbitrary visuals they formed a narrative. Vibrant depictions emerged of a primaeval realm bursting with verdant flora and fauna. Other dinosaurs were larger and more fearsome, yet Sinosauropteryx outsmarted them with cunning speed, thriving in environments that doomed its peers. It stalked unsuspecting rodents but sniffed out carrion whenever necessity dictated staying precariously ahead of lurking threats. Suddenly drawings morphed into a cataclysmic scene - a colossal volcanic eruption filling the sky with ash and darkness. Sinosauropteryx eked out an existence via opportunistic foraging amidst harsh Ice Age conditions, freezing temperatures its sole constant. Deep within damp caverns it concealed itself, swiping eggs from unsuspecting beasts and persisted amidst the unforgiving environment. Age-old tales unfolded haphazardly over time. Humans emerged suddenly amidst thawing ice, initially as tiny, rough-hewn beings wielding crude spears and huddled around flickering flames. Sinosauropteryx dodged these novel threats by lurking in dark recesses and foraging on the outskirts of their encampments. Time passed and ancient societies emerged in vivid sketches that gradually took shape. Ancient conflicts and monumental constructions like the Great Wall of China unfolded under the watchful gaze of Sinosauropteryx a relatively small feathered carnivore that silently observed the tumultuous ascent and decline of successive dynasties. Tom's jaw dropped in utter astonishment. A relic of bygone eras, this creature still thrived, its existence a tangible thread linking us to a realm forever lost.

### A final gift

The creature's soft murmur caught Tom's notice, his gaze drifting back. It inched nearer, slow movements like an arthritic gait, weighed down by the crushing burden of forgotten eras. It lunged forth with a lone razor—sharp hand then swiftly snatched a solitary feather from the extremity of its plumage. Delicate, its rust—red and white hues still popped, vibrant despite the patina of age. A creature thrust a quivering feather at Tom with reckless abandon and he grasped it with wildly shaking hands. He felt an odd warmth seep in somehow like the feather pulsed with the essence of that mysterious creature suddenly. Tom's fingers made contact and suddenly a torrent of visions burst forth in his mind amidst a maelstrom of feelings. He witnessed a bygone era firsthand through the creature's perspective, its primal fear palpable amidst the volcanic cataclysm and its hunger a gnawing ache throughout the Ice Age's frigid grip, as it stood a solitary sentinel observing humanity's nascent stirrings unfold. The creature emitted one last mournful wail—a valediction. It lay back down its chest rising and falling with faint erratic breaths. Tom observed a gradual dimming of the light within its gaze until an unsettling quietude remained.

Tom huddled in the darkness, hours ticking by with agonizing slowness, as the crushing weight of his gruesome discovery bore down relentlessly. He burst forth eventually, a look of utmost determination etched on his face, the feather clutched tightly in his grasp and blurted it out. Villagers were sceptical initially, they figured Tom's tale was merely a product of youthful fancy. Doubts vanished pretty quickly when he finally led them into that cave. A lifeless Sinosauropteryx sprawled before them, its demise rendering onlookers utterly mute. Scientists descended rapidly upon the scene, drawn by news of an utterly improbable breakthrough that had spread like wildfire. Tom's groundbreaking discovery—a remarkably well—preserved dinosaur in China—was astonishingly corroborated by them. Sinosauropteryx got touted as some kinda miracle fossil, basically, a relic from way back when dinosaurs roamed. Scientists were utterly bewildered by this ancient structure's sheer tenacity in piecing together a narrative from murals adorning walls. It survived so long by hiding in darkness, scavenging and adapting somehow to an everchanging world around it. However, even fairly hardy organisms struggle beneath crushing modern pressures. Pollution and deforestation along with human encroachment had ultimately wreaked havoc.

### A Legacy of Survival

Tom retained the feather, a token bestowed by the creature with deliberate intent. Life somehow persists amidst unimaginable adversity a symbol of past and present intertwined inextricably. Sinosauropteryx got a decent sendoff, its final resting place is now a historical site due to some careful preservation efforts afterwards. Scientists persisted in scrutinizing crude sketches and revealed intriguing facts about the creature's existence in a bygone era and its habitat. Villagers, long accustomed to their home's ordinariness, suddenly viewed it with fresh eyes as a realm of enchantment but also a mystery. Tom's life got turned upside down by that discovery somehow. He became a palaeontologist somewhat by chance, diving headfirst into a career that mostly involved unearthing ancient mysteries. No discovery ever rivalled the sheer astonishment of that fateful autumn morning he trailed a faint path of footprints deep into the forest where he stumbled upon China's final dinosaur. But the Sinosauropteryx's departure still lingered, its impact echoing strangely in that boy's soul, amidst a lone feather, within a desolate cave.

# Descenting into the Truth

HKUGA College, Wong, King Long Keith - 17

Morgan ran his hand through his already scruffy hair feeling annoyed. He was never a fan of the humidity in Hong Kong. Even the sterile interior of the jet seemed to be polluted by the muggy mood. Morgan was still not accustomed to this kind of rushed travel, the frantic emails and calls that had dragged him away from his discoveries of fossils all over Guangzhou.

The archeological community, recently, has been busier than ever. Countless dinosaur species had been found all over the globe, some even in places where they were never supposed to exist, defying the established consensus among scientists and geologists. In fact, Morgan wasn't even surprised by his summons to Hong Kong – Guangdong had always been one of those mythical provinces, steeped in the supernatural and mysteries.

He carefully reviewed the data on his tablet one last time: The unusual energy readings received from a construction site in Hong Kong, high levels of radiation, and ruins beneath the site that came to light. Local reports had spoken of fragmented dinosaur fossils, unlike anything seen before. But preliminary surveys hinted at something far more extraordinary: something that defied his lifetime work and his understanding of nature itself. It was the rumors of the 'strange energy' that truly grasped his interest.

A jolt marked the end of his flight. He was met by Wang, his long—time colleague and friend, a young but accomplished Asian geologist.

"Thanks for fetching me," said Morgan, his voice tired but hurrying. "I trust your plunder was uneventful?"

"Come on, you know I am not one of those Western ghouls," she replied, a wry smile playing on her lips. "Surely you've read about the radiation and the anomalies? We have so much to discover, yet all surveying methods through ground level failed. Professor Ding Yi always joked about it like a Pandora's Box."

Wondering who Ding Yi was, Morgan followed Wang towards the construction site over a blur of honking taxis and bustling street markets as they approached the excavation. The roads, he noticed, were all cordoned off, guarded by an armed officer every few blocks. And the site finally lay in front of their eyes.

Spanning 5 kilometers squared, the construction site saw gigantic, sharp skeletal structures — those Morgan immediately identified as dinosaur fossils — jutting out of the soil, with an indefinite number of complex tunnels and reservoirs that seemed to extend deep underground. Only a small fraction of the site near the entrance has been exploited so far. "You've forgotten to mention how beautiful it is." Morgan beamed, only to find a sigh coming from Wang.

"Morgan... There isn't much time left for us to enjoy the view," Wang said, her tone urgent. "The authorities are insisting on a change of hands for the site if we don't uncover something new soon. They're citing everything – public safety concerns, the expenditures... Rumors have it that they plan to abandon all research and pave it up."

Barely suppressing his exhilaration, Morgan felt a peculiar surge of designation. Something had ignited inside him, something propelling him to make a decision that would transform his life.

"Send someone," he told Wang. "No - send me into it."

Wang grinned. "That's what Ding Yi expected. He also offers to be your accompaniment, shall you not mind."

Morgan was genuinely surprised by the chaos as he entered the research campsite. Around him were numerous excavators in various states of disarray. They clearly had run out of table space and put a few workstations directly on the floor, where power cords and networking wires formed a tangled mess. Instead of being installed in racks, routers were left haphazardly on top of scattered bones on the floor — which, to Morgan's surprise, resembled those artifacts in the Great London Museum. He wasn't sure if this was the "mystery" that they were mentioning, but he was sure of one thing: Whatever they were dealing with was too important for them to care about their appearances.

A tall, young man hurried over, apparently unbothered by the mess. Morgan shook his hand. "You must be Professor Charles Morgan," the man said, his voice weary yet clear. "I'm Ding Yi, and on behalf of my team, thank you for your contribution."

"The pleasure is mine."

"Shall we begin? I'll walk you through the big one right away, the one Wang kept on saying."

They arrived at the main exploitation area that loomed like a gaping maw in the earth, an enormous hole plunging downwards for nearly 500 feet, its walls steep and rugged. Surrounding the perimeter, heavy machinery hummed ominously, their cables snaking into the abyss, ready for transport into the depths below. Above ground, the atmosphere was thick with tension; the air was heavy with dust. With each creak of the machinery and distant echoes, an unsettling sensation crawled over Morgan — rather than a Pandora's Box, the site gave a stifling sensation.

Ding Yi asked Morgan whether he had ever tried nuclear protective clothing before; Morgan said no.

"Those suits are borrowed from authorities," said the scientist. "It tingles a bit at first – but you will soon get comfortable."

They were greeted by a series of chambers. Morgan noticed they were descending gradually, giving him the time to study his colleague: Ding Yi was a man with his sharp gaze, exuded an air of competence that didn't suit his age.

"Aren't those fossils at ground level?" He asked as they awaited for what seemed to be a vertical conveyor belt.

"Those you saw on your way, Charles, are just the surface," said Ding. "But the other side of the world is 1400 feet down."

Morgan followed his descent into the earth. Conveyor cables strapped to their backs plunged downwards with a swift motion, carrying them through layers of rocks and sediments. The familiar urban sounds of Hong Kong faded, replaced by a low rumble emitted from the very distant darkness.

"600 feet underground." Ding Yi's voice echoed all over the radio.

The temperature dropped noticeably. Morgan noticed that Ding Yi reached into his pocket and took out a small tablet that flickered along their descent. He murmured something in Mandarin that was muffled by his helmet. Morgan tried to ask, but Ding Yi did not elaborate any further.

The silence went on and on and minutes passed, until when Morgan's view was nothing else but pitch black. Even the low hum was starting to fade away. *Something was off.* 

"1000 feet," Morgan reported. "1300. We're almost there... Hello?"

But there was no response.

Before Morgan could react, the cables jolted to a stop, reaching the bottom of the tunnel. He quickly powered his electric lamp, only shocked to see a new environment revealed through the blinding mist.

The very first thought that came up was aliens — Before him was a cavern far exceeding any expectations. Gone were the narrow walls; instead, a subterranean hall stretched before him. The air was surprisingly breathable, carrying a faint scent of damp earth and something else... something ancient, almost metallic. Immense, nicely carved pillars, reminiscent of ancient Chinese architecture but far exceeding anything Morgan had ever seen, appeared from the dark, disappearing into the gloom of the high, vaulted ceiling. The floor itself was a mosaic of polished stone, worn smooth by time, its surface reflecting the strange light.

Then, he saw them.

Not just scattered bones, but impossibly preserved skeletons that went against his knowledge. These were undeniably dinosaurs, yet their size was staggering, exceeding even the largest discovered T-Rex specimens. But it was the details that truly captivated him – hieroglyphs-like characters were carved into their bones – Chinese, Greek, Hebrew... Morgan felt as if the hall was a forge of distinct cultures, mixing and matching continental histories into a cluster of absoluteness.

And alongside these colossal dinosaurs, he noticed something else. Much smaller skeletons – unmistakably human, were buried alongside the dinosaurs – they were not preys, but more like equals. All the arrangements hinted at one conclusion – a burial, a ritualistic laying to rest.

A low hum resonated throughout the cavern, a deep, throbbing vibration that seemed to emanate from the very earth itself. Morgan felt as if it wasn't a voice that reached his ears through the air; it felt as though it resonated directly within his mind, bypassing his senses entirely. It was ancient, deep, carrying the weight of millennia.

"Charles Morgan," the voice boomed. Echoes initiated from everywhere and nowhere at once.

"Hello?" Morgan, holding his breath, managing himself through fear and adrenaline. He figured that the best way was to communicate: "What exactly am I looking at?"

"You have stumbled upon a truth long buried." It answered. "Do believe entirely what you see. The dinosaurs, and humans among them. Lying before you is the cradle of a forgotten time. It was a time when dragons walked the earth, and men lived alongside."

The voice paused, the silence amplified by the persistent echoes. Morgan's mind reeled, trying to comprehend the words.

"You're saying... The ancient fossils...?"

"They are the sleeping ones, the dragons that live in the hearts of the pure. Most unfortunately, a slumber was long imposed upon them by those who fear their existence. All that remained was no more than hard, cold stones."

Morgan felt as if he were lost in a maze of thoughts. The voice seemed to be speaking out of a dream. "I don't understand."

"Do you not see? The dragons are not ordinary creatures; they were the embodiment of spirits – spirits that were long demised – individuality, courage, and the unyielding will to progress." The words surrounded Morgan with glimmers of pride.

As he stepped forward, flames emerged along both sides of the corridor, illuminating the atmosphere, and revealing the image of the speaker that would haunt him forever.

Before him lay a gigantic dark red titanosaurus, the largest ever recorded to his memory. He could determine that the voice so far was not pronounced verbally; it was delivered through means beyond physical propagation. They were mentally linked; thoughts were simultaneously transmitted and deciphered at each end.

"Dragons?" Morgan did not speak this time, circulating his sentence in his mind.

"As you call it." The voice answered simply.

Dragons? The words seemed absurd, the product of every archaeologist's fevered dream. Yet, the evidence before his eyes, even the sheer scale of the discovery itself has defied any logical explanation he could come up with. The voice continued, its tone shifting, taking on a more urgent, almost frantic quality.

"But the shadows, Professor Morgan, are lengthening. There are people – people from your world, that seek to exploit it, to twist it for their own nefarious ends.

"Those who seek to control the narrative, those who intend to erase the past and rewrite history, are growing bolder. The world you live in seeks to silence this truth forever. They fear the power of the spirits it carries, the spirit of individualism, that it will inspire rebellion. Indeed it is a spirit that cannot be contained, but also a spirit that can be forgotten.

"Beware the ones that surround you," the voice continued, its tone shifting from sorrow to a chilling warning. "Malicious intentions... They seek to erase this place, this history, and with it, the courage of those who dared to resist."

A long pause followed as Morgan felt a knot of dread forming in his stomach. Things were more far—reaching than he had ever imagined; he could see the systematic effort to erase such a significant piece of history, to stifle the truth that lay before him.

"You must protect this legacy, Professor Morgan," it continued with sheer desperation. "Remind the world of the spirit long forgotten! The future of true courage, of identity, of free will... depends on it!"

But before Morgan could formulate a response, the voice was then abruptly cut off. A flicker of movement caught his eye; Morgan looked around, his gaze sweeping across the large skeletons, the smaller human remains, the intricate carvings on the ancient pillars... and Ding Yi, appearing from nowhere.

Ding Yi activated a device on his wrist, his face impassive: A small metallic disc, glowed with an eerie red light. He raised it, aiming it towards the stone pillars. It gave an ominous beep.

"What is going on?" said Morgan.

"Well, that's an interesting question," said Ding Yi pleasantly. "And quite a long story. I suppose we don't have time to go through that."

"What do you mean?" said Morgan, whose mouth had gone dry.

"They are relics," distorted by the helmet's comms, Ding Yi's calm voice cut through the cavern like a sharp knife. "A bygone curiosity, but nothing more. Best kept hidden."

All the time he spoke, Ding Yi's eyes never left the skeletal structure. There was a hungry look in them that made the hairs stand up on the back of Morgan's neck.

"Hidden?" His voice was tight with controlled fury. "This is the truth we are standing for! This is what we have pursued for our entire life!"

"Haven't you realized what — or who I stand for, Morgan?" said Ding Yi softly. "But it is not relevant. What matters is our final goal. For years, the world has been dealing with the very same problem. My superiors — some among world leaders, some even in higher positions — agreed that free will is simply too much.

"We sought to extinguish any signs of this dangerous precedent. But how? Spirits are never meant to be contained, but what if they were addressed at their roots — the symbol of an era where free expression of thought and individualities thrived?"

"Yo," said Morgan, feeling defeated. It became evident what Ding Yi was about to do, but it was too late.

"Sometimes progress means sacrifices." Ding Yi concluded.

The device pulsed faster, the blue light intensifying into a blinding flare. A wave of heat filled the chamber, revealing a deafening roar. Morgan scrambled to his feet, his ears ringing, his vision swimming; the air itself seemed to vibrate along. Then, the explosion hit.

A blinding flash of white light engulfed him, throwing him to the ground. The last thing Morgan saw before he lost consciousness was Ding Yi's face, a mask of cold, determined fanaticism right inside the implosion... and the rest was darkness.

Morgan opened his eyes.

Shadows flickered along the walls, and faint voices drifted in from somewhere far away. Gradually, fragments of memory began to float back to him. Snippets of ancient fossils, fish markets... and then the flash of Ding Yi's last moments.

Morgan swallowed and looked around him. He was lying in a bed with lined sheets, when the sudden brightness of his surroundings made his head throb; a dull, persistent ache that made even the slightest movement painful. He realized that he was in a hospital facility. Wang, her face expressionless, stood by his bed.

"I need to see Ding Yi." Morgan croaked with all the strength left in his mouth.

"I'm so sorry, Professor," she said, her voice softening further. "There was a... a fatality. He didn't make it."

"Wang, you need to help me... It was not an accident... Everything was a calculated act! Ding Yi killed himself -"

"You are eating yourself up, Charles. Perhaps it's the survival guilt that plagues you - Nobody would have predicted a gas leak."

Morgan paused. Gas leak. Almost too convenient.

But Wang knew what he was about to say. "Morgan," she said, her words clipped and hurried. "You need to stop this. You're going too far. This isn't something you can handle."

So she knew.

They were all trying to cover it up. The dinosaurs, the voice, Ding Yi, Wang – they were all part of it, a piece of a puzzle far larger, and far more conspiratious. Had Ding Yi been a pawn in this larger game? The voice had warned him of a malevolent intent to erase the site and silence those who knew its secrets...

The world, it seemed, was not just suppressing the truth; they were actively erasing it, obliterating any trace of a history that threatened their carefully constructed narrative.

Morgan had no clue what he could possibly do.

# Shallow Graves

HKUGA College, Shiu, Lok Yiu Athena - 17

A physician has no place among the dwellings of the dead.

His father's words, once upon a time; when the drought had not yet come, when Yao had never handled the bones of the man for whom graveyards were always forbidden.

*Ironic*, Yak thinks darkly, dusting dirt off the yellowed remains in his lap, seated in the quiet emptiness of his palace quarters. A pair of deadened sockets stare back from a skull too large for any human, dulled canines glinting dim in flickering candlelight, and Yao can't help but sigh as he wonders what his life has come to.

The palace physician, forced into graverobbing duty because he's angered one too many officials.

"What would you think of me now?" He half—asks, fingers skirting the edge of the animal skull, staring back into those hollow eyes. "I couldn't *not* say anything."

Because Governor Shu's rant about *ungrateful peasants* had struck a nerve—— what had these officials done for *them*?

Nothing, even when his brother—in—law filed complaints of unusual bear attacks, when his father bribed guards to actually bring those complaints to the Governor.

They did *nothing*, even after one of those bears mauled his father to death—— and they are doing nothing now, after the worst drought in twenty years robbed the country's peasants of their food.

(Don't worry about me, Yuen wrote in his last letter. I'll be fine.)

Yao does not trust his brother to be *fine*, and he opens his eyes to find the skull's empty sockets still staring into his soul, cracked jaw frozen forever in death.

"I wonder what the Emperor sees in you," he says, finally. Because the excavation *had to be* ordered by the one man above all, because it was just like the court to search for solutions in the mystical instead of practical.

Of course.

No matter.

Yao sets the skull aside, still, because there are other bones to clean, and he still needs the pay to aid his brother in the food shortage—— no matter the fact that the imperial granaries rot while the people starve, no matter the fact that he's trespassed a realm his father refused to touch.

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The mother rises on a day like any other.

She rises from the comfortable darkness of sleep, blinking watery eyes in the familiar rays leaking through the foliage, blanketed in the swamp they've settled in for the night.

Good, her instincts whisper. No attack.

She doubles back to sniff at her charge, still, half-asleep and barely visible in the shadowed muck—— the too-familiar tang of blood does not come raring, and her satisfied exhale scatters like starlight as she nudges her young awake, certain his raptor—injury has not reopened.

He whines when she bites his coat, as she deposits him near the bank, and her eyes stay fixed on his stump of a leg as he——
——ah.
Her charge does not collapse into the mud, today. She huffs approvingly, and is rewarded with another muffled whine as he bobs unsteadily in the viscous swamp.
he is hungry, then.
Hungry <b>and</b> cold, as the mother finds herself cooling quickly in the too—dry air—— but while prey supply may be unstable, safe sunbathing spots are even harder to come by, and he does not know if her weakened charge would survive prolonged cold.
Sunbathing, she decides. Sunbathing, and she will see if she can sate her child's hunger.
It is in the midst of the excavation that Yao finds another reminder of his long—dead father.
He finds himself in the company of bones too often these days, but even as the servant lays them out on a tray too small for their size, Yao cannot help but zero in on the edge of what seems like a pelvis—— too large for a male, he thinks—— fissures cracking its shattered side like powdered snow.
Scattered, branching, splintered, like those littering his father's remains when Yao finally buried him alongside his mother, <i>away</i> from the haphazard pit that served as his father's first grave.
Another life that the gods didn't bother to save, and the realisation that this creature died of <i>mauling</i> comes like a prayer answered too late, running quick as the finger he trails across her ruined pelvis.
A her—— it's a <i>her</i> .
Of course.
Yao's thoughts ring too loud in the palace's silent treasury, and he finds he still cannot understand how this dead creature—— so powerless as to <i>die</i> by the hand of another—— would be the Emperor's answer to his people's plight.
(A god, they say. A god.)
The mother's core is not yet warm when a rustle breaks the silence.
Only shifting trees and crusty scales welcome her roaming eyes, but she is old enough to recognise a warning for what it is; the realisation has her shaking off a comfort only the complacent can afford, a grumbling huff escaping her as she nudges her young awake.
The dried moss of their rock splinters easily under her impatient clawing.
Good.
They need a meal before danger arrives.

"Perfect," says the palace Shenpo—— the witch—— the Emperor's entourage cramming into the treasury like a kiln near—bursting. "These bones will surely grant us our long—awaited rain."

The Emperor leans forward, golden sleeves dragging across the ceremonial tray; his face twists into a boyish grin as he traces the yellowed skull, the beads on his *mianguan* rattling out a rain these bones supposedly promise.

Yuen, Yao thinks, staring at the Emperor's grin—it's a grin that tilts like Yuen's used to, a grin probably wilted under the weight of the drought.

(Brother, Yuen wrote in his last letter, script uncharacteristically shaky. Maybe you should try fasting. It's such a novel experience—)

"Does this mean my daffodils will stop dying?" The Emperor asks the *Shenpo*, and the *way* his voice pitches high only stretches Yao's memories taut.

"Ah, Your Highness," a courtier interrupts nervously, "Four villages in Luoyang—"

"The daffodils," the Emperor emphasises, petulant, as the Shenpo steps forward with a wheat-dry smile.

"Of course, Your Highness. It would be a tragedy to watch your daffodils waste away."

"Luoyang and Chengdu report dozens of deaths-"

"Then *they* shouldn't have wasted their food!" The Emperor snaps with all the vitriol his privilege affords. "My daffodils, Shenpo."

A shadow flickers across the witch's face, too quick to grasp but too slow to escape notice.

"...we can begin immediately," she says, then. "The bones are ready, and your daffodils cannot survive much longer."

"Good." The Emperor beams. "I want to see them bloom before the month is out."

The mother cannot remember a time where her child has stayed silent.

No, because noise is something he cannot live without, but only the soft rustle of drying leaves accompany her trek through the viscous swamp, now, her charge laying eerily quiet on her back.

It is not something she finds comforting.

How long has the swamp ceased its supply of prey? How long will hunger take her child faster than any injury, any predator?

Lethargy is already dragging her limbs down through the thick mud; the rustling in the background is something she cannot ignore.

### Push on.

"Do you know how many patients this one has had this month?" Yao asks the Shenpo, pointedly not looking at his steaming *tieguanyin*, the jade—inlaid rosewood that lines the walls of her quarters.

"Enlighten me." The witch smiles around her cup; amused, indulgent, and the heat that comes does not belong to the tea steeping Yao's throat bitter. "Thirty-six," he grits out, knuckles white as the powder painting the Shenpo's face. "Thirty-six. Most of them children, sunburned and blistered and Gods-damned starving-" ——like Yuen already is, without what minimal protection the court affords. The Shenpo sips her tea. "Commoner patients, hm?" She asks, tone light as the off-white coating her cup. "This one does not see you solving their problems," Yao counters, because she has no right, not when she talks the Emperor away from opening the granaries, refusing to admit her so-called power could not end the drought altogether. "Do you have the power, then?" The Shenpo's silhouette crawls along the table like a waning eclipse. "This one does not see your point—" "—people are dying," Yao hears himself snap, rosewood creaking under aching palms. "Yuen is dying." A pause. "...so that is your intention," breathes the Shenpo, then, painted brows raised high. "You want this servant to aid your brother, don't you?" (I don't know how much longer I can hold on, Yao.) His name is Yuen, Yao wants to scream, but the witch only starts to laugh; it's an unfamiliar thing, ringing sandharsh instead of bell-light, and there is pity in her eyes when she says-"——what a hopelessly naive man you are, dear Physician of our outer court." The mother latches onto thick stone as she surfaces near the split of their hunting grounds. It's shrouded, still dim, the ends of willow brushing dark swamp like dragonflies before rain, but the mud sliding down her scales is a mud crusted over with lack of moisture—— the same lack that foretells no prey. ...no prey. Her charge's developing claws only dig deeper around her neck; the mother's stomach rumbles angrily at yet another denial, but it is the familiar rustle of too-near leaves that forces her to finally straighten, turning sideways to find— ——bulbous yellow eyes, staring back from the foliage like twin suns at midnight. Physician Wong, the letter writes. I am sorry to inform you that one Wong Yuen has died one day prior to the penning of this letter-—crunch, goes the waxed cloth as it collapses under Yao's fingers, frayed edges scattering like locusts at the height of summer.

...Yuen.

"Yuen," he hears himself whisper, voice stretched thin as the dying reeds of the Emperor's garden, the walls returning his brother's name like a broken promise.

Your brother is dead, his neighbour writes, and even as the splintered wood of his quarters draw blood from Yao's knees, the world is nothing but rosewood and silk and the Shenpo's grating laughter, bouncing off the walls of a palace too grand for its people.

(These bones will surely grant us our long—awaited rain, the Shenpo smiles, standing above the remains of a creature unable to protect even itself.)

...they don't understand, do they?

(Stay in the shade, he pleads to the girl curled up in her mother's arms, reddened skin flaking off like year—old paint.)

The Emperor and the Shenpo and all their boot—licking courtiers languish in their rosewood palaces, downing *tieguanyin* over long—dead bones while the people *starve*——

(I can't hold on, Yuen writes, and Yao imagines hollowed cheeks and deadened eyes on a too-young face——)

——this has to stop, he decides, staring at the sun spilling across his floorboards like a once-full dam.

This has to stop.

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Between herself and her child, the mother will always choose the latter.

The latter's hunger, the latter's injury, the latter's life——

He will starve if she allows this to continue.

The mother looks the raptor in its great yellow eyes, and lunges.

The chatter of the gathering hall crashes down on Yao like midday sun.

Bright, intruding, all-encompassing—— and the shudder that runs down his spine is something he cannot control, invasive as the sweat soaking his grip on the bag over his shoulder.

Its contents knock a skittering rhythm in time with his steps; Yao ignores the stares burning past his skin as he shoves through the sea of officials, heart running quick as water down a drain when the Emperor's golden visage reveals itself, a lone gold dot in this muted forest, and——

----CLANG.

His bag hits the floor.

Only the roar of blood past his ears is left, then, the bones of the fragile creature scattering porcelain—bright in the stunned silence that befalls the court.

"...what?" whispers the Shenpo, somewhere far-far-away.

Yao only has eyes for the pelvis in his grasp, fractures still clean as fish laid out on a too-cold day.

This belonged to a creature that had died in pain; robbed of its burial by people who saw it only as a means to an end.

Is this enough? Yao thinks, after the world comes to a standstill, after he's forced to his knees, calves digging into the bones' splintered remnants under the guards' heavy pressure.

The courtiers' stares continue burning through the silence; the Shenpo's glare holds like glass-tossed sun.

Is this enough, or would all this be for nothing?

Yao looks up into the Emperor's young face to find only a sheltered shock in his too—wide eyes, hiding behind the baby fat that still clings to his cheeks.

(I'm old enough, Yao! Yuen screams at him, wide-eyed and oil-splattered and rice strewn across his face—-)

He's young.

He's so young.

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(Wild eyes dart back at her from a snout nested in blood—— wild eyes, identical to those that harmed her child, and the mother's jaw loosens as a desperate fury clouds her mind——)

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"Why?" The Emperor demands, finally, as the thinning threads of Yao's fury slide away like rotting grain, leaving only a simmering exhaustion that has him wanting for collapse.

"My brother starved to death," Yao forces out, voice barely holding in the rising murmur. "You were too fixated on the bones to actually *do* anything about the drought itself."

The Shenpo's bells *clang* like shattering clay as she snarls; the Emperor only blinks.

Whether at his bluntness or lack of respect is unknown, but what does it matter, because—

"I'm here because of *you*," Yao grits out, forgoing formality entirely as his knees draw blood under the guards' growing pressure. "*Your* people are suffering and starving and dying, yet you continue to preach fortune and gods instead of actually *solving the issue*——"

"Enough," the Shenpo thunders as she shoves a flinching Emperor behind her, rich magenta vivid as her reddened face, as her sleeves that sweep the air like wind over rumbling sea, and even as the pressure on his back lifts—

——the raptor's teeth glint like starlight as it rears its head——
——Yao still has time to say——
——the mother kicks her charge into the swamp——
"Have you seen enough deaths, Your Highness?"
A pause, a breath, an eternity in a instant——
And then, nothing.
"Physican Wong."
Yao opens blurry eyes to see the strikingly <i>plain</i> form of the Emperor, standing dark as the bloodstained stones dotting his cell, flickering lamp—light pulsing in time with the pounding in his skull.
"Your Highness," he returns, then, moss skidding across his fingers as he turns, the Emperor's image sloshing in the sludge drowning his thoughts. "How fare the people?"
"You are surprisingly calm, for one scheduled to die tomorrow."
"Your Highness does not have any of my family left to kill," Yao hears himself mutter, and the nausea lifts to find the Emperor's face twisting like water down a well.
"You——" the Emperor cuts himself off. "You will <i>die tomorrow.</i> "
A pause.
"You will die," he repeats, softer, voice thin as the sharp edge of a blade, eyes candle—bright in the dimming light. "I will ensure it is quick."
The stutter in his voice bounds bell—loud off the molding walls, but the set of that string—taut jaw is achingly <i>Yuen</i> , even through the god—given blur that clouds Yao's vision.
Yuen, trying on a mask of bravery that should have not yet seen the light of day.
(I am old enough, Yao——)
"thank you," he manages, after the Emperor's face stops splitting into threes. "This was not necessary."

"It is your right," the Emperor replies, stiff, and when Yao blinks again, he's already at the end of the corridor, footsteps reverberating off the walls like evening mist.

"I——" He stops, one foot out the door. "I will attempt to take your words into account."

Yao's world falls dark again, soon enough.

The smile on his face refuses to follow.

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The child comes to cool wetness dripping down his snout, half-buried in sloppy mud.

There is clotting blood blinding one eye, and the sensation of leaking warmth is not a welcome one, but all is forgotten when he spots his mother lying past the foliage, scales moss—bright in the scattering rain.

His whines do not rouse her; his claws land in coagulating dirt.

He screeches when a giant yellow eye forces itself into view—— slitted, glassy, coated with a blood loss no animal can survive, and it is only then that he knows his mother has gone someplace he cannot follow.

The raptor is dead, ripe for the taking.

The stump of his front paw aches, and his subsequent howl rings through the trees like a hurricane, pitched high as the rain that's come too late.

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When he's dragged out into the dawn for the final time, Yao only feels relief.

(No place among the dead, his father reminds him, as he knots his dirt-brown prison clothes tighter, as his feet meet the cold wood of his death.)

The first drop falls on his cheek.

Cool, wet, foreign as the forgotten dampness that greets him in the square, the crowd that goes quiet under the shattering sky, the dry wood wet under his soles.

Rain, Yao thinks with something like wonder.

Thunder cracks like breaking bone; ten thousand needles thunder down like a vengeance long bottled.

(A physician may have no place among the dead, but all return to the earth eventually.)

He thinks of Yuen; of his father; of the countless nameless dead.

All things come to an end, and the very last thing he sees is the Emperor's young face, standing solemn among the clamouring courtiers, bright eyes still unflinching when the axe finally falls.

# For Gentlemen of Purpose

Hong Kong International School, Cheung, Vanessa – 15

### 190 BCE

### Luyue, the Dew Month - Tenth Month of the Chinese Lunar Calendar

"Have you heard about that poor, poor darling?"

"Oh yes. Her father—that horribly zealous man, Chunyu Yi, the doctor who aspired all the way to devastation." "His failure to save the life of a noblewoman led to his incarceration. What shall it be? Mutilation? Execution?" "I wouldn't linger on that. His daughter, though, the darling—Tinying. She makes the excruciating journey to the capital to appeal to the Emperor himself as we speak."

"May the Torch Dragon light the way to her destination and back."

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Dawn spills millet gold over the horizon. Qin Shufen hauls cattlefeed to his ox, a beautiful beast he reared from a calf: Zhinu, whose presence at his side never falters.

He brings an absentminded hand over her snout. Shufen's body is crouched wary on the dew-dried pasture, but it is controlled by a mind inside a memory months long dead.

Chunyu Tinying's smile, golden sunlight invaluable as jade. "Shufen, you look tired today. Is your mother well?" Shufen swallowed regret and answered, in a nature convincing as any, "She's getting better. Don't worry about her." "I'm worrying about you," Tinying pressed. "My father will be more than happy to watch over you for a day." Shufen swallowed something again, a notion rather akin to blossoning wildflowers and a quickening heartbeat. "I'm perfectly functionable; you and your father don't need unnecessary trouble."

"Alright." Tinying cast him one final, wary look. "Take care of yourself. Please."

In the present once more, in the humidity of almost-winter, Shufen lifts his palm from where it rests on Zhinu.

"Goodbye, my dear companion. I'll be back in the afternoon," he whispers. He stands and turns, beginning the trek home.

How would Tinying fare on the voyage to the capital? She'd slunk away in the dead of night. Surely she knew that had she requested Shufen's help, he would have accompanied her in an instant.

No, she had known. Precisely the reason. Despondency is a sinking weight and Shufen is pulled under.

He returns to the sun-dried hut and its singular room and finds disaster.

Ceramic bowls are scattered in shards on the floor. Amongst the sepia pieces are large strips of torn paper– precious material.

"Māmā."

The shadowed silhouette perched on a chair and wrapped in rags, rouses. "Son," his mother murmurs, "go."

Shufen eyes the strips, the familiar handwriting of his father painted precariously atop. "You shouldn't do such a thing."

"Go!"

He retreats outside the hut, onto the worn, sanded path. His limbs ache. The heat chokes. He walks through the village, silent and unthinking, past falling houses and falling people. Neighbours call to him, but he ignores them.

Shufen's gaze catches on a lone house on the outskirts now devoid of two of its inhabitants. He thinks of the glorious girl that once lived in it.

His headache worsens. Tinying's voice could soothe it. When they were younger she nicknamed him Yuanyang—the name of the ducks that floated along the fresh rivers adorned with joyful plumages, who according to old tales meant: devotion. And she was right — there weren't many things he wouldn't give for Tinying's safety.

The walk takes him opposite the terraced tilling fields and into a mountainous area. A wide gape in one of the mountain's edges attracts Shufen's attention. He quickens his step and soon finds that it's a cave, a small one, with light brightening its bottommost corners. Inscriptions are carved into the stony floor. Curious, he bends down, brushing away dust and sand.

Shufen gasps.

Incised in the ground is a carving of a majestic creature. Its long, feathered tail stretches beyond its torso, which is thin and rigid, held up by four limbs and a spine coated with a veneer of fur. A capability to hurt. And yet. It is no bigger than he is. He takes a rock and scrapes it into the floor, disrupting a thin layer of soil.

Night falls with a whisper and Shufen is intoxicated with discovery. Who could have left that drawing there, coaxed so deeply into stone?

His mother, worn from despair, is asleep on the other side of the hut. The little moonlight trickling in from the window is enough for Shufen to reach for a small chest tucked beneath his bed and crack it open, bright enough for him to pull out a thin pamphlet and read. Here is the only gift he had ever received from his father.

A segment of Shanhaijing. The Classic of Mountains and Seas. A historical relic, his father's letter said. Cherish it. Shufen had weaned himself on the pamphlet, taught himself written language and the fantastical beasts that resided within.

He traces its words. 'The deity of the mountain is named Torch Dragon. When this deity's eyes look out, there is daylight, and when he shuts his eyes, there is night...

He is a god with a snake's tail, protected with a pelt. He has vertical eyes in a straight seam.

What land does the sun not shine on and how does the Torch Dragon light it?

He will come when one calls at dayspring.'

A deity with a snake's tail and a fur pelt. Bringing the sun. Shufen's imagination dances. It almost offsets the bruises that line his ribs, which only throb when he drifts to sleep.

The door is pushed open. Māmā rises swiftly, hair falling away from her face, mouth parting in surprise. She is rendered speechless as Shufen's father stands before the threshold, his features in a genuine grin.

"Am I welcome on my son's birthday?"

"Yes, Bābā," Shufen gasps, finding his voice.

 $B\bar{a}b\bar{a}$  steps inside the house. He's dressed in civilian clothing, distinct from his military armour, carrying a small red pouch.

"How are you, boy?"

"Happy," Shufen croaks. The last time his father had visited his family had been two years prior, when the king's guards had called upon him to fight. "Harvest season is arriving."

Beside them,  $M\bar{a}m\bar{a}$  awakens from her stupor, rushing forward to envelope  $B\bar{a}b\bar{a}$  in an embrace. She giggles when he turns and lifts her in his arms, twirling her, a scene written straight from a halcyon romance.

That night, Shufen sleeps contentedly.

The fourth day of Bābā's visit brings an unwelcome change. Bābā wakes with a wraith in his expression, gaze decrepit and glazed. It is the habit of war disquieting his every action. On the final day he breaks furniture and brings down the door, ruining Māmā's joy in the fashion characteristic of a soldier.

When Māmā tries to stop him from smashing the porcelain set gifted on the eve of their marriage, he raises his fist. Shufen leaps to defend his mother. The fist collides with his chest—he inhales dust and hazily feels the impact.

Māmā screams.

His father stumbles backward, startled, suffocated with shock. Māmā lunges, grabbing him by his shoulders and pushing him forcefully from the house.

"Leave," his mother hisses vehemently, "and only come back when you're unwilling to hit your son."

Bābā, hemp coat doused with the slow pour of midsummer rain, remains frozen in the entranceway. His wife slams the door in his face, drops to the ground, and trembles. "Oh, Heavens," she shudders. Later, after Māmā retires to bed, Shufen opens the pouch his father had left. Within it is a slim stack of bamboo paper, presented with a folded letter. He unfolds it, noticing the simple characters, vaguely recalling Bābā spelling them out one summer a myriad of harvests past.

"This is the Classic of Mountains and Seas," Shufen reads. "Cherish it."

A few moons later a military squadron passes through the district. One solemn soldier knocks, delivering news of the haunting cloak of death.

When Shufen and his mother hug in the aftermath, she sobs sorrow into his shoulder.

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And so begins Shufen's new routine. Rising to dim sunshine, tending to Zhinu, then hiking to the cavern embedded with the carving. No matter how far he excavates, however, the carving remains out of reach, improbably deep in the ground.

Shufen's anxiety grows. Three weeks go by and he finds himself beginning his mornings easing a difficulty to breathe. It shouldn't take so long to reach the capital and back, especially if one has money. Even if one is the youngest daughter in a family of seven. An extraordinarily intelligent, resourceful and determined daughter.

Shufen wants to tear his hair from his scalp.

His mother ceases work entirely, electing to remain in the hut. Voice forgotten in a weathered teapot, the lone survivor in a porcelain set.

One flowering afternoon spectacled with scarlet roses precedes calamity. Shufen returns home, restless with his anxiety for Tinying's life and the purpose of the grandiose carving, and pushes open the front door.

The house has been devastatingly upended, splintered wood and brick pieces, bludgeoned chairs and strips of hemp cloth. Shufen gasps when he sees his treasured chest cracked open.

"Māmā?" Shufen croaks.

"No," his mother whispers, feverish. "I'm sorry. It was I who killed you, husband. If I had not forced you out, would you be here, breathing and unburied?"

Shufen walks carefully toward her, a shepherd approaching a trembling lamb. "Māmā, you saved me. Bābā could have broken my ribs if you didn't."

"Love, I have red on my hands," Māmā rasps. She lifts the *Classic of Mountain and Seas* and tears a straight line down the middle.

Shufen's breath catches. "No. No. Please."

She attacks it—rips it apart. "Why have you *left us*, your wife and your child? We're dirt poor and hungry and *dying*—we'll be buried because of you!"

Shufen moves, attempting to save the last of the pamphlet. His mother lifts her head at the motion and, in her manic rage, aims shards of a ceramic cup and throws.

He dodges before they take out his eyes. He doesn't register the fresh cuts dripping blood down his cheeks, only Māmā's shriek— terror and frenzy and burning lament— and staggers out of the house.

Shufen kneels before the stone creature. The Torch Dragon. He will come when one calls at dayspring. He professes a prayer, casts it in the name of Tinying's safety.

A desire to see Zhinu overcomes him, so he begins embarking towards the terraced fields.

Rusting orange is bloodlet from the heavens, and birds skim across rivers in intimate flocks. Halfway into the walk,

Shufen stops and sits on the edge of the path, legs dangling above the short hillside. Close beneath is a lake. He stares down into the surface, observes himself, the scarlet seeping from the slashes on his face.

One month since Tinying's disappearance.

Before Shufen collapses headfirst into the water, he whispers an apology to Zhinu. His eyes shut to a world of silence.

Shufen wakes. He stands shakily, wincing at the feel of his drenched clothing.

The air is thick and very hot. He's in a wide clearing surrounded by lush, verdant foliage and light grass. The sun bears down, drying his hair. He nearly falls backward into the shallow pond he'd been inexplicably lying in when he sees a shadow soar above, blocking sunlight with flaps of its large wings.

"Oh, that's a pterosaur."

Shufen glances down, notices a peculiar, miniature figure the size of his leg looking up at him, and almost yelps.

"Yes, I can speak," the figure tells him. When Shufen peers closer, he notices the lengthy tail, the thin fur—it's the carving of the Torch Dragon. "I'm a sinosauropteryx, by the way."

"What is that?" Shufen asks. "What are you?"

It scoffs. "Insolent. I'm a dinosaur, according to classification by future generations of your species." "You're so little."

It levels him with an indecipherable look. "Follow me." The creature moves at an unfathomable pace into the thick greenage. Shufen jogs behind, eyes darting around, swallowing his surroundings.

He nearly runs into a tree trunk before he realises it's not actually a tree at all, but the limb of a gargantuan being towering over the forest. Its neck stretches wider than Shufen is tall, bends down and rips leaves from the canopy. "Does it know I'm here?" he asks.

"That titanosaur doesn't," the creature says. "Nothing here does. Not even the plants, nor the wind."

It burrows on, taking Shufen through acres of jungle. The discomfort in his lungs fades and the perpetual ache that trails him dims, overshadowed by curiosity.

The creature speaks the truth—not one entity is aware of Shufen's existence. Insects are unbothered by his proximity to their hives, polychromatic storms dipping past trees in frenzied unison—he breathes sharply when one brushes his arm, at its vibrancy, the flush of vibrating wings and foreign noises.

"Here." The creature gestures to a branch, weighed down by brambles of spotted, shallow—pink fruit. "But only eat the nut that's inside the colourful outer shell. Believe me when I say the odor of that outer shell, when crushed, is abhorrently pungent."

Shufen plucks one from the branch, does away with the shell and places the rest in his mouth. He can't comprehend it, this prismatic alien expanse.

The creature leads him longer, farther, encircling ferocious, robust beasts, razor—toothed and wide—skulled—the tyrannosaurus—and describing to him the anatomy of the pterosaurs.

And then the odyssey halts at a cliff, jagged, rock splinters tipping into the depths.

The heavens are a sweeping blue and the waters a mirror of reverence. "Where am I? Where is this place?" Shufen's gaze flickers askance at the creature. "The Ten Courts of Yanluo that punish sinners?"

If the creature could grin, it would've. "So you've finally recovered from your post-mortem shock."

"I died... I succeeded?"

"Almost. You hang to life by a fraction of a finger. You're one hundred and twenty million years in the past." It shuffles closer to the edge. "Isn't it beautiful?"

This sun is gloriously brilliant, but its warmth is a painful sear on Shufen's skin. He wishes for home. "Yes, it is. Why did you bring me here?"

"Did you know I once saw a sinosauropteryx hatchling be rejected from its herd. I returned decades later to find it nursing a pack of its own. Beautiful, no?"

Shufen frowns. "Your analogy is almost too obvious."

The creature sighs and flicks its tail. A glinting bracelet appears on Shufen's wrist, crafted from golden jade. "Close your eyes."

He does, finally opening them only when the creature has given permission. The scorching air and land of lizards vanish. He's floating, discarnate—faced with a calamity of a structure, built from seemingly indestructible material, with windows a hollow blue covering its sides.

"The Geological Museum of China," the creature introduces. It's hovering beside him in this incorporeal plane. "A grand concrete building, housing numerous national treasures."

"China," Shufen repeats. He tastes the word, finds it reminiscent of Māmā's cooking. Then he blinks, and he's inside the structure. Fluorescent light kisses his neck and before him is a glass case.

Inside the case is his carving. The Torch Dragon. The creature's bones—a sinosauropteryx.

"You're not supposed to dig me up just yet," says the creature. "You'll have to wait for—oh—what is it, two more millenia? Another farmer will come along. Don't you worry."

Shufen twists the jade bracelet on his wrist and asks, "Are you the Torch Dragon?"

The bracelet flashes gold in tandem with the creature's scrutiny.

"What an interesting idea."

Shufen isn't given time to respond. Wind sucks away his shout as he's flung backwards, in free-fall, horizontal and spectral, in a tunnel that is not supposed to exist.

He inhales a lungful of air.

Solid ground is beneath his hands. A shadow leans over him.

"I almost had a heart attack," a voice heaves. An excruciatingly familiar voice.

A hand is stretched out to meet Shufen's. He takes it, half-appreciative and half-disbelieving.

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Tinying's staring at him, and there's sunlight angling off the lake he nearly drowned in, so he catches his own reflection in the expanse of her irises.

"I thought you were dead," Shufen says.

She frowns. "There were accidents. Difficulties. But you had to believe I would survive them."

Shufen surges forward in anguished relief, wrapping his arms around her—she stumbles, nearly falling over, and hugs him back.

"But what of your father?"

"The appeal worked," Tinying mutters weakly.

Shufen shakes his head in disbelief. "You're something impossible." His friend huffs. "Nothing is."

A large silhouette moves toward them—Tinying breaks away to rush to its side. "Zhinu led me to you, to the lakeshore," she explains, caressing the bovine's snout.

A wave of gratitude crashes over Shufen's heart, and he feels he has to build a dam in order to stop the rainstorm of remorse. To his animal companion. To Tinying. He embraces Zhinu, channeling his sorrow into the movement.

Tinying sighs, tension falling from her shoulders. "Shufen. I can't believe I did all that and returned to find you half—dead. You're a fool, Yuanyang."

"Thank you," Shufen says, and he can't express his gratitude enough. "It means devotion, doesn't it?"

"Yes, but that's not all," Tinying laughs, then *grins*, unperturbed, priceless radiance, a healing balm to headaches and waterlogged lungs. "That breed of ducks is a symbol of love."

Reverent, Shufen keeps pace with her as she starts taking off for dry land, Zhinu leading their entourage. Almost unconsciously, his fingers twist against a bracelet softly aglow against his wrist.

He stifles a gasp.

### A Mother's Yearning

International Christian School, Chan, Yan Kiu Sherise – 17

It is silent. Inseparable are the Sky and I, bubbling, intertwining, floating in a void. Pangu tosses and turns in his eighteen—thousand—year sleep, his heavy breathing declaring that he is alive. This is the preamble to our births in the eyes of the Chinese.

Pangu rises from his slumber to a restless night. Concealing his fear of the dark, he throws his axe at the Darkness. With a loud *BANG!* the Dark separates. I am sinking towards the Bottomless. The Sky floats towards the Limitless. The Dark was what we once were. The Dark is what is no longer left of us.

Pangu is our mediator. He exists in the distance between us, his head against the Sky, his feet firmly against me. Pangu is our instigator. He is the distance between us — years of anchoring the Sky and I to our permanent places in eternal separation. He falls, once again, from his great height, formed as a result of his growth alongside the ascension of the sky. His breath is now the wind and the seasons. His sounds are now the thunder. His eyes are the sun and moon, His limbs are four ends of the earth. His skin is the soil, his blood the running rivers, his perspiration the sweet setting dew of all creation. It is complete.

Gifted with Pangu's remains, I am a bountiful entity. My grassy coat runs free on the plains. My unevenness runs deep below the all-encompassing waters. Dressed in changing temperatures, I bathe in the light of new life. I spend the rest of my days longing for the space up above, my spikes in their tireless efforts to wander towards the Sky.

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It is silent. Waves splash upon my shorelines, foam reluctantly leaving its mark on the sand as they roll in. In their tracks is life birthed from the shallow waters I hold. Their shields merely covering their backs, *Psephochelys polyosteoderma* leap in with a *splash*, as their cousins, *Cryptodira*, make their way across grainy textures, dragging their long tails behind. Further out in the fiercer currents are shadows of the giants. My proudest children. *Xinpusaurus* is amongst the first to migrate from the shallow to the deep, each stride of the similar *Anshunsaurus huangguoshuensis Liu* is slow but steady, as it makes its way across my floors in the waters. It is not long until the birth of the land giants, whose steps leave its marks in the soft ground. All is well. *Perhaps, this is not a painful eternity*. I am certain the Sky looks from above with fondness just as I do.

Tranquility does not last long. My contour grumbles louder with every passing day. Unfamiliar with the mechanisms of my surface, I worry for my flourishing children.

It is the peaks in the waters that are grumbling. Still quite new to the world, they are active in eager outbursts, releasing their heated agitation from far below. I attempt to soothe them, yet my efforts go unnoticed. Fear and grief paralyze me as I realize my giants' inevitable fate.

Soon enough, the End begins. Smoke escapes the vents on the ocean floor, first smothered by surrounding gallons of water, then irrepressible flames emerge. First one, then many. The rumbling is contagious, as I feel the heat pass underneath my skin, from the waters to the land. My plates move and crash across the habitats. Yet my pained cries do not halt my craters from erupting, liquid rock flying across my surface, as I feel giants fall into a permanent sleep.

Countless years go by as water dries up and lowlands flood. Rock layers upon me, where the giants rest. The rigid blankets seem to fix my children with me eternally — in an eternal separation of consciousness, further from the surface with every passing century. With little of what is left of the wipe—out, I wonder if my giants will ever be remembered.

Who will tell their story?

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It is lively. Enormous cicada chirps are music to my ears. The tropical climate does not stop the giants from grazing the plains. Newer generations of my offspring graze the bushes. *Huayangosaurus*, the extended family of the Stegosaurus, feed without a care in the world, their long, narrow plates safely guarding them from predators. Towering high above my surface are *Ginkgopsida*, numerous groups of sauropods gathering to reach its bell—like leaves. Stretching out far beyond are conifers, none of which are impossible to reach for the *Mamenchisaurus*, whose necks are at a length comparable to that of the rest of their body. The food chain forms a cruel reality, set such is life. There ought to be *Sinosaurus* ferociously attacking; tearing away at their non—violent counterparts, particularly keeping the herbivores in check, making sure the grasslands and treetops stay intact. All is well. *Perhaps it will be right this time. A true eternity in light and life upon me.* I am certain the Sky nods in agreement, with tenderness, having witnessed the last devastating loss.

Liveliness does not last long. Pangu's breathing becomes patternless; winds come and go, yet winter makes its presence, and has since chronically loomed over the land. The terrain may withstand the occasional frost and snow, yet millions upon millions of years cannot bear an unchanging coolness. The tedious wait for warmth to revisit the beds of the giants grows into despair, the effortlessness of my attempts to preserve heat in the lands with nearby waters gradually becoming apparent. Now it is not simply the scene that has turned cold, but my heart, bracing myself in anticipation of the landscapes nearing a slow stop. One after another, the giants fall to me, never to wake in another time and place.

The new layers of my fallen offspring are wounds I can never erase; burdens I can never lift. In resigned acceptance of their ephemera, my only wish is that they may be known, that they once walked in the glow of my embrace, departing in a peaceful change of state.

Who can tell this story?

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It is silent. I welcome new generations of giants, this time a selection of much more variety than any of the previous. *Sinoceratops* feed on the grasses, their sturdy figures unbothered by the smaller, jagged—teeth *Sinorinthosaurus*, *Sinovenators*, and *Sinosauropteryx*, who sprint across the jungles looking for the next buffet in groups. I suppose they are not all giant in physical size, but by the tracks they have left across me, the times they have lived through with persistence and strength. Some giants travel distances in bounds and leaps, a few steps ahead of soaring, microraptors navigating their way through tree canopies meters above me.

This time, I thought to myself. This time, it will not be I, who puts my children, who cannot stop my giants to eternal sleep. With a tremendous amount of self—control, I am keeping them alive, bathed in the contentment that they shall not perish like the myriads of those before them.

And I was right. Horribly right.

There is a growing speck, the Sky tells me through his messenger clouds and my outstretching peaks. The speck is very, very bright. It may make an unexpected visit. With piercing memories of the past millions of years, this

time I truly knew the end was near in an instant. The speck sears me as it declares its arrival, its emotionless judgment of our fate. The giants...the giants...the giants. This must be the last of them. Every one of them. Surely, I would not — and can not, relive this in any more moments to come.

So this was it. So the giants were never my children, in light of my useless efforts to protect them. So they are left to be buried within me, never to be seen once again.

Someone, please; tell this story, please; don't you dare leave my children and I silenced, I weep as grief overwhelms me into my slumber. Perhaps this is the end of eternity, the end of the cycle of forced farewells. Perhaps it is finished.

Will my story be told?

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It is quiet, except for the light tok-tok-tok clashing of tools. The warmth of the sun has since returned, even lightly scorching at this moment. I drift in the crevices of consciousness, my sorrowful rest uprooted by the disturbance. I pick up voices in the distance.

"Hey! Ge, come over!"

"What is it?"

"It's... a bone!"

"Oh my. Is it a human?"

"It's quite large. I don't think it's a human. But it's not like any animal we've dug up."

"Let me see. A long neck and tail... it resembles one of those sauropods the Westerners found."

"But look, its front limbs are short. That's not a sauropod."

"Yes, I noticed. I guess we have to notify the higher-ups."

"If this hasn't been discovered before, we'd be the first to find a new dinosaur in this country!"

"Let's not get our hopes up yet. But wow, yes. How about we come up with a name, just in case."

"I'm not sure, Ge. You've done this longer than I have. You ought to have better ideas."

"Well, I haven't found anything like this until today, but I'll see. Now let's go, the nearest post office is a while away, and it'll take another while for them to get back to us. Then we'll look elsewhere, and camp out here to guard this site just in case."

"Aight. Let's set off."

I feel footsteps across me. They are very light, compared to the giants that walked before. I suppose they are tiny. Yet the words they spoke held weights upon me, my heart thumping at its core.

"Imagine if we were right! We'll be rich, rise to fame... we won't have to dig in this heat anymore. People will praise and bow to us! Imagine, Esteemed Chinese Paleontologists, you and I. Hey, perhaps we don't need to conscript! Who knows when the wars will end. Who knows if there'll be more wars! Ahh, imagine —"

"Lufengosaurus."

"Huh? Ge, what's that?"

"Lusengosaurus, if it were to be true. Lu seng, that's where we are. On this land."

"Ahh. See, *Ge*, you want this heist just like me! Your years have paid off! But why not name it after yourself? Every time our descendants see this fossil, the FIRST KNOWN DINOSAUR IN CHINA, they'll remember YOU."

"I'm not here for the pay. Nor the fame, nor the respect, whatever those are. *Lu feng*, the soil that I have plowed for years in search of Something. My town, my home, even. I am here to unravel the stories of the past. The stories of the Earth thousands, millions of years ago, deep beneath our feet. All my life I've longed for the day. All my faith cast upon the one day that I will scrape apart the dirt and the soil and the ashes, and find something buried deep within and bring them back to life in our recorded prehistory. One day when I eventually tell these tales to my children, and they tell them to their children, and children of their children, when they can proudly say, *this is the story my ancestors unearthed with their very own hands.*"

"Wow, Ge. You're...different. One day, Ge, one day. And perhaps, this will be the day. We discover Lufengosaurus."

My tears take the form of streams nearby. My prayers have been answered. Yes, the giants, my children, they will be remembered.

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Bustling sounds awaken me to a different landscape. My plains and waters and peaks remain, yet smaller bits of me form shelters for groups of the tiny creatures, the same ones who discovered my giant children. The same ones who found me not long ago — perhaps rather lengthy for the creatures, as there is no 'war' in the same lands now (I did not know what that entailed) — I suppose they must have walked long and hard; but not long, compared to the time since the giants have gone, not long, compared to the time since the Sky and I have parted. Somehow, they have changed me much more than the giants did in a fraction of the time as tiny as they are.

In lands without the shelters are more creatures exploring beyond my surface in search of the giants. Many have become a part of me now, yet some remain unchanged at their cores. It is quite loud in the searches at times, but never too disruptive. I hear keen voices every now and then.

"Jie, hurry! We ought to find the 171st, 172nd and 173rd dinosaur species! Yeye's efforts cannot be wasted!"

"Relax, Di. Our country still holds the most discovered dinosaur species in the world. Besides, we barely survived winter. The snow is just melting, and the ground is pretty hard."

"Gotta stay at the top! Jie, look at these flowers; spring is really making its way over."

"Must be Yeye telling us where to pick the soil apart and uncover new stories. Come, let's go."

Just as I yearned for, the giants return. The creatures have built shelters for their remains that once lived within layers of my grief and despair; bits of me designed by the creatures to tell each other *This is how they roamed the Earth*. Their footsteps, their flight and swims, may no longer be felt, yet they live eternally in the remembrance of the creatures, in the layers of me that have resurfaced. They are seen. They are heard. They are known.

And to be known is to be loved.

# Chronicles of a Hero

International Christian School, Lok, Yee Chi Harriet – 17

Faustania is a utopian planet—it is what I call home. High up on a pine tree I sat in the mysterious Lainbridge Forest just up the edge of the fields of Kattelodge. Up here, the panoramic view of the open fields would leave any person astounded. The lush, green fields seemed to stretch boundlessly, as if it was competing for territory against the darkening sky. Soon it will be nighttime. I had always preferred the nighttime. The brisk, cold air against my skin, the scampering sounds of nocturnal animals—my mind is free of the burdens of daily tasks. The late summer breeze blew at me and the smell of pine seeped in through my nostrils, jolting me from my fantasies. I shivered. Perhaps I should have had on something more than just a T-shirt.

"Come down! It's time for dinner, my boy!" called Father. I slid down the trunk of the tree as fast as I could, it's best not to keep Father waiting, best not to test his temper.

I walked towards the raging bonfire and a contraption that held our dinner above it. Mother must have built that. There was nothing she couldn't build.

Father was putting his rifle away, an anniversary gift Mother had made for him. I had always wanted to go hunting with that rifle, but he didn't think I was ready. I had to prove myself before I could be entrusted with any kind of weapon.

The goose tasted as delicious as it smelled. The three of us sat in silence as we ate. We are a small, quiet family, but I treasure the quiet company of my parents. I could not imagine having a sibling, as nearly everyone else in my group had.

Before we knew it, the sun had set. Our only source of light now comes from the raging bonfire. I sigh in delight as I retire back to our tent. Tomorrow was going to be a long day. It was going to be an important day.

"Wake up, my boy!" yelled my father from outside the tent. The morning sunlight shone in my eyes. This was it. The day that would determine the rest of my life. I had been training for Sports Day months prior. Since Group 1, I had always gotten top five in every category of Sports Day, but I had never won anything. I am now in Group 10. This will be my last chance to impress the Wise One, the one who determines the lives of every Faustanian. A single win would lead to an automatic enlistment as captain in the Faustanian Army—a path to glory will follow.

It did not happen. I was second in the tree climbing race, the one race I had my highest hopes on. Billian, the loud—mouth, red—headed boy had won. He had also won over half of all the other races like he always did. What more glory does he need? All he gained from that win was a dozen more trophies and a dozen more girls swooning over him.

Scully, my best friend, had won archery. I would have liked to celebrate with him in private, as I was truly happy for his win, but the amount of attention he was receiving derailed my plans.

"Oi, everyone! Give it up for Juliette, Scully, Doreo!" hollered Lenrod. "And last but not least, Billian! Who has taken seven titles in the Group Ten Sports Day!"

Everyone burst into cheers and applause. I clapped along. Then, we circled around the victors and chanted their names, as was customary, to praise them for their achievements. So long for my dreams of glory. Just then, a rumbling voice from the loudspeakers hidden underneath the grass summoned me to the headmaster's office. No one seemed to take any notice of the voice or me as I slipped away from my celebrating peers and walked towards the headmaster building.

The headmaster was an old man, yet his eyes shone with a certain youthfulness and his body appeared to be as fit as a thirty year old man's. In contrast to his appearance, his office was archaic, but nevertheless exuded elegance and class.

Behind the headmaster's desk hung a painting of two fearsome creatures, scowling at its captive humans. These creatures towered over the poor humans. They stood on four powerful legs that were thick as a tree trunk. Their tails were, in proportion to the body, rather short and seemed somewhat underdeveloped, but their keen, pointy beaks made up for their tails. Their colourful frills which fanned out from the top of their heads only added to their menacing looks.

"Horrific creatures, aren't they," said the headmaster with disgust. "They're long dead now, no more humans will be killed by them."

"What are they?" I asked.

"They're protoceratops, a type of dinosaur. Dinosaurs used to live on Earth, long before humans inherited the earth. This specific kind lived in China, until the asteroid hit. Intelligent bastards they were. Cruel fighters too. The last kind of dinosaur to die out," He spat.

I nodded. Something about the painting still made me feel uneasy. "But why are there humans in the picture, if they lived before humans existed?" I questioned.

The headmaster sighed. "What a bright mind you have! The painting is a work of fiction. The painter merely took creative liberties to emphasize the terror these protoceratops would have imposed. Protoceratops were the most fearsome kind of dinosaur. Goodness! The trouble they would cause! Just imagine being those poor soldiers!" He ran his hand over the painting.

"Yeah," I mumbled, unable to rid myself of unease.

"Anyway, I could talk on and on about these creatures, but that is not what I'm here to talk about. Please, have a seat."

I sat down.

"You've demonstrated excellence both academically and in physical sports." My heart leaped with excitement at his words of affirmation. "However, since you are not particularly gifted in any specific field, the Wise One has assigned you to the IAF."

"I don't understand, the IAF?"

"The IAF—Intelligence Agency of Faustania—they're the masterminds behind wars." smiled the headmaster.

"So spies?"

"I suppose. But they're more important than you think. Sure, you won't be living a life of glory like actual soldiers, but you'd still be contributing to Faustania."

I pursed my lips and nodded. There was nothing more I could do. I turned and left before anyone could catch me in my humiliation.

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Thirty years I've been working for the IAF and I have yet to receive a single public honour. Every mission I accomplish must be done so confidentially. I was the master behind the scenes, leading Faustania to glory without ever being recognised for it. The price for this job was too high. Right now, I would give anything to be there to be far away from this cold, empty cave on this desolate planet. Every fibre of me longed to be on Faustania.

I glanced around the bare, vast cave housing a few IAF agents. Outside, soldiers hoot with joy around a raging bonfire. I suppose us agents were never good celebrators. Their smug faces could not be missed. I knew what they were thinking. In fact, I was thinking the same. The war could not have been won without us, yet the soldiers party on as if they were the sole contributor to this win. War is nothing without strategy—it is nothing without intelligence. The body is nothing without a mind and the war is won only when your psyche breaks, only when you give up.

I look past the soldiers at the burning remains of the alien village. I was guilty for the burning village even though I may not have been the one to set it ablaze. The soldiers were the bullet that did the killing, but I was the one who aimed and pulled the trigger.

It all began when we landed on this god-forsaken planet.

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I stared out the window of HMSS Faustus V. The universe was darker than I had expected it to be. Suddenly, a ripple appeared out of the abyss. The space ship shook and the sirens blared.

"We hit something!" someone exclaimed.

"We've just lost communication with Central Command!" cried another person.

Outside the window, space did not seem so dark after all. I squinted and a tiny ball of orange-yellow flames just at the edge of the window. That was a sun. We had arrived at a far-away solar system, one that even our radars could not detect. On the other side of the ship, soldiers huddled by the window, pointing and exclaiming excitedly. I tried to see what the commotion was all about, and that was when it happened.

A blue orb that was initially the size of a marble grew at a marvelous rate. It didn't take long for everyone aboard to realise we were tumbling towards it. The space ship lit on fire upon breaking through the atmosphere. The soldiers roared with excitement. A war was about to begin. A new planet was to be claimed.

Time seemed to stop moments prior to the crash. I was holding my breath and my eyes were squeezed shut. I didn't open them until I heard a deafening boom that was soon replaced by the shouts and screams of the Faustanian Army. I huddled in the corner waiting for the army to march off the spaceship before slipping out myself. A wave of hot air hit me by surprise. The earth was trembling, whether because of the impact of our space ship or the wave of Faustanian soldiers I do not know. The sun was beaming at me across the horizon. It was dawn.

The aliens were the most beautiful creatures I had seen in my many years of travelling the universe, but something about them looked eerily familiar. Their beaks were sharp and shiny, their colourful frills fanned out from the top of their heads—colours that were so vivid and bright. Presently, Fastanian soldiers open fire at the creatures, showering them with bullets from machine guns. The spray of bullets seemed to somewhat bother the aliens. They hesitated before continuing their charge, their four thick legs thumping against the ground. One knocked a nearby soldier in the stomach with its head. He fell backwards and was trampled over not soon after. This was only the beginning.

The battle dragged on for a gruelling six hours. The battlefield was littered with the bodies of aliens and humans alike. I had received instructions from my handler, Chief Benson, to locate the leader of these aliens, yet the search had turned out futile. I was just about to head back to the space ship when a suspicious crack in a rock caught my attention. I traced my finger across the crack and nudged it ever so slightly. To my surprise, the door flung open. As quietly as possible, I ventured down the dark tunnel until I was led to the other side.

I stood agape with awe. I had found the alien village. Surprisingly, the architecture resembled those during the times of Ancient China. This village wasn't built to great heights, but instead spanned an impressive width. It stood with majesty and grandeur—commanding respect without demanding or coercing it. The buildings were built bilaterally symmetrical and were spread wide with lush, grassy courtyards and gardens between them. Stone—paved corridors that cut through these courtyards connected one building to another. The wooden walls were painted red and

decorated with intricate designs carved out of gold. The doors had posters with characters written on them. The sharp curves of the triangular bamboo roofs added a final touch of splendor to the village.

I spent nearly three days exploring the village. During those three days, the sky grew increasingly dark. The sun was giving out. The temperature had dropped drastically since we first landed.

It was nearly dusk when I first located the alien central command center. It wasn't hard work, really. There were several close calls where I was hairs away from being discovered. But I managed to stay in the shadows and slip away unnoticed. The village was largely empty, aside from the southern end, where young aliens were playing in a courtyard. If we were to plan an attack on their central command, it should be relatively easy. Behind the South Wall, I could see another alien village. However, it was already in flames and ruins. I suppose the earthquake must have done a number on them.

All I had to do was report the coordinates of the alien central command center. It took less than an hour for the 7th division to torch the village. Less than five minutes later, the alien king came out of his hiding place and surrendered. The battle was won.

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HMSS Faustus V was beyond repair. The engineers had to build another communication device to send a signal to Central Command for transportation back to our home planet.

Suddenly, a noise echoed through the cave. I jumped, startled. I must have dozed off because all the soldiers are asleep now. Their bonfire was left with nothing but smoldering embers. With a torch in one hand, I wandered towards the source of the unknown sound.

To my surprise, I found myself face to face with two aliens, both children. My heart jumped to my throat. The fear in their eyes was palpable. The young one, a male, looked around five years old and the older one, a female, could not have been more than twelve.

"Don't worry, I'm not here to harm you," I say, with my hands raised in the air. "I'll help you find people of your kind, how would you like that?"

They looked at each other reluctantly.

"Come, follow me! I know a secret way out of this cave." I urged as I walked towards the small tunnel at the back of this cave. In the corner of my eye, I could see the two young aliens hesitate before following my lead. We crawled for several minutes before I saw a light at the end of the tunnel. We crawled for a couple more minutes before the tunnel curved upwards to the ground above. I pulled myself up through the opening and glanced around me. We were up in the mountains. I looked around. The sun shone gently over the outline of an alien village situated near the summit. It was already dusk.

Suddenly, the twelve—year—old alien let out a yelp from the tunnel. I looked back to see her struggling to squeeze through the opening of the tunnel.

I tried to comfort them, "Hang in there, I'll go find something to get you two out." I ran a couple paces towards the cabin to look for a rope to pull them out. Instead, my eyes landed on a shovel near the garden. I grabbed it, ignoring the fraughtful feeling I had about the abandoned cabin.

As I walked back to the hole, a sudden crash came from behind the cabin. I froze. The sun dimmed, shielded by a passing cloud. Surely there can't be anyone in the nearby vicinity, and certainly not Faustanian—they were all too tired from the partying to be awake. I shuddered at the thought of being caught. It would certainly be treason and the punishment would be unpleasant.

At long last, I managed to enlarge the tunnel just enough for the two aliens to squeeze through. We were about to walk up to the summit in search of other survivors when a voice boomed from behind us. "What are you doing? These creatures are our enemies. Not a single one of them can live."

I turned and saw my handler, his gun cocked. I froze, uncertain of what comes next. The aliens cowered behind me at the sight of Benson.

"I demand you to hand them over right now."

To my surprise, I found myself shouting, "The war is over! Let them go! They're just innocent children. I'll send them to that village at the summit. The aliens won't bother us anymore, we've won the war."

"They won't bother us alright," he scoffed. "They're all dead! Must have been buried alive when the earthquake hit."

He took out his messaging device, no doubt calling in reinforcement. "They'll be here to pick you up shortly, traitor."

Just then the mountains let out a rumble. Up on the mountains I could see a boulder tumbling down. Chunks of rocks came loose and tumbled down after. They were coming straight for me and there was no escape. It was at that moment when the sun sank into her deep sleep on this planet. Everything went black.

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The capital punishment for treason was never execution—no, the Faustanians were never that kind to spare a suffering soul with death. We believed in life, or so the King Faustus V said to justify life—long torture. Instead of offering a criminal to the sweet, sweet arms of death, they are tried in front of the Wise One. It is he who determines our eternal punishment, he who determines the method of torture that is most suitable for the accused.

There was ringing in my ears and a slow but steady beeping noise. I tried to open my eyes in vain. I was forever confined to this darkness. My nose was itching. I tried to scratch it, but couldn't, to my dismay. The beeping noise accelerated. This was it. There is nothing more I can do.

There once was a time when I believed a body is useless without a mind. There once was a time when I believed I had power over fate. But here I lay, on this bed in the Planetal Hospital, paralysed from head to toe. Here I realised how wrong I was about everything.

### Shadows of Dinosaurs

St. Stephen's College, Li, Ryan Han - 17

It was the year 2210, human beings were facing a huge crisis. Many nations have long disregarded global climate change, which is now an overwhelming worldwide concern. Millions of people lost their homes and lives as severe weather events struck the earth; hurricanes, floods, and other storms. The pressure caused ecosystems to collapse, and resources became more difficult daily to locate. Every country suffered, but China, with its vast terrain and varied wildlife, faced an especially difficult situation. The crops failed; whole species vanished; deserts grew bigger.

A small glimmer of hope appeared amidst all this chaos. Famous Chinese scientist and archaeologist Yu Siyuan led an important expedition to the distant plains of Inner Mongolia. The years of environmental damage have transformed what used to be a rich and productive area into a barren wasteland. However, hidden beneath the damaged exterior were mysteries that predated humanity—mysteries that could alter the future of the Earth.

Yu Siyuan was on his knees in the dirt, carefully brushing away the final bits of soil from what looked like a fossilized dinosaur claw. His team is really putting in the effort; you can hear their tools making noise as they hit the rocky ground. Even though many Jurassic—era fossils had already been found at the excavation site, Siyuan thought this one was special. Global climate change, which a lot of countries have ignored for quite a while, has turned into a huge global problem. Severe weather events hit the planet hard, hurricanes, floods, and droughts caused millions to lose their homes and lives. Ecosystems broke down because of the pressure, and it became increasingly difficult to find resources every day. Every country faced challenges, but China, with its vast landscapes and varied wildlife, experienced a particularly tough situation. The crops failed, deserts expanded, and entire species went extinct.

Siyuan picked up the specimen and examined it closely, turning it over in his hands. The mineral glimmered faintly, almost as if it had a pulse. "This is... different," he said softly. "Please conduct a quick analysis as soon as possible."

Lin returned hours later with the results; her face was pale, but her eyes were filled with curiosity. "This mineral is unlike anything we've encountered before; it's truly remarkable." It's way stronger than anything we've made; it's a compact energy source. If we can figure out how to harness this, it might solve China's energy situation.

Siyuan furrowed his brow. But there's another one, right?

Lin took a moment to stop and think. Of course! The energy inside is really unpredictable. If triggered incorrectly, the genetic material in the fossils might reactivate. It could possibly bring dinosaurs back to life, at least in theory.

Siyuan carefully placed the fossil down, feeling the significance of the discovery pressing on him. He realized that a discovery like this could either make the planet better or cause serious harm.

The news about the discovery, which Siyuan named the "Shadows of Dinosaurs," spread really fast. A few weeks ago, the World Health Organization (WHO) held an emergency summit in Beijing to discuss its implications. Scientists, diplomats, and environmental legislators from all over the world filled the conference hall, each bringing their own agenda.

"This discovery is really important," said well—known environmental scientist Dr. Preta Garitz from Spain. "If we could safely control the Shadows, we might be able to change how energy is generated." Picture a community that operates entirely on clean energy. We can fix the harm we've caused.

General Zhao Min, a Chinese military official, responded, "But what will it cost?" "There are some pretty significant risks here." If these shadows fall into the wrong hands, it could lead to really bad outcomes. A Jurassic apocalypse is the last thing humanity needs.

Siyuan sat at the head of the table, paying close attention. Finally, he said something, his tone calm yet assertive. "The Shadows of Dinosaurs provide both a warning and a gift." They remind us of how fragile life really is and of a time when species much stronger than we can imagine ruled the Earth. If we decide to apply this discovery, we need to do it thoughtfully. The mistakes we've made in the past are leading us straight toward disaster. Let this be an opportunity to take a different path.

Everyone stopped talking. Siyuan's words felt heavy in the air, reminding everyone of what was at stake right now.

Some people viewed the Shadows as a way to gain personal advantages, while scientists and lawmakers debated what should happen next. The rumors about the Shadows of Dinosaurs created a huge buzz in the black market. Motivated by greed and pride, rich nobles and collectors spent excessive funds to acquire the fossils. Some people picture dinosaurs returning as symbols of status. Some people, regardless of what might happen, wanted to take advantage of the energy from the Shadows.

Huang, a well-known figure in the black market, assembled a team of agents to infiltrate the research facility that is currently being scrutinized for the Shadows. Their main objective was to take the Shadows and sell them to whoever would pay the most.

Late one night, the agents from the black market began their attack as a storm raged outside. While staying late in the lab, Yu Siyuan and Lin Wei focused on enhancing their methods for safely converting the Shadows into energy. The loud alarms interrupted the soft noise of the lab equipment.

"What's going on??" Lin rushed to check the security cameras and asked.

Siyuan trailed behind her, feeling a knot in his stomach as he saw armed men moving around the building. "They're here for the Shadows," he said with a serious expression. We need to manage them effectively.

Lin nodded, her face pale but determined. They worked together to fill the fossils into reinforced containers. Outside, chaos erupted as the security guards of the institution confronted the intruders. The air had a smoky scent while gunfire echoed through the

hallways.

One of the intruders entered the lab, aiming his weapon at Siyuan and Lin. "Step back from the fossils," he said.

Siyuan raised his hands, feeling dizzy. Are you aware of what you're dealing with? If these Shadows activate, they might eliminate everyone.

The invader had a self-satisfied smile. "That's not something I need to worry about.."

Lin tossed a heavy tool at him just as he was about to react, sending the weapon flying from his grip. Siyuan pushed the invader down onto the floor. I'm in a rush! He shouted at Lin. "Make sure to secure the fossils!"

Outside, General Zhao took charge of the reinforcements that arrived. Once again, the Shadows were secure; the black market operators were overpowered and apprehended. The attack was a serious wake—up call about how easily greed can threaten the future of humanity.

Siyuan and his teammates worked harder to tap into the potential of the Shadows after the attack. Over the years, they developed a method for safely transforming the Shadows into a renewable, clean energy source. The technology's ability to operate entire cities without producing any negative emissions is fairly groundbreaking.

The discovery sparked a global environmental movement. Nations that used to be at disagreement began to adopt the new technology, which significantly reduced their carbon emissions. The Shadows of Dinosaurs symbolize hope because they demonstrate that individuals can conquer even the hardest challenges through collaboration.

At the same time, the global community took steps to protect the Shadows. The Inner Mongolia fossil site has been recognized as a World Heritage Site by the United Nations, ensuring that it will be preserved for future generations. Strict rules were put in place to prevent the Shadows from being targeted in attacks or used as weapons.

Years later, Yu Siyuan was looking out at the familiar scene he had come to know so well on the plains of Inner Mongolia. The ground, which used to be a wasteland, was beginning to show signs of healing. Grass and wildflowers were coming back, and the sound of birds filled the air.

Lin Wei came over, beaming at him. "It's really beautiful, don't you think?" she asked. I can't believe this used to be all desert not too long ago.

Siyuan nodded in agreement. "It shows us what we can achieve when we prioritize the earth above everything else."

Lin glanced over at him. There are times when you think about what could have occurred. Should the Shadows have been in the wrong hands?

"Sometimes", Siyuan confessed. The past is simply what it is—past. The dinosaurs once

ruled this planet, but now they are extinct. This is our moment, so it's our responsibility to decide what kind of future we want to create for those who come after us.

Siyuan felt a sense of hope as the sun set and the earth shimmered with a golden hue. The Shadows of Dinosaurs taught humans an important lesson: the Earth's resources are limited and its balance is fragile. However, people can tackle even the hardest challenges through creativity, responsibility, and teamwork.

The world now had another opportunity. It is said that wouldn't waste it this time.

# The White Lion Temple

Victoria Shanghai Academy, Chau, Man Hei – 16

Gu Sheng

I kneel in the sand and dust beside my team and pull out brushes and a chisel. We've been here a few weeks but have only uncovered part of a dinosaur fossil. It wasn't anything new and was not without struggle. Excavating next to an ancient Chinese temple would never be smooth sailing.

'Gu Sheng, we've encountered a bit of a problem.' my colleague says, leaning against a wall and beckoning me over.

The dinosaur's spine had been exposed, but it clearly extended further underneath the wall of the main hall of the temple. I pulled out the 3D scanner in my bag and placed it next to the wall, watching the image appear on the screen. My eyes swept across the display as they formed, showing not only the spine extending underneath the main hall of the temple but multiple whole dinosaur skeletons, too.

'Guys, look at this!'

'Never before seen in paleontology...'

'Can any of you identify that one on the right?'

'We have to excavate them right now!'

A flurry of scrambling hands and pointed fingers rush towards the screen, pushing me to the side. I feel blood rushing to my head as I make sense of what we've discovered: multiple intact skeletons and possibly a new dinosaur species. I immediately pull out my phone to draft an email to the local government and my supervisors. We've surpassed what we were sent to accomplish.

Li Shi

'As you come up these steps you'll find yourself in the main temple hall. This Buddha statue was made of marble in 60AD by skilled craftsmen.' I recite as I lead the visitors through the temple. I've done the tour so many times the words practically leap off my tongue. 'The intricate design symbolizes the...'

Bzzt bzzt.

I mutter an apology as I scramble for my phone. As soon as I pick up I hear my friend's frantic tone emanating from the speaker.

'Li Shi! Have you heard? Gu Sheng's palaeontology team found something—'

'Jesus — took them long enough.' I scoff, 'You'd think that with all the disruption they're causing—'

'Shut up for a second!' She exclaims, exasperated. 'There are signs of fossils from an undiscovered species under the temple, they just submitted a request to dig it up. I've just submitted our request to stop them.'

I look around the temple, at the Buddha in front of me, the coils of incense hanging from the ceiling, the intricate paintings and red and gold pillars, the shiny wooden floorboards beneath my feet, the beauty and extravagance of it all. I hang up the phone and murmur something about staying put to the visitor closest to me. I walk calmly down the stone steps before taking off running. I wind past stone statues and bushes, towards the back of the temple, where I know those paleontologists have set up camp. Every shred of manners had left my body as I burst into the biggest tent.

'You're not... going to rip up the temple.' I say through gasps of air.

'I was expecting you but thought you'd at least knock, Li Shi.' says Gu Sheng, turning away from her desk to look at me. 'These new fossils are a major discovery for China, we're only digging under the main hall, unless, of course, there are more fossils in other parts of the temple.'

I can feel heat creeping up my neck as I stare at her friendly—looking smile, I do my best to gather my composure before speaking. 'The temple... is a major part of Chinese history and culture, and is very important to the locals, which you and your team, being from the city, may not understand.' I mutter through gritted teeth.

'We do understand that, but fossils are not often found in China, especially not new species. We have found fossils and must dig them up, that is what my team and I were sent here to do. Whether or not we have permission is up to the local government.' Her calm demeanour only fueled my frustration. Knowing I couldn't do anything but wait for a response from the government, I left the tent with eyes stinging.

Gu Sheng

Walking towards the temple, I listen to the crunch of gravel under my feet. I see Li Shi sitting on the steps with her head down and arms wrapped around her knees. I feel a pang of sympathy. She may not think that I understand the grief of losing something that you feel so deeply for, but my team and I would feel the same pain if we had to pack up and leave, knowing that there was an undiscovered species that may never be unearthed and studied. I'm probably the last person she wants to see, so I sit on a bench, out of view from the steps. I'm just about to open my lunchbox when I get a notification on my phone.

Dear Ms. Gu Sheng and Ms. Li Shi,

Due to the conflicting requests submitted by both individuals, this matter involving China's Institute of Paleontology and National Cultural Heritage Administration, as well as both parties being the Luo Long representatives of their respective departments, the decision of whether to preserve the White Lion Temple or to excavate the fossils, must be decided between Ms. Gu Sheng and Ms. Li Shi.

The Luo Long Administrative Division

So the local government just wants us to sort it out ourselves. Wow. Real helpful. There's no time like the present, right? I think as I make my way towards the temple entrance. I place an extra lunch box next to Li Shi and sit on the steps. She's holding her phone and her whole face is bright red. She's seen the email too.

'I'm not budging on the temple' She says, staring at the path ahead of us.

'I'm not either'

'I'm fine with you and your team being here and turning the attention of tourists away from the temple and to your little excavation project, but you're not taking away the temple. It's the most important landmark in Luo Long and has been for centuries, it's ancient history.'

'Those dinosaur bones have existed for millennia, prehistoric, Li Shi...You know, I've been thinking, and I don't think historians and paleontologists are all that different.' I smile at her, thinking wildly that she may smile back.

She doesn't even turn to look at me. I take a deep breath before continuing, 'Also, sometimes new discoveries draw even more attention to known history'. She still stares at the gravel like it contains the secrets of the universe. I admit defeat and walk away, tensing slightly, thinking she might call after me, or stomp on the ground, though she probably couldn't even bear the thought of scuffing the stone, or I don't know, hurl the lunchbox at my back, but all I hear is the crunch of gravel beneath my feet.

Li Shi

My fingers seem to blur as they fly across the keyboard. My desk is cluttered with copies of Han dynasty records and poetry volumes from centuries ago that mention the White Lion Temple. I have to include everything, anything that might justify its significance in this report. I have almost 2000 years of history to comb through. Surely the government will protect the oldest temple in China.

I glance at my clock and realize it's already past 7 pm. I stroll into the kitchen and turn on the tap to wash my hands before cooking dinner, but no water comes out. I slam a fist onto the counter in frustration as I remember that the water is shut off throughout the town today for maintenance, and I was too absorbed in writing to fill up a bucket.

I walk towards my favourite noodle restaurant and peek into the temple as I walk past. To my surprise I find Gu Sheng kneeling in front of the marble Buddha statue. Intrigued, I walk in and kneel down next to her. A few kids run around the main hall, holding incense sticks.

'I really didn't expect to see you here, Gu Sheng.'

'I wanted to find out what drew you to the temple, what makes you defend it so fiercely' She murmured, eyes closed.

I blinked. She's been living in a tent next to the temple for weeks and we've crossed paths multiple times, but I never took the time to get to know her, every time I had to talk to her it was some sort of complaint about how their excavation was affecting the temple, culminating in all of this. 'I grew up here, and spent my whole childhood learning about the history of the temple, every single statue and painting and what they represented.' I paused, am I

really going to tell her my whole backstory? Maybe it's the calmness of the temple, but I continue. 'I had such a deep love for history, after high school I wanted to pursue it in university, but my parents disapproved.' Her eyes were now open and focused on me. 'They wanted me to study medicine and become a doctor, as all Chinese parents are inclined to do. When I stood my ground they disowned me. I found solace in the temple, the tranquillity, the beauty. Later I was able to study history by getting a scholarship. That's why I defend it so fiercely.'

She chuckled. 'I told you historians and paleontologists aren't all that different. I'll spare you the details but I also developed a deep love for history, only the fossils and discovery kind. My team and I are under a lot of pressure for fossils, something to bring back to the city. Our department risks getting cut.'

I stayed silent for a moment. Maybe we really weren't that different, we both love history. It's just that I'm trying to preserve, whereas she's trying to discover.

'I'll give it some thought,' I murmur, before leaving the temple.

As I enter the restaurant the owner apologetically tells me that because there's no water, they can only serve reheated fried rice and bottled drinks. I tell her it's fine and sit down at the table closest to the door. Just as I'm getting comfortable the door bursts open, and my frantic colleague is scanning the restaurant.

'The temple caught on fire! Come quickly!' He yells, grabbing my wrist and pulling me out the door.

When we reach the temple the gravity of his words sink in, as I stare at the orange flames that are consuming the entire structure, parts of the walls and roof crumbling down, the fire extending into the night sky. The water is shut off. There's nothing I can do, and it's too late. I sink into the gravel path and watch the flames tear down the temple, the red and gold pillars, the paintings, the beauty and tranquillity, all reduced to an ashy mess. As I stared at the wooden floorboards, something clicked. Who would want the temple gone? The temple stood for 2000 years but crumbles today? The world seemed to spin as I stood up, the flames had died down but I still saw red. I remember the drumming of my feet on the ground. I remember bursting into a white tent. I remember people pushing me backwards and fingers digging into my skin. I remember screaming at them till it hurt. I remember hot tears streaming down my face. Then I remember my vision going dark.

### Gu Sheng

I try to steady my trembling hands as I walk down the gravel path, not wanting to crumple the paper I was holding. The temple had been reduced to a charred skeleton of its former glory, the stone steps that led to the opulent main hall only a day ago now led to a wasteland. Only the marble Buddha statue remained, lying on its side, and its bright white marble was now a dusty gray. In front of the statue was Li Shi kneeling with her eyes closed. My breathing is shallow as I step over rubble and charred wood that crumbled beneath my feet. When I reach her I see her cheeks are tear—stained. I gently place the paper next to her and carefully retrace my steps through the ashes.

Not too long after I returned to my tent I heard a few sheepish pats on my tent. I look up to see Li Shi standing at the entrance, her eyes on her shoes.

'Hey, I read the report on the fire.' She practically whispers, waving the paper in her hand. 'I'm sorry for how I acted last night, it didn't even cross my mind that it might have been the kids playing with incense. The pain clouded my judgement, you didn't deserve that.'

'Don't even worry about it, I was more concerned about how you're doing, knowing how much the temple meant to you.'

'Moping about it won't magically rebuild it right?' she says, wiping her cheeks and forcing a smile, 'I just wanted to know what started the fire...At least you can excavate the fossils now.'

'I really didn't want it to happen this way'

'I know...Hey, can I ask you for a favour? The Buddha statue got chipped and damaged, any chance your team could do anything about that?' She asks, finally looking me in the eyes.

'Well, how different is marble from bone? We'll see what we can do.' I say with a smile.

Li Shi

5 years later

The camera flashes are dizzying, and there are a dozen reporters telling us to look this way and that and smile and pose. I turn to look at the rebuilt temple again. The restoration was good. It could never be the same as before, but I still find comfort when I see it. Even more visitors came to see it after it was turned into a part—history museum, or maybe it's just the attached dinosaur exhibit.

'Ms. Li Shi!' I was startled as I realized a reporter had been trying to get my attention, shoving a microphone in my face. 'Do you feel as though the new dinosaur exhibit has overshadowed the temple?'

I chuckle and look at Gu Sheng, 'Well, someone told me once that sometimes new discoveries draw more attention to known history.'

The reporter continues, turning his attention to Gu Sheng, 'Ms. Gu Sheng, is it true that you and Ms. Li Shi had a feud in the past?'

Now it's Gu Sheng's turn to laugh, as she smiles at me and links her arm with mine, she says confidently into the microphone, 'I'd say we got over it.'



# Creative Writing Fiction Group 5

# Ming's Discovery

### G.T. (Ellen Yeung) College, Lam, Athena - 17

Ming contemplated turning back, biting his pale lips as he shifted his weight from foot to foot. Yet if he were to turn back now, people would surely notice the strange bundle he gingerly cradled in his arms—and his shaking knees weren't helping either. Finally, he raised a trembling hand and knocked on the huge door that loomed over him like a haunting nightmare. "H—hello…is anyone there?"

The crisp sound made as his knuckles contacted the wooden door was as if a pebble was cast into a pool of stagnant water, creating a splash that grew into more and more ripples, climbing towards the horizon. Ming couldn't help but recall the chain of events that led him here. The cog that first set everything into motion could be traced back to a serene night...

Flailing with limbs the size of twigs, Ming Junior fell face first onto the solid ground with a squeal. Ming Junior was never built to be a farmer—with the scrawny frame, freckled features, and strength the equivalent of a newborn dinosaur, he was criticized by his seniors and shunned by his juniors alike. And even more so after he picked up reading. You could imagine the look his father gave him: the sheer horror displayed in the proud farmer's dilated pupils.

Ming Junior propped himself up with his elbows and felt for the slab that tripped him in the dark, grimacing as his arms scratched the rough ground. "This is..." He paused, examining the stone with squinted eyes. They were surprisingly fine—grained. Siltstone. Thoughtfully, he traced the uneven contours on top of the slab. Struck by sudden realization, he quickly picked himself up and headed home.

"Where is it...where is it?" Muttering under his breath, Ming Junior pulled his dinosaur encyclopedia out from under his pillow. Flipping through the pages frantically, his eyes landed on a page, and, with a hand over his mouth, he let out a muffled yelp.

It was a page dedicated to a dinosaur fossil unearthed in Montana, US. Ming Junior held up the slab as his eyes travelled back and forth from the photograph and the rock in his hands. Finally, he came to a conclusion: the slab he held was indeed, a real dinosaur fossil.

"Money doesn't fall from trees." Or as the Chinese saying goes: "There is no free lunch in the world." Despite the revelation, it was fair for Ming Junior to be skeptical. Perhaps he was seeing things. Perhaps his desire of making a name for himself was so strong; he sought solace in delusions. Ming Junior was so filled to the brim with unease, he couldn't sleep for the whole night even when the fossil was stowed under his pillow.

He dreamt of a sky filled with hordes of airborne pterosaurs. Roars of Tyrannosaurus Rex shook the sky, threatening to fracture Ming Junior's eardrums as they rampaged the earth, kicking up soil as they went. At first, Ming Junior screamed and ran, terrified when a cluster of dinosaurs chased after him. But after a while, he began to find joy and whooped along with the dinosaurs' roars.

The next day, he wrapped the fossil into a bundle with his old clothes and seeked help. He was really reluctant to, at first, having heard the rumours, but there he was, fiddling with the hem of his grease—covered shirt as he knocked on Old Man Ma's door. "H—hello...is anyone there?"

Rumours of Old Man Ma were not all sunshine and rainbows. Some said that he loves eating Asian children. Some claimed that he was a sorcerer who practices western black magic. Some even said he was a part of the US army back in World War I...but he was here because he heard another rumour: Old Man Ma used to be a Paleontologist.

Just when Ming Junior thought the man wasn't home, the door opened. An elder with auburn hair and a well—trimmed beard stood in the doorway with an apron and a colouring palette. He seemed a bit annoyed. "What's the matter, boy?"

Ming Junior used to run in the opposite direction every time he saw Old Man Ma. It wasn't that the Czech-American couldn't understand Chinese...in fact, Ming Junior prided himself for being able to speak fluent English—it was that Old Man Ma was the only foreigner he had ever seen in this small and isolated village.

Ming Junior peeked through Ma's shoulder and saw a half—painted canvas. "Uh...I must have knocked on the wrong door..." As he hastily retreated with the fossil, Old Man Ma's brows furrowed in concern. "What's in that bundle? You best come in for a seat."

He grabbed Ming Junior's shoulder and steered him into the household. Ming Junior closed his eyes as he prepared himself for being cooked for dinner...but to his surprise, Ma didn't head to the kitchen. Instead, he seated Ming on a comfy leather couch. Ming Junior shook in fear, and he still couldn't open his eyes.

"Tea or coffee?"

"What?" Ming Junior squeaked, peeling his eyelids open.

"Tea or coffee?"

"Coffee!" Ming Junior yelped, terrified.

As Ma went away to prepare the drink, Ming Junior took the time to look around his captor's living room. He noticed an awful lot of marble sculptures on his way in, and on the walls hung tapestries and canvas.

"You should drink tea. It'll help with the nerves." Old Man Ma stated as he lowered a platter. Thankful for the distraction, Ming Junior scooted closer and gingerly took a sip when Old Man Ma slowly inquired. "Is this...a fossil?"

Under Old Man Ma's intense gaze, Ming Junior unconsciously held the slab of rock closer to himself warily. "What if I told you they weren't, and that I really knocked on the wrong door?" He summoned every ounce of his courage, but they all dissipated when Old Man Ma sat down beside him, shoulders slumping.

"Young man, I can recognize a fossil when I see one." Chuckling, Ma retrieved a sculpture from the shelves. It was a miniature dinosaur.

Ming Junior couldn't stop gawking. It was so delicate...he couldn't imagine the intricacy behind the handiwork.

"In some way...unearthing a fossil is like painting." Old Man Ma's eyes lit up with light. "Fossils are nature's handiwork buried deep underground...priceless remnants of the past displaying the glorious evolution of the ecosystem at work throughout the Earth's long lifespan. Digging fossils requires trial and error like one would experiment with meaningless colors until they form a telling piece."

Ming was baffled. "Were you a Paleontologist? Do you know what type of dinosaur this is?" He held up the slab as Ma took a closer look.

Old Man Ma's face was a myriad of colours as he studied the slab. First green, then white and finally, beet red. "Impossible!"

He made Ming Junior wait in the living room as he made a phone call, addressing the person as Li Yumin. "Yes...could you provide assistance on this? Thank you."

Moments later, a brightly coloured jeep stopped at his household, causing quite a commotion. "Marcus!" Exclaimed the newcomer with his arms spread wide open. "What an occasion! I do hope the fossil is worth hitting me up."

Ming Junior scanned Old Man Ma's friend. He is still fairly young compared to Ma, with jet black hair, styled and gelled, a charming smile, and sported a blazer jacket. "You're a local?"

He had never heard of a local Paleontologist. But then again, news in this small village was probably set back ten years.

"Part-time fossil hunter. It's nice to meet you, kid." Li Yumin shook his hand before turning his head towards his friend: "So, where's the fossil, Marcus?"

"This boy..." Old Man Ma hesitated.

"Ming Junior." Ming Junior piped in.

"Yes, Ming pal here uncovered this fossil." Beamed Ma proudly. When Ming Junior didn't move, Ma chided. "Give him the fossil, Ming."

Ming slowly handed over the slab. As Li studied the rock, he imagined if the fossil turned out to be a regular rock. That would mean he had spent the entire day protecting a rock with nothing special...the thought made his stomach turn, and he tasted bile from his throat as he shifted from one foot to another anxiously.

"Tell me how you found the fossil."

After Ming recalled the previous day, Li nodded. "Did something happen in your village in the last week?"

Not seeing how this was related to anything he had just mentioned, Ming Junior answered hesitantly. "There was a flood last week. It triggered a few landslides." Then it dawned on him why Li asked such a question. The fossil must have been unearthed during the disaster!

Li pulled out a silver pen connected to a wire. As Old Man Ma showed Li the plug, Ming Junior wondered out loud: "What's that?"

"This, my boy, is an air scribe. Look closely."

Ming Junior watched in both horror and amazement as the scribe tip repeatedly hit the fossil surface, peeling small pebbles away from the fossil. But the rock remained fairly unscathed after ten minutes...Ming just couldn't help but wonder: how long does this process take?

"Hours...sometimes days." Old Man Ma grumbled. Ming Junior's face flushed red, realizing he had spoken his thoughts out loud.

"Patience is critical for a Paleontologist. We wouldn't want the fossil to be damaged now, would we?" Scolded Old Man Ma.

"Don't be too harsh on him, Marcus. Not everyone takes fossil—hunting seriously, and he's just a boy." Li said absently, his mind trained on the fossil. "Ming should be agitated. It's late, and we're still keeping him here for company. You should head back home, kid."

"But the fossil..." Ming Junior protested weakly.

"We'll take good care of it. We'll notify you after we have found progress." Li smiled.

Feeling not at all reassured, Ming Junior headed home. Soon, he heard from his father that Li had settled down in the village. However, he hadn't heard any news from him since that encounter.

Roughly two weeks later, Li came knocking at their door. "Do you want to go fossil-hunting with me, boy? The fossil you found a few weeks ago...might be a new dinosaur species!"

Ming Junior's eyes lit up as his father cast him a look of suspicion. "Yes, I would love to!"

"Fossils?" His father bellowed, hints of anger creeping into his voice. "What did you do this time, Ming Junior?"

"You can either stay or go with me. It's up to you." Ignoring the agitated farmer, Old Man Ma gently nudged Ming Junior.

"Okay, that's it. Get out of my house!" As Ming's father roughly escorted Old Man Ma out, Ming Junior pushed past him. "Sorry dad."

"Where are you going? Come back, you stupid, good-for-nothing!"

For the first time in his life, "Ming Junior was running with a splitting grin on his face. "Yes, I'm the stupidest son you've ever had!" He yelled at the top of his lungs into the night, hyperventilating, overwhelmed as adrenaline rushed into his limbs, filling his veins with hot lava and his heart with tingling joy as he relished the winter wind...he finally found his meaning in life. He was in control of his own path!

Li caught up to him after a while, his chest heaving from exhaustion. "Boy, stop running. Let me catch my breath..."

As Li and Ming Junior hiked up a small hill, Ming Junior asked after much deliberation. "Why...invite me? I thought you didn't want me here."

"The old man was fully against the idea and gave me a hard time. But I could see that you care about the fossil, Ming. You would make a great Paleontologist if you were to try."

"I'd love to!"

"Then that's settled. Welcome to the team!"

Old Man Ma gave Ming a scowl the moment he saw the scrawny teen. "Try not to touch anything."

Ming nodded obediently as the two adults introduced their team of experts—all who seemed to be deprived of sleep. Carefully, they laid out their gear as Ming observed from the sidelines. "What are these?" He pointed at some sharp—looking tools. Old Man Ma made a disapproving grunt.

"Awls, rock hammers, chisels..." Li patiently explained. "These are used to remove the rock covering the bones. We've just blocked out the site and surrounded it with tape, as you can see, so we could work without interference."

Old Man Ma held a paintbrush.

"Even a paintbrush?" Ming asked, a bit incredulously.

"You can't be too careful, boy." Old Man Ma warned.

Ming went with a small shovel. Sharp tools just weren't his style.

"First, we have to observe the area for fossil remains. We call this process Prospecting. Don't wander too far, and signal us once you find the fossil."

Ming nodded and set off.

Old Man Ma went with him. For a while they scouted the area in silence. Then, Ma spoke. "You know, I'd really hate it if an amateur wrecked a fossil. That's why I objected when Li wanted to bring you."

"But I almost forgot that I was an amateur once...and I broke a fossil on its way to the museum."

Ming Junior looked up. "You did what?"

"Yes." Old Man Ma snapped as he crouched and poked the sand with a twig. "I made a mistake. I was sorry. My point is...maybe we all make mistakes sometimes. What is important is to learn from them."

After a pause, he added dryly: "Just try not to break any fossils. This could be a major discovery." After giving Ming Junior a heavy pat on the back, he headed to another area.

With a lighter heart, Ming Junior worked arduously without pause.

Finally, at the break of dawn, a slit of light cut through the darkness. "I found it!" Someone called, and they all gathered round.

Li grabbed something from his pocket.

"This is a special adhesive: thermoplastic polyvinyl butyral resin." Li lifted his glasses further along the bridge of his nose, all businesslike. Seeing Ming's blank look, he explained: "This is a special glue that helps mend the cracks and fractures in the fossil."

After that, the team dug a trench around the fossil so that the bones sat on a high pedestal. Li and Ma applied a layer of plastic bandages to create a hard cast.

"Once the cast is hardened, it will be ready for shipment to the nearest museum!" Li gladly announced. "Good job, everyone!" The team gave themselves a round of applause.

It was nothing Ming had ever experienced...digging fossils was something he never had the guts to attempt. But here he was, standing at the National Geological Museum in Beijing. If he had told himself in the past that he would go to this lengths just for a dinosaur fossil he had stumbled upon by accident, the Ming in the past probably wouldn't believe him. He could hardly believe himself either.

Just two weeks ago, Old Man Ma delivered good news. "I received a phone call from Li." Huffing and panting, he quickly explained that Li had sold the two slabs of fossils to separate museums in China: the National Geological Museum in Beijing, and the Nanjing Institute of Geology and Paleontology.

"He told me that the director of the Nanjing Institute was exceptionally happy about the finding. He even asked us to do the honors of naming this new dinosaur species on the announcement day."

It felt like a dream standing at the National Geological Museum with a slightly oversized suit, hearing his father telling the reporters that he was his son. Casting Li and Ma a glance, he revealed the name that they had been thinking of: "This new-found dinosaur species will be called the Sinosauropteryx prima, meaning Chinese Reptilian Wing!"

Cameras flashed, and reporters clamoured. Ming Junior didn't know what his future would look like, but he knew one thing for certain—this day will change the trajectory of his ordinary life...forever.

"...Boss, I would like a pot of chicken and mushroom stew with 'malatang' soup, three plates of steaming lamb kebabs, sliced potatoes with chili, and ten bottles of ripe apricot Liaoning wine! It's on me!"

"A pot of steaming hot stew coming right up!"

Hot, spicy aroma wafted through the air, filling nostrils with content. Soup was ladled out and dishes were served. In the midst of a flurry of chopsticks, Ming Junior stood up. "Here's a toast to our newest discovery in Jiangxi—a new Titanosaur species!" A round of applause. "Who could have thought that we would be able to uncover more than 40 dinosaur species!"

Ming Junior had long outworn the suit he had brought to the meeting in the National Geological Museum of Beijing ten years ago, where he first started his Paleontologist journey. Today he sported a fancier suit with gold, trimmed cuffs, a new apple watch, and a bright, confident smile. He even managed to grow abs out last month.

He poured apricot wine into two porcelain cups. "This first cup goes to Li."

Li stood up with a huge beam. He was now in his sixties, but still witty as ever.

"The second cup...goes to my mentor. To you, Old Man Ma." He raised the cup aloft, crystal—clear wine swooshing, and with a soft clink, he downed it in one gulp. People did the same.

Suddenly, a frail teenager raised his hand. "Um...I'm new here. I-I just want to ask...do you have any advice for amateurs like me?" He stuttered nervously, squirming visibly in the spotlight.

This lifted the corners of Ming's mouth. This person...kind of reminded him of his past self. "Being an amateur is nothing to be ashamed of. If my mentor was here, he would probably say that we were all once an amateur." Sparse laughs and headshakes.

"Well...my advice would be to work with patience and vigilance. Oh, and please handle the fossils with ample care. We wouldn't want to break any fossils, would we?"

### New Tales of China's Dinosaurs

HD Beijing School (JinZhan Campus), Chen, Kazy – 17

"I walked in the endless desert

One step, two steps...

The wind rolled up the sand, swallowed my footprints.

I saw a tiny bone.

Move on.

A few bigger ones,

More and more,

I walked aimlessly

I tried to touch them..."

### Nov.16th 4:30am

"Great day," I said, though it was dreadfully cold. I figured no one had ever experienced school at 4:30 in the morning, so I sneak out of the dorm and lie down in the middle of the playground. Why do I always feel empty in my heart? Maybe I didn't say hello to my homeroom teacher yesterday? Or maybe the day before yesterday my friend kicked me and it really hurt so I didn't forgive him right away? I don't know. But I always felt like I was doing something wrong. It's a strange feeling. I always overthink too much. Maybe it's because I care about them. I lay on the playground, waiting for the first person to spot me, and look at him, or her surprised look, or maybe something else?

I seem to be getting more and more sensitive to the little things around me that don't matter. It makes me tired, but I can't stop overthinking.

### Nov.21th 5:30am

I keep having recurring dreams, walking through the desert, meeting more and more bones, some time skeletons. And I wake up when I try to touch them. A year ago, when I had this dream for the first time, I just saw a small bone, and I didn't know which part of the animal it belonged to, so out of curiosity, I tried to touch it. For nearly a month, and especially this week, I have had this dream almost every day, and the bones and skeleton in my dream has been more and more complete and bigger. And the amount of bones are increasing every time.

### Nov.23th 5:10pm

The wind was blowing like it was gonna rip me to pieces. I watched the dazzling sunlight falling little by little until it disappeared, leaving darkness dominating the sky. I don't want to go back to school. The school was like a man—eating demon, which made me resist, even fear. As if mandated, I wandered over to my desk and heard a steady stream of voices I didn't want to hear. My consciousness was kicked back by someone who used to be my... Friends? I looked into his eyes and I felt a wave of powerlessness and fear that hit my heart. I wanted to run, but he was still kicking my legs. The surrounding noise suddenly became clear and harsh. I heard my name and some filthy words. It's this feeling again, I don't know, maybe it's just that a piece of my body has suddenly been dug away.

#### Nov.24th 6:00am

I dreamt about the desert again. Even though I knew this desert so well, I just walked on. I don't know where my destination is. Maybe just to see how much skeleton come across today? As I walked, the small bones I saw first still

puzzled me, but I guessed they didn't matter at all. Unsurprisingly, by the end of the walk, the number of debris had increased again.

I woke up again. I sat on the bed for a long time, and it seemed to me that something was coming. What was the wreckage in the dream? They always give me a feeling of mystery and familiarity, but also distant. And they're so huge. In a flash of inspiration, I suddenly thought of dinosaurs — huge ancient creatures.

Nov.30th

Bad week. During these five days in school, the physical and psychological torture made me feel devastated. I almost ran to bed and closed the covers to sleep. Dreaming of "dinosaurs" seems to be my most anticipated and curious thing every day, but every time I dream of "dinosaurs" before, I seem to have a bad feeling, like something is corroding my soul, I don't know.

The amount of dinosaur remains is growing at a slower rate. I don't know if it's my illusion, but the sky seems a little darker than before. But I seem to see it better than before. In all kinds of ways.

I woke up.

Nov.31???

I forget what happened today because it doesn't make any sense. I just remember being miserable. This pain is endless, invading your soul from every pore. It is extreme. It was so extreme that it is the only thing I can feel in the day.

Every piece of skeleton looks like my body.

Thousand and millions of me.

Nov??

A dinosaur, still alive, come to me through the skeleton which occupied my whole view.

"Who are you?" I asked

There was no answer, only my voice echoed in the silent desert.

## A Story in The Dust

HD Beijing School (JinZhan Campus), Li, Heloise – 17

"... until the dust fades into nothingness."

My pen hesitated over the last word, ink bleeding across the page. I felt my spirit drawing back, its endless whirl above me slowing, then stilling. A knock at the door awakened me; sadly, I took control of my body again. It was the servant. The usual routine, she came in to remind me that it's time for breakfast.

"Young master, you know your brother is worried about you, and he doesn't want to see you indulging in such... I don't know... literary things," said the servant.

"To be precise, It's science," I put my pen in my pocket and grabbed my notepad, correcting her, "but I'll be coming soon."

As I stepped across the doorsill, a gust of wind pierced my chest with its unforgiving coldness. I knew this wind belonged to autumn, for it blends summer's warmth with winter's intensity. A flash of vertigo, accompanied by the wind, prohibited me from clearly seeing the falling leaves, the sun glinting, or the servant. How long has it been since I returned to China... in 1900? Maybe about four years, but it feels as if nothing has changed. It's just like how I was certain my brother was now sitting at the far end of the redwood dining table, placed in the most inconspicuous corner of the main room, where all the important matters take place in our—or any—quadrangle dwelling. He would grab a cup of tea and read his newspaper bought by the servant, frowning at certain moments. Imagining this, I began to feel a strange clarity, and the world finally stopped dazzling me.

My brother was indeed seated at the far end of the table. But this time, he immediately looked up at me, his two hands still holding the newspaper, apparently waiting for me to approach him. Without a word, I walked towards him. "Take and skim through them," he said, his brow furrowed in worry. As he requested, I took the newspaper from him.

Honestly, the text was full of intentional emphasis on imperialism, conspiracy theories about what's happening in the cabinet, and some meaningless advertisements. At least, the newspaper was free enough for any idea to be published, perhaps because the politicians were currently too busy dealing with foreign affairs and their dear fellows or maybe they found these words entertaining as well. But the news reminded me of my father, who is also a politician. Didn't know how he has been doing lately.

"We are not in an optimistic situation," he sighed. I agreed with him because my research progress was also stuck at the moment. I already grew tired of commenting on politics a few years ago. How unfortunate it is to live in this era. This thought always comes to mind when I read ancient books, in which I see the glory of the past. Those glories have vanished, and, of course, our Empire will ultimately fall into destruction too. My brother frequently says that I'm too pessimistic; well, surely, I can't see what he sees in me, and arguing is unnecessary. Therefore, I've chosen to have fewer conversations with him and focus on the study of *Dinosauria*, which I first heard about while I was at university in England.

That was a geology lecture, where the professor mentioned the first dinosaur fossil found in England, which they named *Iguanodon*. As the words entered my ears, they took root and sprouted in my mind—vivid images of creatures from millions of years ago presenting themselves in my head, showing me their magnificent empire—orderly and glorious. At that moment, I knew what I was going to study and bring back to China. Fortunately, I found records from historical books that there were unrecognizable bones discovered, which I speculated to be likely dinosaur bones based on the descriptions given. This proves dinosaurs' territories were vast, possibly spanning the entire Earth.

"...are you still listening," said my brother, interrupting my thoughts, "things are starting to change. Actually, they started to change four years ago. You know about the invasion. But the time has come for us to find an alternative place to live."

"Sure," I responded unconcernedly. The change he's referring to is probably the Russo-Japanese War, which took place in Manchuria. If things have changed, they must have done so a few years ago. However, the days are the same. Slight changes are normal and necessary in this era, but moving to a new place is no reason for me. I could still make more progress here with my studies.

"The real dinosaur that you're describing is this empire we live in. Nothing from the past works anymore nowadays. We should make changes just like our father," my brother said, his voice rising, as if annoyed by my indifferent attitude. "You are willfully ignoring the fact."

"One thing that could be permanent, without being buried, is knowledge rather than a nation," I've provided my reason to him, so now I'm going to leave as I planned. A field visit is also a crucial part of my studies. I turned and walked out the door before my brother could find a counterargument. The food on the table was forgotten by both of us.

'Visiting the pharmacy' was the first item on my schedule. According to records, Ossa Draconis (long gu)—a rare medicinal substance used to treat anxiety and insomnia, is typically made from fossilized bones of large extinct animals such as dinosaurs, mammoths, or other prehistorical creatures. So, I might search for some genuine pieces from the owner.

On the way to the pharmacy my family and I had visited before, the sun climbed higher, the noises around me intensified, and the air grew thick. Once again, my mind began to wander, rethinking the every words I wrote, until the familiar shop sign appeared in my sight.

"Welcome back, young master," the owner said graciously, standing behind the counter that faced the door. "What are you looking for today? I remember last time it was your elder bother who came here to get medicine for your father."

My words hesitated for a moment, then I said, "I wanted to ask if you have any raw bones for making long gu."

"Oh, I can surely get some for you. But it might take a few days, as they are only sold in a distant materials market, where I source all my raw materials from."

"Please, then. I'd appreciate it. I'll come back in a few days."

"Of course! By the way, how's your father? He must be very busy these days."

"He hasn't been home for a week." I said honestly. "I'm actually not sure how he's doing at the moment. I've been caught up with my own work, and I haven't had much time to check."

"My young master, your father will be fine," the owner said confidently. "He's truly a remarkable person, your father. A brilliant politician and a real asset to our country... we don't see many like him, do we? We all learn skills to survive, but only a few can reach the top to thrive. Without a doubt, your father is one of the successful ones, those who fail are quickly swept away."

I nodded, unsure how to respond. The owner seemed excited now, eager to continue. "Only those at the top can really change our country and the world. Most politicians are just fishing in troubled waters. They should be swept away so the country can revive. People like me, we serve the capable ones, which I find satisfying as I know I'm doing my part."

"Is that so?" I replied, flatly. "Thank you. I also believe he'll be fine."

I didn't want to prolong the conversation. I didn't entirely agree with him, but there was little point in debating. His views, while strong, didn't influence me much. In my mind, no one was truly above anyone else—no matter how high they climbed in life, we all face the same end. Pretentiousness, in any form, was meaningless.

After that conversation, I left and went to a bookstore to find more detailed information about the existence of dinosaurs. The more I read, the deeper my regret grew. It's a pity that no real fossils have been recognized in China yet, partly because this field of study hasn't gained much traction, and people have yet to realize the significance of dinosaurs in expanding our knowledge of Earth's history. The world of dinosaurs comes alive even more vividly when I compare it to the present. Carnivorous dinosaurs hunted weaker dinosaurs to satisfy their desires, and they also preyed on each other, battling until one's skin was split and one's flesh broke forth. This even mirrors the struggles of life today. But the most absurd thought is that, unlike dinosaurs, humans have the capacity for rational thoughts and self—reflection. Yet, despite our intelligence, we, too, are trapped in the same cycle of violence and self—interest. In a way, both humans and dinosaurs have followed a similar path, and are likely to meet the same end.

..

In the midst of my studies, I've also encountered a variety of people—some familiar, and some strangers. A retailer told me that our empire is eternal and that the emperor would lead us. A fortune teller tried to convince me that pursuing everything is unrealistic; the past is past, and she thought my pursuit of things from that distant time was ridiculous. A hobo wandering the streets called me over, asking what I was searching for. I told him, and he acknowledged my pursuit, saying that when our country is strong enough, ruled by all its citizen, there would be no more wars, and people could pursue their dreams freely. Not only dinosaurs, he said, but anything we don't fully understand would be studied by all of us. Besides these people, I've also spoken to others, and each offered a unique perspective on life, empires, and knowledge—showing me some new viewpoints for interpreting the world, history, and dinosaurs.

I also received the bones from the pharmacy owner (although I couldn't be one hundred percent sure they were really dinosaur bones), but they allowed me to add some new scientific content to my essay. After finishing a month of work and writing, all the stories people shared and the words I had heard were still echoing in my head as I lay down and closed my eyes. This has never happened before when I was abroad, alone in a foreign land. Now, here, I began to wonder if solitude was ever truly my ally.

In the past few months, I have been writing and reading. Going outdoors has also become part of my usual routine. Father has come back a few times. He looked tired and old, but he remains enthusiastic about what he is doing, constantly striving to make changes to our country and the world. I used to not understand him. Childhood memories occasionally come to my mind—those days when I spent most of my time at home. I enjoyed going out into the courtyard, watching the leaves of the sycamore tree standing near the front door gradually turn orange in autumn, exposing the taupe branches in winter, and then spring would bring the green back, always in the same way. My brother always looked forward to the moment when he could ask me to play with him after coming back from school, and my mother always encouraged us to explore, while never forgetting to remind us to return home. In this turbulent world, our house provides a little peace for all of us.

I sought to record all of history in my diary, though for no apparent reason. Or perhaps for a reason I'm not yet aware of. How time flies.

...

A year passed, and my brother again asked me to move to a new place. But I didn't answer him; instead, I went out again. The streets were full of people, dust flying in the air. They weren't prosperous, but they were alive. The sun warmed me. I walked around without a purpose, greeting the people I knew.

Without realizing how much time had passed, a familiar figure ran up to me from a distance. It was the servant.

"Young master, I finally found you! Please come back home. Father... he had a heart attack," the servant said weakly, her voice trembling. My thoughts of everything else were cleared away. How sudden. I braced for misery to engulf me, but it did not come. The bustling sounds of the market faded into a distant hum, as if I had lost my hearing.

An expected stillness. As I stepped in, my mother and brother glanced at me when I approached the bed. The first thing awaiting me was the sunlight, penetrating through the window and illuminating the stone flooring, which reflected rays into my pupils. I thought—and hoped—that it would give me a sense of distance, a moment of relief. But instead, it pressed harder, as if commanding my eyes to open to a truth I wasn't fully ready to face. Glaringly, it poured its light onto the quilt that covers my father's body. The dust drifting in the beam of light just made time feel even more elusive, slipping through, and nothing else.

My mother walked slowly to my side. She murmured and placed her hand on my shoulder. "Accidents always happen, especially at this age. Life is... delicate and fragile, never showing the slightest mercy. Don't worry about me, though. I believe in destiny. Things will surely unfold naturally, at their own time."

I was oblivious to the expression on my face in that moment, and my mind felt blank. A reel of thread inside my heart unwound slowly and painfully from a tiny end, pricking me at the very core. Sadness deepened in my chest, as it does for almost anyone when facing the death of a loved one. *Never indulge in emotions that will overwhelm you*, I used to remind myself, believing that control was healthier. But the longer I lived, the more those emotions clawed at me.

So this time, I decided to confront them, to grasp the path that goes through my fear and pain, and to unravel myself—before it could grip me.

I thought I understood my brother now. I, too, am deeply attached to this society, to our family. Not just the past, but the present as well. I've been ignoring a simple truth.

A day has passed, and what happened in the country didn't give us much time to mourn father's death. I saw my brother standing at the front door.

"Are you now willing to leave with us?" my brother said, looking into my eyes. "To move to a remote place? Mother will have matters to attend to there, and the servant will take good care of her. I'll probably return here after sending you there, as there's still some of Father's business left that I can help settle. And you—well, you can pursue any studies or writing you wish there."

"I guess so," I said. "I've known this place long enough, and there's no reason to stay. The revolution and war will swallow it all. But... I'll leave my works here. Maybe one day, someone will find them, and they'll be remembered. Just... give me a minute."

"Sure," he simply answered simply, without further questions, "I'll wait for you here"

...

This may be the last moment in my room, which has been with me for decades. Unforgettable is the smell of books and old wood, mixing with memories that flow into my lungs one last time, triggering not nostalgia, but a sense of completeness that makes everything feel worthwhile, even if, ultimately, everything will fade away: my brother, my mother, and anyone I had met or spoken to. But I know that the world will continue as usual, with people fighting to save their countries, their worlds; while some trying to destroy them. Generation after generation, endlessly.

I look through the open front door. My brother is waving at me, calling me from under the sycamore tree in the soft glint of the sunlight. For the first time, my sight feels clearer than ever.

A flicker of hope is growing in my heart that someone will find my diary and essays, which may soon be buried by ruins. So, before I go, I write down the last sentence in my diary:

"...until the dust fades, leaving behind only traces. To whoever finds this, driven by a hunger for history, may you look beyond the dust of time and find in my words something lasting: the dinosaurs, the Empire, our family, and my own story."

### We All Are Excavators

HD Beijing School (JinZhan Campus), Qu, Yoyo - 16

The man's eyes flutter open, eyelids heavy from the aftermaths of alcohol. He looks around. No one. He is hallucinating, again. This distant voice has been crawling within his mind a little too often lately, clogging his thoughts, stealing his senses, though its origin still remains very much of an enigma.

"We all are excavators." The voice reechoes.

The man has been an excavator for a while now: digging ferociously with his shovel; digging for his dinosaur. Though his shovel is made from alcohol, and his dinosaur, moments of his past.

As he digs, letting the liquid venture his memories, a gentle tune weaves through the air—

"Like Dinosaurs! he roamed, oh' he roams..."

"Under twilights' dome where he called home"

"May the caged bird be freed, at the break of dawn."

"As he sings in concreate jungles, his song lives on."

A boy sings.

"Dandelions, blossoms of wistful spring

Carried afar, to where colossus sings."

"Each flake hymns his forsaken lore,

"Where his tales were told by another of yore."

——Dinosaur

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

Winters are doomed to be bland—the Maleficent among seasons that puts everything to sleep, offering white blankets that do little to retain warmth, but rather, extinguishing it.

"Don't let go." Liquor danced within the cup he holds.

...And a playground is undoubtedly not the ideal place for entertainment in Winter. The chromatic silhouettes of children buoyant in every other season melts away, as how snowflakes do, disintegrating whenever the season bids its temporary farewell—seeping into the dirt, forever gone as it blooms into the shadows of a newborn Spring.

"Don't let go..." Liquor penetrated his throat, invading his misery with a squirm of 'warmth' as it digs.

Then again, the playground of street 777 was never enticing: the seats rusted, tinged with rotten shades of blue and crimson; the trampoline ancient yet unstirring, its purpose of making laughter slaughtered by the emptiness that never leaves; the swings drenched with loneliness, housing nothing but layers of dust, leaving a trail of dull gray that dissipates whenever a breeze pays a visit.

They all seem to slumber under the monotony of white.

Except the slide.

It is heated and alive, spiraling with vigor; for on there, perches a boy—a conspicuous outlier to the usual insipidity.

With the vigor spirals a sinuous stream of sound, laden with ardor and the melodious oath of becoming a true singer.

"For Heaven's sake!—" Liquor entrenches within him. It continues to dig, deeper. "...And please...don't stop singing..."

The singing continues.

The boy remains deadly still.

Though his legs and butt must have been quarreling; for the former protrudes way into the slide, while the latter clings firmly to the platform. Nonetheless, his stare always roots afar, burning with a longingness of dreamers and a dauntlessness of youths, to a future his lyrics depict.

"I can't go," the boy replies, well aware that the man has all his rights to demand his company, just like how mankind is eligible to demand the company of its own history, and recollect its fading glories as "cure" to its broken present—what they always do. "I am to you as the slide is to me." He continues to sing, "as for singing, I won't. I will be a real singer someday."

The man smiles, a hint of relief rippling across his aged features. He isn't entirely old, roughly around the age of 40. Then again, age is merely but meaningless number, blunt lie of ignorance that deceits people into thinking how they understand time being.

"I hope your dream comes true then."

"It will." Diego enunciates each word precisely. The man's gaze is pouring onto him, grazing his flesh, yet he continues to let his stares wonder afar. "You come here, and stay here. Everyday." Diego, without turning, gestures at where the man sits with his freezing hand. "Don't you have a life?"

"I once had a life, very much like the one you're having now."

"Alright, what's with the shovel though?" Diego asks, pointing at the half—filled glass bottle in the man's hand. The man looks down at the translucent liquor now rendered white, and takes a sip.

"I use it to dig, to excavate, so you'd be here."

It is not hard to see the resemblance between the two: how they share the same sapphire eyes, the same aquiline nose, the same shaggy blonde hair, and the same smile. The only differences would be the "how's" –how the man's eyes are filled with heavy shades of despair, while Diego's overflow with aspiration; how the man's nose grows to be rugged and irregular, while Diego's is still smooth; How the man's hair cascades down his face lifeless, while Diego's is short and fresh, standing upright and erect; and how the man smiles only when he sees Diego, while Diego ceases smiling only when he sees the man. Other than that, they are brothers under the skin.

"I know you Diego." The man whispered "I know you more than you know yourself, I'd tell you that." The sky starts snowing again. Diego doesn't reply. A laugh stealthily finds its way out of the man. "Still quite stubborn eh! Just like the Diego I know.."

A soft gush of white descends upon the two, muted and serene. Its dull gray hue looms overhead, cloaking the two in a gentle veil—an indistinguishable blur they come to be, as if they are one person.

It is only when flakes pile up at the tips of his hair does the man frown. "Are you not—" he comes to a sudden halt, forcefully swallowing down the rest. Of course, Diego could not possibly be cold, as winter was the man's favorite season, when he was his age. "Well, I am..." he mutters. Youth is the antidote to many, including the fear of cold, as youth elapses, this fear returns. "Let's go inside shall we, I'll show you around our house. Our new house."

The gentleness of winter waits not for Diego's answer, it quickly expires, and the soft gush of snow turns into a raging blizzard. So, with little hesitant steps he follows the man to a little lonely house resting at the corner of the playground—their only light source in this now shrouded sky.

Enveloped by disattached sawdust and dirt, the house seems to bear somewhat of a kindred to the playground and the man—all are makings of the moment, lost in bygone days, brimming with heavy scents of nostalgia.

With a gentle push, the wooden door creaks—which, according to the man, is a welcome cheer—revealing an empty, rather dimly lit room of many singles: a single table, a single window, a single crumpled piece of paper, and a single antique clock that, despite its age, still exceeds in performing the chant of time being with its defiant 'tik—toks'. Then there are the many's. The instant Diego steps in, a pungent and cloying odder cages his senses. More than recognizable. It is the sickly—sweet residue of spilled liquor that permeates every fiber of the decaying wood, as if the room itself is exhaling fumes of a thousand drunken nights.

"It's a miracle that you're still living, by drinking this much."

"Who says I am?"

The man gazes at Diego wearily. His pupils dilating and contracting, exhibiting a flow of emotions that finally settles with a mixture of fray and misery. "I don't feel 'living', like how I felt. Like how you feel."

Diego's gaze fluctuates until it lands on the crumpled paper, and see scribbles—a repetition of words being written and erased. "You write lyrics. Do you sing as well?" he turns to face the man, eyes bright with anticipation, though they are reciprocated by the despondence in the man's, who doesn't answer. "I will sing for you then." "Bones to the eye but a hue in white,"

"Reminiscence of history's one-way ride."

"dreams that once soared, nevermore,"

"In remembrance they echo, evermore."

"You really are a talented singer, Diego."

"And you are a talented writer! These lines are well written, bet they would fit if they aren't so...pessimistic." "fit where?"

"Dinosaur. My best song yet." The man's heart loses a beat.

"Right..." It doesn't beat, not for himself; it once beaten, passionately, for Diego, for singing. Now it is simply a lump of dead meat, its color washed away by streams after streams of alcohol. "*Dinosaur...*" The man smiles, eyes knit tightly together. Not to trap tears, but the lingering vision of memories that he has left. Sometimes he wishes his mouth would be so as well. Though he could no longer sing, "my voice would at least not omit me."

Diego looks up, "your voice discarded you?"

The man pauses, escaping; he has been escaping from ever since he starts excavating, ever since his memories become a sanctuary that hides him from the present, from the reality.

After a long moment of silence, a shaky whisper finds its way out of the man's clenched jaw—"You-I-we. We discarded singing."

"We?"

The man chokes himself with his glass bottle, draining the last drop of liquor. "Don't you think we look alike?" as it slides down his throat, his voice slides down along with it. When he tries to sing, nothing comes out but a raspy lament that marks the annihilation of his childhood dream.

Diego is speechless, but not motionless. He snatches the crumpled paper and a pen. "Write." The man stares at Diego.

"You want me to write down my story?" He received no replies but a determined nod.

"You want me to write down how you grew up to be a failure that turned away from your own dream?" The same reply. "Why? My past, your future. It's no good story."

"Because words are silent songs that you sing on paper."

.....

The alcohol digs deeper.

He is no longer in his house, but in the middle of a field. Scattering in the distant are rows of lifeless dirt house.

The alcohol excavates deeper into his memories—Diego's memories. The tip of his pen collides with the crumpled paper, performing a chorus of their own.

"2000 1.21.

My childhood was black and white with no intermediates.

God put me in a village where I was born to be monotonous, born to be troubled over the basics of survival. We lived with our faces toward the loess and our backs toward the sky. We lived on the brim of starvation, like dinosaurs on the brim of extinction."

"2003 8.18

It was quite astounding how one's world could change overnight.

Maybe because we did our job well, God sent us a gift. It was squared, thick, with only visions of black and white; but it brought color to my world. I learned afterwards that it was called a 'Television'. Screw that. I used to call it "The God's Eye," because it served exactly what the name said—propped high up in the air, above rows of villagers who were all waiting for new stories to be shown. It took us out the village, it let us saw what the world was really like."

"2003 9.30

"Dream" was a concept I learned from "The God's Eye." It made me differentiate "needs", "wants", and "pursuits". Food and shelter was what I needed.

Nice food and nice shelter was what I wanted.

But they were not my pursuits."

"2003 10.1

I was the last to leave.

Tonight "The God's Eye" showed us no stories, but simply a woman singing. Her silhouette a vision of grace and poise; Her voice, ethereal. It was as if the very essence of the Universe had been distilled into a single perfect note. My note.

I guess I found my intermediate between black and white."

"2006 2.4

I belong somewhere out there!

I will leave this place, and head to where "The God's Eye" traced.

Become a true singer, standing on my own stage;

And let 'Diego' be forever remembered.

Singing is my antidote, my route to freedom."

Another sip of liquor, the excavation continues.

2010 7.2

"Beijing.

They say here is the place where dreams come true."

2011 4.8

"Liar.

I didn't belong here."

2012 1.1

"A new year awaited.

It was snowing, it rarely snowed back in the village.

I stood on the street, singing incessantly, singing my throat out. From the break of dawn to midnight.

One person stopped by. He said I was blocking him, and told me to get out of the way."

2013 1.1

"Again."

2013 7.2

"I tried to publish my very first album "Dinosaur".

I wrote the lyrics back in the village, thought it was gonna be a big hit. I never knew why I called it Dinosaur, maybe because I was living like a dinosaur then. Big and mighty in the village, small and meek in a foreign land. Beijing was a falling stone. Shattering my singer dream."

2015 11.7

"First sip of liquor.

A friend of mine said it cures pain and illness. Mental ones.

He wasn't a liar.

It became my new antidote."

2017 4.9

"I made some money by singing in the bar. Perhaps the last time I sang. I didn't sing like a singer, I sang like a coward trying to get rid of a burden.

Earned some coins though, bought some liquor.

Felt happiness for the first time in a long while, even if it was fake."

2017 10.10

"Bought more liquor.

Couldn't survive without them."

2018 2.23

"My voice left me.

Couldn't sing anymore."

2018 5.12

"I want to go back"

2019 6.6

"I WANT TO GO BACK."

2022 4.16

### "I WANT TO GO BACK!"

2025 12.11

"I heard a voice...

We all are excavators, it said.

If I continue to excavate, will I meet Diego again?

The Diego of the 2000s.

My precious little dinosaur.

The pen bids its farewell to the crumpled paper.

There are no more liquor left to drink; no more memories left to excavate.

There in the room is Diego alone. Winter escapes his window and clings to the old man. The window now painted with new blooms of spring; his hair a pale shade of snowflakes. "2050," he whispers, "it took me 25 years to rewind."

The old man looks down at the crumpled paper, now crowded with words. Each word a past moment, each resembling a bone that together assembles a skeleton. Dead and empty. All phantoms of his past.

"Dinosaur deserves an ending verse."

"Transience it is—his utmost syndrome"

"Transient indeed—annihilation. And venomous foam."

"Astrayed, terminal that no longer sings,

"In river of alcoholism, they drown;"

"for losing his angel wing."

At least he feels quite alive, before withering to extinction.

### New Tales of China's Dinosaurs

HD Beijing School (JinZhan Campus), Xie, Boyu – 17

"Michael! Come and see what I just found!"

As soon as my partner Jacob shouted, I ran towards him. When I arrived there, I saw nothing in front of him. "Where is it?" I inquired.

"Look at the ground, I just found quite tiny part of a fossil."

I stooped down, checked carefully but nothing was there. I had been doing this for years, definitely there was no fossil! At that time, before I could say anything, I felt a hard whack at the back of my head. A blood taste immediately filled my oral cavity, and my ears rang loudly. I fell down, my head thumped against the ground hardly, then I saw Jacob holding a baseball bat in his hand before I lost consciousness and everything faded out.

I didn't know how much time passed, I opened my eyes, but here was not the excavation, not a hospital either, but a wild forest. I tried to stand up, I found that I could not stand straight, however, I could only stand in a stooped way. At this time, I suddenly noticed that my hand become a claw, I screamed and was totally frightened. I looked up and saw a lot of dinosaurs were beside me, I was the same species as them. I observed them carefully and tried to determine which species I was. Obviously, I was a herbivore, since the dinosaur beside me was chewing the leaves on the tree in front of me, with a crunching sound which came from his mouth. Soon, I discovered more features about us. We were ornithopods, and could either be bipedal or quadrupedal, our length were about 2 meters. More and more details were discovered, and I was mostly sure that we were the species Agilisaurus louderbacki, which means that the time period now is Middle Jurassic, either in the Bathonian stage or the Callovian stage.

"Gasosaurus constructus is coming!" Shouted the dinosaur beside me. I had no idea about why I could understand the language of Agilisaurus louderbacki, but there was no time for me to think about it, what I need to do is just run away from here and avoid being eaten in the first hour I came into this world.

I followed my herd, tried my best to control this new body, but it was difficult, and soon I lost my way and couldn't find my herd. Luckily, The Gasosaurus did not come and find me, but continued chasing my herd. Losing one member might means nothing for a huge herd, but for me that was a catastrophe.

Suddenly, the ground began to tremble, a low and menacing rumble was becoming louder and louder, at first, the land shook gently, but it was intensifying.

"That must be an earthquake." I thought. "But that's quite strange, they have already been erupting so long!" But this did not weaken my fear, but strengthened it, a fear of an unknown threat.

After several seconds passed, a Behemoth appeared on the horizon. It was as high as a three—storied building and 20 times longer than me. But obviously, it was a herbivore, a carnivore could not grow up to be that big. According to its features of long neck and tail, I could recognize that it was a Sauropod. Its neck was much longer than its tail, this feature is not quite common through all the Sauropods, which meant that this Behemoth probably was a Omeisaurus. At this time, I memorized about all the dinosaurs I had met, Agilisaurus, Gasosaurus, and Omeisaurus, I was sure that I was in Sichuan Province of China.

"But whatever, that is not important", I mumbled, "the most essential thing is to find my herd."

I walked through the way that I had come from. I spent many days on this journey. During days I tried to walk as far as I could, and sleep during nights. I did not remember how many days passed, but one day, I found some footprints of our Agilisaurus, I followed those footprints, walked for several more hours, I felt the sense of hope, I believed I could find my herd soon. But I did not recognize the clouds which became heavier and heavier, as well as the wind which became stronger and stronger. Suddenly, the world was lightened, a lightning tore the sky, just after that, a deafening roar came, that was the thunder. That was the heaviest rain I had ever felt, I had to find a shelter, I walked into a cave and waited for the rain to stop. I fell asleep during the night, when I woke up in the morning, it was still rainy outside. I ate some leaves and kept waiting in the cave. In the afternoon, the rain finally stopped, I paced out the cave, the sun shined on my body. I immediately tried to check whether the footprints were still there or already washed away. Obviously, the clue already left me.

"What an unsuccessful time—travel this is!" I shouted desperately. "It never works like this in the novels!"

After that there was silence, I could even hear my heartbeat, nobody could respond to me. But suddenly, I heard calls from our Agilisaurus, I could not believe that!

"It must be my hallucination!" I murmured.

But the call did not stop. "We are here! Come and find us, my son."

According to the memory of my body, I could recognize that was my mum's sound. I ran towards the direction where the call come from, and my herd definitely was there. I could not believe it! I was shocked and frozen, the same reaction as I had when I just arrived in this world.

My family members crowded around me, including my parents and my siblings.

"Oh, my child, where did you go?" My mum said gently.

"I miss you so much, I was so lonely and afraid during this period!" I cried.

"Calm down, tell us what happened."

"Well, you remember that day we were chased by the Gasosaurus, that moment I lost and could not find you. After that I have been looking for you. Yesterday I found the footprints from our Agilisaurus, I tried to follow them, but the rain came, I had to hide in a cave, and after the rain, unfortunately, the footprints were all washed away."

"Yeah, the rain was really heavy, even several friends in our herd died in the flood yesterday. That is a shame"

"How about we build our home on the top of the hills? Then the flood would not affect us anymore." I finally could use my modern knowledge to help my herd.

"But how can we do that?"

"We can choose to create some tools to get some wood, then use the wood to construct our home."

"Let me discuss with the others in our herd, you can wait here."

But I did not follow my mum's instruction, instead, I walked to the crowd with my mum to persuade others.

To be honest, it went much more smoothly than I thought. Nearly everybody in my herd agreed to this plan, they thought this was their only chance for them to get a better life.

The next day, we chose a hill and started working. I taught them how to create stone axes, and how to use the axes to fell the trees. Although Agilisaurus could not work as easy as humans, they were also Bipedal.

I could not teach them to build the modern houses, because the tools definitely could not do that. I considered which kind of houses could be easily achieved. I got my idea from the Banpo remains, we could choose to build semi-subterranean houses, that would be much easier.

I separated everybody into three groups, they were responsible for tool creation, logging, and building houses, respectively.

Soon, one month passed, and all the houses were built successfully. The semi-subterranean houses were partially dug into the ground, wooden poles were used as the skeleton of the houses. For the walls, I told everybody to use mud or clay, with branches inside, which I thought it should be strong enough to bear the extreme weathers. The roofs were built by using thatch and feather.

Luckily, carnivores had not come to disturb us during this period, but we needed to get prepared.

The next morning, I gathered everybody to come to the centre of our tribe.

"Good morning everybody, what an exciting moment this is! We just have finished building our own home! It was unbelievable one month ago, but we did it! I believe this is only a beginning, we will get better and better in our near future! Today, I gathered everyone here, is not only for the celebration, but also making our future plans! The threat of Gasosaurus have been our nightmare for a long time, and next step is to defend! The only problem now is how to defend, I already have my own plan, and now I am going to share with you and prepare for it together. The first thing we should do is to learn how to use fire."

After the word "fire" came out, my presentation was interrupted. "You know how threatening the fire is?" "Are you going to murder us?" "The fire is even more dangerous than the Gasosaurus!" The crowd were shouting at me, kept questioning me. This was also in my plan, I picked up a branch and a piece of wood, stepped backward, and started making fire by drilling the wood. Soon, the fire was generated, I picked up another piece of wood, lit it, and held it.

"Now, the ones who believe me, please step forward." I said seriously.

Only my parents and my siblings stepped forward, although this followed my prediction, I was still disappointed. I passed this torch to them, to show the torch were not threatening and dangerous. This was really persuasive, since nobody would think that I was murdering my parents. I finally successfully persuaded them, but I felt that some of them started having complaints. Then I continued my presentation in front of the herd.

"Using fire is only our first step, we need to build our own defence system. We are going to put sharpened wood around our tribe to create a physical line of defence. Also, we are going to create some weapons, especially spears, to protect our home. Now, I am going to separate you into three groups, different groups are responsible for different jobs. First, I need a group to learn from me how to use fire, this is an important job, which fire is most threatening for the predators. Then I need another group to build our physical line of defence. And last, I need some young, male adults to become soldiers, their job is to create their own weapons and fight for our herd when needed. Let's make it easier, all young, male adults should become soldiers, all other males are responsible for creating the physical line of defence, then all the females come with me and learn how to use fire."

Everything went well in the next two weeks, until that day. It was early morning, I was still sleeping in my own semi-subterranean house, suddenly, I felt something cold touched my waist, then there was a sharp pain, I could feel

the contraction of my muscle, the adrenaline level in my body soared. I woke up and shouted out, but no response. I raised my head, and saw a soldier holding his spear, and the spear penetrated my body.

"Why?" I asked weakly.

"Before you give your ideas, we did not need to work. But now, we have to build houses, have to become soldiers, we have to do everything! That is all your fault!" He shouted madly.

At this moment, everybody heard the noise and ran towards my house, they came up and overpowered him, I felt sleepy again because of the pain.

When I woke up again, I was in my Agilisaurus parents' house, my parents stood beside me worriedly. I still could feel the ache in my waist.

"Mum, should I still help our herd? I am so disappointed about this. I have tried my best and our herd have already improved a lot, why they are treating me like this! I am desperate now!" I was taking a deep breath to make sure that I could articulate.

"That should be your decision, but I have good news for you. The soldier who had attack you was just expelled from our herd."

But after that, I chose to continue to help our herd, it was only that soldier's fault, but not our herd. I could not move for days after the injury, so I did not leave my house for the next few weeks, I just give them instructions. I taught them how to make pottery and create containers. Then, I taught them how to distil water and extract salt from lakes, since we have containers now, it was much more convenient. After they started to drink distiled water instead of drink lake water directly, they got sick less and less frequently.

Soon, three weeks passed, and my injury healed mostly, I paced out of the house. Then I saw an undesirable face sitting at the centre of our tribe. The soldier tried to murder me before was sitting there. I could not believe it! Why did he come back like this? Why did he even not work? At this moment, he recognized me, and smiled at me. Suddenly, I had a premonition, last time I saw my parents was a month ago. I ran to my parents' house, fresh blood was everywhere, my parents' body lay motionless. "It is all my fault!" I fell onto my parents' corpse and cried. At that moment, a lot of soldiers surrounded this house. I ran out, their spears were penetrating me, I shouted desperately, I did not understand why they all betrayed me. I finally ran to the border of our tribe, but was stopped by the physical defence, blood was bleeding from every part of my body, I fell on the defence line and my hands held a piece of wood from the defence line. Soon, I lost my consciousness.

When I woke up again, I found that I was lying on a bed in a modern hospital room, and I am Michael again. It seems that my Jurassic adventure was only a dream, but was that a dream? My hands were still holding the piece of wood.

"You finally woke up!" Shouted my sister. "You have been in a coma for three days! The doctor said you might never wake up!"

"What happened? Why I was here?"

"Three days ago, you did not come back home at night. Mum telephoned your laboratory; your colleagues said you were still at the excavation. We felt quite strange and went to the excavation, then we found that you were unconscious."

"Jacob did that, help me call the police please."

After the police came, I told the police that Jacob did that, and soon Jacob was caught. I was surprised that he had not run away during these three days, but was still working in the laboratory. But soon I got the answer of it from the police, Jacob had done that because of jealousy and wanted to replace me. That was why he chose to stay in the laboratory, because that time he became the best researcher in the laboratory. I was so disappointed about this, because I really helped him a lot when we worked together.

"Jealousy is one of the most common things in this world, and betrayal is the result." I murmured.

### Treasure Under the Farmland

Jiaxing British Columbia Offshore School, Jia, Ruotong -

On a piece of farmland in Liaoning Province, old Li was busy as usual. His hoe suddenly touched a hard object and made a crisp sound. Old Li squatted down and peeled away the soil with his hand, revealing a strange stone. "What is this?" old Li muttered to himself, he had never seen a stone like this before. It was shaped somewhat like a bone, but much larger than an ordinary bone. He looked it over and over and he decided to take the stone home, maybe a few kids in the village who were studying knew about it.

The next day, before the sun shone on the stone leaning against the wall next to the front door, old Li's house visited by an uninvited guest. A stout, middle—aged man nonchalantly pushed open the half—covered door and cleared his throat, "old Li, I heard you dug up a treasure in the field recently?" The person who spoke was old Zhao, he was the richest man in the local area, back then he made his fortune by freight transportation, now he has long handed over the company to his son to manage, and he himself lives in the biggest house at the entrance of the village. Many farmland in the village are his, and are also known for his love of collecting exotic treasures and then reselling them at high prices.

Old Li nodded and led old Zhao into the house. He picked up the stone from the doorway and handed it to old Zhao. He took the stone and looked it carefully. Not saying anything on the surface, he pondered in his heart. The shape and texture of this stone was very similar to the fossils he knew, and it was now the archaeological fever, this was going to be a big profit. "I can't let him know that this is a treasure, otherwise he will have to ask for a lion's share. I also need to get his farmland which is full of fossils......" He raised his head and smiled, "Old Li, this is not a good thing well, it also shows your land is full of stones which is not good for farming. But for the sake of our same village for so many years, this piece of land I'll take it, and the other land under my hand, you can pick at will."

Old Zhao's voice carried a toughness that couldn't be refused. Old Zhao was notorious for being stingy, why was he so kind today. Old Li firmly shook his head, "No, this piece of land is my family's ancestral heritage, I won't sell it." Old Zhao didn't expect such a reaction from him, sneered and turned away, leaving behind a sentence, "You will regret it."

Ever since old Zhao left old Li's home, the atmosphere in the village became subtle. As old Li walked along the village path, he could feel the eyes of the villagers wandering behind him, they exchanged words, their eyes full of doubt and curiosity. One day old Li walked into the village shop, but he heard a few people in the corner suddenly lower their voices, their eyes darting to him from time to time as if they were discussing some secret.

"Have you heard? Something extraordinary has been dug up in Old Li's field." A villager whispered. "Yeah, Old Zhao seems to be very interested in that piece of land, he must ......" Before another villager could finish his words, he was interrupted by the coughing of the others. Old Li's heart sank, he knew that old Zhao's reputation was not good in the village, his greed, always thinking of ways to get benefits from others. Old Li bought something and hurriedly left the kiosk, old Zhao's words "You'll regret it." constantly echoing in his mind.

A few days later, old Li found that his crops had been deliberately trampled and uprooted. He stood at the edge of the field, looking at the messy farmland, his heart filled with anger and helplessness. Old Zhao's tactics were even more despicable than he had imagined, not only did he send people to destroy his crops, but he also spread rumors in the village that old Li's fields had problems, might cave in, and even sold poison. Old Li was originally selling vegetables for a living, and now no one dared to buy his vegetables anymore. He had been trying to sell his vegetables for the past few days without resting, but he hadn't yet earned any income. Old Zhao walked around the

village proudly, his eyes revealed a kind of victor's posture. From time to time, he complained to the villagers that he had tried to help Old Li with a good piece of land, but had been rejected. Old Li's nights were filled with restlessness and anxiety. He worried about his land and his future. But he still persisted. He knew what the land meant to him. And with Old Zhao making things difficult for him in such a stock way, the stone must be a treasure, and he decided that he would have time to take it to town and show it to the people in the government, they must know.

But before old Li could plan a trip to town, a middle—aged man in plain clothes and glasses knocked on old Li's door. "Hello, I am a paleontologist from Beijing, my name is Zhang Wei. I heard that you recently found a strange stone in your field?" Zhang Wei asked politely. Old Li nodded and led Zhang Wei into the house. He brought the stone from the table in his bedroom and carefully handed it to Zhang Wei. Zhang Wei took the stone and scrutinized it carefully. A trace of excitement flashed in his eyes, the shape and texture of the stone was very similar to the dinosaur fossil he had studied. "You may have discovered something very precious." Zhang Wei's voice trembled a little. Old Li looked at Zhang Wei suspiciously and asked in disbelief, "What actually is this?" Zhang Wei took a deep breath and explained, "This might be a dinosaur fossil, and looking at the shape, it might be a new species that we've never seen before." Old Li's mouth opened wide in surprise, he had heard the children in the village talk about such creatures that had once existed, and he had never imagined that he could be involved. Zhang Wei took away the stones, promising Old Li that he would go and study them, and that he would definitely come and tell him if he had any news. Although Lao Li was a little reluctant to part with the stone that he had so carefully protected all these days, he felt that being taken away by Zhang Wei was the right place for the stone to belong.

No stone, but also let the old Li heart a lot of peace of mind. But a few days later a midnight, the old Li was awakened by a noise. He put on his clothes, picked up a flashlight, rushed to the farmland. Under the moonlight, he saw a group of silhouettes hanging around in the field. They were digging, obviously looking for those precious fossils. "What are you doing!" Old Li shouted angrily, his voice echoing in the night sky. Old Zhao slowly walked out from the crowd, a hint of mockery in his smile, "Old Li, you're getting in my way, don't you know?" Old Li's voice trembled with anger, "This is my land, my ancestor's land, I won't let you destroy it." Old Zhao's face changed and he pointed at him, "What do you know, you nerd? What's here can make me rich, very rich! If you don't give me the stone, then I'll dig it myself!" "The stone? It's that stone again! That stone has been taken away by the government people! It's gone to be studied!" Old Li shouted. Old Zhao sneered, his eyes revealing a kind of madness, "Research? Just with that small piece, there must be thousands and thousands of such stones in this land. This land, say anything is mine now, what can you old poor man do with me? Originally also want to let you earn a little money, but you ......" In the distance, a burst of sirens broke the silent midnight, getting closer and closer, and faintly you can see the lights of the police car flashing. This middle of the night noise, early disturbed the rest of many villagers, someone reported to the police. Old Zhao's face changed a little, more than a hint of fear. He hadn't guessed wrong, here was the police's destination. Zhang Wei was the first to jump down from the car, his voice firm and strong: "According to the latest research, it has been determined that this is a national level archaeological site, you are committing a crime!" Old Zhao's face turned pale, his original smugness completely disappeared and he looked half shorter. The police quickly surrounded the scene and took old Zhao's group away. Old Li and Zhang Wei looked at each other and smiled, and then this smile gradually turned into a big laugh.

Old Li voluntarily donated his land to the state so that Zhang Wei and his team could continue their research. After months of study, finally confirmed the existence of the new dinosaur and named it "Sinosauropteryx". It became a new hot spot in the paleontology world, attracting paleontologists and tourists from all over the world. Old Li's life changed as he became a guardian to protect the land. When people talk about that land, they never forget to talk about the old man sitting on a bamboo chair at the entrance of the village, shaking his fan and cheerfully talking about his experience of discovering this fossil back then......

# The Awakening of the Sleeping Dragon

Jiaxing British Columbia Offshore School, Xuan, Hanyue –

In the depths of motherland, the long river of time is flowing quietly and the ancient secret is waiting up like a sleeping dragon.

In the 1990s, a local farmer in Liaoning province was working in the fields as usual. Accidentally, his hoe revealed a strange fossil. That means he opened a door to the ancient past. The contours on the fossil are very similar to those found before, but with an addition that has never been seen before: feathers. Scientists have named it "the Chinese Dragon Bird" with shock and awe. This discovery, like a star slowly lit up in the pale ontological sky, drew the world's attention to this ancient and mysterious land of China.

After the news spread, Liaoning became a huge treasure trove, attracting paleontologists and explorers. From then on, the land of Liaoning will always bring surprises to people. More than 40 dinosaur fossils have been unearthed here and there are 24 kinds of stegosaur fossils that are even more eye—catching. Through finding a lot of these, the secret become more clearly. Their spread their huge wings, as if to show us the magnificent picture of their soaring in the sky in the past. And each of their bones is carved with an eons of legend.

In the mountains of Jiangxi, new wonders are quietly growing. There was a quiet little village in that place, surrounded on all sides by mountains. In this small village lived a young man who was very interested in paleontology and his name is Ling Yun. A few year ago, when he traveled through this place, he became very interested in this place. He is convinced that this seemingly ordinary mountain forest hides hidden secrets. Since then he decided to stay here until he could successfully prove his conjecture.

In a morning that was no different from before, Ling Yun, carrying a geological bag as usual, walked into the mountain forest that he was familiar with. His eyes were keen to scan the ground, not missing any corner that might be unusual. And every now and then he would take a little shovel and dig through the dirt. Just when he was ready to go home, feeling as unproductive as before, he suddenly found some strange rock fragments at the foot of a mountain. The shape and texture of the fragments were very different from the surrounding rocks, which caused him to be highly alarmed.

Ling Yun crouched down to examine the rock fragments carefully, and his intuition was strong enough to tell him that this could be a major discovery. He began to dig carefully in the direction of the fragments, and as he dug deeper, a large fossilized bone revealed a corner. With his heart beating faster, Ling Yun knew he might have touched the remains of an ancient monster.

The news quickly spread throughout the paleontology community, and they immediately formed a professional research team led by Professor Li, which a paleontologist with very deep experience, and rushed to Jiangxi. A group of excited and enthusiastic scientific teams carried out large—scale excavation work at the site where ling Yun fossils were found. The team worked day and night, taking great care to pull a huge fossil out of the mud perfectly. At that moment, all the fatigue and hard work suddenly disappeared, replaced by the surprise of discovering new things. But the excavation has not stopped. As excavations continue, more and more pieces of fossil fragments were being found. Therefore, the morphological characteristics of these fossils were becoming more and more obvious and all suggest that it was a tyrannosaur that had never been discovered before.

In the process of continuous excavation, the scientific team also found some interesting phenomena. For example, many of the rocks around tyrannosaur fossils have some very strange marks, like the marks of running water

but also like scratches of other creatures. According to Professor Li, the area may have experienced a massive flood after its death, which caused his body to be buried, leaving these marks.

In order to better study it, the team decided to transport some of the key fossil samples to a nearby research base for study. The transportation process was difficult because the fossils were so large and heavy. So you need to bring in large transportation equipment and enough manpower to move this over. Plus, because it's mountainous and the ground is rough, every bump could damage the sample. But luckily it was also perfectly transported to the research base.

After returning to the research base, Professor Li and his team used a variety of advanced science and technology to research tyrannosaur. They used a high-precision CT scanner to image the samples internally. They found tyrannosaur vertebrae with special cavities, and speculated that these might be used to reduce body weight and maintain skeletal strength. Therefore, it is concluded that this is a unique evolutionary feature of tyrannosaur adaptation to survive by a large size.

Additionally, they studied the habits of the tyrannosaur. After studying a lot of data and comparing it with previously found dinosaur fossils. They found that the giant tyrannosaur had a severe case of wear on its teeth, so it could be seen that they were mainly feeding on tough foods. This was probably due to the abundance of mules and ferns in the area at the time. Besides, it is assumed that their huge claws were used to dig up the soil and roots of underground plants.

After months of difficult research, the research team finally unraveled the mystery of this giant beast. They published their research results in an internationally renowned scientific journal, thus causing a sensation in the global paleontology community. The tyrannosaur, which has been sleeping for hundreds of millions of years, seems to be thinking that modern humans can tell the story of the distant and mysterious age of dinosaurs. The story of China's dinosaurs is no longer a simple discovery but a vivid life story. And Professor Li knows that this is just the beginning. In the vast land of China, there will be countless sleeping dinosaurs waiting to be awakened, and they will continue to tell the secrets of that dinosaur age.

### The Farmer's Dilemma

Jiaxing British Columbia Offshore School, Zhu, Xiaolei -

I am an ordinary farmer who used to farm in the fields.

The afternoon was clear and sunny, with the fresh warmth of spring in 1990, in Jiangxi. I was working for my field as usual. I swung my hoe to renovate a piece of land. I stumbled upon something hard, suddenly. I dug away the surrounding soil, a sight was revealed to me. This was a well—rounded stone, seemed to special, with some traces of feathers visible on it. My wife was keen on different types of fragments and loved to collect them then. I bet she would definitely like it. I pick it up, put it in my pocket and took back to home. In the evening, I said mysteriously to my wife," Guess what I found in the afternoon?" "What?"And then, I showed the stone founded to her. "Wow! That's amazing; I've never seen such wonderful stone before. How did you find that?" She surprised. She sat around and looked at it again and again. As a result, this stone was placing in the most visible place in the room, and always being taken out to look at.

The day flowed by like a river, until by chance, the wise man from the village, who went by the name of Lao Wang, passed my house and spotted the stone. He was a wandering and knowledgeable individual. Squinting his eyes, he put on his reading glasses and examined it thoroughly before whispering to me, "This might be a fossil, and it could be worth a considerable amount of money."

Lao Wang's word was like a stone thrown into the calm lake, stirring up waves in the mind of my wife and me. I started to ask around the value of the fossil. It is obvious worth a lot. Every time in the dead of night, I would take out that stone and watched it carefully. I imagined about when I getting very, very rich and luxurious..

The greed grows, my mind began to become uneasy, I knew that wealth came too suddenly, too easily, and it made people suspicious. It just found by accident, how can I do that? I could improve my quality of life, the education level of my children, and even get a new large house to accommodate. I would never ever do things like a farmer. At the same time, I was also worried that if the fossil was sold, it would cause unnecessary trouble and disputes

Just then, the village school held a popular science lecture on dinosaur fossils. I went to the lecture with curiosity, but unexpected gained a lot of knowledge. In the lecture, the professor vividly explained the living habits of dinosaurs, the evolution process and their important position in the history of the earth. He also mentioned the role of dinosaur fossil for the study of earth's history and biological evolution, as well as the impact on the international, local and scientific community for fossil discovery.

At that moment, it was as if I was struck by an invisible force, I began to think of my actions and realized that it was not only a violation of morality and law, but aware of the power and knowledge—it is because I lack knowledge, that I can blind by greed. I decided to change my mind and donate this fossil to the nation for free. When I handed to the fossils to the archaeologists, there was a look of surprise and gratitude on their faces. They told me that this fossil was extremely valuable for studying the evolution of dinosaurs. It might shed light on the origin and evolution of dinosaur feathers and their relationship to birds. Hearing this, my mind was filled with pride and satisfaction. I realized that this fossil was not just a stone, it was a bridge between the past and future, a witness to the history of the earth.

After the news broke, major scientists came to the door, all of them aspired to scramble to study this precious fossil. They came from different countries and regions, with the advance of equipment and research teams, and want to cooperate with us. However, I firmly refused their requests and handed over the fossil, lying in scientific research institution. I knew that the value of the fossil to the national scientists.

As research continues, the fossils influence grows. It not only attracts of many scientists at our country and abroad, but also becomes the hot spot and research. Many research papers and monographs have cited the result of the fossil, providing new perspectives and ideas for the study of dinosaur evolution. At the same time, this fossil had become the pride and symbol of our village, attracting the tourists to visit and understand. The discovery of the fossil not only makes me realized that the power and the importance of the knowledge, but also makes me fell learn to cherish and be grateful. I understand the happiness was not from material accumulation, but from every choice I chose.

# Memories of An Old Story

Ning Po No.2 College, Wong, Tsz Yan – 18

The grey Hong Kong sky held the promise of a soon coming storm. The air was humid in my room, which made concentrating harder. The journal's latest article lay open on my lap. The journal Earth and Environmental Science Transactions of the Royal Society of Edinburgh had recently published an article about the Dinocephalosaurus. For the past hour, I had been reading about the new findings. At least, I had been trying to. Instead, my mind kept remembering that August, when I was on my way back to town to visit my parents.

The greenery next to the sideways covered up all the land, arranged neatly inside each huge square and stood up straight. When the hot wind blew under the sun, the plants were moving left and right, greeting me on my way back home. An abundance of healthy crops grew heavily in the use of advanced techniques invented by experts in China. I was glad that the neighbours in Liaoning were living a more comfortable life compared to the one I had been living in the hope of receiving a better education in Hong Kong.

My home was not much different, still the old environment with the familiar fragrance of the grass and flowers. The big old tree rooted in the yard was still as strong as my grandfather, who was reaping the crops during the harvest. As I observed my grandfather's steady movements, my mother came out of the house and welcomed me back home with a tight hug and kisses on the face.

That day we had gone to the house and discussed what I had learnt that year in my Geography class for hours. By the time my grandfather came back into the house, it was already night time. He sat down comfortably on his rattan rocking chair and closed his eyes. He had only just started speaking when I mentioned the word 'fossils'.

'Kid, let me tell you a story.' He said softly.

After that, my grandfather had told me an old story. The story was so interesting that I could still remember all of the details.

In the year of 1996, when the hot month of August had just started, my grandfather worked as a farmer and lived in a small house. Although life was a bit tough, he worked very hard every day to get enough food and never complained. Whenever he could, he would also offer help to some of his elderly neighbours.

One particular day, the villagers had seen a few people wearing some special clothing, their faces quite different from the other faces in the village. With raised and furrowed eyebrows, the villagers had witnessed the foreigners enter their town. My grandfather, however, had put down his tools and walked towards those people.

'Hello there. Do you need something?'

One of the team members, a beautiful lady with blue eyes, who carried a big backpack and wore a hat, answered him.

'We are looking for possible fossils nearby. According to the map, this village is called Sihetun, right?'

'Yes, but...' My grandfather had never studied anything about fossils or Geography before, 'what's a fossil? And how can we help you find it?'

'Well, fossils are like hard parts of the body such as bones or shells.' she continued 'They can be from plants or animals which were buried in sand and mud or under ancient seas, lakes and rivers from a long time ago.'

'My name is Jane.' The lady continued enthusiastically, waving her index finger towards herself and her team members, 'We are a team of palaeontologists. We have found some of the fossils in Liaoning and we are excited to discover more.'

My grandfather nodded in response, though, at the time, he did not understand what they were trying to do.

As it turned out, Jane and her team of five people were searching for fossils for a long time next to the village of Sihetun. They worked under the bright sun and the high temperatures. One day, they sweated a lot and had run out of water and food. So, they went back to the village and asked for some refreshments. However, the villagers refused to help them.

The palaeontologists felt desperate until a muscular man, who was working in the field, saw them. He invited them into a small house and served them a few vegetables and rice. The sound of laughter and chatting surrounded the small house.

The sun hid behind the mountain and the sky turned orange, pink and purple. My grandfather had arrived home with the harvest, sweaty and tired. He was curious about the familiar voice that came from his house.

'Welcome home.' The muscular man said.

My grandfather smiled and patted his son's arm, 'Looks like you made some new friends.' He was proud of my father.

They allowed their palaeontologist friends to stay overnight and had a long chat about the fossils they had found. Jane showed them some pictures of the fossils she had collected. The bones and structures were clearly printed on the rocks. That is also when my grandfather started to learn more about fossils.

The next day, Jane and her team woke up early and went fossil hunting again. This time, my father went to experience the hunt with his new friends. He guided the palaeontologists to search the area which was full of andesite and basalt since the fossils may have been hidden inside those types of stones.

'You're familiar with this?' Jane was curious about my father.

'I'm a farmer.' My father started digging the soil and picked up the small stones, 'But I sometimes spend time looking for fossils. I think it's fun. I never take them away and put them in my house though.'

After a few hours, the sky turned grey. Crops were blown by the strong wind, a cloud of dust stirred up. Then, small raindrops began to fall from the sky.

'Let's go back to my house first.' My father said.

Soon, the rain became heavy and turned the solid road into slippery mud.

On their way back to the village, they were walking on an uneven surface covered with water and clay. Jane slipped because of a small, but sharp, white rock and fell on the mud. My father and Jane's teammates quickly grabbed both of her arms and helped her up. After hobbling for a while, she was carried by my father on the way back home under this difficult weather conditions.

The team of seven people went back to the small house without having more injuries. Jane settled down on the chair, her clothes were full of mud, brown but also red. She was in pain when she saw an 8 cm long, wide and deep wound on her leg, bleeding and swelling. Luckily, one of Jane's teammates used his first—aid skills to stop the wound from bleeding. However, they had to stop fossil haunting in order to take Jane to the hospital to get medical attention on her leg.

Although Jane smiled, trying to stay strong to comfort her teammates, her eyes showed sadness. She was taken to the hospital right after she had some water and analgesics.

Long hours passed, and the rain stopped.

'Where are you going? Hey!' My grandfather yelled.

Without answering, my father carried his spade and the rock hammer which Jane left him and didn't stop walking until he went back to the place where they had been that morning. A sharp white and red rock was nearly exposed on the clay, special and quite different from what he had always found before.

So, he determinedly dug the stone out of the clay and tapped the side of the stone carefully with the rock hammer until something really special appeared—a piece of fossil, with rare structures and body parts he had never seen before. It looked like a bird as the fossilised marks looked like feathers, but it had a long tail. He was confused with the fossil he found but kept it like a treasure because he wanted to give it to Jane.

Days passed, and finally, in the middle of August, a lady who carried a big bag pack and wore a hat stepped on the Sihetun village, walking on the trail towards a small house. My father then noticed a lady walking around his field who looked like she was looking for something or someone.

'Hello there!' My father walked towards the lady and greeted her, 'Do you need something?'

The lady took off her hat, allowing my father to see her face clearly. Her eyes shone like diamonds under the sun.

'So ... Did you make good use of my rock hammer?' The lady asked.

'Jane!' My father cried with joy,' I thought you would never come back.'

Jane showed happiness with her beautiful diamond eyes and a warm smile. Then, she replied to him with a tight hug and a kiss.

After the warm reunion, my father had held her hand tightly and confessed his love for her. They had been together ever since.

Great feelings of delight and honour flooded me again, just as they had the first time I heard the story from my grandfather's mouth. The story was indeed very fascinating, but that summer my interest had laid in the fossil discovery. Back then, I had urged my grandfather to tell me more.

My grandfather had told me that before I was born, my father and my mother found more fossils and sold them to two Chinese science museums. These special bones were considered precious and they helped extend the scientific studies of fossils and the development of fossil haunting. My mother had also told me that the dinosaur in the fossil my

father found was named Sinosauropteryx, beautifully described as 'The China Dragon Bird'. Though it was shown with feathers, its relationship is closer to small dinosaurs and isn't directly related to birds.

Returning to the present, I turn my attention back to the article and notice the small droplets running down my window. I am not bothered by the sounds of the rain tapping on my windows as my attention shifts to the pictures and words from the article. Turning over the page, I feel a sense of pride. Lately, more and more of these special fossils are being found in China. These precious bones not only made the discovery of ancient animals more interesting, but also solved a lot of mysteries about ancient China and the evolutionary relationships between different animals.

I smile, and look at the picture of me and my parents on my desk, proud and feeling lucky to be the daughter of the fossil hunters. At the same time, my fingers slightly touch the pictures and words from the article, wondering how the story of fossil hunting will develop and what kind of treasures will be found in the future by me, my parents, and more of us.

## The Dragon in Us

Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Shen, Ruililin Bob – 17

Jacob's fingers traced the glossy pages of Paleontological Frontiers as he sat hunched over his desk in the dim research station. The clock ticked past midnight, but time held little meaning in this sanctuary of scientific pursuit. His weary yet determined eyes devoured every word of the feature article:

"China: The New Epicenter of Fossil Discovery"

In the hills of Liaoning province, a farmer's casual discovery in the 1990s ignited a paleontological revolution. The Sinosauropteryx, with its unmistakable feathers, emerged from its stony tomb to rewrite our understanding of dinosaur evolution. Since then, China's soil has yielded an embarrassment of riches—over 40 dinosaur species unearthed in Liaoning alone.

Jacob leaned back, his mind awhirl with possibilities. Dinosaurs were portals to a world beyond imagination, grounded in scientific reality. He flipped through the magazine, pausing on a quote: "In the end, we are all time travelers. Some just dig deeper." Jacob smiled. They were excavating not just bones but stories—the epic tale of life on Earth.

Turning to the microscope before him, he felt a flicker of excitement. The night was young, and who knew what secrets awaited in the fragments of the past?

The clock's ticking faded as Jacob peered through the eyepiece. His breath caught. The DNA strand illuminated in the field of view was unlike anything he had encountered. It twisted and coiled in patterns that defied classification, a molecular enigma that sent his mind reeling.

"This can't be right," he muttered, adjusting the focus. But the image remained, challenging everything he knew. The strand seemed to dance with an otherworldly grace, hinting at capabilities beyond known biology.

Jacob's hands trembled as he meticulously documented his observations. Could this be the discovery of a lifetime? Or a cruel trick of contaminated samples?

As dawn crept through the windows, Jacob sat back, his eyes bloodshot but gleaming with excitement. He had run every test. The results were consistent: this was something new, something extraordinary.

"What are you?" he whispered to the sample. In the silence, he could almost hear echoes of ancient roars, the beating of leathery wings against primordial skies. His imagination soared, conjuring creatures that straddled the line between science and myth.

With a deep breath, Jacob prepared himself for the next step. Reporting his findings would be a leap of faith, a test of resolve against the scrutiny of peers. But as he gathered his notes, a quote from paleontologist Robert T. Bakker came to mind: "It's important to go out into the field and see fossils coming out of the ground."

Jacob smiled. He had held this discovery metaphorically. Now it was time to share it with the world.

### The Confrontation

"Contamination? Have you considered all possibilities, Dr. Zhao?" Jacob's voice quivered as he stood before his supervisor's desk.

Dr. Zhao leaned back, skepticism etched on his face. "Jacob, your enthusiasm is commendable, but we must always consider the simplest explanation first. Have you checked for environmental factors? Chemical interference?"

Jacob's heart sank. He had spent hours preparing for this moment, but Dr. Zhao's dismissal felt like a bucket of cold water on his excitement.

"I've run multiple tests. The results are consistent. This DNA structure is unlike anything in our databases. It's not just different; it's... revolutionary." The words sounded hollow even to Jacob, his confidence eroding under Dr. Zhao's gaze.

Dr. Zhao sighed. "Early in my career, I thought I made a groundbreaking discovery. Do you know what it turned out to be?"

Jacob shook his head, dreading the answer.

"A smudge on the microscope lens." Dr. Zhao's chuckle held no mirth. "It taught me a valuable lesson: exhaust all mundane explanations before leaping to extraordinary conclusions."

The silence that followed was deafening. Jacob wanted to argue, but words wouldn't come. Instead, he nodded as Dr. Zhao suggested additional tests.

As Jacob turned to leave, Dr. Zhao's voice softened. "Don't lose heart. This field requires persistence. Let setbacks make you better."

The door closed behind Jacob. The fluorescent lights buzzed overhead, their harsh glare a fitting backdrop to his emotions. Disappointment warred with determination.

He leaned against the wall, closing his eyes. In his mind, he saw the strange DNA strand twisting like a serpent from ancient myths. Was it truly just a mundane anomaly, or was it the key to unlocking secrets beyond imagination?

Jacob pushed himself off the wall and walked back to his workstation. A new resolve formed. He would run the tests, check every variable, and eliminate every possible error. Deep down, a voice whispered this was more than a simple mistake. It was a challenge he couldn't ignore.

The path ahead was uncertain, fraught with failure and ridicule. But as Jacob sat at his microscope once more, excitement returned. After all, wasn't this the essence of scientific discovery? To venture into the unknown, to question, to seek, and sometimes, to dream?

With steady hands, Jacob prepared a new slide. The journey wasn't over; it had only just begun.

### The Forest

The train's soft hum provided a soothing backdrop to Jacob's thoughts. Outside, the landscape transformed from urban sprawl to rolling countryside, mirroring his inner shift from skepticism to hope.

Jacob's fingers absently traced his notebook, filled with meticulous notes and wild theories. Despite Dr. Zhao's dismissal, he couldn't shake the feeling that his discovery was more than an error. The image of that peculiar DNA strand haunted him, beckoning him towards... something.

His gaze fell on a crumpled map spread across his lap. In the heart of an ancient forest, marked with a red circle, lay his destination—a remote site where legend and science intertwined.

As the train wound through terraced rice fields and mist—shrouded mountains, Jacob remembered standing wide—eyed before towering dinosaur skeletons in museums, his young mind ablaze with questions. "Why did they disappear?" he had asked his father. "And why do we keep looking for them?"

His father's response echoed: "We look back to understand our future. Every bone, every fossil, is a letter in the great story of life. And who knows? Maybe one day, we'll find a new chapter no one's ever read before."

A new chapter. The thought sent a shiver of excitement down Jacob's spine. Was that what he had glimpsed through his microscope? A fragment of an untold story?

The train lurched to a stop at a small station. Jacob gathered his belongings, his heart racing with anticipation. Stepping onto the platform, thick with the scent of damp earth and wild vegetation, he felt a profound sense of homecoming.

An old man, his face a map of wrinkles, approached. "You seek the ancient forest?" he asked in a dialect Jacob strained to understand.

Jacob nodded, surprised. "How did you know?"

The old man's eyes twinkled. "Only those with questions in their hearts come to this place. But beware, young one. Some answers are best left undiscovered."

Before Jacob could respond, the man melted into the crowd, leaving him with unease and exhilaration. The warning fueled his determination. He hoisted his backpack and set off down a worn path leading into the verdant unknown.

As he walked, the sounds of civilization faded, replaced by nature's symphony. Birds called from hidden perches, unseen creatures rustled in the underbrush. Jacob felt as if he were walking back in time, each step taking him further from the world he knew.

The path narrowed, becoming little more than a game trail. Jacob pushed through dense foliage, his clothes damp with dew. Doubt crept in. Was he a fool to come here based on a hunch and a dream?

Just as despair threatened to overwhelm him, the trees parted, revealing a small clearing. In the center stood a weather—worn stone, covered in faded carvings. Jacob's breath caught as he recognized the unmistakable shape of a coiled dragon.

With trembling hands, he brushed away years of moss. Beneath, barely visible, was a series of symbols he didn't recognize. But one stood out—a twisted form resembling the DNA strand he had observed.

Jacob sank to his knees, overwhelmed. He had come seeking scientific truth and instead found himself face to face with myth made real. As fading sunlight filtered through the canopy, casting the clearing in an otherworldly glow, Jacob realized he stood at a crossroads between rationality and belief.

In that moment, a quote from Carl Sagan floated through his mind: "Somewhere, something incredible is waiting to be known." Jacob smiled, his resolve strengthened. Whatever secrets this forest held, he would uncover them.

With renewed purpose, Jacob unpacked his equipment. As night fell, the forest came alive with mysterious sounds. But Jacob worked, guided by the light of his lantern and his curiosity.

He was no longer just a scientist chasing a theory. He was an explorer on the brink of discovery, a storyteller poised to uncover a tale as old as time itself. And as the night deepened, Jacob felt certain that by morning, the world would be forever changed.

#### The Guardians

The first light of dawn found Jacob bleary—eyed but exhilarated. He had spent the night documenting every inch of the stone, cross—referencing its symbols with known archaeological findings. The soil samples he took from around the stone set his heart racing.

Under his portable microscope, the soil revealed microscopic fragments that defied explanation. Structures seemed both organic and crystalline, pulsing with an energy he could almost feel. It was as if the ground was alive with echoes of ancient power.

As Jacob meticulously logged his findings, a twig snapped behind him. He whirled around, coming face to face with a group of weathered men and women, their eyes filled with curiosity and wariness.

An elderly woman stepped forward, her voice strong despite her frail appearance. "You disturb the sleep of ages, young one. What brings you to this sacred place?"

Jacob swallowed hard, aware of how out of place he must appear with modern equipment amidst this timeless forest. "I... I'm a scientist," he stammered. "I'm seeking answers about the past, about the creatures that once roamed this land."

The woman's eyes narrowed. "Some secrets are not meant for the world of men. Our ancestors have guarded this place for generations. It is not for outsiders to uncover."

Jacob felt frustration surge. He was so close to something monumental; he could feel it. "But don't you see? This could change everything we know about our history, about evolution!"

A younger man pushed forward, his face twisted with anger. "What gives you the right to decide what should be revealed? Our legends speak of calamity when the ancient ones are awakened. Would you risk that for your... science?"

The confrontation might have escalated, but just then, a deep rumble shook the ground. The stone in the clearing began to glow. Jacob and the villagers watched in awe as the symbols on its surface came alive, swirling and reforming.

In that instant, Jacob understood. The stone wasn't just a relic; it was a key. And his presence, his probing questions and scientific inquiry, had somehow activated it.

As the light grew brighter, Jacob made a split—second decision. He turned to the villagers, his voice urgent. "I believe we're witnessing something extraordinary. Something that bridges your legends and my science. Please, let me continue my work. Together, we might uncover truths that could benefit all of humanity."

The elderly woman studied him, then nodded slowly. "The ancestors have spoken. You may proceed, but with caution. We will watch, and if necessary, intervene."

With trembling hands, Jacob returned to his equipment. As he worked, he felt the weight of centuries pressing down. He was no longer just a scientist pursuing a theory; he was an explorer on the brink of reshaping humanity's understanding of its past.

As the day wore on, Jacob's findings grew astonishing. The DNA structures he observed in the lab were present here in abundance, but they were changing, evolving before his eyes. It was as if the fabric of life was in flux, dancing on the edge between the known and the unimaginable.

As night fell again, Jacob sat back, his mind reeling. He had come seeking answers about the past, but what he found pointed towards a future beyond his wildest dreams. The implications were staggering—not just for paleontology, but for biology, physics, and perhaps even our understanding of reality itself.

In the soft glow of his lantern, Jacob began to write, his pen flying across the pages of his notebook. He knew that what he recorded would be scrutinized, challenged, perhaps ridiculed. But he also knew, with certainty, that he stood on the brink of a discovery that would change the world forever.

As he wrote, the forest pulsed with ancient power, and he could have sworn he heard the distant roar of creatures long thought lost to time. The boundary between past and present, between myth and reality, had never felt so thin.

And somewhere in the depths of the forest, something stirred, awakening from a slumber older than human memory...

The Awakening

The forest pulsed with an energy that thrummed through Jacob's bones. The stone's glow had subsided, but the air remained charged. As he pored over his notes, a low, resonant sound reverberated through the clearing.

Jacob's head snapped up, eyes wide with fear and anticipation. The villagers fell to their knees, faces a mixture of awe and terror.

The elderly woman raised her trembling hands to the sky. "The Guardians awaken," she whispered.

The ground began to shift and buckle. Trees groaned and swayed as if caught in an impossible wind. Before Jacob's disbelieving eyes, the earth itself seemed to rise, taking form and substance.

What emerged was beyond imagination. It was as if the forest floor coalesced into a living, breathing entity. Massive limbs of stone and root stretched skyward, a body that seemed to bridge the gap between organic and inorganic. Its head was a writhing mass of branches and leaves, with eyes glowing like molten amber.

Jacob stumbled backward, struggling to process what he saw. This was no dinosaur, no creature from any known evolutionary line. It was as if the spirit of the ancient forest had taken physical form.

The being's gaze fell upon Jacob, and he felt the weight of eons press upon his consciousness. Images flooded his mind: primordial seas teeming with life, great beasts striding across continents, the rise and fall of civilizations long lost.

And then, impossibly, it spoke. Not with words, but with thoughts that resonated directly in Jacob's mind.

"You seek knowledge of the past," the thoughts came, ancient and powerful. "But the past is not a dead thing to be unearthed. It lives, it breathes, it changes."

Jacob found his voice, though it came out as a whisper. "What... what are you?"

The being's form shifted, branches and stones rearranging in a hypnotic dance. "We are the Guardians, the memory of the earth. We are what your kind might call evolution incarnate."

The villagers prostrated themselves, murmuring prayers in a language Jacob didn't recognize. He realized their legends were rooted in a truth far more profound than he imagined.

"But how is this possible?" Jacob asked, curiosity overcoming fear. "You defy everything we know about biology, about physics!"

The Guardian's response was tinged with amusement. "Your science has barely scratched the surface. The forces that shape life, that drive evolution, are far more complex than you comprehend."

As if to demonstrate, the Guardian extended a limb towards Jacob. As it neared, he saw that what he had taken for simple stone and wood was an intricate lattice of the very DNA structures he had been studying. But they were alive, shifting and adapting.

"The creatures you call dinosaurs," the Guardian continued, "were but one expression of life's potential. We are another. And there are countless more, waiting to be discovered or to emerge."

Jacob's mind raced with implications. Every theory, every assumption he had about evolution and the history of life was being upended. But with that upheaval came excitement. The possibilities were endless.

"Why show yourselves now?" Jacob asked, aware that he spoke for all of humanity.

The Guardian's form rippled, and Jacob sensed great sadness. "The world changes. The balance we have maintained is shifting. We reveal ourselves because soon, we may be all that stands between your kind and oblivion."

Before Jacob could ask for clarification, the ground shook again. In the distance, more massive forms were rising from the forest, each unique yet bearing the same impossible melding of organic and inorganic matter.

The elderly woman approached Jacob, eyes shining with tears. "Now you understand," she said softly. "This is why we guard the old ways. The Guardians are not just our past; they are our future."

Jacob nodded, feeling the weight of this newfound knowledge settle upon him. His discovery was more than a breakthrough. It was a responsibility, a calling to bridge the ancient wisdom of the villagers and the relentless progress of modern science.

As the sun began to set, casting an ethereal glow over the assembled Guardians, Jacob knew that his life's work was only just beginning. He had come seeking answers about dinosaurs and uncovered a truth that spanned the history of life on Earth.

With trembling hands, he opened his notebook to a fresh page. The title he wrote at the top seemed inadequate for the task ahead, but it was a start:

"The Living Past: Redefining Evolution and the Future of Life on Earth"

As he began to write, Jacob felt the watchful gaze of the Guardians upon him. He was no longer just a scientist; he had become a chronicler of a new chapter in Earth's history, a translator between worlds old and new.

And somewhere in the depths of his mind, he heard the Guardian's voice once more: "Remember, young one. The greatest discoveries often come not from finding what you seek, but from being open to what you find."

## Reality among the Unknown

Pui Ching Middle School (Macau), Chan, Chit - 17

In a valley hidden away from the rest of the world, a man was digging away at the earth alone. He had been digging around for quite some time, yet he could not find what he was looking for. His only companion was a necklace of the Four Holy Beasts, which he brought for good luck. "Curses! Where is it?"

When this man was younger, he stumbled upon this valley by accident and discovered an unknown skull. After growing up, he started looking into its origins. It was most likely the skull of a dinosaur.

Now, he is searching for the fossil again in order to unearth it and find out what species it was. Yet, this valley was huge. He was alone, without any experience of excavations. He was pushed to the limits of his mental capacity.

Just then, a voice rang out. "Human." The man recoiled in shock. There should not be anyone else here. "You are searching for the remains of a dinosaur, correct? I am interested."

The voice came from his necklace. "Ah, apologies if I frightened you. I am Qinglong, the Azure Dragon. This dinosaur shares the Chinese character 'loong' with me, so I wanted to know if we are related."

The man responded without giving it too much thought, perhaps out of loneliness and lunacy. "That seems unlikely. Dinosaurs are ancient creatures that roamed the earth before humans even came into existence. They also look nothing like you."

"Precisely what I said, Qinglong." The man heard another voice, and two more laughing. "Ah, let us introduce ourselves to the child as well. I am Xuanwu, the Black Tortoise." "I'm Baihu, the White Tiger! Surprised, kid? We holy beasts have come to talk to you!" "Don't mind them calling you a kid, boy. They're just old. I'm Zhuque, the Vermillion Bird. We really have taken interest in dinosaurs, though. Mind telling us more?"

The man answered while walking. "Dinosaurs were brought to extinction by a devastating asteroid strike. Yet, some parts of them remain in the form of fossils. In fact, if we find a new species from a fossil, we get to name it. The species 'tanius' was named after the Chinese paleontologist, Tan Xichou, for example."

"Fossils... These odd bones, perhaps? Humans in China used to use them as medicine. I would know, since turtles were also used in medicine." Xuanwu stated.

The man replied. "That may be, but we now know their historical value. With fossils, we can find out many things about dinosaurs. Their biology, appearance, diet, and so on. Moreover, we can tell how they evolved and adapted to the environment."

"Speakin' of evolution, kid, what happened to the dinosaurs? Surely, they can't be completely gone without a trace." Baihu asked, with a curious tone.

"A fine question. Well, if we were talking about the closest descendants of dinosaurs, it would be birds." The man continued to walk while replying.

"Birds!? Unbelievable! A simple look would tell you we birds look nothing like those ancient brutes, boy. Are you sure you aren't mistaken?" A surprised Zhuque cried out.

"Hold it, Zhuque. We felines have a variety of forms as well. A tiger like me, a lion, and a cat... We look vastly different, but we share the same ancestors. So what the kid said could be true." Baihu explained.

"Still, human. What brings you to a mystical place like this to search for fossils?" Qinglong questioned the man.

"I found a part of a fossil here once. ... Maybe it wasn't real. Perhaps it was just a realistic dream... I wouldn't be surprised. I'm talking to my necklace right now, after all." The man sighed.

"Do not give in to despair, child." The Four Holy Beasts spoke, one after another. "That's right, kid! If ya don't believe the dinosaur exists, then who else will?" "Listen well, human. We deities are fleeting beings, as there is no concrete evidence that we exist. If one believes we exist, then we do. If one believes we do not exist, then we do not." "Don't confuse the boy with your abstract metaphor, Qinglong. Ahem, what we mean to say is, you must find the fossil, as that is the only proof that the dinosaur existed. Believe in yourself, boy."

The man was stunned. Then, the four voices spoke together as one. "We thank you for the interesting talk. Before we depart, let us say this: You will surely become a talented paleontologist."

Just then, the man found the skull fossil he had been looking for right next to him. The man smiled, and begun working on digging up the fossil.

Eventually, the fossil became a display in a museum, proving its existence to all who gaze upon it.

# The Dinosaur's Secret

Pui Ching Middle School (Macau), Chen, Seng Hin Kingsley – 17

The rain beat continuously against the classroom windows, producing a rhythmic symphony that lulled the pupils of Bright Future Academy in Guangzhou, Guangdong, into a condition of semi-consciousness. Mrs. Lee, their biology teacher, stood at the front of the room, passionately discussing dinosaur fossils, unaware that half of the class was preoccupied with their phones. Mrs. Lee said, "Dinosaurs are more than relics of the past. They hold secrets we are only beginning to uncover."

A collective sigh of boredom spread through the classroom, but Lucy Chen sat up straighter. Lucy had always found dinosaurs—especially those discovered in China—to be fascinating. She studied a lot about the old giants that used to live in the area she knew. Kingsley, her best friend, looked at her oddly.

"Are you still dreaming of digging up a Lingwulong in your backyard?" he said, referring to one of China's iconic long-necked dinosaurs.

Lucy started to smile. One never knows! We live in Guangdong, and you have heard many stories about dinosaur remains here.

Kingsley let his eyelids roll back. "I'm sure some dinosaurs rested under the volleyball field."

Mrs. Lee's lesson was interrupted short as she turned to write on the whiteboard by a brief surge of static. The ceiling screen started to reveal a peculiar light pattern. The chamber hummed quietly, then all of a sudden the electricity turned off.

Students hurried to switch on their phone flashlights as screams tore across the room. The hum strengthened, and beyond the window there was a faint green glow. Lucy blinked and the shadow vanished even though she felt she saw it travel fast across the green light. Lucy and Kingsley dashed to the window after casting anxious glances at one another.

A massive UFO hovered over the schoolyard, its surface gleaming like liquid metal—probably polished by aliens with way too much free time. It pulsated with a spooky light that cast shadows over the classroom's skeleton dinosaur models.

"Everyone, stay calm!" Mrs. Lee yelled, her voice betraying her own terror.

The UFO dropped gently and landed in the center of the soccer field. The buzz stopped, giving way to an uncomfortable quiet. Before anybody could react, the craft's hatch opened, producing a beam of light that landed directly in the biology classroom.

Lucy felt a strange pull, like invisible hands were drawing her toward the light. She grabbed Kingsley's arm, but it was no use. Within seconds, both of them were lifted off the ground and into the beam.

Lucy blinked as her eyes got used to the dim UFO's interior. There were dim lights on the walls that looked like a mix of old Chinese writing and binary code. His face was pale as he stood next to her.

He asked in a whisper, "Where are we?"

There was a voice in the background before Lucy could answer. Being bigger, with longer arms and bright eyes, it looked like a person. There was a small device in its hand that sent out holograms of... dinosaurs.

"You have been chosen," the being said in perfect Cantonese. Its voice was sweet and strange at the same time.

"Picked for what?" Lucy asked with a shaking voice.

There was a hand motion to the holograms. "We are the Omn, and we learn about time and space." A long time ago, we studied the most common species on Earth, which you might call dinosaurs. They were not just animals, though. They looked out for your world and kept it safe from outside threats.

Lucy's eyes widened. "Are you saying dinosaurs were... intelligent?"

"In a way," the Omn replied. "They were connected to a network, a biological web that spanned the planet. This network is still active, but dormant. We have returned to awaken it, for your planet is in danger once more."

Kingsley, who had been silent until now, finally spoke. "Danger from what?"

The Omn's hologram changed to show an oncoming dark, swirling mass. "A parasitic being called the Klyth." It eats worlds and leaves them empty. We need your help to get the guards to wake up again.

Lucy and Kingsley looked at each other. "But we're kids," she said. What should we do?"

The Omn raised its device and looked at Kingsley and Lucy. "You're not like most people. You are interested in this job and determined to complete it. Could you help us?"

Lucy didn't think twice about nodding. "Yes." "What should we do?""Mrs. Lee?" Lucy asked. "How did you get here?"

She held up a small gadget that looked like a tablet and said, "I don't know." "For a moment, I was in school." The next thing I knew, I was... here.

A picture of the Nanling Mountains was shown on the tablet when it turned on. A red dot pulsed near a place where dinosaur bones and tracks have been preserved over time.

Kingsley said, "It's pointing to a place." "Perhaps that's where the 'guardians' are."

The three people had no choice but to start their trip, which took them through a thick bamboo forest. During the trip, Mrs. Lee told stories about the past of Guangdong.

"Decades ago, fossilized dinosaur tracks were found in this vicinity," she remarked. "Researchers think this region was formerly a vibrant environment for herbivores such as Mamenchisaurus and predators like Sinraptor." If the Onn are correct, we could be treading upon the very ground they once inhabited.

As they reached the marked location, they found themselves standing before a massive rock formation shaped like a dragon's head—a symbol of power and protection in Chinese culture. The tablet glowed brighter, and a hidden entrance revealed itself in the rock face.

Inside, the air was cool and damp. The walls were lined with fossils that seemed to hum with energy. At the center of the cavern was a massive crystal, pulsating with light. The Omn's voice echoed in their minds.

"This is the core of the network. You must activate it."

"How?" Lucy asked.

"Place your hands on the crystal and focus on the guardians."

Lucy hesitated but stepped forward, placing her hands on the crystal's surface. It felt warm, almost alive. Kingsley and Mrs. Lee joined her, and together they closed their eyes, concentrating on the images of dinosaurs they had seen in the holograms.

The crystal responded by unleashing a burst of energy through the cavern. The fossils began to light, and the ground rocked as hologram dinosaurs appeared around them. Among them were Chinese species such as the tall Mamenchisaurus and the feathery Sinosauropteryx. They roared to life, their eyes shining with the same light as the crystal.

"They're... alive?" Kingsley asked in awe.

"Not alive," the Omn replied. "However, their essence has been restored. "They will protect your planet."

The next three days were very busy. As the holographic dinosaurs spread across the world, they formed a wall that stopped the Klyth attack. There were tales of glowing dinosaurs sprouting up in every big city, and scientists were trying to figure out what was going on.

The Omn swore Lucy, Kingsley, and Mrs. Lee to secrecy and thanked them before departing back into the stars.

Back at Bright Future Academy, life went back to normal—mostly. Lucy couldn't help but smile as she glanced at the skeletal dinosaur reproductions in the biology classroom. She had discovered their secret and it was a story she would remember for the rest of her life.

Mrs. Lee continued her lesson, and Lucy leaned over to Kingsley.

"Do you think they'll come back?" She whispered.

Kingsley grinned. I hope not. "I've had enough alien adventures for a lifetime."

But deep down, Lucy couldn't wait to see the Omn—or the dinosaurs—again.

# Wings of the Forgotten Era

Pui Ching Middle School (Macau), He, Pui Pui Rebecca – 17

Northeastern China in the summer of 1974 was a lush wilderness: an endless fabric of green forests, undulating mountains, and crystal—clear rivers. The Changbai Mountains were full of history and folk tales, providing a habitat for numerous kinds of flora and fauna, while the peaks were shrouded in mist throughout much of the year, thus adding to the mystery of the place. The air was filled with the scent of pine and wildflowers, combined with the fresh smell of moist soil.

Li Wei was an enthusiastic paleontologist in his late twenties, raised in the city of Shenyang—a bustling place, filled with life—the sound of the horn never stopped and murmurs of people never quiet. His academic successes included numerous publications on his fossil finds, but he craved that moment of discovery found only in the wild. His childhood was filled with tales of ancient beasts from his grandmother, who always told stories of the mythical dragons that once flew across the skies. Tales like these instigated within him an interest in the natural world and mysteries that lay within it.

His friend Mei Lin was an intrepid journalist, with the keen knack of digging out fantastic stuff out of the ordinary. Her short black hair and camera ever slung over her neck turn her into one with an eye for detail. Mei had heard the same tales as Li– stories whispered among villagers of remote areas about flying creatures and legendary beasts. Together, they decided to embark on a journey that could rewrite history.

They adorned their gear with small talismans to ward off evil spirits as they prepared for the expedition. Mei had a jade pendant, passed down from her grandmother, who had told her that it was an evil spirit—repellent pendant. Li, however, carried a small carved dragon figure symbolizing strength and good fortune. All these things were connected to their heritage and gave their adventure a basis in the rich tapestry of Chinese culture.

The journey was quite weary: The winding roads through denser forests came to be winding lanes where jeep passage was about the only vehicle of movement. The engines coughed their displeasure now and then, frequently compelled to break up stuck branches or get around mudflow. Yet the hope itself put balm into their spirits. Villages fell on their way, one after another—each with their charm and own myth among the people.

They had traveled for several days before they came upon a small village sitting nestled at the foot of the Changbai Mountains. The villagers, in their worn wooden houses with red lanterns attached to the fronts, heard the hustle and bustle of daily life. People haggled over goods in the marketplace, where fresh produce overflowed from the stalls, hand—crafted goods were on display, and aromas of traditional dishes like dumplings and stir—fried vegetables filled the air. The natives were colorfully dressed: women with embroidered jackets, and men with traditional tunics, reflecting their cultural heritage.

But the villagers were wary of outsiders; the lines on their faces bespoke a mixture of curiosity and suspicion. Soon enough, the charisma of Mei and the sincerity of Li won over the villagers. The villagers shared several meals with them: hearty dishes of rice, pickled vegetables, and fish freshly caught from the river nearby. The elders told stories of the flying dragons that once commanded the skies, their tales rich in details of how such beasts guarded the land against storms and catastrophes.

As night enveloped the village, thick fog rolled in from the mountains, wrapping around the homes like a shroud. Mei took notes while Li sketched the elder's words, the flickering firelight illuminating their excitement. The elder's tales echoed in their minds, intertwining with their quest for knowledge.

Early the following morning, they left for exploration of the surrounding cliffs after breakfast of rice porridge and preserved vegetables. Through the trees, the sun came filtering down casting dappled shadows on the forest floor, the air being crisp with a smell of damp moss and at a distance, a waterfall cascaded down the rocky walls.

Continuing to ascend higher, they found a number of curiosities regarding rock formations. The cliffs were rough, overgrown with lichen and moss, and their footsteps produced echoing sounds against the stone walls. Examining these formations in detail, Li's heart went into an excited pounding as suddenly he saw strange carvings of what appeared to be some winged animals.

"Look, Mei!" he exclaimed, his voice barely containing his excitement. "These look like Pterosaurs!"

Mei's eyes shone with excitement as she snapped pictures. "This could be proof of them having lived here! We have to document this.

While they noted the findings with due care, the atmosphere was electric with possibility. Li felt the ancient creatures begging him for release, urging him to bring their stories into the light once more. The profound solitude of the mountains enveloped them, the weight of history weighing on them.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, casting an orange glow across the sky, they set up their tent in a small clearing, its canvas contrasting against the rugged terrain. Li meticulously sketched the rock carvings by the flickering light of a lantern, while Mei wrote notes about their findings, her mind racing with possibilities.

Then, out of the blue, something broke the quiet—a low rumble it was, as if from the mountains. Suddenly, it had seemed as if the very earth were whispering a secret, and the two of them exchanged a glance, nervous; curiosity overshadowed their fear. They decided to investigate the source of the sound.

They walked deeper into the woods until the night sky was full of stars, twinkling like diamonds against a velvet backdrop. The sound grew louder, reverberating through the trees—an eerie symphony that seemed to echo the whispers of the past. The atmosphere was electric, filled with anticipation and an underlying sense of danger.

Soon after the hike, they emerged into an opening, and above them came the astonishing view: an immense cave opening was glowing early. There the cave now sat, the mouth a void like unto an entryway into some other place entirely.

"What do you think is inside?" Mei whispered low, her heart pounding in her chest.

Li's eyes sparkled with wonder, reflecting the glow of the cave. "We have to find out."

As they approached the cave with caution, they were met with a sudden gust of wind that seemed to howl past them. It was as if the mountain itself had exhaled upon them. The air grew cold, and the light began to brighten. The entrance of each step was abruptly illuminated by the glow inside. Inside they found ancient paintings of Pterosaurs flying through the sky, their great wings outstretched against very alive colors.

The walls were adorned with intricate designs, patterns that seemed to swirl and dance in the flickering light from fungi illuminating the cave. Every stroke told a story—a testament to ages long past. Li was taken by the picture of a flying Pterosaur with a dragon—like face, similar to mythical creatures he had heard stories about as a child.

Then, a loud crashing sound came from the interior of the cave and made them jump. The ground shook, and boulders started falling from the ceiling.

"We need to get out of here!" Mei shouted, panic rising in her voice, but Li was transfixed by the paintings.

"Wait! This is incredible! We have to document this!" he insisted, his voice filled with urgency.

Suddenly, the ground gave way beneath him, and he dropped down into a room underground. "Mei screamed and grabbed for him, but in a flash, he was gone from view, swallowed by darkness.

Li landed on a bed of soft moss, dazed. The cavern was huge, the ceiling disappearing upwards into darkness. Strange bioluminescent fungi illuminated the space, casting that eerie glow through the air that felt electric. The silence was deep, disturbed only by the echo of a water drip somewhere in the cavern.

"Li!" The voice of Mei echoed back through the chamber, laced with panic. "Are you all right?

"I'm fine!" he called back, steadying himself. "But I think I found something amazing!"

He began to investigate and, through his flashlight, started to make out the remains of creatures that he had previously only seen in books: the remains of Pterosaurs, their wings outstretched in one final gesture to their glory. It was a sight that took his breath away in the surreal feeling of magic and hauntedness, as if he was traveling back in time.

The bones were half buried in rock, while the sediment layers surrounding them told a tale of their own. Li's heart was racing with the realization of what this could mean. He carefully documented all that he could, his hands shaking with excitement.

Meanwhile, Mei was pacing anxiously at the entrance of the cave. "Come back, Li! We have to get out of here before it collapses!

But Li was entranced, lost in the moment. "Mei, you won't fathom this! It could alter everything we think about these animals!"

What felt like hours passed before Mei finally heard the low rumble again. "Li! We have to go, now!"

Reluctantly, he gathered his notes and started climbing back up to the entrance. As he emerged, the cave shook once more, sending dust everywhere and making it difficult for him to breathe.

They emerged just in time, as the entrance collapsed behind them. They leaned against a tree, gasping for breath as adrenaline coursed through their veins and heartbeats raced in time with the chaos around them.

"That was too close," Mei said, her heart racing. "But what did you find?"

Li's eyes were aglow with excitement. "Fossils, Mei! Pterosaur fossils! We have to report this!"

By the time they headed toward the village, the enormity of their discovery had begun to dawn on them, and they could not restrain themselves from theorizing how these great creatures once raced across the skies.

Imagine the stories these bones can tell," Li muttered, his mind racing with all the possibilities. "We are actually uncovering a lost chapter of history, not just fossils.

One evening, while taking a break from their research, Li shared a story from his childhood that had shaped his love for paleontology. "When I was about ten, my grandfather took me to a museum. I remember standing in front of a massive Pterosaur skeleton, its wings spread wide. I was in awe. I imagined it soaring over the landscape, hunting fish from the water below."

His eyes had sparkled while speaking, and Mei could still see that wonder alive in him. "I wanted to be just like that creature: free and powerful. It inspired me toward paleontology."

Mei smiled, knowing full well how deeply he felt about this. "That's why you can't let anything distract you from this discovery. These fossils are not just bones; they're a connection to our past."

Over the following days, they documented the findings and searched for further evidence. The villagers became more interested in what Li and Mei had to say about their discoveries as they shared these findings with them. Tales of local myths about the Pterosaurs told them how the creatures protected the land and were respected by ancient peoples.

When night began to fall and the sun sank behind the mountains, painting the sky with shades of orange and purple, the villagers would sit around a fire. The elder told them stories of how the Pterosaurs flew in the skies, their wings casting shadows on the land.

He said, "In the olden day, the Pterosaurs watched over our place. They would guard us from windstorms and light our paths in the night. When gray clouds appear in the middle of the sky, they show up; lights up the heavens with their wings.".

The words of the elder struck a deep chord in Li and Mei, who could feel the connection between the ancient creatures and the culture they had come to know. They realized that the Pterosaurs were not just fossils but part of the villagers' identity, interwoven with their beliefs and traditions.

One day, the ever—adventurous spirit, Mei, plunged into an impulsive leap of faith. "Let's climb that cliff," she said, pointing to a steep rock face jutting out over the valley. "I want to see what it feels like to stand where those creatures once soared."

Li was more cautious, recognizing the dangers. "Are you sure? It's steep, and the rocks look loose.

But Mei was not one to give up easily. "Nah! If a Pterosaur could glide through the air, we can manage a little climb.

With a deep breath, Li nodded, and they began the ascent. As they climbed, Mei's laughter echoed against the rocks, her spirit infectious. They reached the top just as the sun began to set, casting a golden hue over the valley below.

Look at this view!" Mei exclaimed, arms outstretched as if she were flying. "This is what they must have felt like-untouchable and free."

Li smiled, the thrill of the moment washing over him. At that instant, he knew that their journey had been about more than a discovery but a way of embracing life, just as the Pterosaurs they idolized.

As their journey came to a close, Li and Mei went back to Shenyang, their hearts full of memories and their minds racing with ideas. The city felt different now—noise and chaos a stark contrast to the serenity of the mountains. They wrote articles, shared their findings, and presented their research to universities, igniting a spark of interest in the world beyond.

Years later, when they were still into paleontology and journalism, respectively, they would look back to that summer in the mountains. The experience had shaped their lives, their friendship deepened by the adventure they had shared. They had become storytellers in their own right, weaving the magic of the past into their narratives.

And though the Pterosaurs had long disappeared, their legend survived through stories by villagers, in the caves of the mountains, and in the hearts of those who dared to dream of a world full of wonder.

Decades had passed, but tales of their adventure kept on inspiring newer generations. Li and Mei went on to be called pioneers in their fields, but neither ever forgot that summer or the whispering winds of the forgotten era.

It was a silent evening as they sat together, thinking about the journey taken; it was then that realization came—things were indeed much more about the bond they forged and the stories they shared rather than the discovery of

something. They did not just uncover the past; they had become part of a much bigger narrative—one which crossed time and space—reminding them that the world was full of mysteries waiting to be unveiled.

And so they smiled at each other, knowing their journey was far from over. The sky was still so big, and the winds whispered of adventures yet to come.

However, as they prepared for a lecture series on their discoveries, a shadow loomed over Li's excitement. A rival paleontologist, Dr. Zhang, known for his aggressive tactics and skepticism towards Li's work, publicly challenged their findings. He claimed that the fossils they discovered were misidentified and that their research was built on myth rather than science.

"Why should we believe a couple of dreamers?" Dr. Zhang scorned, as the audience erupted in a chuckle. "They found nothing but local legends."

Li's heart sank. The hard work and dedication felt fragile before everything. Mei was steadfast: "We know the truth, Li. We saw those fossils, and we documented our work to the letter. We can't let him bring us down."

Having come up with something of this magnitude, they took a conscious decision to return to the cave and get more evidence. The villagers were helpful, telling them more legends and about the Pterosaurs. "Our ancestors admired those creatures," he told them, "They were more than just fossils, but a sign of our history.

This newfound sense of purpose ignited the fire in Li once more. Thus, Li set out again, armed this time not only with scientific tools but also with stories and support from villagers.

Li and Mei both feel excited yet mixed with a tinge of fear as they go once more into the darkness of the cave; the atmosphere heavy with presages, the eerie, dim shadows cast by fungi of bioluminescent mushrooms growing on these very walls. This time, it will be more than what they wanted to discover—the truth in the tales, at least—other than the fossil findings.

Further in the cave was another chamber with ancient carvings, like the first but more intricate. There were images of Pterosaurs but also strange symbols they couldn't decipher.

Then, out of nowhere, a loud, thunderous noise sounded throughout the cave, and boulders from the ceiling collapsed, sending dust and debris everywhere. Li and Mei looked at each other with worried faces, but then, without warning, the ground beneath them started to shake severely. The cave was collapsing in on them.

"Li! We have to get out!" Mei shouted, panic surging into her voice.

Turning to flee, they found their way blocked by a shadowy figure: Dr. Zhang, the confident smirk spreading across his face. "I knew you'd be back. You're only proving how reckless you are."

"What are you doing here?" Li exploded, the anger churning beneath his surface.

"I came to stop you before you embarrass yourselves further," Dr. Zhang jeered, pressing in on them. "You have turned your back on real science for fairy tales."

Now, before Li could respond, another strong tremor began, and boulders began falling around them. In the sudden chaos, Mei yanked Li's arm and yanked him down a narrow opening. "This way!".

They squeezed through the opening just as a massive boulder crashed where they had stood moments before. Heart racing, they stumbled into another chamber, panting and wide-eyed.

And there, in that new chamber, they were astonished by the following sight: a perfectly preserved skeleton of a Pterosaur, wings spread out, majestically. That view had left them all speechless, just proof of the grandeur of the ancient creature. The bones looked so perfect, set within a layer of sediment that did not appear to have been disturbed for ages.

"We have to document this!" Li exclaimed, pulling out his notebook and camera.

The moment Mei started snapping pictures, he knew that this was it, as the very symbols they had been seeing all these days were engraved on the rock next to the skeleton. "Li, look at these markings. They are connected with the legends. This is no find, but a bridge between our past and present!"

Suddenly, Dr. Zhang burst into the chamber, face incredulous. "You... you really found it?" His bravado fell as he stared upon the skeleton.

"Yes, we did!" Mei exclaimed, defiance in her voice. "And this proves our research is valid. These creatures are part of our history, and we'll make sure the world knows."

Dr. Zhang suddenly looked different. "Perhaps... perhaps I underestimated you.

But even before they could celebrate, another quake hit the cave and blocked the entrance. Rocks began falling, trapping them inside. "We have to find another way out!" Li yelled as adrenaline rushed through him.

The search for an exit led them behind the skeleton and a hidden passage; it opened up into an underground river. "This may be the way out!" Mei exclaimed, racing with hope. They plunged into the water, swam against the current, and finally reached the other side, gasping for air.

They came out of the cave and into a brilliant sun beaming down overhead. Li and Mei looked at each other, and the wave of relief just washed over them. The air was fresh and invigorating, a far cry from the damp darkness of the cave. Coughing from the water, Dr. Zhang trailed behind, looking astonished and contrite.

Where do we go from here?" Mei asked, her voice ringing with excitement. "We have the evidence we need, but we must present it in a way that's undeniable."

Li nodded, his mind racing. "We'll need the support of the villagers. They hold the key to the legends—together we can connect the ancient stories with our findings.

As they walked back to the village, Li and Mei shared with Dr. Zhang their plans, and to their surprise, he agreed to help them. "I was wrong to dismiss your work, I must admit," he said, softer now. "This is a big find, one that calls for celebration.

By the time they reached the village, a gathering was already in progress. The villagers had heard word of their adventures and were anxious to learn the results. The elder received them with open arms, and his face lit up with encouragement.

"Your journey has left us with hope," he said, addressing everyone present. "These beings are a part of not just our history but our very identity. United we stand as the custodians of this knowledge."

That evening, under the star-studded night sky, Li, Mei, and Dr. Zhang made their presentation: the photos of the Pterosaur skeleton and the ancient carvings they had found. The villagers listened intently to what the elder said, connecting the dots between the fossils and the legends as he spoke, and grunting in agreement with him.

This is a moment of unity," said the elder. "Those creatures once flew in our skies and now, they would soar in our stories, telling us about our identity.

Thus, the collaborative paper between scientific research and local lore began to take shape and ink with new vigor. The previously skeptical Dr. Zhang now turned an avid supporter of site preservation and the inclusion of local knowledge within scientific discourse. Thus, all three worked untiringly, meshing their expertise together.

News of the discovery spread far beyond the village, and national media and several academic institutions were informed. Soon, they were invited to a major paleontology conference, where they were to present their unique way of integrating mythology with science.

As the day of the presentation approached, the three were feeling a mix of excitement and anxiety. "This could change everything," Mei said, looking at the packed auditorium. "It's not just about the fossils anymore; it's about respecting the stories that come with them."

Li nodded in agreement, his eyes gleaming with responsibility. "We're not just researchers; we're storytellers. We have to honor the past and pave the way for future generations.

They finally went on stage, showing their findings with passion and conviction. The audience was in awe as they wove together the science of paleontology and the rich tapestry of local legends. They shared how the Pterosaurs were not just relics of history but a symbol of resilience and cultural identity.

When they finally finished their presentation, the audience exploded into applause. The excitement was palpable, and the response was overwhelmingly positive. They received questions, invitations to collaborate, and offers of funding to further explore the cave and its significance.

But just as they were beginning to bask in the success, an unexpected challenge arose. A company was interested in the land around the cave and wanted to develop it into a resort. Their proposal would not only threaten the cave but also the way of life in the village.

"We can't let this happen," Mei said fiercely, her eyes ablaze with determination. "The fossils, the stories-they're all at risk!"

Until then, Dr. Zhang had doubted the villagers' stories, but now he was squarely in their camp. "We must garner the scientific community's and the public's support. We have to show this site is priceless."

They organized a campaign, collecting signatures, holding protests, and appealing to environmentalists and historians. The villagers joined in, relating their stories and pointing out the cultural value of the site.

They had to defend the cave against all odds, including legal battles, media pressure, and convincing the corporation to back off. But all that seemed only to strengthen their determination.

The months passed, weeks within the cave fighting for its preservation, until finally a pivotal moment presented itself: being invited to plead their case in front of the local government. The meeting was tense, full of politicians and stakeholders, but Li, Mei, and Dr. Zhang stood as one.

"Today, we are not here to talk about fossils," Li said, his voice firm. "We are here to fight for a piece of history that belongs to all of us. The Pterosaurs represent more than just creatures of the past; they embody the spirit of this land and its people."

As Mei began telling the tales of the villagers, her story gave way to bright-colored pictures: Pterosaurs, as guardians of the land. On a scientific note, Dr. Zhang noted that this cave might actually help provide quite substantial information concerning life in those times.

Their passionate plea fell on good ears, and the local government agreed to reconsider the development plans. They announced a temporary halt to any construction, allowing for further investigations and community discussions about the site's future.

With the cave temporarily secured, Li, Mei, and Dr. Zhang continued their research, delving deeper into the mysteries surrounding the Pterosaurs. They found new fossils and artifacts that further solidified the importance of the site.

Tourists came to learn about the Pterosaurs and the legends involving them, and thus the village flourished. The stories of the elders gained prominence, and villagers developed a new pride in their heritage. They began sharing their culture and hosted festivals that celebrated the Pterosaurs and their connection with the land.

Years passed, and they became known no longer as researchers but as ambassadors of culture. They inspired other paleontologists and historians to allow a whole new generation to consider the story behind the bones.

As Li and Mei sat together one evening, looking out over the valley where the cave lay hidden, they reflected on their journey. "Can you believe how far we've come?" Mei said, a smile lighting up her face.

Li nodded, his heart full. "We started as dreamers, but we became part of something much larger. The Pterosaurs may be gone, but their legacy lives on through us."

They knew their adventure had impacted not only the course of their lives but also the livelihood of the villagers and the world community at large. Whispers from the past would still be murmuring down these mountains—a reminder that every single fossil was a narrative that needed a voice.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, the scenery was painted by his golden rays, and they felt grateful for this journey that had brought them together, their life courses interwoven into the tapestry of the land and its guardians.

# New Tales of China's Dinosaurs-The Dinosaur's Secret

Pui Ching Middle School (Macau), Lui, Wa Chon – 17

#### Chapter 1: The Emperor's Court

The grand hall buzzed with life. Golden lanterns cast warm light over carved jade pillars. The scent of roasted duck mingled with the sharp tang of rice wine. Laughter rippled among the courtiers.

Emperor Xuanzong sat atop his throne, his crimson robes shimmering like embers. He raised a hand, commanding silence. All eyes turned to the scholar Li Wei, who stepped forward with measured grace. He held a scroll tied with a crimson ribbon.

"This," Li Wei began, his voice steady, "is a record of your majesty's reign. Peace. Prosperity. A legacy unmatched."

He untied the ribbon and unfurled the scroll. Its ink gleamed fresh, the characters bold and precise. Gasps of admiration rippled through the room as ministers craned their necks to see.

"Read," the emperor said, his tone calm but expectant.

Li Wei bowed. "Your armies secured the northern borders," he began. His words painted images of victories, of treaties signed with elegance. "The Silk Road thrives under your wisdom, linking distant lands."

General Tai Peng, seated near the emperor, chuckled. "Don't forget the battles," he said, his voice loud and rough. He leaned forward, his scarred. "The blood is the cost of the glory."

The emperor smiled faintly. "Indeed, General. Share one with us."

Tai Peng stood, towering over the seated officials. "It was ten years ago," he said. "The steppes burned under our advance. Their leader challenged me—a duel of blades." His hand mimed a stroke through the air. "He fell with one blow."

Applause erupted. The air vibrated with admiration. Yet, behind the clamor, a distant rumble echoed faintly—a storm gathering beyond the palace walls.

#### Chapter 2: Shadow in the Flames

The forest was quiet. Too quiet.

Zhang Liang walked among the pines, axe resting on his shoulder. The usual hum of crickets and rustle of leaves was gone. Only the wind remained, cold and biting. He scanned the tree line, unease coiling in his chest.

A scream shattered the stillness.

He dropped the axe and sprinted toward the village. Smoke billowed above the rooftops. Flames licked the sky, casting jagged shadows over the chaos. Villagers fled in every direction, their cries swallowed by the roar of fire.

Through the inferno, Zhang Liang saw it. A monstrous shape loomed, its wings unfurled like black sails. Scales glinted in the firelight. A tail swept through a hut, splintering wood like straw.

For a heartbeat, their eyes met—golden and burning with malice.

The court was in disarray. Ministers whispered in tight clusters. The emperor sat rigid on his throne, his usual composure cracked.

"The northern highlands are in flames," a messenger had reported. "Villages destroyed. Survivors few."

Xuanzong rose, his voice cutting through the murmurs. "Bring Li Wei, General Tai Peng, and the messenger at once."

In the private chamber, Zhang Liang knelt before the emperor. His clothes were singed, his face pale.

"Tell me everything," Xuanzong commanded.

Zhang Liang's voice trembled at first. "It wasn't human," he said. "A beast—scaled, winged. Fire poured from its jaws. It tore through the village like paper."

Li Wei frowned. "Dragons are myths, long extinct. Perhaps fear clouds your memory."

Zhang Liang met his gaze. "I know what I saw."

General Tai Peng leaned forward. "Myth or not, this is a threat. If it can destroy villages, it can march south. We must act."

The emperor's eyes darkened. He paced the room, his robes sweeping the floor. Finally, he stopped.

"Li Wei, your knowledge is unmatched. General Tai Peng, you are the bravest man I know. Zhang Liang, your familiarity with the region will be invaluable. Together, you will investigate this threat."

Li Wei hesitated, then bowed. "As you wish, Your Majesty."

Tai Peng suggested: "We leave at dawn."

Zhang Liang rose, determination steeling his face.

As the trio left the chamber, the weight of the task ahead pressed heavy on them. Behind them, the palace lights burned against the growing night.

#### Chapter 3: Into the Inferno

The village lay in ruins. Smoke still curled from blackened timbers. What remained of homes were skeletons of charred wood and collapsed stone. The air stank of ash and something sharper—like burned meat. General Tai Peng scanned the wreckage, hand resting on his sword. Survivors huddled near a half—standing wall, their faces hollow with fear.

"We'll rebuild," Tai Peng assured a trembling elder. "But first, tell me what you saw."

"Wings as wide as the sky," the elder whispered. "Fire that rained like hell itself. It wasn't human."

Nearby, Li Wei stood before the crumbled temple. He knelt, brushing away soot to reveal a shattered relic box. Its intricate carvings were scorched, the contents gone. He frowned. "This was no ordinary attack. Something sought this specifically."

Zhang Liang crouched near the forest's edge, inspecting clawed gouges in the ground. He called the others over. "These marks—they lead somewhere. Somewhere it didn't want to be followed."

Tai Peng nodded, glancing at the survivors. "Stay together. Stay hidden. We'll find the answer."

By nightfall, the trio had climbed into the highlands. The terrain grew rough, the air thin and biting. Li Wei consulted a faded map that depicted the village as it had been during the old dynasties. "If the legends are true, dragon lairs are in high, isolated places. We may be close."

Tai Peng's hand never left his sword hilt. "Stay alert."

The roar hit them like thunder. Rocks tumbled from the cliffs above. The trio froze, eyes fixed ahead. Cresting the ridge, they saw it: a dragon, massive and terrible. Its scales shimmered like molten gold.

It turned, golden eyes locking onto them. Then came the shriek—a sound of rage and dominance. Its wings unfurled, and the beast took to the sky.

"Run!" Tai Peng shouted.

#### Chapter 4: Battling the Sky

The dragon roared, shaking the ground beneath them. Its wings spread wide, blotting out the sun. Flames erupted, searing the air. General Tai Peng barely rolled away in time, his armor smoking.

"Li Wei!" Tai Peng shouted, gripping his sword. "What do we know about killing this thing?"

Li Wei ducked behind a jagged rock, coughing from the acrid smoke. "I'm thinking!" He flipped through a scorched journal, his hands trembling. "Legends say they're vulnerable under the scales—soft tissue. But getting close is suicide!"

The dragon turned, golden eyes locking on Tai Peng. It lunged, claws tearing through the earth. Tai Peng charged, sword raised, but the beast swiped, throwing him into a boulder. He groaned, struggling to his feet.

"This is madness, we are going to die" Li Wei muttered.

Nearby, Zhang Liang crouched, studying the terrain. His eyes narrowed. The cliff walls loomed high, dense forest above. A narrow pass cut through the area. He glanced at the dragon, then back at the landscape.

"I have an idea," Zhang Liang called, running to them.

"We don't have time for ideas!" Tai Peng snapped, blocking another fiery breath with his shield.

"Just listen!" Zhang Liang pointed to the pass. "If we lure it there, the trees will trap its wings, and it can't get out of the narrow cliff pass."

Tai Peng hesitated, then nodded. "Fine. But it'll follow me. Get ready."

The general sprinted toward the pass, shouting curses to draw the beast's attention. The dragon roared, chasing him. Its massive wings stirred up dust and debris.

Zhang Liang and Li Wei scrambled into position. "Now!" Zhang Liang yelled.

Tai Peng dove into the narrow pass. The dragon followed, wings scraping against the cliff walls. Its claws tore at the earth, but its wings snagged on thick branches above. The creature screeched, thrashing wildly, but it was stuck.

Tai Peng emerged, sword drawn. "Now we finish it!"

For the first time, victory seemed possible.

#### Chapter 5: The Hidden Truths

The battlefield was quiet now. Smoke curled from the dragon's carcass; its massive body sprawled across the forest floor. General Tai Peng wiped blood from his blade. Li Wei leaned against a rock, catching his breath.

Nearby, Zhang Liang noticed faint footprints leading away from the scene. "There's more," he said, signaling the others to follow.

"What is that?" Tai Peng asked, walking over.

Li Wei crouched and lifted a delicate piece of jewelry, encrusted with jade and gold. His face paled. "This... this belongs to Prince Qinzong."

Tai Peng frowned. "The emperor's brother? How did it get here?"

The tracks led them to a hidden cave, partially concealed by dense undergrowth. Inside, the air was cold and damp. Torches lined the walls, their waxy remains suggesting recent use. A crude altar stood at the center of the cavern, surrounded by symbols carved into the stone floor.

"There's something about this place.. it feels eerie," Zhang Liang muttered.

On the altar lay large bones, their size and shape unfamiliar. Beside them were tattered scrolls covered in strange script. Li Wei carefully examined the bones, his eyes widening. "These aren't dragon bones," he said. "They're fossils. Dinosaurs. Creatures that lived long before us."

Zhang Liang's voice was low. "So the dragons are connected to these ancient beasts?"

"Perhaps," Li Wei replied, "but why summon them? And for what purpose?"

The group exchanged uneasy glances. The symbols on the altar hinted at something dark—a ceremony not meant for mortal eyes.

"We need answers," Tai Peng said, sheathing his sword.

"No," Li Wei said, clutching the jewelry. "We need to warn the emperor. If Prince Qinzong is involved, this goes deeper than we thought."

Without another word, they began their descent.

#### Chapter 6: The Capital in Turmoil

The capital was a city on edge. Guards lined the streets, their armor gleaming under the midday sun. Whispers of invasion rippled through the markets, and messengers darted between the palace gates.

Li Wei, General Tai Peng, Mu Lin, and Zhang Liang were ushered into the throne room. Emperor Xuanzong sat stiffly, his face grave as the party bowed low before him.

"Speak," Xuanzong commanded, his voice firm despite the tension in the air.

Li Wei stepped forward, presenting the jade jewelry. "Your Majesty, this belonged to Prince Qinzong. We found it among the dragon remains."

The court gasped. Xuanzong's hands tightened on the arms of his throne.

"Dragons are real," Zhang Liang said, his voice cutting through the stunned silence. "We saw them. Fought them."

Tai Peng nodded. "They are a weapon. A threat unlike anything we've faced. And if Prince Qinzong is involved, this treachery endangers the entire empire."

The emperor's expression darkened. He rose. "My own brother," he muttered, more to himself than anyone else.

He turned to his ministers. "Mobilize the armies. Fortify the capital. Prepare the provinces for war."

The room erupted into a cacophony of voices as commands were shouted. The emperor's gaze swept over the group, his expression stern yet approving. 'You have done well,' he said, his voice cutting through the chaos. 'But this is only the beginning.'

#### Chapter 7: The Calm Before Chaos

The chamber was shrouded in shadow, lit only by flickering lanterns. Prince Qinzong stood before an ancient table, its surface carved with cryptic runes. His crooked smile deepened as he watched the leader of the northern tribes kneel before him.

"In three days," the prince said, his voice low but charged with malice, "the stars will align. A night of destiny. We strike then, and the capital will fall." His laughter echoed off the cold stone walls, sending shivers through even the most hardened warrior.

Meanwhile, in the emperor's grand study, Li Wei unfurled an old scroll, pointing to the night sky map. "Your Majesty," he said, "in three days, the stars will collide—a rare celestial event. Prophecies speak of transformative change during such times."

The emperor's jaw tightened. "Then we must prepare for it."

#### Chapter 8: Final Encounter

Flames engulfed the outer walls. Dragons circled overhead, their roars deafening. The defenders screamed orders, their voices barely audible over the chaos. General Tai Peng stood at the gates, barking commands. His armor was scorched, his sword slick with blood.

"Hold the line!" he roared, driving his blade into an enemy soldier. "Keep those ballistae firing!"

Above, a dragon swooped low, spewing fire. The heat singed Tai Peng's face as archers released a volley of bolts. One struck true, piercing the dragon's eye. It shrieked and crashed into the battlements, crushing men and stone alike.

On the wall, Zhang Liang aimed carefully, his bowstring taut. "Aim for the wings!" he shouted to his men. His arrow flew, tearing through the thin membrane of a dragon's wing. The beast spiraled down, smashing into its own forces below.

At the command center, Li Wei pored over a map. "Shift the catapults west," he told a lieutenant. "Focus on the largest cluster of invaders." He paused, watching the stars above. "The dragons are weakening. Their coordination is faltering."

The tide of battle turned. The invaders fell back as the defenders pushed forward, but the cost was steep. The city lay in ruins, its streets littered with the dead.

A trumpet sounded. On the wall's highest point, Prince Qinzong stood, his armor gleaming in the firelight. "Xuanzong!" he bellowed. "Face me, brother! End this here!"

The emperor climbed the steps, his robes billowing. His face was grim. "Qinzong," he said, his voice heavy. "You've betrayed your family. Your people."

"You never understood me," Qinzong spat. "You've always looked down on me, always the perfect ruler. While I was nothing."

"You were my brother," Xuanzong replied. "You still are. Surrender. We can end this madness."

"No." Qinzong unsheathed his blade. "It ends with blood."

Their swords clashed. Qinzong fought with raw fury, his strikes wild but powerful. "Do you know what it's like to live in your shadow?" he shouted, slashing at Xuanzong's shoulder.

Xuanzong parried, his movements measured. "Do you know what it's like to carry the weight of an empire?" he countered. "You think this was easy? That I wanted it?"

The fight raged. Xuanzong slipped, and Qinzong's blade nicked his cheek. Blood dripped down his face. "Yield!" Qinzong snarled, pressing forward.

Xuanzong's gaze hardened. He stepped aside, disarming Qinzong with a swift strike. His sword hovered at his brother's throat.

"Do it," Qinzong hissed.

Xuanzong hesitated. His hand trembled Then he stepped back. "You are defeated, brother. But I will not kill you."

Guards rushed in, seizing Qinzong. The last dragon fell from the sky, its massive body hitting the ground with a final, earth-shaking crash.

Xuanzong turned to the city below. Fires still burned, and cries of the wounded echoed. Victory tasted bitter.

"Is it over?" Li Wei asked, stepping beside him.

"No," Xuanzong said, his voice hollow. "Not yet."

### Chapter 9: The Empire's Legacy

Emperor Xuanzong sat alone in the throne room, the weight of his crown heavier than ever.

The doors creaked open. Li Wei, General Tai Peng, and Zhang Liang entered, their faces solemn.

"The city is secure," Tai Peng reported. "The remaining invaders have fled."

"And the people?" Xuanzong asked without lifting his head.

"Rebuilding will take years," Li Wei said. "But they will endure."

Xuanzong nodded slowly. "And my brother?"

"In the dungeons," Zhang Liang said, his tone measured. "Awaiting your judgment."

The emperor rose, his figure shadowed by the faint light of dawn. "I will speak to him. Alone."

In the dim cell, Qinzong sat slumped against the wall, chains rattling as he moved. Xuanzong stepped inside, his expression unreadable.

"Come to gloat?" Qinzong muttered.

"No," Xuanzong said softly. "I came to understand."

Qinzong laughed bitterly. "What is there to understand? I wanted what you had. Power. Respect. Freedom from the shadows."

Xuanzong stared at him for a long moment. "You were never in my shadow, Qinzong. You put yourself there."

Qinzong looked away, his pride crumbling.

Outside, the first light of dawn crept over the horizon. Xuanzong emerged from the dungeons, his face hard but his eyes filled with quiet resolve. He turned to his companions.

"We rebuild," Xuanzong said, his voice steady. "Not just the city, but the trust that was lost. For our people. For our future."

Li Wei stepped forward hesitantly. "Your Majesty, there's one matter left. The dinosaur fossils we discovered in the northern village—what should we do with them?"

The emperor paused, his gaze distant, as if seeing the bones and the creatures they once belonged to. "Return them," he said finally. "To the earth. To the creatures who owned them. Let them rest where they belong."

The room fell silent, the weight of the emperor's words settling over them. The group bowed and departed, leaving Xuanzong alone to watch the first rays of sunlight break over the city.

A thousand years later, archaeologists unearthed rare dinosaur fossils—Sinosauropteryx and new Titanosaur species—in a remote Chinese village. Their discovery sparked wonder, but the bones carried with them a story long forgotten, buried beneath earth and history for centuries.

# The Diosaur Heist

Yew Wah International Education School of Yantai, Sun, Xiaohan Ellie – 17

In the heart of Shandong Province, where the earth holds secrets older than time itself, a discovery is about to change the course of history. The early morning sun casts golden rays upon the rugged hills of the Sihetun area, where untold secrets remain hidden. Daniel Chen, a paleontologist is sitting alone on the side of a steep hill, his hands trembling with the weight of his find.

Daniel rubs his eyes, realizing he's been working for over four hours. His watch shows it's just past 5 am. He arrived at the fossil site near Sihetun four hours earlier, driven by a tip about a fossil potentially buried in these hills. He knows the stakes: whoever discovers this fossil first will redefine our understanding of dinosaurs. Brushing away the last speck of earth, he sees it: the delicate imprints of feathers. His heart races, hands shaking with a mixture of fear and excitement as he gently lifts the fossil with his gloved hands.

"I can hardly believe my eyes! I've stumbled upon a secret that no one else has ever seen," he thinks, his breath visible in the cold air. The hill he's on is known for its danger, but he's not wrong. This is the discovery of a lifetime. He places the fossil in his backpack, the weight of history on his shoulders as he heads back to his car parked at the base of the hill.

Meanwhile, at the Yantai Times office, journalist Eason Smith is engrossed in a book, legs propped up on his desk, surrounded by a sea of old newspapers. The door bursts open, and his colleague, Tim, storms in.

"You gotta hear this," Tim says, voice urgent as he pours coffee.

"What's so important?" Eason asks, not looking up.

Tim stares at him as if he's lost his mind. "It has been found."

"It—what?" Eason tosses his book aside.

"The fossil, the one the whole world's after," Tim says, his voice rising.

Eason scoffs. "Any fossil is ordinary."

Eason knows where this is going. Tim wants a scoop to save their declining newspaper sales. With a sigh, he tidies his desk. "If this is going in the paper, we're going," he declares.

"Where to?" Tim asks.

"To the Yantai Paleontology Museum downtown," Eason says, his voice firm.

\*

Daniel Chen is driving back to Yantai, his bag beside him like a ticking time bomb. He doesn't realize the darkness lurking just over the horizon.

\*

At the Yantai Paleontology Museum, Detective Luke Parker stands in the shadows, not particularly interested in fossils. Jet lag has him up at 5 AM, and now he fights off sleep. The museum buzzes with anticipation as Joseph Chan, the curator, receives the fossil from Daniel, his eyes wide with wonder. The fossil, still smelling of fresh soil, is placed in a bulletproof glass case in the museum's Exhibition Hall, surrounded by lasers.

As the day progresses, Parker slips away, a nagging sense of unease about the fossil's security. He bumps into someone on Yantai's main street—a tall, lean figure with a scar like Otto Skorzeny's, who vanishes before Parker can ask questions.

\*

Later that night, Rurik Petrov, dressed in black, sneaks into the Yantai Paleontology Museum. He moves with the stealth of a shadow, avoiding the lasers to extract the fossil from its case. He's a ghost, leaving no trace as he disappears into the night.

The next morning, Joseph Chan finds the case empty in the Exhibition Hall. "It's gone!" he cries out, panic in his voice.

"How can it be gone?" Naomi, his intern, asks.

"Go tell the local paper we're closed today," Chan orders.

Eason Smith's home phone rings at 6 AM. "Put this in the paper—the museum's closed for today," a voice says urgently.

He's wide awake now, curiosity piqued. What could have happened to the fossil? The museum's security was supposed to be impenetrable.

Alexander Volkov admires his prize, the fossil resting on black velvet in his penthouse suite in Yantai. "Money can solve all my problems," he thinks, the thrill of the heist still coursing through him.

Parker's phone vibrates as he stands in his room at the Yantai Grand Hotel, staring out the window at the empty streets, with a cryptic message: "It was stolen..." He drops the phone, heart racing. His plans to return to Florida are shelved.

At the museum, he finds Chan pacing in his office. "Thank God you're here," Chan says with relief.

"Security gave me trouble," Parker replies, examining the empty case. No fingerprints, just a note inside, written in Russian. He reads: "Lost, gone, gold."

Parker compares the note to Naomi's handwriting, then arrests her, believing the writing matches. That night, however, in his dimly lit room at the Yantai Grand Hotel, Parker's doubts grow. He dreams of the man from the street, piecing together the clues. "It's him, not her," he realizes, seeing the note's significance.

"I can't do this, not anymore. It's time to give up; you can't solve this," Parker thinks, his grip tightening on a glass of water, feeling it crack under the pressure. He never planned to retire, but now, with the weight of this case, he wonders if it's time to step back from the mysteries that haunt him. He stares at himself in the mirror, the day's events taking their toll. His brown hair is now messy, dark circles under his eyes. He feels himself tense up just looking at his reflection.

"No, it can't be. It just can't..." Parker thinks as he lays back down again. The man with the scar, the note—it all seems so familiar. He looks at the note again, three words sticking out: "Lost, gone, gold." He pulls out his notebook, writing down the words. "Lost as in the fossil being lost for almost a million years ago, gone being that it had been taken, and gold meaning that it's worth a ton of gold." He runs a hand through his hair, piecing it all together.

Then, it strikes him. He knows who it was, an old friend he'd never paid attention to before, about to be arrested. Parker knew it was now or never to get back on the case. He pushes all thoughts aside, pulls on his dark trench coat, and heads out into the snow—covered streets of Yantai.

"I'm coming for you," he thinks as he runs, determination washing over him. The darkness was over, and now it was time to bring back justice, just like he had done so many times before in his past.

Parker dashes into a dark storage room at the back of the Yantai Paleontology Museum. "You're under arrest for theft! Stop where you are or you're dead!" he yells. Volkov looks at him in shock as Parker stands in the doorway, gun and handcuffs in hand.

"Is it really you, Parker?" Volkov asks, backing into a corner.

"Quit talking—hand it over," Parker says calmly, taking the sack containing the fossil and cuffing Volkov.

The next morning, the fossil is back at the museum, and Naomi is cleared. Excitement fills the air as reporters and visitors crowd around in the Exhibition Hall, the fossil once again the star of the show.

But as the day unfolds, a mysterious figure, who has been watching from the shadows, approaches Parker in the museum lobby. "Detective, there's more to this story than you think," he whispers, slipping a small note into Parker's pocket before disappearing into the crowd.

Parker reads the cryptic note: "The true value lies not in the fossil, but in what it guards." His mind races with possibilities. Was the fossil a decoy? Perhaps there's another artifact, even more valuable, hidden within the museum?

The fossil is safe at last, or is it really? The thrill of the chase lingers in the air, the scent of danger still fresh, like the soil from which the fossil was unearthed.

As Parker shoves the note into his jacket pocket, his mind is racing from the brief conversation. His thoughts drift to the people he had quick interviews with—the curator, the intern, the visitors, and even the strange—looking man he has seen on Yantai's main street. All of them could be involved in some way or another, either major or minor.

That night, he vaults in through an open window of the museum's administrative wing. The fossil is back in its case, the security system once again being set into place. The museum's dim lighting makes things difficult to see, but as Parker moves towards a computer in the corner, he knows his purpose.

As he hacks through the system, he looks on at different footages that the security camera has captured. He sees from the grainy black—and—white footage that a man is there in the Exhibition Hall, yet it isn't Volkov nor is it Petrov. This man is shorter, quicker, and he moves with precise accuracy as he dodges the camera. Parker pauses when he sees something peculiar and zooms in closer. The man is wearing a ring of some kind, and there seems to be something etched onto it, like a crest.

"That's it." Parker thinks to himself, "The chase is not over yet." As he closes the computer and vaults out the window, he knows that he has to find this man—no matter what obstacles might come his way.

As he sits back down at his desk in his hotel room, his mind begins piecing together the pieces of information he just saw. The fossil was just a cover story, and there is more to this tale—something that is hidden in plain sight. The hunt is on, and Parker is more determined than ever to uncover the mysteries behind the fossil, the note, and the man with the scar that marred his face.