

Fiction

Group 1



How the Silk Road Began

German Swiss International School, Caspar Lai – 8

The cold air pierced his frozen hands; it had been an arduous few days since leaving Wuwei. They had to endure sub-zero temperatures, rain that only stopped to turn to snow and feet that had never recovered from the last round of frostbite; they knew it couldn't be much further.

The emperor had sent Zhang Qian and his men on this expedition to secure a military alliance with the Yuezhi people against the nomadic Xiongnu. He had embarked on this journey with his guide, Ganfu and 99 other men; now just 67 remained.

As they were trudging up a small incline, disaster struck. There was an earthquake. "Ahh!!" screamed Ganfu. He and Zhang leapt aside. That was close. They turned around to see that the others were not so fortunate. Many of the men had been crushed by falling rocks. We have to save them!

He knew he would need his best men and would have to use ropes, pulleys and levers to haul the weightiest of the boulders. But time was not on their side; there was a high risk of an avalanche, rockslide or even a second earthquake. Hurry Hurry! Ganfu thought to himself. As he looked up, he saw that the moon was already starting to rise up on the darkening canvas above. They frantically searched for ropes, logs and stones to carve into pulleys. In lightning quick time, they constructed a frame for the pulley mechanism and got to work.

After several hours of backbreaking work, the reality of the situation came into view. Zhang was mortified; there were many broken bones, bloody wounds and at least 25 men had been totally crushed like tomatoes.

This is a catastrophe he thought to himself. Decisive action was required. "The injured men will remain here whilst we get supplies." They hunted deer, foraged for natural remedies and looked for fresh water. The conditions were brutal and unforgiving yet they persevered and made it back, armed with supplies. This cannot be! To their astonishment the area was deserted. They scoured the area until they found a clue. He immediately recognised it. His father had told him about these Yuezhi headbands.

His thoughts were disturbed by some movements on one of the hilltops. He scanned the area and realised they were surrounded by archers. There was no escape! They all froze and yet after a deathly silence, with time standing still, the Yuezhi people lowered their weapons and approached. They kindly escorted them to their camp where they discovered the injured men receiving care. The Yuezhis only spoke Tocharian thus he had to resort to hand signals; not the easiest way to negotiate the return of his men and a military alliance. It would prove to all be in vain.

Two days later they were already heading home. There would be no military alliance this time yet they had laid the foundation for one of the most important trade routes in human history.

The Man Who Crossed the Silk Road

German Swiss International School, Dylan Fong – 7

Once upon a time, in the city of Samarkand in Uzbekistan, there lived a merchant with a big dream. He wanted to travel to a faraway place called China, use his gold to buy special goods, and bring them home to sell. But there was one big problem: he only had donkey sleighs, and the long desert was hot, dry, and full of danger.

The merchant sent his best people to search for China, but every time they returned with nothing. So he decided to try the journey himself. He walked for weeks under the burning sun. His water was almost gone, and he was very tired, but he did not give up.

One day, he saw a man lying on the sand, weak and dying from thirst. Even though the merchant hardly had any water left, he shared it with the stranger. After drinking a little, the man felt better. He told the merchant he had a map that showed the way to China and wanted to trade it for gold. The merchant was kind and gave him half of his gold. Before both of them fainted from exhaustion, the stranger warned him about ruthless thieves on the road ahead.

When the merchant woke up, the man was gone. But strangely, his water bottle was full again. He didn't understand how, but he continued his journey. Using the map, he finally reached China. There he discovered the soft and shiny fabric silk, which was more beautiful than anything he had ever seen. He traded all his gold for silk.

On his way back home, a group of thieves attacked him. They stole all his silk and left him with nothing. He was sad but thankful to be alive. As he kept walking, he met another group of thieves. They said they had robbed the thieves who took his silk. They returned half of it and said, "We only rob fairly." They also told him that the best way to avoid robbers was to pretend to be one himself.

When the merchant returned to Samarkand, he sold the silk for even more gold than he originally had. On his next trip to China, he brought a large group of people, and they all dressed like thieves. They didn't rob anyone, but no robbers dared to attack them either. He traveled many more times, traded a lot of silk, and became the richest man in all of Uzbekistan.

Years later, on the day of his son's wedding, the merchant received a surprise gift: the rest of the silk stolen from him long ago. The people who brought it revealed the truth. They were not thieves at all. The man the merchant had helped in the desert was actually a wizard. Touched by the merchant's kindness, he had sent them to protect the merchant and his family forever.

The merchant never forgot that kindness is always returned many times over.

Altan's Silk Quest

The French International School, The French International School, Edward Tsui – 7

Altan was young but he had a big dream. He lived in a caravanserai long ago in the Tang dynasty. At night, he sat by the fire with other children. They sang:

Rain from the east, sand from the west,

One treasure will help the quest.

Thread and paper, spices and corals,

Glass and gems, perfume florals,

One coral will float in the final quest.

Altan said, "I want to go! I want to find this treasure!"

He went to Chang'an. The streets had stalls selling many wares. He got a spool of thread. As he pulled the thread, a Treasure-Flower picture was revealed. It pointed to Dunhuang where to Mogao caves are. He met a monk there. The monk gave him paper. He told Altan, "Write down everything about your journey. You must find the next place that sells spices."

Later, Altan travelled to Kashgar. The air smelled like spices. His camel sneezed so loud that people laughed. A kind trader gave him corals for his thread. Altan picked three and put them in his bag. He said thank you and left.

Then, he journeyed to Samarkand. He saw beautiful blue domes. In the market, he bought glass beads and shiny lapis stones. People whispered about the treasure like in the song he sang at the caravanserai.

Altan kept going to Baghdad. There were big libraries. The air smelled like flowers. A scholar amazed by Altan's quest, gave him perfume and a scroll. He said, "You will meet the Rain Master in the East."

Altan sold his camel for a horse. He rode to Antioch in the East. At the gate, an old man had a bucket. Altan put the corals in. Two sank, one floated. The man was the Rain Master! Altan gave him a special coral so the Rain Master gave him a riddle:

I am small but I am powerful,

I make mountains but I can move like water too.

What am I?

Altan replied, "Sand!"

The Rain Master pointed west. Altan knew where he was going - The Taklamakan desert. He was born there. He was named after Altun Shan. It means Golden Mountain.

Near Miran, a lady waited. She said to Altan, "You have collected the treasures like in the song. I will show you the greatest one now."

The dunes opened. There were mulberry trees and silkworms. The silkworms made shiny threads. This is how 'Silk Road' got its name.

Altan went home to the caravanserai and wrote his story. The children sang a new song:

Altan found silk, soft as clouds,

A treasure making happy crowds,

Spice and stone, glass and scroll,

Perfume and gems, a story is told.

Star Chart of the Silk Road

Victoria Shanghai Academy, Victoria Shanghai Academy, Elsa Liu – 9

Ten-year-old Atu had never seen so many stars.

The camel bell echoed hollowly in the silence of the Taklamakan Desert. He clutched the oilcloth-wrapped astrolabe to his chest—the last bronze star chart crafted by his grandfather, and the only hope for the caravan to cross the “Sea of Death.” Three days ago, the leader had fallen ill with fever, leaving only Atu and this old, road-wise camel in the vast ocean of sand.

“Follow the Big Dipper,” his grandfather had said on his deathbed. “The star chart will show you the way to the Moon Well.”

But there was no moon tonight, and the wind-whipped sand blotted out the sky. Trembling, Atu unfolded the astrolabe. Its delicate engravings gleamed faintly under the starlight. He remembered the warmth of his grandfather’s hand as he etched the final arc on a spring night in Chang’an, when the pomegranate flowers were in full bloom.

Suddenly, a wolf’s howl pierced the distance.

The camel shifted uneasily, tugging at its reins. Atu’s heart pounded like a drum. He traced the twenty-eight lunar mansions marked on the astrolabe by Persian astrologers, his finger resting on the “Well” constellation—according to the chart, the Moon Well lay just ten li southwest, behind the yardang landforms. But the sandstorm had erased all landmarks.

The howls drew nearer.

Atu took a deep breath and pressed his face against the cool bronze. On the back of the astrolabe, his fingers brushed a shallow, faint engraving: not a constellation, but a simplified pomegranate flower—the emblem of his grandfather’s courtyard back home. In a flash of understanding, he realized—the star chart guides the heavens, but blood remembers the way home.

He abandoned his search for the Well constellation and instead recalled a Qiuci folk tune his grandfather used to hum. Hidden in the melody was a rhythm: three quick steps, a pause, like the cadence of a caravan trekking over dunes. Following his intuition, Atu guided the reins, and the camel obediently turned. Before dawn, a damp scent reached his feet.

It was not the Moon Well.

It was a small oasis surrounded by saxaul trees, its spring no larger than a bowl, yet the water was clear and sweet. Carved into a stone beside the spring was the same pomegranate flower—thirty years ago, his grandfather’s caravan had rested here.

As Atu knelt to drink, the first light of dawn tinged the eastern sky. The wind died down and the full heavens slowly unveiled themselves. Raising the astrolabe to compare, he saw that the Well constellation was, in fact, in the opposite direction.

The first ray of sunlight illuminated the bronze astrolabe, filling the grooves of its constellations with gold. At last, Atu understood: a guide more reliable than the stars is the memory and love engraved in one’s bloodline. He carefully put away the star chart and bowed deeply toward the caravan’s original destination.

Ahead, morning light of the Silk Road spread across the sandy sea.

Silk Beyond the Glass

Victoria Shanghai Academy, Victoria Shanghai Academy, Emma Shi – 7

Today, our class visited the Hong Kong Palace Museum, after a year of learning about different eras in China. As we walked the winding pathways, my classmates rushed towards the Terracotta Warriors, while a small section of the Tang Dynasty drew me in. In a glass display, stood an opulent, multi-coloured hanfu made of silk. A big red sign said DO NOT TOUCH. I glanced around. The room was empty. I knew I shouldn't, but my hand moved on its own. I reached past the velvet rope, expecting to meet cold glass. Instead, my fingers passed straight through. Gold flickers began to grow around my arm. The silk brushed my skin—cool, soft, alive. Light exploded around me. I squeezed my eyes shut as the illumination devoured me whole.

I adjusted to my surroundings, realising the museum was gone—now, a garden of willow trees and lotus ponds replaced it. A mixture of tunes danced its way into my ears—flutes and gentle drums. My school uniform was replaced with the colourful hanfu that now draped over me. A girl in matching silk appeared on the path. She looked my age, her hair coiled with jade pins. The girl smiled and bowed.

“I'm Mei. My father trades silk along the Great Silk Road. You're wearing one of our finest pieces!”

I looked down at the glowing hanfu, then back at her—confused. “I'm Emma...I have no idea how I got here...”

Mei laughed. “The silk often chooses curious hearts. Come!”

I couldn't tell if Mei's words held hidden meaning or just teasing, but I decided to feed my curiosity. I trailed behind as she guided us to a queue of camels loaded with bolts of shiny fabric. Within the vibrant market, merchants from far-flung lands traded spices, jewels, and tales alike. Folks of every colour and language exchanged smiles and lively conversations. In that moment, I saw how the threads of the Silk Road had woven not only friendships but also culture across the east and west.

Suddenly, a thief snatched a bolt of crimson silk and ran.

“Stop, thief!” Mei cried.

“Use the ropes!” I shouted. Together with Mei and other children, we stretched the ropes across an alley. The thief tripped, dropping the silk. Rather than punishing him, the merchant offered him honest work instead.

That evening, around a fire, drinking brick tea, Mei said, “The Silk Road teaches us that everything is connected. Stealing breaks those connections, while sharing makes them stronger.”

I thought of how I'd touched the museum hanfu against the rules. Agreeing, I nodded. “We must protect history's treasures so their stories will last forever.”

The hanfu began to shimmer. Golden lights swirled, and I was back in the museum, in my uniform. In my pocket lay one crimson silk thread. Later, I told my class about the Silk Road's true magic: respect, cultural exchange and friendship. Curiosity is tremendous, but true adventure lies in honouring the past so everyone can enjoy it.

A Memorable Expedition

Victoria Shanghai Academy, Victoria Shanghai Academy, Wong, Chun Yu Arnold – 7

“Vroom! Vroom!” After the jeep travelled for three long hours, Photographer Xing finally arrived at Dunhuang. The morning breezes blew, and the hood windbell rang, making a jingling sound. At the entrance of the Mogao Caves, he was fascinated by this UNESCO Heritage, a spectacular structure on the Silk Road.

Xing investigated the cave, which was dim but enormous. On the ceiling and the side walls, painted hundreds of pictures of different Buddhas, and traders playing antique musical instruments. The environment was peaceful.

Suddenly, something glowing caught his eyes. Intrigued, Xing stepped cautiously towards the painting, reaching out his fingers. In a split second, his hand was tightly glued to the sparkly stone. He tried, but failed to pull away. He was petrified. Meanwhile, the light grew brighter, then even brighter. He got sucked in...

It was unexpectedly quiet.

Xing opened his eyes, looked around, and was taken by surprise. He had an odd-looking outfit and the surroundings were different. A voice broke the silence, “Hurry up, we have to get to the traders’ station before sunset!” The photographer rushed out of the cave, and in front of him was a caravan of traders and camels carrying silk and porcelain. The leader was slim and tall, with tawny beige skin and curly black hair tied up in a bun. He wore a long blue-checked robe with a red belt and a pocket knife on the side.

“Where are we heading to?” asked Xing nervously, reaching for his phone which showed no signal.

“Towards Taklamakan Desert, to trade for spices and tea,” explained the leader as he spearheaded under the blistering sun. “Our families have been doing this since the Tang Dynasty began, for 30 years now. My father said the route is 6,000 kilometers from here to the West, to a place called Constantinople. I want to go there some day too, but we only work in this region.”

“Tang? So this must be thousand years ago. Did I travel back in time?” Xing murmured, opening his eyes wide in disbelief.

While he was catching up, they came across a group of fierce-looking and sneaky bandits armed with weapons. Instantaneously, the traders started to defend. As they fought, their weapons made clinking sounds and sand was sifting around. Despite an arduous struggle, the bandits were still stronger than the traders. Xing felt scared and ran behind the camels, when his camera accidentally dropped and he suddenly had an idea. He seized his camera, rushed back to the battlefield, and flashed it. Surprisingly, the bandits were scared and were sent scurrying in different directions. The traders celebrated and the evening was a campfire filled with laughter.

Three months later, Xing looked back at his photograph collection, remembering his journey to the past in the Silk Road. What had happened remained unknown, but he would never forget his interaction with the traders, nor the unanticipated sandstorm that brought him back to the present. Xing couldn’t help but smiled.

My Fantastic Dreams

YK Pao School Shanghai, YK Pao School Shanghai, Rosabelle Lo – 9

One day, I decided to go to the library to read some books. I noticed a very thick, old book on top of a bookshelf. I asked the librarian to help me get it. Taking a closer look at the cover, I saw a man who looked like an explorer standing there. He looked very strong and formidable. There were camels and other men standing behind him. The book was called *Marco Polo's Travels*.

I got interested and started to read the book. But it was very dusty and smelled strange. As I skipped through some pages, I couldn't help sneezing. So I returned the book and went back home.

That night, I went to bed and dreamed about the seventeen-year-old Marco Polo! He was younger and much skinnier than the man on the book's cover. He asked me a lot of questions, like how long it would take to get to China, what it would be like, and what he could get there. He seemed to be very interested in the journey.

But I couldn't answer any of them because I hadn't really read the pages I had skipped. I also asked him some questions, like "How are you feeling?" and "What is it like in Venice?" He only said that he was a bit nervous but also very excited! I told him I would find out the answers to his questions. Then I woke up from my dream and, surprisingly, it was morning!

I got up and hurried to the library for the book. This time I was so absorbed in the book that I didn't notice hours had passed. I peeked out of the window and saw the moon. I dashed into my room, tucked myself comfortably into my blanket, and fell asleep. In my dream, I saw Marco Polo again! I was so eager to tell him what I had found: that it would take four years to travel from Venice to Dadu, the capital of China, and the journey was over 10,000 kilometers.

Marco Polo shushed me and whispered that I should look around. I suddenly noticed that Marco Polo looked much different from the last time I had seen him. He said that he was 21 years old then and that he could show me around and take me to Kublai Khan. Realizing that we were already in Dadu then, I was really excited!

That was a moment I had always been looking for! I saw red carpet lying on the ground welcoming us. At the end of the carpet sat Kublai Khan. Marco Polo and I were invited to be the Khan's messengers! So we traveled around and visited different places in and beyond China.

At last, I heard the alarm clock and had to wake up from my dream. I went to the library and kept reading *Marco Polo's Travels*. The story in my dream was just same! Look, I was mentioned in it too!

My Adventure to the Past

YK Pao School Shanghai, Tavis Lo – 7

One day in the forest, I found a strange machine. I stepped inside, though I did not know what it was. Out of curiosity, I pressed a red button, and it took me back in time!

I met a man who was looking at a very old map. He noticed me and introduced himself as Zhang Qian. He told me that Emperor Wu had sent him on a mission to the Yuezhi to form an alliance and fight against the Xiongnu together. Zhang Qian invited me to join him, and I said, “OK.” But I was worried about the dangers along the way. Zhang Qian smiled and said that it would be fine because he was going to bring 100 men. With me on his delegation, he would then have 101.

Unfortunately, on the trip, we were captured by the Xiongnu. Zhang Qian helped me, I was the only one who managed to escape. I ran back to the time machine, thinking I could get help from modern times. I started the machine, and it brought me back to the present.

I looked around; the time machine had taken me to my home! I grabbed my robot and an axe from my dad’s toolbox and hurried back. I was so eager to help Zhang Qian. I knew that he was the pioneer of the Silk Road, and without him, the East and the West might not have known each other for centuries.

After I traveled back, I was surprised to find that ten years had passed since Zhang Qian and his delegation were captured! “Oh no, it’s too late!” I murmured. I sneaked into the Xiongnu camp, only to find that Zhang Qian was still imprisoned. He had never surrendered!

I had to help him! I sent my robot to throw a stone at the Xiongnu guards. They saw the robot and all ran after it. I went in and cut the chains of the cell with my axe. “Let’s get back on the Silk Road,” I said.

“What is the silk road?” Zhang Qian looked curious. I suddenly remembered that the name Silk Road wasn’t invented until the 19th century. So I said, “The Silk Road is an international trade route between Asia and Europe. Thanks to this road, people in different countries can exchange goods like silk, tea, spices, and so on. You are the pioneer who will make it happen!”



Creative Writing
Fiction

Group 1

The Silk Handkerchief

Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Cheung Tsz Kiu Chloe – 7

It was a summer holiday. Tsz Kiu, Sze Wan and their parents went to China to visit their beloved granny, who always told interesting stories.

After lunch their parents went to the farm while the girls ran around the house. Tsz Kiu stopped at the bookshelf, looking for a book, instead she found an old map.

“What’s this, Granny?” Tsz Kiu asked, holding the map. Granny pointed and said, “Long ago the Silk Road wasn’t just one road. It had many paths. Traders on camels carried silk, paper and spices between China and faraway lands.” The girls listened closely.

Later in the attic they found a treasure box with half of the key inserted. “I wonder what’s inside,” Tsz Kiu said as she inserted and turned the key.

A loud noise pulled them into the box. When they opened their eyes, they were in a desert. The sun was like a huge golden fireball beamed down on them. The caravan of camels passed fully loaded.

“Who are you? You look funny,” a boy asked. A man beside him smiled kindly and asked, “Are you lost?” Then he looked up and down at them and murmured, “You look familiar... almost like someone I once knew.” Sze Wan showed the key. “This key brought us here,” she said.

“Come with us. We will keep you safe,” the man said. They joined the camel caravan.

During the day, they watched camels walk across sand dunes. At night, they set a camp fire and sat under stars to tell stories.

The girls wondered what the Silk Road carried. So the man told them the shining silk went westward while wool, gold and silver came to the east. “Silk threads woven into clothings were transported to other parts of the world. Besides, people also carry tea, porcelain, spices and jade.” He pointed to the camel caravan who were trained to carry heavy loads.

One quiet night, a stranger sneaked into camp and stole the goods and the key placed next to Sze Wan’s pillow. “Thief!” the boy shouted. They chased him across the desert. After a long run, the thief slipped and tumbled, then caught by the man and he took back the key.

Before they left, the man handed each girl a silk handkerchief embroidered with ‘Cheung’ in Chinese. “A gift for you. We hope to see you again soon,” he said.

Then a strong wind twirled and spun, the key glowed and soon they were back in Granny’s attic.

Granny heard the noise and ran up to the attic.

“You won’t believe it, Granny,” they cried. “We went to the Silk Road. We saw tea, silk, porcelain and camel caravans. Someone even gave us these handkerchiefs.”

Granny gasped, then opened the treasure box and took out a handkerchief exactly like theirs with a knowing smile.

New Tales of China's Silk Road

Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Chow Nok Hei Oliver – 9

Light flickered through my eyelids. My head was pounding with a fiery headache. I forced my eyelids to open. “Ashley? Is that you?” A familiar face was slowly coming into focus. “Yes, where are we?” My mouth was dry, my throat raspy. “I don’t know.” Ashley replied vaguely. I blinked again, taking in the view. We were standing on top of a small sand dune, golden yellow against the fading sunset. “We’re in the desert,” I said, astonished. “How are we ever going to get out!” Ashley stomped her feet on the golden mound, sending loose sand down the hill. “Look!” I pointed at the distance, “Someone’s coming!” From the valley came one, then two, then three, and finally a whole company. The company came on camels, with brightly coloured cargoes strapped onto their backs. “Come on.” I said to Ashley, “Let’s go.” “Hello,” said the man, “We’re heading to Aleppo, do you want to come?” “Yes,” Ashley said enthusiastically, accepting the ride.

Aleppo was a large city connecting the east and west. The market was bustling with different people from all over the world. “This is the middle of the Silk Road,” said the Chinese man, “We come here from our city of Chang’an. We’re just resting on our way to the Roman Empire.” The man also showed us many Arabic cultures in the city, like snake charming. We also saw Chinese traders selling silk, tea and porcelain to the Arabs.

After our short rest at Aleppo, we travelled to the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire, the fortress of Constantinople. Constantinople was a magnificent city, with towering walls and marble houses. We strolled into the city of Constantinople, where merchants were trading silk and other Chinese goods in return for precious silver coins. We walked inside a broad villa where we took out our silk. “Where are we selling them?” I asked, pointing at the silk. “At the busiest part of Constantinople, of course the Grand Bazaar!” the Chinese man said. The Bazaar was enormous, with every kind of spice, jewellery, fur and antique available. We sold our silk, porcelain and tea for gold and silver and started our journey back.

After selling most of our silk, we rode on our camels back to Chang’an. The stunning sunset painted the muddy ground golden. Once we reached our homeland, China, we saw horses and soldiers everywhere. We strolled around and talked, “This is the west market of Chang’an. Also, one of the largest and busiest markets.” “Chang’an is so busy!!!” I answered. “Yeah! Chang’an has the.....” All of a sudden, everything went black.

My eyes fluttered open, and I looked around. The TV was playing the national PLK CKY news. I recounted my adventures to mom and dad, but nobody believed me. But Ashley both knew it was real.

The Silk Road Adventures

Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Lo Cheuk Wing Hailey – 8

Sheldon was nine and loved adventure more than any other thing. One night, one of his grandma's ancient silver pendants started glowing bright yellow and started blinking. A mysterious deep voice whispered, "Kiddo, do you want an adventure?" Sheldon grabbed his backpack with a food box, some stationery, the blinking pendant and jumped inside a tremendous ancient vase.

WHOOSH! He landed in a dusty city called Acre, in the year 1271. Three men on camels were debating about how to get back to their hometown, Venice. A young gentleman wearing a fur cap and red robes, holding a bow and a sword, looked worried. "Hi! I'm Sheldon from the future 2025!" Sheldon shouted. Two machos reached for their swords, but Marco laughed and spoke. "Relax guys, he is harmless. Hello, my name is Marco Polo and these two are my helpers, Jack and Phil." Sheldon rang his bell, and he couldn't believe his eyes that in front of him was the widely known as the most famous western traveler. Without a doubt, Sheldon became the fourth Polo member. He rode the smallest camel named Spidey.

They crossed a giant red desert. One time Marco was starving, Sheldon shared his magic food box that never ran out of food. The box would have food refilled infinitely. Marco liked to call it "The witchcraft box"

At night, the sky was full of sparkling stars as Sheldon had never witnessed. He drew some new constellations, like a desert camel, a poisonous red snake and an angry Marco etc.) and Marco duplicated them into his special notebook, it later known as "The Travels of Marco Polo"

They got lost in the scary Taklamakan Desert. Jack and Phil were concerned, but Sheldon recalled following the North Star rule from school. "We should follow that one and we will be safe. Please trust me" he said. As expected, they came back on track after they got lost for almost two days. Everyone cheered and referred to him as Captain Sheldon. In a green oasis, they met some foreign traders selling merchandise. Sheldon traded some of his stationery for a heavenly horse. Marco traded silk for Buddhism.

One day they reached the summer palace of the great Khan. The Khan had a swimming pool bigger than a stadium! Marco told stories and Sheldon drew pictures on rice paper. The Khan laughed so hard. He gave them both golden medals as an award.

After a few months, it was time for Sheldon's silver pendant to glow again. On the last night Marco gave Sheldon his favorite red fur hat. "For my bravest little brother in the world," he said. Sheldon hugged him tight. "You're going to write the best book ever, and kids like me will read it seven hundred years later!" The yellow light came, and Sheldon waved until Marco had just disappeared from his sight.

He popped back into his present living room. On his dining table sat Marco's red hat and a note in funny writing:

"Thank you for showing me the way, Captain Sheldon. Keep exploring and having curiosity!

Your best friend forever, Marco Polo, 1271"

Li Xiao Long's Journey on the Silk Road

Shanghai Singapore International School, Erlin Fan – 7

“Li Xiao Long, are you ready to leave yet? Sunrise is almost here.” called Chang’e to her husband.

“Yes, yes! I’m done packing the donkey with the silk,” he replied.

“I’ve got rice, meat and a cake to eat on your journey,” Chang’e called back.

On the dusty path from Xian (Chang’an) on a hot dry morning, Xiao Long felt excited as he thought about how much money he could make. Happily, he thought about the food and goods he could bring home to his wife and children.

Sadly, Xiao Long thought about how many months it would be until he saw his family again. The Silk Road was enormous, like a long winding snake and crowded, like a stall selling dumplings cheaply!

After six long months, Xiao Long had become an experienced trader who had sold most of his silk for a good price. He had also bought surprises and goods to take back home to his family. They would be so pleased!

Many moons came before Xiao Long finally arrived in the city of Luoyang, a busy city with many traders. Xiao Ming and stood before the impressive city gates, along with hundreds of caravans carrying silk and other fine goods, foods and materials. Of course, Xiao Long knew this was a key city in the Silk Road. His clever plan was to sell the rest of his silk and head home to Chang’e. He missed his family.

Unfortunately, Xiao Long found it much harder than he had planned. He tried to sell his last silk, but no one bought it. People said, ‘Too costly!’ Li Xiao Long’s heart sank. Early one morning he was sitting at a café, sipping hot tea, sighing about his problem, when he saw a familiar face, a friend he had met months ago from Europe also travelling on the same road.

“My old friend! It has been a long time since I saw you,” Lorry exclaimed as he hugged Xiao Long.

“Indeed and I am hoping you can help me,” said Li Xiao Long. “I need to sell my last bags of silk before going home. Are you keen to buy?”

“Of course, I’m just looking for silk of excellent quality,” smiled Lorry.

The next day, after a large breakfast, Li Xiao Long finally packed his donkey for the last time. Excitedly, he thought about buying more gifts for his family but decided he had enough. He smiled as he pictured his children running to him. He could almost smell the warm cake at home. He jumped on his donkey and followed the dusty, winding road north to home.

Fiction

Group 2



The Journey Which Does Not End

Diocesan Boys' School Primary Division, Lau Yuet – 12

The wind and sand pummelled my face as I spurred Shothera, my horse, to go faster. I turned my head, and saw my brother emerging from the waves of sand that surrounded us. Comforted by his presence, I turned back and continued to ride.

“Halt!” After a while, the words from my brother, Chang Er, rang in my ears. “Halt! Aliraca is hurt, and she cannot go any further.”

I pulled on the reins, turned back, and saw that his horse, Aliraca, had a long wound on her belly, and her leg was broken, so I suspect she had fallen on her side.

“Only another three kilometers to the oasis!” I shouted over the howling wind, straining to hear my voice. “We will heal her there.”

“No, brother; she has to be put down,” he shouted glumly. “She is greatly pained.”

I understood, as Aliraca was indeed more wounded than I thought at first. I spoke no more, only waved my hand, and turned away to re-tie Aliraca’s wagon to Shothera. A whine sounded behind me, and I knew that Aliraca was gone. I closed my eyes shortly, then climbed onto Shothera’s saddle, while my brother climbed into one of the wagons.

We arrived at the oasis later than I would have liked, due to the extra load Shothera had to carry. Dingy tents littered the grass there, and some sleepless travellers crowded around a large bonfire. I ignored them completely. However, Chang Er, as the talkative man he was growing up to be – unlike me – sat down next to them and began to pester them about their travels.

“Where are you going?” Asked one of them.

“To the western countries. Our final destination is –” Chang Er replied, but one of them cut him off.

“Do not, my fair friends; we had the same thoughts as you, but bandits ambushed us. Do not go!” He said, much agitated.

“What do you think, my brother? What do you think?” My brother turned to me and asked, fear evident on his face.

“We go,” I said. “We go.”

Chang Er started to protest, and any other brother – any other better elder brother, I realised now – would have listened, but I, a cold man and not of words, shunned him there and then.

“Do as you wish. I set out no matter what.”

The next day I did just that. I left my brother his wagon, so it would not hinder me – I wouldn’t have to share my future wealth with him anyways, I thought. Then I left.

Up until noon I encountered no trouble; even the sandstorm had set. However, after a brief lunch in the middle of nowhere and continuing my journey, I soon found myself surrounded by battle-scarred folks at a random dune, far, far from the oasis I rested at last night for me to reach before they kill me. And with their raised swords and wide snarls, I won’t be surprised that they might both seek to rip me of my treasure and also quite possibly my life. I pulled on Shothera’s reins, and pulled out a hatchet I got from a blacksmith for my eighteenth birthday and prepared to fight.

Whoever strikes first has the advantage, I thought. Jumping off Shothera, I swung my axe as easily as I would swing my own hand, and embedded my axe in the head of one of the bandits. Dodging a crossbow bolt, I rolled near another and sliced him first in the chin, then in his throat.

Spinning around, I buried the axe in the chest of a third bandit, but before I could do a second strike to ensure he was dead, a sword sliced through my leather armour and pierced my left arm from behind. I delivered a backwards kick to the bandit, but he did not fall, so I spun around to strike his head with the axe.

To my surprise he blocked my swing with ease, unlike every other bandit I had killed. But I fought often, and I had met many formidable enemies before, so I pivoted and swung again. He deflected the blow, then sliced on my right arm, creating a wound five inches long.

Pain enveloped me, and he, piercing my right ribs. I panicked, because blood was slowly filling my lungs, and I couldn't breathe. My vision blurred, and a sliver of blood ran from the side of my mouth. My lungs screamed as I fought on, and once, when I was close to landing a strike, I ran out of oxygen and flopped onto the ground, right in front of him.

And at one point, my memories overlapped with my vision.

In my memories, my father, drunk, swung his cane at me.

The bandit swung his broadsword at my head.

I blocked the cane with my right hand.

I faintly stuck out my hand to block.

The sharpest pain sliced through my mind as my right arm was sliced off by the bandit. I screamed out, and all my organs clenched from the intense pain. I was about to black out, the bandit was about to land his final strike, when a cutlass beheaded him.

It was my brother. He had, as I later learned, bought a horse from a traveller, and came after me, just in time to save my life. But I did not hear him. The world spun, and darkness defeated me.

When I awoke, I was back at the oasis, healed. Afterwards I sobbed like a newborn, with my emotions overwhelming me. My arm was gone, but that was the least of my worries now. I was alive.

And after a few days for me to recover, my brother came to me, during which I thanked him for saving me and apologised for my harsh treatment of him.

He smiled like a child promised candy, and asked me a question.

“Do you want to go on?”

And I said yes.

Li Wei's Journey on the Silk Road

Diocesan Boys' School Primary Division, Li Tsun Nip Priam – 11

In the vibrant and bustling city of Chang'an, a merchant named Li Wei prepared for a momentous journey along the legendary Silk Road. The air was filled with the scent of spices and the sounds of merchants calling out to potential customers, creating a symphony of commerce and culture. Li Wei was known throughout the city for his exquisite silk, a fabric so luxurious that it was sought after by nobles and traders alike. Each bolt of silk he packed was a testament to his craftsmanship, shimmering with hues of deep indigo and rich crimson.

As the sun rose, casting a warm golden light over the city, Li Wei felt a sense of excitement and trepidation. He had heard tales of the vast distances and the many challenges that lay ahead—treacherous mountains, scorching deserts, and the ever-present threat of bandits who lurked in the shadows, waiting for unsuspecting travellers. Yet, he was resolute, driven by the desire to expand his trade and connect with distant cultures.

With his cart laden with silk, Li Wei bade farewell to his family and set out on the narrow pathways leading from Chang'an. The journey began with a sense of adventure, the anticipation of meeting new people and discovering unfamiliar lands filling his heart.

As he ventured further into the wilderness, the terrain became increasingly rugged. The roads twisted and turned, often leading him through narrow gorges where the sun barely pierced through the rocky cliffs. Li Wei's determination was tested as he faced the elements—harsh winds whipped through the valleys, and sudden storms threatened to halt his progress. Yet, he pressed on, motivated by the thought of the treasures he could acquire and the stories he would gather along the way.

One fateful afternoon, as Li Wei navigated a steep incline, he suddenly found himself surrounded by a group of bandits. They emerged from the shadows like phantoms, their eyes gleaming with greed. "Your silk belongs to us now," one of them snarled, brandishing a crude weapon. Li Wei's heart raced, but he knew he had to think quickly.

Instead of cowering in fear, Li Wei stood tall and addressed the bandits with confidence. "What if we trade?" he proposed, "I can offer you silk and tell you stories from the lands I visit. In return, allow me safe passage."

The bandits paused in what they were doing, intrigued by his offer. Li Wei blew a sigh of relief, about what he promised the bandits. He told them all the tales he knew, mostly about his daring expedition, and the dangers he encountered, he also handed them a enormous bag of silk, the bandits was thrilled about his tales and surprised about the silk, they agreed to let him pass, having gained a newfound respect for the merchant.

Continuing his journey, Li Wei soon reached a serene monastery nestled among the mountains. There, he met a wise monk named Xuanzang, who had travelled far and wide in search of knowledge. The monk welcomed Li Wei with open arms and offered him food and shelter for the night. As they sat together, Li Wei shared his ambitions and the challenges he faced on the road.

Xuanzang listened intently, nodding thoughtfully. "The journey of a merchant is not solely about the goods exchanged but also about the understanding and respect you foster with others," he advised. "Every trade is an opportunity to create bonds that can last a lifetime."

Inspired by Xuanzang's wisdom, Li Wei resumed his travels with a renewed sense of confidence. He understood that his journey was not just about silk and spices but about the connections he would forge and the stories he would share.

As he approached a bustling market governed by a local dynasty, the sights and sounds overwhelmed him. Merchants from various regions displayed their wares, and the air was thick with the scent of spices and incense. Li Wei felt a surge of excitement as he set up his stall, carefully arranging his silk to catch the eye of potential buyers.

With each passing hour, traders approached, curious about the quality of his silk. Li Wei engaged them in conversation, sharing stories of his journey and the craftsmanship behind his products. His genuine approach and the tales of far-off lands captivated his audience, leading to successful negotiations. The silk, once merely a product, transformed into a symbol of connection and cultural exchange.

Among the traders was a merchant from Persia, who spoke of exotic spices that could revolutionize the culinary traditions of Li Wei's homeland. The two negotiated enthusiastically, exchanging goods and ideas, and Li Wei left with not only spices but also a friendship that would benefit both men in their future endeavours.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, casting a warm glow over the marketplace, Li Wei secured not only the spices and treasures he had sought but also the respect and camaraderie of fellow merchants. The bonds he formed transcended borders, creating a network of support that would benefit all involved.

With his cart laden with goods and his heart full of stories, Li Wei began his journey back to Chang'an. The road felt different this time; he was no longer just a merchant but a storyteller, carrying the essence of the Silk Road within him.

Upon returning to his city, Li Wei was greeted as a celebrated merchant. He shared his adventures—the bandits he had outsmarted, the wisdom of the monk, and the vibrant cultures he had encountered. His tales inspired others to embark on their own journeys, embracing the spirit of the Silk Road—a pathway of trade, culture, and shared humanity.

In the heart of Chang'an, Li Wei became a figure of admiration, embodying the timeless lessons of the Silk Road. His journey taught him that true wealth was not merely measured in gold or goods but in the connections forged and stories shared along the way.

As the seasons changed and the years passed, Li Wei continued to travel the Silk Road, each journey enriching his spirit and expanding his horizons. He became a living testament to the enduring legacy of the Silk Road—a journey that continues to weave together the threads of humanity, culture, and trade across time and space.

The Last Caravan

Diocesan Girls' Junior School, Amanda Chu – 12

The silence was the first thing I noticed, the empty roads were the next.

For fifty years, the caravanserai at Khotan had been a beautiful racket. A symphony of camel bells, of Bashir grumbling at a stubborn hoof, the sizzle of fat from a merchant's skillet, the laughter of men who'd crossed deserts to share a flask of wine. Now, only the wind. A dry, lonely sound, scraping at the gates.

I ran a hand over Anahita's soft nose. Her breath was warm, her humps full. She was ready. We all were. Twenty camels, ten men, a fortune in Khotan jade strapped to their backs. A final run to Samarkand.

But my boy, 18-year-old Jun, stood in the gateway, blocking the sun. "Don't do this, Father."

I didn't need to look at him to see his face—the smooth skin untouched by desert sun, the eyes already counting profit and loss like the port-city merchants he admired. My son had always detested the roads, especially after what had happened with his other father-figure, Yusuf. Yusuf had been taking care of him since my boy was born — after I had rescued him from the slave trader in the Gobi Desert, hiding him in my gear when the trader had come knocking. Ever since then, Yusuf had felt like he had an unpaid debt, and decided to fulfil it by taking care of Jun.

However, I suppose Jun's hatred of the roads started there. It was my fault. I had abandoned those eager eyes when they need me most, and when Yusuf suggested I bring Jun along, I lashed out. I told Yusuf to try the road himself first. If he succeeded, I would bring Jun. If not... nothing more needed to be said. Yusuf died on that trip and I brought his body home and laid it on the rug.

"You see," I said, "People who take the road end up like this." That was Jun's turning point. He developed a cold demeanour. We grew distant. There was not a day on the road when I had not been ridden with guilt.

Jun's voice brought me out of my trance. "The Portuguese ships," he said, his voice too calm. "They carry more in one hold than you can in ten trips. No bandits. No warlords. No... this." He gestured at the empty courtyard devoid of people, of life, of laughter.

"They carry things, Jun," I said, my voice rough. "They don't carry the story of the Roman coin I got for a song and a smile. They don't carry the taste of the flatbread that Sogdian woman taught your mother to make."

"It's a dead road," he said, and the pity in his voice was a knife to the gut.

I turned to my men. Lei, who'd lost an eye to a bandit's arrow. Old Man Bashir, who could read the stars like a love letter. They weren't ghosts. They were one of the last true things among world that was forgetting itself.

"We go," I said. The words felt heavy.

The journey was a walk through a dying house. We passed the caravanserai at Cherchen. Its roof had fallen in. The well was a mouth full of sand. In Dunhuang, the great Buddha smiled down on empty streets.

The end came at the Miran spring. It was dust. Just a patch of cracked, white earth. We dug with our hands but found only more dust. The life was gone from the place.

That night, Lei spat into the fire. "The world's broken, Kael. It's all gone to sea."

I didn't answer. I went to my pack and pulled out a small, lacquered box. It held a feather from a Caspian bird. A faded sketch of a camel, drawn by a man with eyes the color of a summer sky. A recipe for Sogdian bread, the ink smudged by someone's tears. A single, worn Roman coin.

"This," I told them, my throat tight. "This is what we traded. Not just silk for silver. We traded pieces of the world. We sat at fires and learned that a man from the other end of the earth fears the same dark, loves his children the same way, laughs at the same stupid jokes. That's the road."

We turned back.

Weeks later, I stood again in the silence of Khotan. I didn't bother unloading the jade. I took my box and I buried it deep in the earth near the stables.

Jun found me. He didn't say "I told you so." He just put a hand on my shoulder. I was surprised.

"It's not the ships, Jun," I whispered. "It's the step. We've forgotten how to take the first step into the unknown. We'd rather stay in our own safe courtyards."

I stared at the sun setting over the Taklamakan. A road I'd walked a hundred times. A road that no longer was.

"Jun," I said, "let me tell you a story."

"There's a man they write about," I said. "Zhang Qian. They call him a hero because he came back empty-handed from the west."

I looked at Jun. "We who knew the road tell a different story. Not of kings, but of a parched man saved by a stranger's last water. Of a cold night where a rival trader shared a felt blanket just to hear a joke."

I leaned closer. "When the Huns took him, a family of potters lied to raiders at their door. They weren't protecting an envoy. They were protecting the man who'd mended their cart."

I placed a hand on his arm. "His road wasn't mapped by scholars. It was woven from a thousand small kindnesses between people who knew the desert claims you if you face it alone."

"Do you understand now?"

Jun's gaze shifted to the darkening dunes. "Yes, Father," he whispered. I thought I saw a tear glisten near his eye.

Perhaps there was still some hope after all.

Camels On the Silk Road: Tales of Trade

Diocesan Girls' Junior School, Ellerie Lau – 10

“Move it, you lazy camel! Hurry up!” threatened the merchant, holding a whip that seemed to be made of fire. My head was spinning from the heat as I staggered forward on the scorching-hot sand. I tried to catch up to my best friend Mantou, who was trailing up front with the others in the caravan, but my head filled with daydreams about my herd, free to wander while I suffered with heat and devastation.

“If he had to carry 600 pounds of goods every single day, he would complain too!” I know I shouldn’t, but I couldn’t help cursing the merchant. “Stop complaining, Fuzai!” Mantou bellowed. “We will soon arrive at Dunhuang, the best oasis town! You can drink as much water as you want!”

Ever since my great-great-great-great grandparents, our herd had been trained to carry heavy loads of luxury goods like lightweight silk, precious jewels, delicate tea, and flavourful spice across the Gobi Desert. Each journey took days if not months, and it was exhausting, even for us camels.

A cool breeze soothed my overheated soul. I looked up and admired the beautiful Milky Way. Just as I was drifting into dreamland, I heard a scream. The rude merchant who had handled me was bitten by a snake while sleeping! The guards of the caravan hadn’t noticed the hissing of the Gobi Pit Viper as it slithered away into the deep dark. The shudders of the man only reminded me of how dangerous the desert was.

“Fear not! We can use acupuncture to stop the spread of the venom and the pain!” a medical practitioner exclaimed, pulling out some needles. At that moment, our caravan leader took out a small vial of shiny clear blue liquid. “Wait! I have this potion with healing powers from the last trade, that for sure will save him. Let me help!” Well, that merchant was lucky. Even though he was particularly mean to us camels, he was fortunate enough to get the best help from all the kind souls on the journey.

When I awoke the next day, the whole oasis was in an uproar. As it was nearly Chinese New Year, a huge market was bustling with excitement, where merchants from different regions could buy and sell their goods. Tons of caravans loaded with diverse treasures approached, settling down at Dunhuang.

I caught a strong whiff of spices, sneezing as I walked, hearing a merchant crying out, “Get your exotic spices here! We have saffron, cardamom... name it and we have it!” As I looked around, I caught a glimpse of some ladies gathering near a stall, dabbing some pink powder on their cheeks, and sniffing the strong aromas of perfumes. Nearby, another stall was stocked full of colourful, flowy silk garments. We walked along the streets, passing a stall stacked high with sweet pomegranates, grapes and melons. Every stall had its own unique touch, making them festive and joyful, ready for the New Year.

After the merchants unloaded the treasures from their far-away homelands, the other camels and I quickly formed a bond, eagerly sharing about our travels and stories under the bright sun. “I just came back from Turfan, where our caravan got lost in a sandstorm, and luckily found our way back!” a dusty-looking camel named Chén boasted with recognisable

pride. “Well, I’ve been to Urumqi! We got attacked by bandits.” another camel cried with serious wide eyes. “No you haven’t!” Chén protested. Eventually the bickering grew so loud, it clashed with the music and laughter from the lively New Year market.

When the merchants finished selling their goods, we loaded up and continued on the journey back home, recharged by the break. Suddenly, I felt it. Mantou felt it. We all felt it; I saw the hairs on my fellow camels prick up in fright. It was the biggest, worst, sand-stormiest sandstorm I had ever experienced. A huge vortex of swirling sand and wind swept through the desert, swallowing our spices and tea leaves up.

“Don’t panic,” our leader shouted over the tumbling noise, looking at his herds’ worried faces. “We can figure this out! Everybody take cover under the camels!” We stood still for quite some time, feeling the heavy, dense sand hitting us.

By the time the sandstorm stopped, we realized we were lost in the dunes of sand that were towering over us. I felt a pull toward the north, and I walked toward it. “Huh? Stop walking!” the rude merchant hissed at me. “It’s the camels’ instinctive sense of direction! Come on, everybody! Follow Fuzai!” a clever young man at the back said. He reminded me of my true owner, Chu. Mantou and I had been in his herd before we were whisked away for the adventure. He was kind and caring, smart and witty like this young man. Even though he was always in a rush, he always found time to hug and chat with me and my camel friends.

We walked what seemed like forever, our tired hind legs dragging behind our sore backs. I glimpsed something that made my heart race. Could it be? I thought, my pace quickened. In the distance, I saw a faint outline of a man waving. It was my Chu! I was not the only one in a rush. The other camels also quickened their steps, and the merchants began laughing and cheering. “We’re home! We’re finally home!”

This journey had a lot of challenges – scary snake bites, huge sandstorms – but it was filled with good times too! Like the bustling New Year market, new friendships, interesting stories, and there was pride. I felt proud, knowing that I helped exchange important goods and cultures, linking the East and the West. I’m thrilled to be part of the grand journey along the Silk Road, bringing people together and sharing food, stories and ideas. Off we go!

Threads of Silk, Shadows of Sickness, and Sands of Time

Diocesan Girls' Junior School, Tong Yui – 9

The Silk Road wasn't any normal road. I knew that the moment I stepped onto the trading route, where the ground was pressed by hooves, wheels, and countless journeys. It wasn't one road at all, but a network of routes—threads of stone and sand stitching East and West together.

It carried goods—silk, spices, stones. Stories traveled here. Prayers were whispered here. Religions traveled here, passed from soul to soul like a forest fire leaping from branch to branch, tree to tree. But the Silk Road also carried sickness. Illness moved along it like an unseen passenger, riding on breath and spreading through crowds.

My name is Avice, daughter of a trader from the eastern lands. Since childhood, trading filled my life: sorting spices, counting coins, gutting and skinning the occasional animal. My father said a good trader needs two things—sharp eyes and patience. My mother added a third: caution.

Mother didn't let me step onto the Silk Road. "It's for your own good," she would say. "The Silk Road is full of bandits and desert."

But she couldn't keep me forever. I grew older, restless as a caged bird hungry for freedom. And when I was fifteen, my parents finally allowed me onto the route that had shaped their lives.

We loaded our goods onto camels and rode west, aiming for the Parthian Empire. Our caravan was small: my parents, me, five other traders, and two hired guards whose faces never relaxed.

That comfort did not last.

A sickness had struck our region before we left—smallpox, the disease families feared more than drought. At first it seemed far away, the way disasters do when they belong to someone else. Then it reached roads, markets, neighbors. It began with heat and aching bones, then a rash that rose and spread until skin looked burned. Some survived. Many didn't.

My father fell ill during the journey.

According to the map, we had to cross the Taklamakan Desert and skirt the Lop Nur region. Taklamakan sounded like a warning even when whispered. An older trader muttered, "If you enter, you might not return," as if to keep bad luck from settling on his tongue.

There was no water except what we carried. No food except venison, sweetcorn guarded like treasure. The desert taught me quickly it had no interest in bravery. It did not care who you were.

A month in the desert changed us. My lips cracked. My skin darkened. My father grew weaker, and my mother's eyes sharpened. When the last dunes fell behind us, mountains rose ahead—jagged like broken teeth. The caravan exhaled. One trader smiled and wept at once.

But our troubles were just beginning.

The mountain paths narrowed until camels walked single file. Winds shrieked through the passes, stealing warmth from our bones. Rocks shifted beneath our feet; the air thinned until every breath felt borrowed.

Then came bandits.

Our guards tensed. The traders tightened their grip on bundles. My mother pulled me close, her fingers iron around my wrist.

They did not rush. They let fear work slowly. They waited until we entered a narrow pass, leaving no escape. Then they appeared—men wrapped in dusty clothes, faces half-covered, eyes bright with greed. Their leader stepped forward and spoke calmly, as if offering trade to an old friend.

“Pay for passage,” he said, “or leave your goods and walk away.”

The leader’s gaze flicked to our camels, to the silk, to my father’s pale face. “The sick travel too,” he murmured, half amused. “Bad luck follows you.”

I understood that danger was not always an attack. Sometimes it was a choice forced on you—what to give up, what to protect, what to risk.

The bandits took our coins, then demanded one bundle of silk. My mother tightened her grip, ordering me silent. My father swallowed and nodded. Pride is costly on the Silk Road. Survival costs less.

The bandits vanished into stone like ice.

Near the Parthian towns, we rested in a shallow cave along the hillside. We had barely settled when a boy appeared—thin as a twig, shirt torn.

“Travelers,” he said. “Have you come from the east?”

My mother nodded.

He spoke fast, as if speed could soften the words. “The pox sickness... it is here now. Smallpox. It came from caravans and crowded markets. People are sick. People are dying.”

My mother pressed coins into his palm. “Go. Buy food. Buy soap if you can. Stay away from crowds.”

“The gates may close,” he warned. “They say caravans bring death.” Then he disappeared down the rocky path.

In town, barely anyone came to our stalls. The wind carried sickness through the Empire. There wasn’t a single smile.

A week after we arrived, the news came: the Silk Road was closing. Our guard returned from the gate. “They’re stopping caravans. Some roads are blocked. Some posts won’t stamp travel passes.”

“Because of bandits?” someone asked.

“Because of the pox,” he said. “Too many innocents died.” He paused. “And there’s another reason: sea routes. Ships can carry more than camel. Merchants will send goods by ocean instead of bringing them across deserts.”

“So the road is closing,” I said, “because it’s sick, and because it’s old?”

“Because it’s dangerous,” the guard answered, “and men follow profit the way thirsty travelers follow water.”

I was packing when the jade in my hand slipped and fell onto the floor. Outside, I saw the boy—talking to men with accents like his. And I recognized their voices.

They were the bandits.

I wanted to confront him. But the thought of my sick father held me back. I gathered our supplies, heart torn with betrayal, and hurried to our cave.

We left sooner than planned. My father was weak, my mother feared being trapped behind closed gates. At every inn we listened for coughing the way you listen for footsteps.

When we finally arrived home, dirt-caked and thin, my mother sank to her knees at our doorway. I thought it was gratitude.

Then the news reached us. The Silk Road had been shut down in many places—caravan posts closed, travel papers denied, routes abandoned. People said it was temporary, but their voices didn't sound convinced. Smallpox had taken too many, and fear finished the rest.

Years later, I sit by the hearth with my grandchildren crowded at my knees. They beg for stories of a road. They want to know the feel of silk sliding through your hands like water, or the way a desert can swallow a caravan and leave no grave.

And when they ask where the Silk Road is now, I speak the truth: the road lived as long as someone remembers it—passing from branch to branch, tree to tree, until the last voice falls silent.

Grapes and Silk

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Arrow Wang – 11

Ahe ran his fingers over the plump purple grapes hanging from the vine, the sunlight dappling his face. He gazed westward, where the distant mountains faded into the horizon. His eyes were soft with longing—for a grassland full of wild, plump grapes, and for a girl with bright eyes who had once saved his life.

It all began in the spring of 138 BCE. Emperor Wu gave Zhang Qian, a Lang in the court, a mission: to explore the lands far west and trade with other people with silk. Ahe, a 12-year-old servant, was the youngest in the ten-man team. His responsibility was not only to take care of Zhang Qian, but also to guard a heavy bag filled with silk bolts.

For two long months, they trekked across endless deserts, seeing no one. Until one day, when they were dragging their weary bodies forward, Ahe spotted a flash of green. He rubbed his eyes hard—there, in the distance, was a grassland covered with wild grapevines, heavy with juicy purple and green fruit. “What’s that?!” he yelled, jumping up, his eyes lit up. The tired men rushed over, their mouths watering at the sight of the sweet, glistening fruit they’d never seen before.

This was the land of the Pu Tribe. Soon, a crowd of tribespeople closed in on the strangers from the Central Plains, their eyes wide with curiosity, and their lips moving in soft whispers. Suddenly, a man strode over, his chest puffing out like a peacock. He wore a turban decorated with golden threads, a thick sheepskin robe, and a curved knife at his waist—this was the tribal leader, Tengri.

“Who are you, and what brings you to our land?” he asked in a cold, hostile voice, his jaw tightening with suspicion, his eyebrows knitting into a big frown.

Zhang Qian bowed politely and told him about their mission of exploration and trade. He asked Ahe to pull out a bolt of sky-blue silk and unfolded it. The silk shimmered in the sun, smooth and light as a cloud. The tribespeople gasped, crowding around to touch it. “Back off, you useless brats!” Tengri shouted impatiently as he ran his hands over the silk, his eyes popping. “Is this woven from the wind? It’s so soft and shiny!” He smiled at Zhang Qian. “Stay with us for ten days. Rest and enjoy our grapes.” He announced, however, a faint flicker of evil flashed across his eyes before anyone noticed.

That night, the tribe held a feast. Ahe stood by the fire, seeing people dancing and celebrating. Suddenly, a girl ran over and took his hand. She was about twelve or thirteen, with braids tied with colourful ribbons, round cheeks, and big, bright eyes. “My name is Ali, would you like to dance with me?” The little girl asked, her voice as clear and bright as a tinkling bell. Ahe grinned and nodded.

Over the next days, Ahe and Ali became best friends. Ahe learnt that Ali was the only daughter of the tribe leader. They spent every free moment by a sunny spot under the biggest grapevine, where Ahe taught her to draw houses from the Central Plains with twigs on the ground, and Ali took him to pick the sweetest, tangiest wild grapes—the most delicious fruit Ahe had ever tasted.

It was the tenth night, the wind whipped through the grapevines, creaking and groaning like an old rocking chair. Ahe let out a small cough, freezing mid-movement when he spotted a shadow darting to the tent. “Ali!” Ahe couldn’t help but gasp, his eyebrows shooting up to his hairline. How could she be here so late? Beneath the cold silver moonlight, Ali’s face was pale with fear, her eyes glistening with tears. She pressed a woollen bag into his hands and ran away before he could speak.

Confused, Ahe opened the bag. Inside was a hide map marked with camel footprints and springs, a small packet of grape seeds, and a crumpled note. It read: Run! Now! My father is planning to kill you all to keep your silk.

Tears rolled down Ahe’s cheeks. He finally understood why the leader had been so kind. He wiped his eyes and ran to find Zhang Qian at once. Before leaving, he took out another silk scrap—sewn into his collar by his mother—and left it on the smooth stone where he and Ali used to sit to draw and eat grapes, with a note: May we meet again someday.

Under the silver moonlight, the group followed the map and slipped away quietly.

Years later, those grape seeds grew into lush vines in the Central Plains. As Ahe stood among the grapevines, the wind carried the sweet scent of the fruit. He looked west, and in his mind, he saw a girl with bright eyes, standing under the big grapevine on the grassland, waving goodbye.

Crimson Silk

Kowloon Tong School (Primary Section), Ceron Cheng – 11

VENICE, SPRING 1453

In the humid and salt-scented air of Venice, 1453, Ilbrahim al-Tabriz stood by the Grand Canal on the Rialto bridge. A breezy gust of wind brushed against his arms that were resting on the railing of the bridge. The wind provided no comfort against the overwhelming chatter of merchants haggling for better prices. He watched the sleek ships cut through the lagoon water to unload their goods from the East. A sailor in a white woolen shirt boasted loudly of better sea routes that didn't have the danger of bandits and could hold more goods, solidifying his hypothesis – the Silk Road was fading, and this journey may be his last. He was an Arabic merchant, who was old enough to know that the years behind him outnumbered those ahead — if any lay ahead at all.

He walked down the bridge, searching for his crewmates – A Chinese scribe clutching rolled-up paintings; Indian jewelers fleeing from war; Arab astronomers carrying star charts forbidden in Europe... They went to the merchant galleys waiting for them, where he loaded his camels heavy with Venetian glass beads, Murano mirrors and more. After that, they started sailing. They crossed the Adriatic, landing in Constantinople, then the Black sea. They carefully maneuvered past storms, past pirates and islands, till they finally arrived at Tana.

TANA - TARTAR

After weeks of living a barren life of creaking decks and stale bread, they finally arrived at the Tana port. When the gates creaked open, something was off. Very off. The Tartar markets were supposed to be a sprawling bazaar that thrummed with life. Instead, half of the stalls were empty. Spices rotted below the open sun. Some of his crew found rats running around abandoned boxes, while some found empty houses. Ilbrahim aimlessly walked around the market. Suddenly, he came across a rug covering a large object. With morbid curiosity, he lifted one corner. An empty eye looked back at him. Flinching back, he whipped the whole rug off the ground. The corpse's neck was covered in buboes, and blood oozed out of his half-open mouth. After asking the merchants, they waved it off, "Tis sickness from the East. Very common." Disturbed, Ilbrahim bought his camels and headed off.

The caravan left Tana with the line of camels following behind. Tatar guides led them northeast along the Don River, then east toward the Volga – a muddy road worn by centuries of wear. All they could see was a rolling steppe dotted with white tents. At night, they camped around small fires providing little warmth. The air smelled of sweat and the rot of distant marshes. Ibrahim listened to the camel bells and felt, for the first time in weeks, a small sense of safety. But on the ninth night, one of the young camel handlers woke up coughing blood onto the grass. By morning his armpits swelled into black buboes. The Tatars backed away, touching their Muskas and whispering "A'udhu billah" – I seek refuge in Allah – with horrified expressions. Ibrahim hesitantly ordered the body to be burned. As they went on past the deserted city of Sarai, the caravan's laughter faded. The vast sky no longer seemed free – it was foreboding.

CASPIAN STEPPES

The caravan turned south-east into the steppe edging the Caspian Sea. The days blurred together – the searing heat, the smell of death and rot. Sometimes, they came across caravanserais (roadside inns), which offered brief shelter, but most were empty, their wells filled with brackish water and doors with red crosses. In one inn, three men woke up with a severe headache and vomited all over the floor. By dawn, two had died with blackened armpits while the other stabbed himself “to stop the pain”. The team were shell-shocked with panic. The Italian eyed retreat, the Arab astronomer cursed the stars, the scribe saw ghosts at night. Only Ibrahim’s beckoning and the promise of gold had kept them going. When the palaces of Samarkand rose on the horizon, half of the caravan was left. The once-thriving markets had no chatter nor laughter. Ibrahim traded his Venetian mirrors for silk while wondering how many more deaths lay ahead. After their business, their caravan left.

The caravan climbed into the snowy Pamirs where air was scarce. At night, they sat around in a group, unable to sleep due to the bone-chilling temperature. Most of the group had already perished. The remaining few dragged on with gaunt faces and hollow eyes. More and more corpses lay behind them. Fevered men babbled of seeing the dead beckoning them to succumb to death. Then, they ran into the Taklamakan fringe – endless dunes that spread past the horizon with sand scraping their lungs and eyes. Oases revealed poisoned wells and abandoned caravanserais crawling with rats. The last Indian scraped the sand with his fingers, screaming until he coughed up blood. By the time Kashgar could be seen, only a handful remained. In the city, Ibrahim traded the last spices and beads for more silk and dried fruit. After resting in the city, they finally headed out for the final push – the Gansu Corridor.

The survivors entered the Gansu Corridor under a cold autumn wind. The path narrowed to a dusty road with towering mountains on the south and the barren Gobi desert on the north. Fortified watchtowers of stone and dirt rose along the route and the Jiayuguan Pass loomed ahead. Beyond it lay Dunhuang’s Mogao Caves, their sandstone interiors filled with Buddha statues staring blindly from the shadows. The plague had taken its toll. Those left were merely hollow shells, trudging with numb limbs toward the horizon. After what seemed to be years, the walls of Xi’an appeared on the horizon. The journey had come to an end. Ibrahim traded his silk and rested in inns.

He rolled open a piece of silk. Blood of a dead merchant stained the cloth, reminding him of the cost of his journey.

The Journey on the Silk Road

Singapore International School, Annabein Wong – 11

The rhythmic *clink clink* of camel bells and the braying of donkeys carrying loads for their owners was the soundtrack of Nina’s childhood. One day, the sun was high over the bustling markets of Chang’an. Nina stood mesmerised before a stall that said, “Heavenly silk”. Her fingers hovered inches above the layers and layers of silk that shimmered like moonlight on a moving river. The silk was dyed indigo, woven with silver threads that formed the shapes of soaring cranes. Nina had wavy brown hair, blue eyes, and a sharp nose, dotted with freckles. She may seem innocent and polite, but there is a brave side of her that shows when she really wants to achieve something.

Sometimes when she was spending her time in the markets, she would look out of the walls of the city and imagine the great desert, the Gobi Desert, sitting majestically, *waiting* for her. The golden horizon she had only ever seen in ink paintings before stretched across the lands. The skies painted with fiery orange and bruised purple, she imagined the wind whistling through the dunes, hundreds of camels trekking West, their long shadows like giant fingers on the sand. Echoes of coyote howls, a distant caw of a hawk. Her, riding a camel, a trekker travelling on the legendary Silk Road.

Nina always wanted to travel on the Silk Road and meet people from all over the world, but she was never allowed outside the city. Her father, a merchant, took her aside one afternoon. “Listen, Nina. You are old and mature enough to join our caravan now. We leave tomorrow morning. Pack your things.” He turned to leave. Nina couldn’t hide her excitement. A huge grin spread across her face. “Yes, father, thank you, father!” She bowed. Nina’s father stopped in the doorway and said, “The Silk Road is not a path, Nina. It is a conversation between worlds. And tomorrow you join that talk.”

The journey began. Nina rode her very first camel, whom she named Dusty. “This is it!” Nina said, her heart whooping with joy. “I’m finally travelling on the road I was always meant to be!” She felt the wind whistling in her ear, a melody she longed to hear. Several merchants joined their trading caravans, and his dad, Master Lin, was the leader of the group.

The caravan travelled west. Nina watched as the lush rolling hills of Central China slowly began to thin out into the dry rocks of the Loess Plateau. As the sun dipped below the rugged hills, the caravan circled the camels to create a windbreak from the cooling air. This was Nina’s first campfire with the “Veterans of the Sands” ---men and women whose faces were etched with the years of travelling. As the brushwood fire crackled, sending sparks flying towards the sky, the men told stories, legends they heard during their travels across the world.

Then, after months of trekking through the treacherous mountains and scorching deserts, Nina finally saw it: a shimmering spark of turquoise that seemed to hold a piece of the sky captive on the earth. It was Bukhara, the “Jewel of the East”, and the heart of their long journey.

“Look closely, Nina.” Her father said, wearing a proud smile. “This is where the world meets to exchange its secrets.”

As Nina and the merchants walked through the city, they were fascinated by the facades, shimmering with glazed tile mosaics, some even with detailed brick patterns. Even more, Nina was overwhelmed by the caravans of hundreds of camels and horses, all laden with goods from India and China, flowing in like waves, bringing treasure to a distant island. The strong smells of spices wafted into Nina's nose. Markets displayed woven carpets, wool, gold embroideries, and much more. As merchants traded in caravanserais, sharing meals, exchanging news, languages and culture, music filled the air as local Bukarans performed, some playing foreign music, or dancing, all celebrating their special day, Silk and Spices Day. The constant flow of people from Persia, India and China brought diverse traditions to Bukhara, making this city a carpet woven with Buddhism, Islam, Muslim, and Judaism. Nina was fascinated by the difference between Bukhara and China. Unlike the rigid, grid-like streets and sweeping wooden eaves of Chang'an, Bukhara was a swirling mystery of narrow alleys and trading domes called *taqs* that hummed with a thousand languages. The local people are blowing foreign flutes, so *different* from China. Every corner revealed new wonders, from a deep, cool pool, a *hauz*, to merchants selling "glass", a material as clear as mountain water.

On their final night in the West, the merchants held a last campfire to celebrate their successful trades and the forged bonds on this journey. Under the canopy of stars, the air was thick with a sweet floral scent of perfume. Around the fire, the distinctions of nationalities faded; the Chinese silk merchants, Persian jewellers, Sogdian guides laughed together, their voices a symphony of different tongues united by the shared language of the Silk Road.

Nina realised the Silk Road wasn't just a route that allowed people to trade with one another, but it acted like a road to a feast of bonds with people of different countries and cultures. On her way back to Chang'an, Nina thought about when she met a Persian trader, how she taught him how to weave silk, something that was passed from one generation to another in Nina's family. "And see, that's how you make these luxurious fabrics." Nina had said, finishing her weaving, producing a crimson red fabric that stunned the fascinated merchant. And in exchange, the merchant taught Nina how to identify pure silver coins.

The Silk Road hadn't just brought them to Bukhara but had woven their lives into the grand tapestry of the world, and the Silk Road will continue to flourish for years to come. As for Nina, it was just the beginning of a whole new journey on the legendary road of the West.

The Peril of the Precious Pouch

Singapore International School, Chen Wun Yi Amber – 10

The air in Suzhou smelt like mulberries and secrets. At fourteen years old, Li's life was woven into her village's special silk trade, a trade guarded more fiercely than even a dragon's hoard. She was a weaver with dye-stained hands, and a protector of her village's silk secret that nobody else knew.

Her brother, Jia, was the opposite of silk: coarse, loud, and about as subtle as a gong in a library. He was supposed to be mastering trade skills, but he mostly just bragged about their "special process" to anyone who'd listen – a habit that drove their father mad.

Today, Jia was boasting to a stranger.

Li knelt outside the workshop, picking up stray mulberry leaves. The stranger was tall and thin, draped in expensive foreign wool, taking notice of nothing but a handful of silkworms and dye samples.

"Oh, yes, we have a great variety of the very best White Mulberry bushes here. Their leaves are what make our silkworms and dye mixture so fabulous. The secret is the quality of the materials used, Kleptes." Jia said.

Li's basket hit the ground with a loud thud. She didn't just feel anger; she felt a sharp prickle of fear. The secret hadn't been shared; it had been surrendered.

"Ah, Li," the stranger said, turning. "My true identity will remain concealed, yet you may address me as Kleptes, a monk from the Eastern Roman Empire. Emperor Justinian finds your village's exceptional work quite... interesting. Your brother's been very informative."

"That's nothing," Li said hurriedly, her voice sounding high even to herself. "It's just gossip. Jia, Mother wants you to help with the loom. Go!"

As Jia shuffled away, Kleptes smiled. "Such generous people. I've become fond of your 'tiny weavers.' It would be a tragedy if this secret remained in a single village. Tell your father to watch out; Roman silk may soon rival your own." He patted the hollow bamboo staff he carried, a sly move that suggested a hidden compartment.

He pressed a coin into Li's palm, his eyes gleaming, then turned away and vanished between the bustling huts. The coin felt like a hot ember in her hand. Li knew the bamboo staff was no longer empty.

Without waiting for permission, Li leapt onto her chestnut mare Xia, and urged her after Kleptes, who'd leapt onto a horse and was cantering off. She paused for one last look at her village, where her parents and brother worked on a loom, chatting happily, unaware of the catastrophe. The peaceful scene steeled a resolve in her heart: she must restore the secret for her village. Kleptes was heading east and if he reached his emperor, the secret of their unique, shimmering silks – the special silkworms and dye – would be lost forever to the world beyond the Great Wall.

"Kleptes, she thought as Xia galloped along a bridge. "Doesn't that mean 'thief' in Greek? He wasn't scared to be obvious; he knew we'd never overpower him."

Li caught sight of Kleptes near the Great Canal. He was talking with a merchant, holding up a small object. A cocoon. Li's stomach flipped. A confrontation was impossible – he was armed and backed by the mighty Roman Empire. She needed to win without him realizing a fight had happened.

Li watched as Kleptes put the cocoons back and guided his horse east. Directing Xia through a marshy shortcut just off the main road, Li reached a night market a few moments after Kleptes. While Kleptes wandered about the stalls, Li dismounted quietly and slipped over to his horse, where he'd left the cane. Her heart was beating furiously as she pulled out a bag of wild cocoons she'd scavenged – lumpy things that produced silk like straw, and a jar of paint used for fixing stains. To untrained Roman eyes, they looked exquisite. To a true weaver, they were trash.

Li's hands shook as she swapped everything. Just as she finished and turned to leave, she bumped into Kleptes, who was entering the stables.

“Looking for your brother?” Kleptes asked mockingly.

“No,” Li said. “I've come to tell you that our secret isn't a gift. It's a curse for anyone who dares to steal it.”

Kleptes laughed. “Well, I believe in gold and the power of my empire, not myths told by a peasant girl.

Get out of my way.”

Li mounted Xia. As she rode off, she glanced back. She almost felt sorry for Kleptes. When that hollow cane reached the Emperor Justinian, the threads would be brittle, the colors would be dull and boring, and Kleptes would have to explain his failure to a furious emperor not known for his mercy.

The village was quiet when Li reached home at dawn. A crowd had gathered outside the Cocoonery, observing the splintered remains of the boxes containing jars of dye and silkworm cocoons Kleptes had smashed. Her father was at the front, watching Jia pick through the wreck.

Jia swallowed. “Father, our stocks are gone...the ones we needed for the next cycle of this rare breed. The jars of dye are all smashed. Nothing is left...we're finished.” Her father remained silent.

“Father? I...got these,” Li said, passing the cocoons and dye to her father.

For a moment, her father stayed still, staring at them. Then a look of disbelief broke across his face. “How?” he asked, cradling the pouch in his arms like they were made of crystal. “We thought we were doomed.”

“The secret isn't the quality of the materials, Father,” Li said, glancing at Jia. “It's about knowing how to protect it. Threads can be taken, but the history of our silk is woven too tightly for a thief to unpick.” Then she walked into the peaceful workshop. She'd finally gotten what she wanted – the secret was safe in the crates, the future was secure in the village, and the loom was waiting for her touch.

The Princess Who Wove the Road

Singapore International School, Lye Yutong – 11

The wedding procession was grand: fifty horse carriages and two hundred soldiers. But the journey was long and grueling: one year from the Tang capital of Chang'an, through the wind-scoured Hexi Corridor, past the oasis of Dunhuang, to the far west of the Silk Road.

“Do the mountains ever end, Captain Yang?” Princess Nanping asked the stern-faced soldier riding alongside her window.

He glanced at her, surprised that she had spoken. “They end, Princess. We will reach Dunhuang soon, then comes the desert, then...” he paused for a moment, “then Khotan.” He did not want to remind Nanping of the name of her future kingdom.

She nodded as her fingers moved to the elaborate headdress weighing her hair down. Hidden within, were the forbidden treasures: silkworm eggs and mulberry seeds—her secret to bring freedom to Khotan. But she knew her father would never let her do this, for it could endanger Tang’s monopoly on silk.

Her father. The Emperor.

She looked out the window and sighed, as her mind slowly drifted elsewhere...

“I know you feel trapped, going from one cage to another,” her mother’s calm voice echoed through her mind, “But, Ping, you can break free, just like silkworms do.”

Glistening tears trickled down her cheeks, but she wiped them off, determined to walk her own path.

Weeks became months and the greens disappeared into vast, empty deserts. One night, camped in the darkness and silence, Captain Yang approached her by the fire. “You have been quiet, Princess. Most in your position would cry.”

Nanping poked the fire with a stick, sending sparks spiraling like escaping stars into the dark night sky. “Does the road cry, Captain, because it leaves the mountain behind? Or does it rejoice to meet the desert?”

The captain was not used to such questions, “A road does not feel.”

“Maybe not, but those who travel the road must,” she looked at him earnestly. “Tell me about the Khotan people, what do they hope for?”

He replied, “Water, because their river fails and their crops wither. They hope our alliance brings food. They hope for rain.”

“I can’t give them rain,” Nanping paused, then beamed. “But look, silk, isn’t this the colour of water?” She pointed to the deep blue silk of her sleeve.

The captain was confused, “Silk is luxury. It won’t feed its people.”

“Not yet,” she smiled knowingly. “But it all starts with a single thread, a single seed.”

After an exhausting five months, the procession passed the Jade Gate, the last Chinese outpost before reaching Taklamakan, which meant “the desert of no return.”

Facing a severe storm, the carriage shook and sand seeped in. Princess Nanping jolted, and her headdress fell to her legs. Her heart raced as she quickly scanned her surroundings to make sure no one saw what was hidden. Just before she was about to put it back on, she noticed a small scroll tucked inside. With trembling hands, she unrolled it carefully as it read, “Break the cocoon to become silk”, signed off with the Emperor’s seal.

Nanping’s breath caught. The Emperor knew. His message wasn’t an accusation, it was a blessing for her to share the secret of silk with her future kingdom. A slight smile appeared on her face, relieved and touched by her father’s hopes for her.

One scorching midday, the princess’s carriage suddenly stopped. A wheel had broken. Everyone panicked, except Nanping who remained calm. As men laboured under the sun, a Khotanese boy ran to the carriage curiously.

The princess bent down from the window and handed a piece of rice cake to the boy, beautifully wrapped in silk. He finished the cake quickly. As the silk wrap touched his cheeks, it felt smooth and made him chuckle.

“What is it?” the boy asked.

“It is a promise,” Nanping said softly. “Tell your people the princess brings not just herself, but a future that can be woven.”

Khotan was a kingdom of dust, sun-baked clay walls and half-full rivers. Its subjects lined the streets, welcoming Nanping, now their Queen.

The welcoming feast was meagre by Tang standards. Nanping’s new husband, King Vijaya, cleared his throat, “We warmly welcome Queen Nanping from the mighty Tang, a new beginning for Khotan.”

Nanping rose and the entire court immediately fell silent. “Your Highness, and People of Khotan, I have travelled the Silk Road not just as a bride, but as a bearer of gifts.”

“But my most precious gift is not gold or jewels.” She reached up calmly and removed her heavy headdress, amidst the gasps and muttering. From its hidden compartment, she took out a tiny pouch.

“This,” she said, holding the tiny, pearl-like eggs, and shaking a few dark seeds onto her palm, “is the secret of silk.”

The king was bewildered, “Silk? We need grains, not finery.”

“You need a root that does not fear dry soil,” Nanping’s voice strengthened. “The mulberry tree is hardy. Its leaves feed the silkworm. The worm in turn spins a cocoon—a cage that it makes so it can transform. From the cocoon, we draw strong threads more beautiful than jewels. And silk trades for grains, all that we need.”

“I was given away in a cage,” she continued aloud. “But I shall bring you freedom.” Her words were powerful and strong, like the tall, steady mountains in Tang.

Months passed after the seeds were planted. The first mulberry grove took root near the canals. Under Nanping’s guidance, Khotanese women learned to tend the delicate silkworms. The day the first thread was reeled, a crowd gathered. Nanping demonstrated how it was done, her fingers manoeuvred through the warm water, finding the thread’s end.

Queen Nanping had travelled the Silk Road, but her journey did not just end, for the Silk Road carried more than just goods—it carried ideas, courage, and the quiet power of a princess who understood that real freedom is not given but woven.

The Silk Road

Singapore International School, Oon Yu Mo Emma – 11

Remember, Tao, there is always a dark side to the moon, as there is to a person. Don't try to reason with soldiers. Tao took that advice to heart, but even then, he still relied on his father to find hiding places and keep them out of sight of soldiers. Tao knew he had to learn, sooner or later, but he wanted to keep his weak hold on the elusive sense of safety. And life was peaceful for a while, but naturally, fate decided to turn Tao's life upside down.

"Well, well, well, look what we found here, a pair of *silk smugglers*. And we all know the punishment for smuggling silk, right, Fong?" Tao leaped back, but the other soldier, Fong, grabbed him by the collar of his tunic. The first soldier had already bound his father's wrists.

"Open the basket! See if they are silk smugglers like I thought they would be!" The first soldier snapped. Fong grabbed the basket and upturned it, spilling out all the silk inside. Tao's heart dropped to the bottom of his stomach. Things were not looking good for him.

"Take them both back to the Imperial Palace for their execution, Fong! I will check for more smuggler scum who may be hiding nearby!" The soldier was practically spitting in excitement. Yet, to Tao's disbelief, Fong *dropped* him and grabbed his father instead!

"What are you doing, Fong? Take him!" The soldier snarled, teeth bared, spit flying out from his mouth.

"The boy is too young. Take the adult. He will die out there alone anyways. Now you. Run." Fong grunted, aiming the last sentence at Tao. He tossed him backwards. Tao scrambled to his feet, meeting his father's eyes. His father gave an almost imperceptible shake of his head, and he knew that there was no hope left for him. The look in his eyes was clear. *Go. Run.* Tao didn't need to be told twice. He ran. He ran and ran and ran until his legs wouldn't function anymore. He collapsed and crawled under a dense bush, falling into a deep slumber filled with blood, soldiers wielding swords slick with blood, and, worst of all, his father, dying in about a hundred different ways.

When Tao woke up, he ignored the pangs of hunger wracking his body. *I don't deserve to live.* Tao thought of his father, who was dead by now, and how he had run away like a coward instead of staying to fight. He should have disobeyed his father's orders. True, that was disrespectful, but at least there was a chance his father would still be alive. Tao crawled deeper into the bush and lay there for days, wasting away. Even when he barely had enough energy left to sit up, he still did not move. *I'm going to die soon. Then I will see Father in Heaven.* This thought comforted him, and Tao drifted off to sleep, dreaming of the moment father and son could reunite again.

"Hey, wake up." Somebody shook Tao, and he jolted upright. Soldiers! But then his eyes cleared, and instead of a soldier, a boy close to his age stood over him, next to a man whose sack was stuffed with an assortment of colourful silk. *Silk smugglers.* I can trust them. So, Tao grasped the boy's hand and stood shakily, pausing only to look at the bush. It had sheltered him during his delirious grief. Now that he was leaving, Tao wondered what other things he had taken for granted before.

Even though the boy who rescued him, Ping, and his father gave him a far better life than Tao's father could ever have given him, he could never be truly happy with them. He tried to forget, tried to forgive, and to live his life in the present and stop remembering the one thing that pained him the most. And he almost succeeded, feeling a sense of security, he hadn't felt since his early childhood. But it seemed as if his past had a way of catching up with him.

"Silk smugglers? When was the last time we found a batch, two years ago?" A voice straight out of Tao's nightmares barked. He jumped up, clenching his fists to restrain the beast tearing through his body, threatening to break loose and unleash havoc at the slightest trigger. Tao's body shook, the edges of his vision darkening, and he reined back the creature that was thrashing, struggling, and burning in his gut. He clenched his fists tighter and gritted his teeth, ignoring a voice whispering in his head, *you can take them. There are three of you and two of them.* Tao shook his head. The odds were far worse than the propaganda the voice was feeding him. The soldiers were older than him and Ping, with more combat experience. So, he could only stand there as Ping yelped and scrambled to his feet, trembling nonstop. Then the soldier, Fong, who had Ping's father in a vice-like grip, said the same thing that he did ages ago,

"The kids are too young. Take the father." Fong nodded towards Tao and Ping, and Tao swore he saw recognition flare in Fong's eyes. Then it was gone, and Tao grabbed Ping's wrist despite his screams of protest, forcing him to flee with him.

"What do we do now?" Ping whispered once they were far away, his eyes wide, hands clammy, face whiter than snow. Even before Ping asked, Tao knew the answer. It was the only way for them to survive.

"We head to the beginning of the Silk Road, where the soldiers have no authority."
And...maybe we could make a new life there.

New Tales of China's Silk Road

St. Paul's Co-educational College Primary School, Chen Sze Ying Sonia – 11

The sun rose behind the mountains, but this sun was strangely different to the one I knew, pinker, and more piercing. As it burst through mountain peaks, it brought with it a lashing wind, and red sand blew up into my face.

It had been an arduous, tiring journey from Bianjing upon the painful rolling back of my camel, but it was my last option, as the spice I needed for my father's chronic respiratory illness was nowhere to be found. We'd squeezed out every coin for the doctors, but even the most skilled practitioners couldn't cure it, and searching the markets and stalls, even trekking the mountains, was fruitless.

As the red sand cleared, I squinted at the large, misty-rose colored sun, and below it rose towers with curved tops. A lopsided wooden post was nailed to the tallest tower in sweeping, curling characters, along with some Chinese in tiny print at the corner that confirmed my suspicion: I was at a Samarkanese trading post. The hustle and bustle of haggling men, along with scuffling, shoving and blooming smells assaulted my senses. Setting my jade collection down, I crouched and waited for merchants willing to trade.

A bird squawked as it fluttered above me. I squealed, then reprimanded myself quietly: men shouldn't scream like that. A group of men pushed their way towards me, all simultaneously drawing out rows and rows of Qingyuan Tongbao - Chinese coins. My heart sank. I had been hoping for a new spice, not more money.

A man's coughing caught my attention, and I shooed the others away. He had to have a cure. The trader's smoky irises flickered over my pieces of jade. As I stood up to acknowledge him, a small maroon box, lined with gold filigree, fell out from the deep folds of my clothes.

The man tilted his head and pointed. Reluctantly, I unlatched the clasp, presenting a stunning carving of a jade phoenix. The wings were delicately fanned out, tipped with gold plating, the tail feathers dissolving into flames. As I admired the jade carving, I saw my father's eyes, clouded over with disease, his hands shaking and weak.

"Yang, this is for you. Keep this close, however far you are from home," he had wheezed.

The trader's rough touch jerked me back to reality. I shook my head ferociously, attempting a steely gaze. As I did so, a few locks of dark hair escaped from the tightly bound cloth on my head and I thrust them back in. As the man moved closer, I caught a strong whiff of a bitter, smoky scent. I pointed at my nose, sniffing, then his clothing, hoping my quizzical expression would help him understand what I was trying to request.

From his sagging garments, the Persian drew out a medium-sized, strong-smelling pouch. He coughed violently, then thumped on his chest, took a small pebble-sized clump of golden resin from the pouch, dunked it in his flask, and took a long swig. The man mumbled something like "muh," repeating over and over again. He held the flask to me. I took a small sip, tasting dew and earth, along with a tangible sweetness. The taste of its name on my lips was familiar, yet I had only heard of it during my earlier trades several years ago.

The word came back to me - myrrh. I hadn't paid it much attention then, but now, it was as if thunder had struck me.

"Respiratory diseases! You can heal it by boiling it in water and adding oil? Can it heal... father?" I gestured to the pouch, and he reached for the phoenix.

No. Please, no.

I offered other pieces of jade to trade, but his gaze remained firmly on the phoenix. Finally, I relented and whispered my goodbyes to it as I traded it with the man. Maybe I could trade and give some of my belongings to others one day in the future, and give them as much hope as this small pouch gave me.

I lost track of time as I rode off into the desert on my loaned camel, the rose-tinted sun yellowing into a warmer one, the dry sand turning into fields. I returned my camel, shouldered my jade and sprinted towards our cottage.

As I burst through the door, mother was easing a dollop of congee down father's throat. She rushed to envelope me in a warm hug, staining my shoulder with tears.

"It's been almost two years, and we thought..." she trailed off, voice cracking. "Father's got worse."

I quickly boiled some water on the fire and dunked in the golden resin clumps from the Persian, praying it would work.

A gentle wind blew outside. Stray leaves from the willow tree rustled and let go from the branches. As they softly swirled by, I could almost see a phoenix flying to distant lands, a gold-flecked tail disappearing past the window frame. Smiling, I wondered who would receive the phoenix next, and how their stories would intertwine with mine through this piece of jade.

Maybe the Silk Road was not just about a means for trading, but for the stories we left behind and the ones to come.

Maybe, one day, I'd see the phoenix again.

Pouring the hot concoction into a small bowl and adding some oil, I helped father sit up, then gently put the bowl under his nose. A small sip. Then another, his milky eyes seemingly clearer.

I unwrapped the cloth from my head, letting my silky dark hair fall over my shoulders. Father smiled. Then, he spoke for the first time in years, his voice ragged.

"Yangjing..." The dam of tears I had been holding back this whole trip broke, and I crumpled as our family embraced, whole.

"My daughter." That was the only thing I needed to hear right at that moment, holding the aspirations and hope from the Silk Road like the weight of the jade phoenix.

"My girl."

The Frail Bridge of Two Worlds

Wycombe Abbey School, Au Yeung Lin Yan Lyanne – 9

History does not reveal itself through the loud fanfare of grand achievements; it whispers in the silence that follows. Sometimes, the most surprising thing is the sheer resilience of humanity—the way a single, small detail can bridge the gap between centuries, influencing the way we think, act, and ultimately, change the world.

The Dust of the Past (130 BCE)

Ying hauled herself back onto the hump of her camel, the coarse fur scratching her sun-burned legs. It was 130 BCE, and the afternoon sun hung suspended in the sky like a molten copper plate, mocking the travellers below with its unrelenting glare. They were deep in the heart of the Hexi Corridor. Around them, mountains of sand stretched toward the horizon, undulating like the waves of a frozen, golden ocean.

The caravan was led by seasoned merchants, men whose faces were etched with the deep lines of a thousand miles. They were bound for the distant lands of India, their beasts of burden laden with the finest treasures of the Han Dynasty: shimmering bolts of silk, delicate porcelain that chimed like bells when struck, and lacquered household goods.

After countless days and freezing nights, the desert finally surrendered to the lush greenery of the Indus Valley.

“I shall trade you my finest saffron, uncut emeralds, and polished ivory for three crates of your mulberry silk,” the Indian merchant negotiated, his voice a rhythmic song. While the elders haggled, Ying wandered through the marketplace.

The return journey was a gruelling four-month struggle against the elements. When the familiar gates of Chang’an—modern-day Xi’an—finally appeared, Ying was hollowed out by exhaustion but fuelled by hope. After Ying got her meagre wages for surviving the Silk Road’s wrath, she slipped away from the caravan, seeking solace in the only place that brought her peace.

Ying travelled to the outskirts of the city, to a wooden bridge that spanned a wide, rushing river. It was a place where the water met the sky in a perfect horizon. She called it *Yun Shui Qiao*—the Bridge of Cloud and Water. There, she gazed at the clear reflection of the sun, wondering if the bridge of trade she had just crossed was worth the price of her soul.

The Steel of the Future (2046 CE)

Two thousand years into the future, Ming Xue sat comfortably in the ergonomically designed, climate-controlled cabin of the AeroSwift. This high-speed maglev train didn’t just travel; it glided, humming at four hundred miles per hour. She swiped her thumb across the glass of her light-blue tablet, pulling up the coordinates for the “Heaven’s Tide”—the modern incarnation of the *Yun Shui Qiao*.

Ming Xue was a digital historian, traveling to Xi’an to capture the synthesis of ancient architecture and hyper-modern engineering. The Heaven’s Tide was now a world-renowned marvel: a glass-and-carbon-fibre bridge that spanned not just a river, but an inlet of the reclaimed coastal territories. It was famous for its surreal scenic views.

As the *AeroSwift* pulled into the Xi'an terminal, Ming Xue marvelled at the efficiency. She slid her tablet into her satchel and approached the fare gates. With a flick of her wrist, her digital wallet chimed, and she walked through. She boarded an automated shuttle and looked at old sketches of the Silk Road on her screen. She felt a strange pull toward the bridge—not just for her project, but for something deeper.

When she arrived at Heaven's Tide, the sun was beginning to set. The bridge was a stable, shimmering ribbon of white light. Below it, the river expanded into the vast, dark blue of the ocean. At this hour, the rippling water reflected a breathtaking image of a hazy, purple sky, shot through with streams of marigold light peeking through the clouds.

She walked to the centre of the span, leaning against the cool railing. Thousands of tourists walked past her, their chatter a dull roar, but Ming Xue felt a sudden, profound silence.

The Convergence

Just then, she felt a small spark at her fingertips—a static discharge from the railing, perhaps, or something more. It felt weak at first, like a heartbeat from a great distance, but she held onto the sensation. She closed her eyes, letting the spark carry her away.

Suddenly, the smell of salt and ozone was replaced by the smell of dry dust and camel musk. Ming Xue's head felt light, her body felt heavy, and the cold glass under her hands turned into rough, weathered wood.

Across the veil of time, Ying felt the same tremor. She was standing on her wooden bridge in 130 BCE, looking down at the water, when she saw a reflection that shouldn't exist: a girl in strange, colorful clothes, holding a glowing slate of blue light.

For a flickering moment, the two women—the silk-trader and the digital historian—locked eyes through the ripples of the water. The “New Tale” of the Silk Road wasn't about the goods traded or the speed of the trains; it was about the bridge of human experience that never broke.

Ming Xue felt the weight of Ying's exhaustion, the grit of the Gobi Desert in her own throat. And Ying, for the first time since her journey began, felt the breeze of the future—a cool, hopeful wind that promised her path would not be forgotten.

The spark faded. Ming Xue opened her eyes to the neon lights of modern Xi'an. The bridge was still there, firm and immovable. She realized then that the Silk Road was never just a route on a map; it was a living thread. She pulled out her tablet, but instead of taking a photo of the architecture, she began to write. She wrote of the dust, the camels, and the girl who had stood here before the world turned to steel.

The bridge was no longer frail. It was the strongest thing in the world.

Creative Writing
Fiction

Group 2



Saviours of the Silk Thread

Chiu Sheung School, Hong Kong, Siddharth Jagadeesan – 12

When the first spool of silk left Chang ‘an, it didn’t just shimmer—it *hummed*. Traders called it luck and emperors called it glory, but the Road knew better: silk was never only fabric. Silk was a *map*, stitched with invisible routes, promises, and half-understood dreams. For centuries it carried more than goods—foods, inventions, art, and ideas travelled its dust like sparks looking for new fires.

In 2013, when the New Silk Road was announced, the hum returned—louder, deeper, like the world’s oldest instrument being played again. Cargo ships groaned. Satellites blinked off for one heartbeat. Beneath a forgotten desert caravanserai, an ancient loom began weaving by itself, pulling threads that didn’t belong together: silk and steel, paper and pixel, camel-bells and train-whistles. Doctor Strange felt the tug in the Sanctum as a golden strand slid from a cracked scroll and coiled around his wrist, yanking him west. Wonder Woman felt an itch under her bracers. Batman’s screens filled with a desert sky where stars braided into a line. Superman heard footsteps in the air—millions of them—walking at once.

Then the tear opened, and *he arrived*: a figure crowned with broken compasses, cloaked in torn maps and expired passports, eyes spinning like coins. “I am the Tangle,” he whispered, smelling of dust and old ink. “Trade. Travel. Ideas. I feed on the *between*.” His plan was cruelly elegant: knot the New Silk Road into a snare so tight every city would be sewn shut—no change, no movement, no imagination. In Xi’an—once Chang ‘an—a high-speed train passed an ancient gate and became a caravan. Passengers blinked into wooden carts behind camels, while their phones showed only one new app: **THE ROAD**.

Superman saw the shimmering street with super vision and X-ray vision, so he flew into the shimmering street, then slowed in confusion—his vision couldn’t pierce the haze because it wasn’t smoke. It was *history*. “We’re not trapped by walls,” Batman said over comms. “We’re trapped by time.” A portal snapped open and Doctor Strange stepped out, cloak snapping like a flag, with Spider-Man trailing behind because the universe can tug a thread all it wants—Spider-Man is a 15-year-old kid called Peter Parker. And Peter will *always* yank it back. Wonder Woman arrived like a storm kept inside a calm face. Spider-Man stared at the camels and said, “Okay, so... do we get charged extra baggage fees for the camel?” Batman didn’t smile, but his silence came close.

Strange raised the golden strand. “This is the original Silk Thread—linked to every exchange ever made along the Road: goods, songs, inventions, stories. The Tangle is corrupting it.” Wonder Woman pressed her palm to the air, feeling the vibration. “Then we don’t cut it,” she said. “We *reweave* it.” The Road tested them as they followed the hum west: dunes that shifted like turning pages, markets that sold impossible bargains. In Samarkand, a bazaar offered Spider-Man a vial labelled **THE DAY UNCLE BEN LIVED**. His hand shook. Wonder Woman gently closed his fingers. “The Road gives,” she said, “but it also asks what you’re willing to become.” Batman paid instead with a coin of pure honesty, and for one heartbeat the mirrors showed the Tangle’s true face—an emptiness with teeth.

They reached the Loom Between Worlds, hidden in a canyon where the wind sounded like applause. Threads ran through it: silk, wool, copper wire, Fiber optic, and something like starlight braided with song. The Tangle danced at the loom, tying knots fast enough to make ships stall, flights ground, and city lights flicker like scared fireflies. Wonder Woman's Lasso of Truth snapped out and caught a strand midair. "What lies are you weaving?" she demanded, and the Road answered with memories: a Chinese merchant sharing tea with a Persian astronomer; a healer trading herbs for glass beads; a child learning a new song and humming it forever. Superman gripped a thick cable-thread—modern steel braided with ancient silk—and held it steady with strength measured in suns. Batman shattered the loom's locking pegs—click, click, click—shifting the tension. Spider-Man webbed strands together, bridging old caravan routes to new rails, story to story, person to person. Strange spoke a spell not from any book but from the Road's own rhythm, and the threads flared into every colour of every place they'd passed. The knots loosened. The world exhaled.

As the Tangle shrank back into the loom's shadow, his voice thinned into a final hiss: "Sharing makes you weak." Wonder Woman tightened the Lasso and replied, "Sharing makes you free." The silk's hum softened—not a warning now, but an invitation. Somewhere, a child picked up a scarf in a market and felt it vibrate with a tiny, brave song, as if it whispered: *Keep walking. Keep learning. Keep weaving.*

The Adventure of the Silk Road

Shanghai Singapore International School, Jimin Lim – 9

Long ago, during China’s great Han Dynasty, a ten-year-old boy named Li Wei stood in a quiet village near Xi’an, staring down the road that led west. Every day his mother sat at the loom, weaving silk that shone like moonlight, and his dad made paper villagers bought cheaply. But the person Li Wei admired most was his uncle, Zhang Feng—a brave traveler who knew the paths of the legendary Silk Road better than anyone.

One warm evening, Li Wei stood tall in front of his uncle and said, “This time, Uncle, I’m coming with you.”

Zhang Feng laughed gently. “The Silk Road is no place for a child, little nephew. Bandits wait in the shadows. Sandstorms swallow whole caravans. You might not see your mother or father for years. Stay here and help your father with his work.”

Li Wei listened without arguing. But in his heart, the decision was already made.

A few days later, when everyone was asleep, Li Wei slipped out of the house with a small bag and followed the caravan into the night. He walked until his legs ached and his stomach growled, too stubborn to turn back.

When Uncle Zhang finally discovered him at dawn, he shouted, “You foolish, reckless child! Do you know how dangerous this is?”

“I do,” Li Wei answered softly. “That’s why I came. To face it with you.”

There was no turning back now. Grumbling, Uncle Zhang tied a short rope from Li Wei’s wrist to the saddle. “You have to obey all the rules. And you will work—hard.”

Luckily, Li Wei had come prepared. Hidden in his bag were treasures from his mother: a few pieces of her finest silk, some precious sheets of paper his father made, and a tiny bottle of ink he had traded for in the village.

The journey was extremely dangerous. The sun scorched their skin during the day. Nights were so cold their breath turned to frost. Yet, Li Wei didn’t give up.

Then one day, in the endless dunes, the wind began to howl. Sand blasted into Li Wei’s eyes, nose, and mouth. Li Wei fainted, collapsing onto the sand.

A woman found him almost dead and carried him to safety. The caravan rested at a small oasis while Li Wei recovered. There he met A Duo, a boy a little older than him, writing clumsy characters onto flat stones with water-soaked fingers that faded quickly in the sun. When A Duo saw Li Wei’s paper and ink, his eyes shone with wonder.

The next morning, a commotion woke Li Wei. His bag was open, and his paper and ink were gone. A Duo had taken them, desperate to learn.

Li Wei couldn’t tell the truth. His family had saved his life! Li Wei had seen those bleeding fingers, the endless writing that vanished in the sun as soon as they appeared. But giving away things to sell broke the caravan’s rules. After a long, painful silence, he lied to the caravan leaders: “I gave them to him. To thank him.”

The punishment was great—no food from the caravan for a week. Li Wei grew weak, and his vision blurred. On the fifth day, Uncle Zhang gave him bread and dried meat secretly at night. No words were spoken, but Li Wei understood—this was a sign of forgiveness, a sign his uncle still loved him.

Two years later, in a bustling market town farther west, Li Wei met a tall boy named Raphael, who dreamed of making beautiful, comfortable clothes. Raphael showed sketches he had drawn and clothes he had made from linen and wool.

“I want to use real silk someday,” Raphael whispered. “But it’s so expensive...”

Li Wei thought of his mother’s tired hands. He made a deal. “Take some pieces of my mother’s silk. I’ll give it to you cheaply. Years from now, when I return, repay me in twice the real value.”

Raphael’s eyes shone with hope. The deal was struck.

Time passed like the wheels of the caravan. Li Wei, now a steady young adult, returned home after six years of traveling.

Centuries passed. Dynasties rose and fell. The world changed.

In an international school at modern Xi’an, a thirteen-year-old boy named Li Ming often found himself bullied by classmates Francesco and Michael. Francesco mocked his old, worn clothes, while Michael delighted in announcing his poor grades.

One day, their teacher assigned students to bring something meaningful from their families. To Li Ming’s surprise, Francesco, Michael, and he had all chosen letters that looked strikingly similar.

Michael stepped forward first, opening a scroll in the glass box. “Even though I am an American, my ancestor Duo was Chinese. He had a chance to study after Li Wei gave him paper and ink. This is the Li Wei Theorem, which you can see in our math textbook.”

Next was Francesco, showcasing a tablet and a modern silk scarf with patterns of ancient lotus flowers. “My ancestor Raphael designed the first Liwei patterns, inspired by the silk gifted to him by Li Wei. The shop was extremely successful, so they moved to Italy.”

At first, the children thought it was just a coincidence, until...

Li Ming took a deep breath and shared, “My ancestor Li Wei traveled the Silk Road at just ten years old. This is a page from his diary: Today, I gave my silk to a boy named Raphael. Uncle Zhang scolded me, but I felt it was worth it!”

As he continued reading, the classroom grew silent. For the first time, the three boys looked beyond their differences and truly saw one another.

The Silk Road wasn’t just a long path for trading silk, spices, gold, and other goods. It was a giant bridge connecting faraway places, where people also shared kindness, care, and trust along the way.

And somewhere in history, an old traveler named Li Wei smiled, proud of the connections being made through time.

The Price of Sand

Pui Ching Primary School, Ku, Lap Yin – 12

“Before I start, have you ever seen a feathered dinosaur? And where do you think it was found? Argentina? Brazil? Germany? South Africa? Let me tell you, the first feathered dinosaur was found in China.” Steven said as he pointed at a picture on a museum brochure.

“In the 1990s, a fossil hunter named Li Yumin found the world’s very first feathered dinosaur. Scientists called it the *Sinosauropteryx*, which means ‘the China dragon bird’. The *Sinosauropteryx* lived during the Early Cretaceous Period, 125–122 million years ago. It is a meat-eating dinosaur and it ate small animals, including mammals and lizards. Since then, more than 40 dinosaur species have been found in the province of Liaoning, including more than 24 pterosaurs (winged reptiles) and more.” explained Steven, my crazy scientist friend that invents futuristic gadgets.

“It will be a pleasure to visit the Early Cretaceous Period...” Kyle said with a sigh.

“Actually, we can!” exclaimed Steven.

“How–We can use your newly invented time machine!” Kyle said as his thought interrupted him

“Hmm, how does this thing work? Kyle wondered.

“Let me turn this on,” said Steven, then he pressed a few buttons on the round thin panel. The time machine started glowing and flashing. All of a sudden, the tiny laboratory filled with books and maps turned into a narrow glass tunnel filled with blue and purple smoke and stars were shining. Bright blue lights started flashing and the time machine panel beeped loudly. Before Kyle knew it... bang!

“Where are we?” Kyle screamed loudly.

“Don’t be such a freak. We’re in the Early Cretaceous Period.” Steven said calmly.

“But where?” Kyle said while wind blew on his face.

“Um...The time machine can tell what place we’re in!” he said excitedly, then we swiped to ‘Location’ on the virtual projection.

Tony, the robotic voice whispered, “We are in the Early Cretaceous Period of northeastern China, and in the area of...”

“Ok, please stop it, Tony. That’s enough information” he said as Steven pressed a navy-blue button and a digitally projected screen popped out on the panel. Then he swiped to “Off”.

“Let’s start our adventure!” shouted Steven. Thrilled, he took out two small bags in a compartment in the thin panel.

“Uh, where are the dinosaurs? We walked for almost two hours, and found none.” Kyle signed hopelessly.

“Is your time machine broken...”

Stomping sounds interrupted him. The sand ground was shaking and they felt like someone was behind them.

“RUN!” shouted Steven, then they ran down a hill and into a cave. The cave was lit with twenty candles.

Huffing and puffing Kyle said. “Phew, we finally escaped from that horrible thing–What was it?” as he sat on the rocky floor.

“Silly, it’s the Sinosauropteryx, it roa...Huh, what is this?” He said as he walked to a narrow path in the cave that was covered with rocks and mud

“Let’s go in!” Steven said excitedly, then Steven went in. The path led to a cave hole. There were two eggs, with little cracks on each of them.

“Roar...”

“Uh-oh, the dinosaurs are coming! What are we going to do?” asked Kyle panicked. Crack! They heard some squeaking. When they turned around, their eyes widened, -the egg hatched.

The little dinosaurs were feathered. “What are we going to do? The dinosaurs are coming. We have to protect these little dinosaurs.”

“Yes, but how-We can use the Survival Mud Sprayer! If you press the button on the handle, it can spray mud on the dinosaur, the mud will become solid so it can survive.”

“Ok, let’s spray mud on it now...Don’t, because the solid mud can only make the creature inside survive 122-125 hundred years. The mud will freeze them, so they can have a narrow chance of survival.” explained Steven as he took out his inventions from his bag.

He took a deep breath and whispered, ‘Here goes nothing’ then he sprayed the mud spray onto the two little Sinosauropteryxs. Then they froze into mud statues in 5 seconds.

“Let’s escape now before it’s too late!’ Kyle reminded Steven, and they climbed up the cave. When they went back to the surface of the cave and saw there were huge dinosaur foot tracks that went deeper into the cave.

“This is a great chance to escape. Let’s sprint back to the time machine—where is it?”

“Don’t worry, I’ve put a tag on the time machine. We can locate the area of the machine. You can see it on your watch. They followed their watches to the time machine.

“So, it should be here—but where is it?” said Kyle worriedly.

“Don’t freak out yet. Before we went out, I pressed the hidden button, just in case the dinosaurs chew the wires.” Steven said proudly as he pressed the ‘Show’ button and the time machine popped out of thin air.

“Wow, that was impressive!” exclaimed Kyle. Steven pressed a few buttons on the round thin panel. All of a sudden, the deserted desert turned to a thin glass tube. As they raised up the pitch-black tube filled with sparkling tiny stars, red and yellow smoke filled the tube, but this time it felt like a million years to arrive back to 3023.

“Uhh, we finally arrived. Is there something wrong with your time machine?” said Kyle, annoyed.

“No...” said Steven as the TV reporter cut him mid-sentence.

“-We have great news! A team of fossil hunters found two baby Sinosauropteryx fossils in a cave where trees and rocks blocked the entrance. They have also found giant tracks leading dippers into the cave. We will do more research about that. Thank you for your time.” announced the reporter.

“Did we make that fossil?” asked Kyle.

“Yes, kind of...” said Steven.

“What do you mean we created two fossils?” Kyle asked, shocked.

“Yes, we created history,” said Steven delightedly.

The Price of Sand

Stewards Pooi Kei Primary School, Chloe Kate Lau – 10

The physician's words hung in the air of their small, stone house, as unattainable as the stars. A cure existed. Diana's fingers, stained from grinding cheap herbs, clenched around the meagre coins in her pocket. They were not enough. Since her mother's death, her father was all she had. Now, each day was a countdown, the chill of the house deepening with his ragged breathing.

Trudging home through the dusty forum, a parchment poster snagged her gaze. "WANTED," it read. "Brave souls to trade sparkling Roman glass to Chang'an. Reward: 10,000 denarii." Her heart slammed against her ribs. This was the lifeline. Then she saw the words beneath: "The Silk Road". The very name was a whisper of peril.

She rushed home. 'No, you can't. The world is too dangerous for a girl,' her father pleaded, his voice frail. His fear was a cage. If she went, she could die. But if she stayed, she would certainly lose him.

That night, she made her choice. She packed a bag with bread, dried meat, and her most precious possession: a vase of brilliant Roman glass. After asking her neighbour to care for her father, she kissed his sleeping cheek and left.

The sun was a merciless hammer. Before her stretched the Taklamakan, the "Sea of Death." Its dunes rolled like golden waves. The air was so dry it stole the moisture from her lips. After two days, her water skin was dangerously light. She saw the bleached bones of a camel half-buried in the dust, and a true, cold fear gripped her. I cannot do this. But then she saw a vision of her father's smile. Gritting her teeth, she forced herself on.

On the third day, she saw a figure slumped against a dune—a boy, his lips parched and cracked. Without thought, Diana stumbled to him and offered a few precious sips of her water. He said his name was Kavi. His guide had abandoned him, taking the supplies.

"My father is sick," Diana explained, her voice rough. "This glass is his only hope." She unwrapped the vase, letting the sun catch its deep blue hue.

Kavi's eyes widened. "I have nothing to trade, but I know the stars. I can navigate. Let me help you."

Their partnership was born of necessity. Kavi guided them by night; Diana shared her food and fierce determination.

Weeks later, they reached the Tianshan Mountains. The desert's furnace was replaced by a needle-sharp cold. On an icy path, Diana's foot slipped. She fell, a sharp crack echoing as blinding pain shot through her finger. It was bent at a sickening angle.

Kavi's face was pale, but his hands were steady. "We have to set it." Using a stick and cloth from his tunic, he splinted the broken finger. The pain was intense, but Diana bit her lip until it bled.

One night, huddled in a cave, Kavi pointed to the brightest star. "My brother taught me that," he said, his voice soft. "He was a soldier. He didn't come back." Diana understood. They were both fighting for a future stolen from someone else.

After a gruelling journey, the walls of Chang'an finally appeared. Their relief was short-lived. The trader, a man with hard eyes, examined the flawless vase.

"A fine piece," he admitted. "But I can offer only 2,000 denarii."

Diana's heart plummeted. It was not enough. But the Diana who had crossed the desert felt a fiery anger rise. She stood tall, her voice steady.

"Sir, this glass is priceless. I was promised 10,000. If you do not honour our agreement, I will take it to the Imperial court. I am sure they will appreciate its beauty... and question the word of a merchant who cheats a girl who has crossed the Sea of Death."

She held his gaze, her splinted finger resting on the vase. The trader was taken aback. He looked from her determined face to the glass, and with a sigh of frustration and respect, pushed the full sack across the table.

"You have your father's spirit, girl," he grumbled.

The heavy sack felt like more than payment; it felt like justice. She had done it. Not with magic, but with her own courage, wit, and the strength she never knew she had.

The journey back was a different kind of trial. When she and Kavi finally reached the fork where their paths would diverge, no lengthy farewell was needed. He simply pressed a smooth desert stone into her palm—a navigator's token. She clasped his hand, her splinted finger a reminder of all they'd endured. Then she turned towards home, the weight of the coins in her sack matched by the lighter, solid weight of the stone in her pocket.

When the familiar silhouette of her stone house finally appeared, Diana's breath caught in her throat. Then, she rushed inside.

Her father lay still, his breathing a faint rustle. "Father?" she whispered, kneeling.

His eyes fluttered open, clouded with pain. "Diana? A dream..."

"No dream." She placed the heavy sack in his hand, closing his frail fingers around the leather. "The cure is yours."

Tears traced the dust on his cheeks. He pulled her into a weak embrace, his hand brushing the clumsy splint on her finger. "My brave girl. What did it cost you?"

Diana thought of the blinding dunes, the shattering cold, the moment she found her voice before the hard-eyed trader. She thought of Kavi, a brother forged not by blood, but by survival. She thought of her own strength, uncovered layer by layer like a buried city.

"It cost fear," she said softly, resting her head on his shoulder. "And it bought more than medicine."

Outside, the wind swept over the path that led east. It was no longer just a road of peril, but a thread connecting her to a wider world, and to the unshakeable knowledge that within her was a fortitude more enduring than Roman glass.

The Truer Path

Stewards Pooi Kei Primary School, Choi Hei Yuet – 10

In the throne room of Kashgar, a vital oasis kingdom on the Silk Road, Princess Yurai stood ashamed before her mother, the Queen. The Queen’s expression was one of cold, final disdain. All eyes were upon Yurai as her mother announced her banishment.

This was the consequence of her reckless tongue. Her public insult to the Ambassador of Khotan—mocking their traditions as “the customs of simple sheep-herders”—had shattered a vital alliance. For Kashgar, which thrives on the trade between East and West, peace with its powerful neighbour, Khotan, is essential. Yurai’s words had threatened war.

A shocked gasp echoed through the court. Yurai’s own eyes widened in disbelief. She had been raised in a court where power was everything, but she had never imagined her own mother would discard her so completely. The severity in the Queen’s voice left no room for argument.

Yurai was sent to her chambers to pack. She took only simple dresses and a handful of gems—the currency for a journey, not the jewels of a princess. Forced from the palace, she found her loyal servants lined up at the kingdom’s gates, offering whispered prayers and small, meaningful gifts.

The sun was hidden behind a harsh winter sky as she rode into the barren landscape. A quiet, burning resolve solidified within her. She whispered a promise to herself: they would see who she truly was, not just a rebellious girl.

She turned her gaze east, towards the treacherous paths of the Silk Road that led to Khotan. Her banishment was not an end; it was a beginning. She would travel to the very kingdom she had offended, learn its ways, and earn its respect. She was beginning her journey of revenge, friendship, and, most importantly, a chance to forge her own freedom.

The avalanche had been nature’s blunt lesson. For days after, Yurai travelled in wary silence, until the outpost appeared—a more cunning test.

The merchant’s eyes, sharp as a hawk’s, found Yurai the moment she led Orb into the dusty outpost. “A fine animal,” he said, blocking her path. “Too fine for these trails. Trade her. I offer donkeys, supplies, safety.”

Yurai’s old pride flared. *Safety from you*, she almost spat. But she remembered the avalanche—a force she couldn’t insult into submission. This man was the same. She met his gaze, her voice controlled. “The mare is not for trade. Sell me grain and directions to Khotan. Name your price.”

His smile turned venomous. “The price is my offer, girl. Or you walk.” He stepped closer.

“Master Bo.” A young woman’s voice was calm behind him. Elisa stood with a water bucket, her mountain-worn clothes patched but sturdy. She looked only at Yurai. “The west-pass guard is looking for you, Bo. Something about a missing tax seal.”

Bo’s confidence faltered. He cursed, shot a glare at Elisa, and spat out a ridiculous price for the supplies. Yurai paid with a small sapphire, her last act as a princess with gems to burn.

As he stalked away, Yurai turned to Elisa. “Why help me?”

Elisa shrugged. “He preys on the lost. You are not from a caravan, yet you go to Khotan. That is a story I want to hear.” Her eyes were intelligent, appraising.

“A storm is closing the high pass tonight. You will not find the path alone.”

“And you know it?”

“I live here. My business is knowing what others do not.” Elisa glanced at the darkening sky. “Ride with me to the next ridge. In return, you tell me why a noble-born rider seeks Khotan alone.”

It was not a request, but a proposal. Yurai saw no pity in Elisa’s face, only curious calculation. Here was the first real choice of her exile: trust her pride, or trust a stranger’s knowledge.

“Very well,” Yurai said. She offered a hand up.

Elisa mounted behind her with ease. As they left the outpost, the world narrowed to the winding trail and the gathering wind.

“The main path here is a bandit’s lure,” Elisa said, pointing to a deceptive fork. “The real way is hidden.”

“How do you know?”

“My brother took the wrong path,” Elisa said flatly. “I guide others so they do not.”

The truth of the Silk Road settled over her like dust—its dangers were not just in nature, but in the false choices of the proud. She had just traded a gem for her first true necessity: a guide who knew the difference.

Before the gates of Khotan, Captain Varik and his Kashgar guards blocked Yurai’s path. “The Queen commands your return,” he stated.

Yurai’s old pride surged, but Elisa’s steady silence grounded her. She remembered the avalanche, the hidden paths—lessons in humility. “I am not returning,” Yurai replied calmly. “I enter Khotan as a traveller, not a princess.”

Varik signalled his guards forward.

Suddenly, the city gates opened. The Khotanese gate captain stepped out, her guard beside her. “No foreign arms on our soil,” she declared, then eyed Yurai. “You are the one who mocked our traditions.”

Yurai dismounted and bowed her head slightly. “I spoke from pride. I come to learn, and to offer service in apology.”

The captain looked to Elisa. “You vouch for her?”

“She has learned the true path from the royal road,” Elisa said simply.

A pause. Then the captain nodded. “Enter. But you earn your place by deeds, not words.”

Varik scowled. “The Queen will hear of this.”

“Tell her,” Yurai said, meeting his gaze, “her daughter seeks respect, not revenge.”

The Kashgar guards withdrew into the gathering dark.

Elisa fell in beside Yurai as they passed through the gates. “Not the welcome you imagined?”

“No,” Yurai said, gazing into the lantern-lit city, its air thick with incense and distant song. “But it is the one I earned.”

Together, they walked forward—not as princess and guide, but as travellers choosing the truer path.

A Thousand Golden Threads

Stewards Pooi Kei Primary School, Ho Ka Yao Kiyō – 11

Manon watched over her mother’s shop on a bustling Beijing street. Bolts of silk—crimson, jade, and saffron—glowed in the afternoon sun, each one a testament to a tradition her mother’s worn, skilled hands poured into every thread. But as Manon folded a length of cobalt blue, her mind was not on the familiar patterns. It was wandering the dusty, sun-baked streets of Rome, tracing the shadows of ancient ruins she knew only from whispered tales.

“We cannot afford such fancies, Manon.” Her mother’s voice, gentle yet firm, had crushed that dream a dozen times. The sorrow in it was a physical ache. Manon understood her duty, yet the longing to leave, to see, was a constant, restless flutter in her chest.

One afternoon, a trader from the West entered, his eyes alight with a keen appreciation. He lingered over her mother’s finest piece—a tapestry woven with a thousand golden threads. When he named his price, it was a small fortune.

Manon’s heart stuttered. This was not merely a sale; it was a key, glinting with possibility. In that charged silence, she saw it all: the weight of her mother’s life, and the uncharted path of her own. This was passage on a west-bound caravan. This was the taste of strange spices and the sight of mountain passes. This was the dust of the Roman Forum on her shoes. This could be the beginning of everything.

The weight of the trader’s coins felt like a secret in Manon’s palm. That night, she showed them to her mother under the flickering lamp light.

“Passage on a west-bound caravan,” Manon whispered, her voice trembling with a mix of fear and exhilaration. “I can go to Samarkand. I can secure better prices for our silk than any trader here. Let me prove our silk’s true worth.”

Her mother’s face was a landscape of conflict—pride warring with fear. Finally, she nodded, a single tear tracing the lines by her eye. “Do not just trade silk,” she said, her voice thick. “Trade our name. Earn us a reputation that will outlive us both.”

Manon’s goal was no longer a vague dream. It was a mission: to earn the “Seal of Samarkand”, a mark of quality from the city’s most powerful guild that would make their family’s silk legendary.

The **desert** was a brutal teacher. The sandstorm that hit wasn’t just an obstacle; it was a predator. It stole her water skin and buried her compass. For two days, she wandered, parched and delirious, the coins in her pouch feeling like worthless metal. She was saved not by luck, but by her own wits, spotting a specific rock formation her mother had once described.

When she finally stumbled into Samarkand, it wasn’t as a confident trader, but as a desperate, dusty girl. The guild master, a man with eyes like chips of flint, laughed at her. “A child, with silk from a no-name Beijing shop? The Seal is not for you.”

This was the real test. Defeated, she met Amina, a young translator whose own family had fallen from grace. “The guild master values stories,” Amina explained. “Not just quality. He wants to know why your silk matters.”

Together, they devised a new strategy. Manon didn’t just show her silk; she unfolded it before the guild master, her voice growing strong as she spoke of her mother’s hands, the thousand golden threads, the dream woven into every inch. She wasn’t just selling fabric; she was selling a legacy.

The guild master was silent for a long time. “The quality is... exceptional,” he admitted. “But the story is better. There is a Roman Senator in the city. He seeks a gift of unparalleled beauty for the Empress. If you can secure that trade, you will have your Seal.”

A new, terrifying goal was set. The Roman Senator was surrounded by shrewd guards and seasoned competitors. To even get an audience, Manon and Amina had to use all their cunning, bribing a guard with the last of Manon’s dates to get a moment of his time.

As Manon stood before the Senator, her heart hammered, not with fear, but with purpose. She had not just travelled the Silk Road; she had survived it. And she was ready to prove her worth.

Standing before the Roman Senator, Manon felt the weight of every mile she had travelled—not in her bones, but in her voice. She did not merely present the silk; she let it fall open like a revealed secret, its golden threads catching the lamplight.

“This is not just silk,” she said, her voice clear and steady. “It is my mother’s life, woven with a thousand prayers. It survived the desert so it could reach you.”

The Senator, a man accustomed to flattery and barter, grew still. He touched the fabric not as a buyer, but as a witness. “You speak of its journey,” he said. “And now it has found mine.”

In the guild hall’s solemn silence, the master presented the Seal of Samarkand. The disc was heavy, its surface etched with a lotus encircling a star—a mark of permanence. He pressed it into her palm, its cool metal a shock against her skin. “You did not just bring silk,” he said, his flinty gaze now holding respect. “You brought a story worth more than gold. Your family’s name is now part of ours.”

Outside, under a sky streaked with twilight, Manon clasped Amina’s hands. The Seal’s weight in her pouch felt like a promise kept—to her mother, and to herself.

“We did it,” she whispered. Amina’s smile was the final reward, more brilliant than any seal. They had not just traded silk; they had woven a new story together, one of resilience and unbroken faith.

She thought of her mother’s shop, the bolts of silk glowing in the Beijing sun. They were no longer just lengths of fabric. They were beginnings.

The Keeper's Key

Stewards Pooi Kei Primary School, Li Cheuk Tung – 11

The scent of ginger and garlic filled the tiny kitchen of their Hong Kong apartment. Penelope focused on her hands, carefully pleating the dough of a dumpling—a family recipe passed down for generations. It was a tradition that always made her miss her mother the most. As she worked, her fingers brushed against the small, jade locket she always wore. It was the last gift from her mother, a historian who had spent her life studying the Silk Road.

“This locket was a secret the city keeps,” her mother had told her, her voice soft but sure. “It was found right here, in Hong Kong. It’s for you, my bridge.”

Suddenly, the cool jade grew warm against her skin. A soft, green light pulsed from it, casting long, shifting shadows across the room. Penelope gasped and stepped back as the shadows in the corner of the kitchen deepened and swirled. From them, a figure emerged—a man with the intelligent eyes of a human but the legs and curved horns of a goat. A satyr.

“The gateway has been opened,” the creature whispered, his gaze fixed on the glowing jade. “Your mother was a Keeper of the Road. Now, the task falls to you.”

He placed a cracked, bronze compass into her trembling hand. Its needle spun wildly before pointing insistently away from the city’s skyline, towards the distant heart of Asia.

“This will not guide you north, but to what you have lost,” he said. “Follow the Silk Road to the Oasis of Echoes. But know this: to find a connection, you must risk losing what matters most in the present.”

With those final, chilling words, he vanished into the shadows. The locket’s light faded, but the compass needle held its course. Penelope knew with a terrifying certainty that it was pointing to the Silk Road. Her mother’s locket had not just been a gift; it was a key. And she had just unlocked her destiny.

The satyr’s words still echoing in her mind, Penelope found herself not on a familiar Hong Kong street, but in a dusty, winding lane in a strange city. The bronze compass in her hand pointed unwavering down a narrow alley labelled ‘Meshi Street’.

Following it, she was drawn to a small, cluttered antiques shop. Inside, a man was frantically searching through scrolls. He started as she entered, but his eyes widened, fixed on the jade locket around her neck.

“The Keeper’s Key,” he breathed, his anger melting into desperate hope. “My name is Martin. I was your mother’s guide.” He led her to a back room, where a young woman lay pale and still. “My daughter, Luna. A sickness of forgetfulness has taken her. The Oasis of Echoes holds a cure, but only the true Keeper can open the path.”

He showed Penelope an ancient book, its pages detailing the locket’s powers: ‘1. *The compass within will guide you to what was lost.* 2. *A double tap will carry you to a place you hold in mind.*’ The third power was lost, a page torn away.

“The Oasis does not give without a price,” Martin warned, echoing the satyr. “To find a connection, you must risk a present loss.”

Determined to help, Penelope double-tapped the locket. A radiant, emerald light enveloped them, and the world shifted. The air grew thin and cold. They were standing at the foot of the formidable Fann Mountains, a stone tablet before them: ‘*Climb to see the path.*’

The ascent was treacherous. Penelope's foot slipped on a loose stone, and she tumbled, a sharp rock gashing her leg. As Martin helped her up, a figure emerged from the crags—a teenage boy with sandy hair. With gentle hands, he helped bind her wound. He communicated through gestures; his name was Alan, and he too sought the Oasis to find a lost brother.

Together, the three reached a hidden cavern—the entrance to the Oasis of Echoes. Inside, the air hummed with whispers, and illusions swirled. Martin recoiled from visions of failing his daughter. Alan reached out for a phantom brother. Then, Penelope saw it: her mother, in her final moments. The sight was a dagger to her heart, the sorrow so immense she could hardly bear it.

“We must leave!” she cried, tearing her eyes away.

But a golden note materialised: *‘The past is the key to flee. To leave, you must watch the entire scene.’*

Understanding the terrible price, they turned back. They endured the painful visions, witnessing their loved ones' suffering until the very end. As the final illusion faded, a gateway shimmered into view. A guardian stood before it.

“What is the price of a memory?” he asked.

Penelope, her heart raw but clear, answered, “The price is the pain of remembering. It is the loss of the comforting lie.”

The guardian nodded and let them pass. Penelope stepped forward, and finally, she heard her mother's voice, warm and real. “Thank you for coming, my bridge. But you must let me go, and live your life.”

With those words, her mother vanished, granting Penelope the closure she desperately needed. She had found the connection, but at the cost of a final farewell. As she emerged from the Oasis, the locket felt lighter, its magic spent, its purpose fulfilled.

As Penelope stepped back into her Hong Kong kitchen, the scent of ginger and garlic was now mingled with the faint, magical scent of desert sand and mountain air. The jade locket lay cool against her skin, its light faded to a soft, constant glow. She looked out at the neon-lit skyline and saw, superimposed upon it, a shimmering web of silvery light—threads of connection stretching from her window to Martin's shop, to the mountains of Tajikistan, and beyond.

Her mother's voice echoed in her heart: *“My bridge.”*

She wasn't just Penelope anymore. She was a Keeper of the New Silk Road. And her journey had only just begun.

Beyond the Crown

Stewards Pooi Kei Primary School, Ma Hiu Ching – 11

Princess Athena of Rome stared at her reflection, trapped in a gown of priceless Chinese silk. Tonight, her father, the Emperor, would announce her betrothal to a Germanic prince she had never met—a political trade to secure an alliance. She was not a daughter; she was a commodity.

When she confronted him, her father boomed, “The entire empire will benefit from this union!”

“And what of my life?” Athena cried. “Am I just another spoil of war to be traded, like this silk?”

“Do not dare question me! You are lucky to be a princess!” he shouted.

“Lucky?” she whispered, her voice trembling with a new, terrifying resolve. “Then I no longer wish to be lucky.”

That night, she packed not jewels, but practical clothes, a dagger, and the one possession she truly treasured: a map of the Silk Road. An old merchant from the East had given it to her, his eyes twinkling as he spoke of caravans led by women, of sprawling markets in Samarkand, and of an empire, China, that valued scholarship and art. It was a world where a person could be valued for more than their bloodline.

She looked at the map, its lines pointing to freedom. She wasn’t just running away from a marriage. She was running towards the legendary Silk Road, **to a self she had only imagined**, to find a place where she could be more than just a princess. She slipped into the night, leaving the palace, and her old life, behind forever.

The freedom of the open road was a terrifying illusion.

By the third day, Athena’s fine sandals were in tatters, and the money she’d taken was dangerously low. The map was her guide, but it couldn’t show her how to barter for a stale loaf of bread without being cheated, or how to sleep in a ditch, listening for the footsteps of bandits or her father’s soldiers.

Her salvation came in the form of a dusty caravan bound for the East. Its leader, a sharp-eyed woman named Zahra, looked her up and down. “You have the hands of a princess, not a traveller,” she stated. “Why should I let you slow us down?”

“I can read and write Latin and Greek,” Athena blurted out, her voice trembling but clear. “I can keep your records, translate for you. My father is... was... a merchant.” The lie tasted bitter, but it was her only currency.

Zahra considered her, then nodded. “You will work. And you will learn.”

The caravan became her university. She learned to tie a secure knot, to judge the quality of silk by its sheen, and to understand the unspoken rules of the road. The other travellers, initially suspicious, slowly warmed to her relentless work ethic. She traded stories of Roman palaces for tales of Samarkand’s golden domes, her world expanding with every mile.

The real test came at the edge of the Taklamakan Desert. The “Sea of Death” stretched before them, a vast, silent ocean of dunes. Here, a sandstorm struck, a roaring, blinding wall of fury. Tents tore, and camels bellowed in fear. In the chaos, Athena didn’t freeze. Remembering a trick Zahra had taught her, she helped secure the water skins and guide the panicked animals into a huddle, her voice a calm anchor in the storm.

When the calm returned, Zahra clapped a hand on her shoulder, a gesture of respect. “The princess is dead,” she said, her voice low. “Out here stands a woman of the Silk Road.”

Months turned into a year. The journey was a tapestry of blistered feet, breathtaking landscapes, and hard-won friendships. When she finally saw the winding streets of a bustling city—not Beijing, but a Central Asian hub like Samarkand—her heart swelled. She had done the impossible.

But as she marvelled at her new home, a familiar sight made her blood run cold: the crest of a Roman helmet bobbing through the crowd. Her father’s men had found her.

Athena’s breath caught, but she didn’t run. Three Roman soldiers faced her, armour gleaming under the Samarkand sun.

“Princess Athena,” their leader said. “You return with us.”

The market quietened. Athena stood tall. “The princess you seek is gone. She died in the desert.”

The centurion stepped forward. “Our orders—”

“—can be satisfied another way.” Athena lifted her father’s signet ring. “Take this. Tell him I was lost in the Taklamakan. That saves your honour.”

She glanced at Zahra, who stood nearby with Khasan and others from the caravan. Without a word, they moved behind her—a silent, unyielding wall.

The soldier hesitated. Athena pressed on. “And take this too.” Zahra handed her a bolt of luminous silk. “A gift for my father. Proof the Silk Road holds more value than a runaway daughter.”

The centurion weighed the silk, then tucked both it and the ring into his satchel. He gave a stiff nod.

“The desert shows no mercy,” he said quietly. “Your story will be told.”

He turned, and his men vanished into the crowd.

Only then did Athena breathe freely. Zahra squeezed her shoulder. “Well bargained.”

In the weeks that followed, no one in the caravanserai spoke of princesses. They spoke of Athena the translator, the record-keeper, the merchant.

She sat in a courtyard scented with spice, a ledger open before her. Her hands, once soft, were marked with ink and sun. She tracked shipments in Greek, bartered in three tongues, mapped routes her father had never dreamed of.

A breeze lifted a strand of hair from her face. Beyond the mountains lay Rome—a memory of silk and confinement.

Here, she was free. Not because she had run from a crown, but because she had chosen a life. Not because she was given a name, but because she had earned one.

She closed the ledger and gazed out at the bustling square—her home, her world, her making.

The Stone and the Sand

Stewards Pooi Kei Primary School, Sut Yui Ching Abbie – 10

After school, the first thing Amy saw was the stone. It was a deep, celestial blue, veined with specks of gold—a piece of lapis lazuli. Her archaeologist father had told her, “This was more precious than gold to the traders of the Silk Road. Hold it, and you’re holding history.”

She picked it up. It was unnaturally warm. A faint vibration hummed under her thumb.

The air in her room began to shimmer, and the sounds of modern Hong Kong faded into a golden blur.

When her senses returned, a crushing heat pressed down on her. She stood in a vast, empty desert, the horizon wavering like a mirage. The silence was absolute. “Hello?” she whispered. Her voice was swallowed by the landscape. Panic seized her. “HELP!” she screamed, the sound lost in the expanse.

As her fear peaked, the sand at her feet swirled, coalescing into a tall figure. It was not human; its body was made of swirling dust and heat, and its eyes glowed like embers.

“Who... what are you?” Amy stammered.

“I am a Djinn,” it rustled, pointing to the glowing stone in her palm. “Bound to the path you hold.”

“The stone brought me here! I need to go home!”

“Every journey has a price,” the Djinn intoned, his voice like shifting dunes. “To find your way back, you must first help me find mine.” It gestured to a tarnished lamp half-buried in the dunes. “My prison, and your key.”

With the lamp in her hand, Amy trudged into the burning desert. The sun was merciless, bleaching the sky pale. Soon, a dizzying thirst took hold, her tongue clinging to her mouth. Her foot caught on a stone, sending her stumbling to her knees.

As she fell, a familiar warmth bloomed in her pocket. The lapis stone pulsed, and the Djinn materialised before her.

“Water is near,” he rasped, pointing to a lush grove of palm trees in the distance. An oasis. Amy’s heart leapt, but suspicion followed. *A trick*, she thought. But to die of thirst was certain. “I trust you,” she said, the words dry in her throat.

She followed the illusion, only for it to dissolve into nothing. There was no water. Yet, the Djinn looked almost pleased. He glided to a cactus and collected precious drops of dew onto a leaf, offering it to her. The first test of trust was passed.

As the scorching day faded into a freezing night, Amy looked up. The stars were brilliant diamonds scattered across endless black. Remembering her father’s lessons, she traced the constellations. “We go east,” she whispered. The Djinn watched, his ember-like eyes flickering with quiet respect.

They did not see the bandits watching from the shadows. The men emerged, their eyes locked on her pocket. “The stone, child,” their leader snarled, his voice rough as sandstone.

Amy’s fingers tightened around the lapis. As the men lunged, she turned and ran. The Djinn rose, summoning a whirlwind of sand that sent the bandits tumbling away. Gasping for breath, Amy felt a sudden tug at her legs. She looked down in horror. The ground had turned to liquid. Quicksand.

It pulled her down with a terrible, hungry force. The Djinn reached for her, but they were both consumed by the swallowing darkness.

They landed in a cavernous space, ruins of a caravanserai under glowing crystals. The Djinn grew quiet, drifting towards a fossilised campfire.

“He sat here,” he sighed. “He was kind.”

Amy saw then he wasn’t just powerful—he was a lonely soul, tethered to the past.

As she explored, the lapis stone flared, pointing to a rusty metal box. At her touch, the ruins shimmered. Inside lay a map in ancient script. The only word she recognised was ‘Han’.

The Djinn stared at the map, his features shifting with long-buried emotion. “This is a map to a temple,” he translated, voice hushed. “It holds the key.”

“How do we get there?” she asked.

The Djinn took her hand and placed it over the map, the lapis stone glowing fiercely in her palm. “Like this,” he said. The world twisted, and they were pulled into the parchment itself.

They landed in a grand, silent temple, air thick with incense and age. An old guardian stood before them, robes the colour of forgotten sand. “The curse can only be broken,” he said, his voice echoing, “by an act of selfless trade.”

Amy and the Djinn looked at one another. They understood. The magic was not in the lamp or the stone, but in the fragile connection they had forged—woven from trust and shared hardship.

“I trade my return for his freedom,” Amy said, the declaration ringing clear.

As the words left her lips, the lamp on the Djinn’s belt shattered into dust. The curse was broken.

For a moment, there was only silence. Amy felt the cost of her choice—her way home, gone—settle in her chest. The Djinn’s form settled, the restless sand calming into serenity. His eyes held a new peace.

“You are free,” she whispered.

“Because of you,” he said, his voice now clear and deep. He looked at her, stranded.

“Your courage deserves a reply.”

He raised his hands. The lapis stone glowed with a gentle light. It rose, spinning, weaving a vortex of sapphire dust—a portal, lovingly made.

“Go home, friend.”

Amy’s heart ached, but she felt a quiet triumph glow within. She picked up the stone, now cool and inert, and placed it by the ancient guardian.

“It stays with its history.”

She stepped into the light. Warmth bloomed, then faded.

She was in her room. Hong Kong’s glow framed the window.

In her heart, a warm certainty remained. Under ancient stars, a lonely soul was free. She had learnt that the greatest treasures are not carried, but forged—in trust, and in the choices made for another.

Carl and the Time-Turner

Taikoo Primary School, Ko Ling Wan – 11

Like every day for the past ten years of his life, Carl the delivery driver woke up to his screeching, high-pitched alarm clock. After five minutes of moaning, he finally managed to stand up properly. He then put on an out of style old jacket and his most boring tie as he yawned for at least six times and then saw a boatload of parcels on his doorstep.

While delivering his final parcel, he started daydreaming about himself being in an enormous mansion, eating anything he wished, doing anything he wanted.

All of a sudden, Carl saw a tiny rock in front of his eyes. At first, he thought that it was nothing. However, after a few seconds he fell straight onto the floor. As he was screaming like a baby, he saw a golden light coming out of the box. Without thinking, he took the thing out of the box, and started admiring its beauty as if it was a diamond ring. It was shining brightly like a star in the sky, looking just like a watch. As he pressed a mysterious button, he fell through what looked like a veil. “Woahhh,” he yelled as he started falling, for the first time, he was worried. He thought, “Wh-What’s happening to me? A-Am I falling, w-where am I exactly?”

He thought that he would have seen a bright blue sky, but instead saw a sunset like, bright orange sky above his head with people wearing silk robes around him. He asked, “Who in the world are you?”

“Merchants from China of course. Now, it’s time for you to pick up that box of silk and come with us. We used to have horses to ride, but you know, they died too because of the harsh weather and the plague,” said one of the other merchants with very messy hair and wearing incredibly dirty clothes.

After months of walking, Carl was starting to get used to walking so much. However, during one fateful day his fellow merchants had disappeared. He didn’t know what happened and gave up going to Afghanistan, and went back to China.

Even after he returned, he still felt constant pain in his head, and had nightmares about his fellow merchants getting killed.

Soon, he and fifty other merchants were going to Uzbekistan to trade with the people there, and they made Carl himself the leader. However, someone thought that Carl was a spy working for the bandits, causing him to get demoted from leader.

As December was approaching, the merchants and Carl headed to Uzbekistan. This time, the Taklamakan Desert was still as hot as the sun, but some parts became freezing cold. Compared to a delivery driver, being a delivery driver was like an easy job.

Two months later, he had finally reached Uzbekistan but saw none of the merchants who were originally with him just like last time. The new year felt more like suffering rather than having fun. He stayed up every night, trying to trade his silk for food, trying not to think about the raid that happened. He also received a mysterious book one night from a stranger called “The book of mysteries on the Silk Road”.

The wind howled in the pitch-black sky as he slowly opened the book with fear and excitement. On the first page he read out loud, “The plague on the Silk Road was a massive outbreak of bubonic plague which turned the Silk Road from a corridor of wealth into a pathway of disease and social collapse, killing around 13 million people by 1333.”

Next, he read the paragraph below,” Bandits were a constant threat to travelers in the silk Road, ambushing them in deserts, mountains to steal valuable goods like silk, spices and gold. Groups of outlaws usually hide in narrow paths like the “Trail of bones” in the Taklamakan Desert. They specifically target slow-moving camels, sometimes even killing them, with places like the “Vale of blood” being infamous for such raids.

After he read that paragraph, he felt his soul leave his body, finally realizing that he had probably passed the “Vale of blood”, and his merchant friends were probably gone for good. In the end, he finally decided that he would return to seek help, so that he can help free the innocents captured.

After asking for help over and over again, the emperor still said no, no matter how many times he asked. In the end, he decided that he would free the innocent people all by himself.

He still remembered that he had the old jacket which was almost transparent. He decided to hide beneath it and try breaking out of the country. Unexpectedly, he managed to break out. Now, he needed to think of a way to survive the severe weather in the Taklamakan Desert and how he was going to survive the bandits. Luckily, Carl still had water and the jacket.

Five months later, he had finally reached the mountain where the merchants and other innocent people were captured. He immediately put on his jacket to disguise himself among the other bandits. After reaching the cells where the people were held, he freed everyone who was captured. They all broke out together like a team.

After going back, everyone loved him for saving innocents. As a reward, the emperor gifted him a golden, tiny box with something shiny. As he opened the tiny golden box, he realized that it was a time-turner, exactly like the one he used to come here.

The crowd chanted his name, and he looked into all of their watery eyes and said,” Well, this is it. Looks like my five-year voyage has come to an end, so..... Goodbye!”

Like a man-made wish, Carl returned to his world, and had changed from being a spoiled man to being someone who was brighter. Even after he had retired, he still remembered those five long years, five years that nobody else had ever experienced in their life.

The Journey of Silk

The International School of Macao, Choi Pak Long Lonzo – 9

Sunlight streamed through the wooden shutters of the weaving room. A small cluster of silkworms nibbled their breakfast: fresh mulberry leaves. The soft sound of chewing blended with the chatter of young silk weavers and the whistling wind, creating a gentle, comforting tune.

The master weaver lifted me carefully from the loom. Her hands were rough from years of work, yet her touch was soft and full of pride.

“You are my joy and pride,” she whispered through red eyes and parched lips.

I was folded gently and placed in a wooden chest lined with cotton.

That was the moment my journey began.

The market of Chang’an was lively and grand—like a festival that never ended. Merchants shouted to advertise their goods, and the air was filled with scent after scent: hot dumplings, roasted duck, exotic spices, and sweet tea. Tables were covered with treasures—blue and white porcelain, shining bronze mirrors, and colorful embroidered fabrics.

“Gorgeous Tang Sancai!” hollered a shopkeeper.

“Yummy dim sum and hot tea!” shouted a restaurant owner.

I was placed carefully on a fine oak table. Days turned into weeks. Other silks were purchased quickly and taken away to begin their adventures. People admired me and whispered that I was beautiful—yet too expensive.

So I waited.

Finally, one morning, a wealthy merchant stopped in front of me. His eyes widened.

“This,” he said, “will make a perfect gift for the Doge of Venice!”

Before I could blink, I was purchased, rolled carefully, and tucked safely into the merchant’s leather bag. From that moment on, I never left his side.

At dawn the next day, a large caravan prepared for departure. Hundreds of men loaded camels with supplies: dried meat, dates, apricots, and gallons of water. Precious goods—jade carvings, porcelain bowls, fragrant tea, scrolls, and silk like me—were wrapped carefully in layers of fabric and rope.

The merchant climbed onto the first camel. He looked back at his workers and bellowed:

“Our journey shall begin!”

The caravan marched forward. The camels’ padded feet kicked up dirt and sand, creating a swirl of heat and motion around the travelers. Chang’an slowly disappeared into the distance.

Scorching days burned skin, freezing nights chilled bones, and sandstorms sometimes forced the caravan to stop. After many days, a small dot appeared on the horizon.

It was Dunhuang—home of the famous Mogao Caves, where thousands of Buddha statues rested inside stone temples. Travelers exchanged news from distant lands while monks prayed for peace. I heard the merchant murmur:

“Buddhas, protect our men and bless our faithful camels with water.”

After a short rest, the caravan entered the vast Taklamakan Desert.

Miles and miles of shimmering golden sand stretched ahead. Beautiful—but dangerous. In the heat, skin peeled and sweat poured down. At night, the cold cracked lips and numbed fingers. Yet still, we pressed on.

Finally, we reached Kashgar.

Kashgar was a crowded crossroads where cultures met: Chinese, Persians, and Uyghurs all lived and traded together. Colorful fabrics, spices, precious stones, and carved wood filled the marketplace. The caravan men finally enjoyed hot laghman—hand-pulled noodles served with meat, vegetables, and tomatoes.

Beyond Kashgar stood the towering Tian Shan Mountains. Their lakes were clear as crystal, and their meadows bloomed with flowers and the camels happily munched. After climbing and crossing rivers and rocky trails, we eventually reached Merv—a city of scholars.

Here, mathematicians, poets, and philosophers talked joyfully in shaded courtyards while others enjoyed sweet melons. The caravan restocked bread, rice, and meat before continuing toward Damascus.

More mountains and deserts passed beneath the camels' steady footsteps until we finally reached Damascus, famous for its master craftsmen.

Shops overflowed with strong steel blades and fine leather goods. The merchant traded some silk for shining armor and steel swords—but I remained close, still guarded inside his personal bag.

A nobleman hosted a great banquet for the travelers. They ate enormous portions of lamb flavored with clove, saffron, and pepper. They enjoyed pastries, nuts, and sweet jams. Stories filled the hall—stories about families, myths, and lands far beyond the horizon.

Soon after, the merchant boarded a ship on the Mediterranean Sea. Moonlight shimmered on the water as the ship sailed westward.

When we reached Venice, gondolas carried the goods along shining canals to the palace.

The merchant presented me to the Doge as a royal treasure—a symbol of wealth and status. I hung proudly in a magnificent room filled with mahogany furniture, decorated walls, and soft velvet sofas. One wall displayed heroic battle scenes. Another held a giant polished mirror.

For the first time, I saw myself clearly.

I was beautiful.

I remained in the palace for many years.

Then came chaos.

Muffled cries. Heavy footsteps. Horses galloped. Smoke filled the air. A frightened servant rushed into the room, gathering valuables. He grabbed me and stuffed me into a wooden crate filled with scrolls, books, and coins.

He whispered,

“Someday, someone will want to remember.”

The crate was carried away and buried deep beneath desert sands.

Centuries passed.

Then one day—

Clink. Clang. Clink.

Sunlight burst through the darkness.

An archaeologist gasped.

“Wow... what a beautiful treasure.”

Once, I traveled in a caravan.

Now, I travel in a specimen box.

I have returned to Xi'an—once known as Chang'an. I am carefully displayed inside a grand museum.

Once, I was a treasure.

Now, I am a testimony—welcoming people from around the world, sharing friendship, culture, and the long, unforgettable story of the Silk Road.

New Tales of China's Silk Road

Tung Wah Group of Hospitals Hok Shan School, Ng Lok Him Norton – 11

I live in the Taklamakan Desert, where mighty winds blow sand everywhere. We grow melons near a small watchtower. Grandpa told me camels passed through here long ago on the Silk Road. Now, I watch the white train pass by every day at 3:17. It goes to distant cities like Urumqi and Kashgar, and to other countries. Grandpa knows these names but has never been to these places.

I help Grandpa in the field every morning, irrigating the melons while birds search for food in the sand. The melons ripen slowly in the hot sun. My grandfather, Tursun, sometimes watches the train pass, then spits in the sand. “A train that does not stop is like a river that does not provide water,” he says. “What’s the use of being fast if it does not benefit anyone?”

At night, Grandpa tells me stories about the old Silk Road, when merchants brought camels with silk and spices through the desert. “The train is faster and can hold a thousand camels,” I tell him.

After school, my best friend Nur visits. We run through the melon fields pretending to be train operators. “Maybe someday we can go to Shanghai by train!” Nur exclaims. “The train is full of numbers and papers,” Grandpa says. “Not carpets or spices or stories. Look at our melons in the sun. That’s reality.”

One day, I receive a colorful paper from a company offering to deliver our melons to Europe by train. They call them ‘Taklamakan Gold’ and want to teach us proper storage methods. My parents are excited but worried. “If we work hard, perhaps foreigners will love our melons,” my mom says.

At dinner, we eat bread, melons, and lamb, discussing the future. I want to contribute, but I’m afraid. Grandpa is angry. “Our family has grown melons for generations,” he says. “We don’t need computers to teach us about water or to sell our name to strangers.”

A woman named Li Wei from Shanghai visits our farm. Grandpa and I show her how we plant melons while she takes pictures with her tablet. I show her my favorite melon. Perhaps the train and the company will help my family, and my children might remain on the farm to grow melons.

Li Wei tells me about Shanghai’s vast high-rise buildings. I’ve never left Xinjiang but would like to see new places. She promises to write me postcards from other countries and explains the boxes that keep melons fresh. Grandpa gives her tea but doesn’t smile much.

I hand Li Wei a small melon. “This is the sweetest melon,” she says, and I feel proud. “We must send them quickly before they spoil. The old camels needed months, but our train only needs two days. This is how ‘Taklamakan Gold’ stays fresh and sweet.”

One night, a large sandstorm arrives. The wind roars and the sky turns brown. The electricity goes out, stopping our water pumps. Grandpa remains calm. He takes an antique lamp outside, and Li Wei and I follow. He uses traditional methods to redirect water to the grape vines, learned from his elders. After the storm, we repair the pipes and tidy the fields. I understand that both traditional and modern approaches are needed.

During the outage, I sit outside with Wei under the stars. She talks about city life; I talk about the desert. We become fast friends. Grandpa calls out, “The sensors aren’t working. The satellite is useless. This,” he points to the ground, “is the map we need.”

Li Wei incorporates my family's ideas into her project report. "We need both technology and tradition," she says. The company agrees we can use both methods. Li Wei tells Grandpa he is brilliant.

Grandma prepares tea and talks with Li Wei about our old melon seeds. "These seeds remember the desert wind," she explains. Li Wei promises to honor our tradition. Grandpa shows her where the sand is soft. "The morning water stays longer there," he says. "My grandfather's grandfather found it."

My parents are pleased to see everyone working together. Nur and I discuss learning English to communicate with foreigners who buy our melons. Li Wei says, "Trains, roads, or products are less precious than our knowledge. We must not forget our old ways."

At harvest season, neighbors help us. There are songs and laughter, and the sweet-smelling melons are distributed to everyone. "This must be the best melon!" they say. We build a new cold-storage warehouse. The "Taklamakan Gold" boxes are printed with Grandpa's picture. I take a photo with my family and Li Wei in front of the boxes, wanting to remember this day. When the new system begins, Li Wei, Grandpa, and I choose melons and load them into a cold truck. At the border, we see giant cranes and containers—so different from our farm. Our melon boxes sit on a huge train, each with a particular number. I wave goodbye, hoping they're delivered safely and bring joy. I wonder if someone far away will taste our desert melon and remember our desert.

As the train begins to move, Grandpa hands the driver a small melon—a tradition for saying goodbye that has gone on for generations. The driver smiles. The train departs like a caravan from years ago, carrying our melons, our hopes, and our love for the land. That evening, I lie in bed listening to the wind, feeling proud and thrilled. Changes are underway, but our family's stories remain with us. I dream of visiting other lands, yet feel deeply proud to be from mine. Standing with Grandpa and Li Wei, we feel the desert wind. We hear the camel bells, still there, now blended with the sound of the train. Our story has changed.

Fiction

Group 3



Blood of the Covenant, Water of the Womb

Diocesan Girls' School, Pang Yuet Wing – 14

They were tiring. Minyun saw it in their slumped shoulders, sluggish movements and drooping eyelids. They had probably set off at dawn; now the sun was dipping below the horizon, the last of its rays carpeting the land with streaks of orange.

Good, Minyun thought. After all, tired travellers never saw the blade coming.

A glance behind her told her that her fellow bandits were poised for attack with swords drawn, waiting for her command to spring on the unsuspecting merchants.

She had ambushed many a Silk Road caravan over the years, yet every raid felt like the first. Her world narrowed down until all she could see was the cluster of camels and their riders. She closed her eyes, attuned to every single sound from her own even breaths to the whistle of the brisk wind.

The leading camel's steps faltered.

Minyun's eyes flew open. *Now*.

She launched herself at the traders, the others echoing her battle cry as they fell in behind her, swords and daggers set aflame in the waning sunlight. Her movements were fluid and swift: swiping, slicing, diving and rolling like it was second nature. She let loose a gleeful shriek as she pounced on a camel, its passenger tumbling to the ground. Eyes wild, he scrambled back on all fours, the metallic tang of his fear permeating the air.

She left him lying motionless on the ground, his blood staining the orange-streaked earth a deeper shade of scarlet. The vultures could have him.

Almost immediately, Minyun threw herself back into the fray, fighting a merchant guard, back-to-back with a fellow bandit. She could hear her own laboured breathing over the clangs of metal that filled the air. Her heart hammered in her chest. A few locks of hair escaped from her hood and whipped around in front of her face. Cuts and scrapes on her arms stung and oozed blood, but she had never felt more alive.

Then, she saw it. A large bundle of silk, bound tightly to the back of one of the few camels that still had a person perched on its back. Even from a distance, she could tell that the silk was meant to clothe royalty. It was exquisitely woven from the highest-quality silk threads, so white and pure that it shone against the darkening sky.

She had set her sights on the silk. Now to deal with the merchant.

Minyun broke into a run towards a boulder, using it as a ramp to leap twice her height. For a moment, she hung suspended in the air, eyes trained on her unsuspecting prey's neck. Then, her target was rushing to meet her and she slashed—

Her blade clashed with an elegant steel dagger. The merchant had turned to intercept her blow, glare as sharp and deadly as the dagger he—no, *she*—wielded. Their weapons grated against each other as they grappled for the upper hand, and she took the time to observe her opponent.

Her hood had long been snatched away by the wind, exposing ivory skin. Her oval-shaped face was accentuated by wide cheekbones, a round chin and a wide, flat nose, not unlike Minyun's own. In the dim light, her eyes seemed coal-black, with the same glint as a crow's. Dressed for the unforgiving heat of the day in loose robes typical of Chinese merchants, she was trembling from the plummeting temperature, but her strikes did not let up.

Minyun growled under her breath as her stab was once again parried. She was used to looking down at people while they grovelled for mercy, revelled in watching the look in their eyes as their fate caught up to them. Anyone who dared take on her swiftly met their end; it was a *rule*.

The merchant, sensing that she was preoccupied, lunged at her neck. Years of honing her reflexes barely saved her from being decapitated, but not without damage; her hood was cleanly severed into two.

In shock, Minyun braced for an attack that never came. She lifted her head, only to see widened eyes staring back at her.

“Heyue?” The name was whispered tentatively, probing, almost. It tightened around her like a lasso, wrenching her from the present and back, back, back into a buried fragment of her past.

“Heyue!” Her mother screamed as, at the same time, she grabbed her young daughter’s wrist and pulled her in. Huddled with her mother and sister, she watched in fear as bandits descended upon her father.

A masked bandit was approaching them, a hyena searching for any sign of weakness. Through the sand and dust, she could make out the silhouette of her father, unarmed and backing away from his attackers. One well-placed thrust had him crumpling altogether.

A wail of anguish pierced the air as her mother broke into gulping sobs, chest heaving. Seizing the moment, the raider darted in and interrupted her mid-howl, brutally impaling the woman without so much as a blink. Instinctively, she stepped in front of her sister as he turned his attention towards the two young girls, baring her teeth and brandishing a sharp stone.

To her surprise, the bandit chuckled, eyes twinkling with...was it amusement? He conversed with one of his comrades, snippets like ‘brave’ and ‘keep’ making their way to her ears. All at once, hands were yanking her away from her little sister. She clung on to Hesui for dear life, her knuckles white from the effort, but it was too much. She looked into those crow-like eyes she knew so well, knowing she would never see them again.

And yet, here they were, peering back at her a decade later.

“Heyue?” The merchant—no, her *sister*, repeated, voice steadier, more certain.

“Hesui!” Minyun reached to hug her long-lost sibling, eyes glistening, and pulled her behind a dune.

They learnt what befell the other after their paths had split: Hesui had been rescued by soldiers while Heyue had been given a new name and life by the bandits.

Upon hearing Minyun’s story, Hesui’s face fell. “Heyue, your name is Minyun now? You genuinely like being a bandit? They murdered our parents in cold blood!”

Minyun’s eyes hardened, soft gaze turned steely to mask how rattled she was by her resurfaced traumatic memories. “They were cowards. They didn’t fight or protect us. Besides, the bandit life treats me well.” *Was this the truth, or merely a narrative fed to her?*

An awkward silence hung in the air, the women eyeing each other warily now, hands twitching near their scabbards.

“Please,” Hesui spoke so softly, Minyun could barely hear it. “I’ve been trying to restore our family’s reputation on the Silk Road. The coffers are empty. This bundle of silk is my last chance. I need to complete this trip.”

Minyun’s loyalty to the bandit clan wavered. She didn’t feel sorry for her sister, she reassured herself. *It was just that the way her lip wobbled was pathetic, and now that she knew of the brutality surrounding her origins...*

Just then, the rest of her men rounded the corner and found the sisters sitting in the sand. They looked at each other uncertainly, until one drew his sword and advanced towards Hesui. Minyun—no, Heyue—knew what she had to do.

“Wait!” Instinctively, Heyue stepped in front of her sister Hesui and produced some rope from her pocket. “This is the daughter of a wealthy merchant. If we put her up for ransom, we could earn some easy money.”

She knelt and began to tie Hesui up, hoping she was sharp enough to catch on. To her credit, she didn’t struggle against her bonds and looked appropriately distressed. The rest of the raiders were none the wiser—Heyue just hoped she had made the right choice.

Later, under the full moon’s watchful eye, Heyue treated her companions to a drink, claiming it was a reward for a successful raid. She coaxed them to take more and more swigs of the bottle, ensuring that they were all half-asleep and unaware before slipping into the hostage tent. Making quick work of untying Hesui, she shoved the silk into her arms, along with a meticulously-drawn map of the bandit base.

Just before sending her sister off, she paused and clasped her hands in her own. “Stay safe, alright?” She trailed off, swallowing down the emotions rising up her throat.

Hesui traced the lines on Heyue’s palm, gently caressing it. “Are you sure you don’t want to come?” she asked, her tone bittersweet. She already knew the answer.

Heyue smiled and pointed her in the direction of the camels, before rejoining her men.

When the alarm that the hostage had escaped was raised, Heyue rushed with the crowd to the edge of the plateau, but the raiders were too late.

A shadow rode into the night towards Dunhuang, saved from a gruesome fate by a kindness seldom found in the harsh deserts of the Silk Road.

Ballast for the Soul

Diocesan Girls' School, So Yui Ka Clara – 14

Under Lyra's bed, the case of her violin was coated in a thick layer of dust. She had never been able to play beautifully enough, but she couldn't understand how. Every piece she'd heard embodied such deep emotional complexity. She could remember the joy and sorrow, the apprehension and anticipation, and the light and darkness resounding from various pieces. Music, to Lyra, felt like rainfall on a dry and desolate land or like a sunrise, essential and stunning. Yet she herself, even after having practised over and over again, found it impossible to express herself through music. Sure, Lyra had perfected the technical parts, but that proved to be inadequate as music was more of an art than a mechanical task. In a moment of utter frustration, she had given up and shoved the violin under her bed. Despite her appreciation for the fascinating allure of music, she couldn't bear disappointing herself.

It was a pity, for the violin was the family heirloom, meticulously crafted centuries ago by a dedicated luthier who picked out the materials himself along the Silk Road. The fingerboard was dark amber, made of ebony from Zanzibar, Tanzania. The bow was strung with Mongolian horsehair. The body, which had intricate carvings of botanical patterns, was made of spruce from Kazakhstan and polished into a rich russet. Although the original case had a felt lining, it was later replaced by silk of an exquisite sapphire blue from Suzhou, China. The violin was a physical embodiment of the Silk Road and was priceless. Lyra had obtained it when it was passed on to her after her parents' premature death.

Lyra's parents had been lovely. When she was younger, her father would reiterate the stories of the heirloom's journey, whether they were true or not, and Lyra would always listen intently, a curious gleam in her eyes. But whenever she reached for the violin, her mother would start tutting.

"Don't touch it, darling. But maybe Dad will let you have it someday," her mother would chide, wagging a finger at her, which would cause Lyra to sheepishly retract her arms.

Both her parents had been geologists, working on a survey for the prestigious Silk Road Railway Project. Lyra distinctly remembered the gratification on her father's face when he received the invitation. Now she thought of the invitation as a curse, horrible and cruel, since it was during their inspection that they were killed by a landslide.

Lyra was twelve when the fateful accident happened, and she had been scarred ever since. Her interests sometimes felt like nothing but chores in face of the burden that was grief and an agonising anger towards the world. Even music couldn't soothe the gaping hole in her chest.

But she managed to adapt through the course of five years, and every day she kept to herself to get by. Her uncle, whom she was sent to live with, was rather reserved, but Lyra thought that wasn't a bad thing. Whenever they communicated, he would seldom bring up Lyra's parents. Lyra had always had trouble with her words and emotions, and she wanted to let go of her feelings through music, but she just felt bottled up.

Until one day, the railway of the Silk Road Express was complete. Her uncle had decided to work as a train conductor there as a tribute to Lyra's parents' work. He was in charge of the route from Kunming to Vientiane, which lasted one week.

"How about you accompany me and see what your parents helped create?" her uncle suggested.

On one hand, Lyra was tempted to hitch a ride on the luxurious train. But, on the other hand, what if she couldn't handle it, what if it was too soon, what if her emotions all came back? She felt threatened by the onslaught of the barrage that was her feelings if she saw the place her parents lost their lives. Or, perhaps a change was what she needed. Yes, she decided, she would face this obstacle. And overcome it, with pure determination if she had to.

"You could also bring that violin of yours along. It would be fitting."

His work started the next day. The train's exterior was quite traditional, and had a relatively bulky structure, covered in a sumptuous crimson, accompanied by a striking stroke of gold about halfway on the side of the train. A row of windows, along with curtains made with what seemed to be the softest fabric, was aligned with an arm's length between each one. The wheels were a sleek and glossy black. On the top of the locomotive, a brass pipe emerged—the train whistle.

The first day was uneventful, as Lyra spent her time on a couch with an outrageous amount of cushions in the locomotive while passengers were boarding. But the next day, the whistle sounded. Hmm, Lyra thought, G sharp. She was reminded by it of a mournful cry, while to others it was a call to adventure. She also couldn't get the reverberations of the rhythmic, metronome-like clicking of the wheels out of her head. She couldn't help but start tapping her foot to it. It was steady, and rapidly paced, mirroring the anxious beating of her heart.

After tuning her violin, Lyra started to play a scale in G sharp minor in accordance with the clicking sounds. In her head, a melody started forming. It was in minor key, but Lyra still couldn't put her heart into it. She sighed. Her uncle turned his head in interest.

"That's pretty good. You could try composing something while you're here." he said.

Right after that, Lyra heard the songs of the Yi minority from a village not far away, which had been carried to her by the wind. The high-pitched pentatonic harmonies were a pleasant contrast to the melody she had. She tried to replicate them, only with more of a jumping rhythm, and transitioned them into the first movement.

Upon arrival at Pu'er, her uncle informed her that the Dai people were having a festival nearby. The lively and celebratory sounds of their music were accompanied by the bright, dance-like rhythm created by the elephant-foot drum. Lyra decided to mimic this by adding a pizzicato to her second movement. She could feel her heart getting lighter from a stagnant state of grief.

In Luang Prabang, the train was to travel along the Nam Khan river, where villagers had built an elaborate bamboo bridge. As the sun sank behind it, casting a mellow pink light over pristine waters, the soothing sound of a khene, a quintessentially Lao instrument, drifted from a temple courtyard. The melody it played wasn't linear but an interlocking drone, carrying melancholy and grief. Lyra felt serenity settle in her heart, while also including a droning note in the second movement of her piece. The sound of the river inspired her third movement as well, as she added a glissando melody. Now her head was clearer and she truly felt alive for the very first time.

Before long, they had arrived at their destination, Vientiane. Observing the leisurely lives the people led in comparison to hers, still on the train, Lyra felt a sense of relief. With that, she refined the structure of the whole piece and practised the final movement, which encompassed, she felt, all her life's experiences. It had laughter, it had tears, it had uncertainty, it had hope. It was loud and quiet, joyful and melancholic, all at once. It sounded, Lyra thought, like the song of birds. It was wonderful.

While the staff were celebrating the first journey of the Silk Road Express, Lyra and her uncle stayed behind so she could debut her piece to him. She couldn't help but feel nervous. This piece was the first conversation they would have about the death of her parents.

“This is Ballast for the Soul.”

As she played, she felt an all-encompassing warmth swelling from her heart, spreading throughout her limbs. It felt like flying. Light seemed to blur and spiral as Lyra's thoughts melted away into bliss and elation. The music radiating from the instrument had the likes of sunlight, especially that of which outlines clouds with luminous gold seams, or breaks through the grey sky with radiant and glowing shafts. All the light, sound and warmth were overwhelming yet fulfilling, combining into one entity which was neither feeling nor thought, but a state of pure exultation. She was finally free from the shackles of grief and sorrow when they poured from each and every note of the piece.

Her fingers grew lithe and nimble. Grief, she realised, was a curious thing. But she would never be burdened by such intensities of this tribulation again, for she had lost her troubles amongst the melodies of the Silk Road, of history, and of time itself. No, she wouldn't have to suffer again.

When she finished, wonder filled her uncle's face.

“What else have you been up to all these years?”

The Curse of the Jade Lute

ESF West Island School, Claire Chen – 13

Daphne Iris Miller ran her hands over yet another jagged stone, eyes panning to the countless labyrinth before her, all part of what was known as the yardang fields of Dunhuang. Time had clearly broken down the rock, and what was left was truly breathtaking – pieces of historical evidence that had stood for over 40 millenia, seeing its impressive share of history – including bearing a silent witness to a certain fable about a lute. Now this – the utter, beautiful preservation of history, was what made Daphne truly happy.

She had gotten her Ph.D at the young age of 26, but found desk jobs boring – Daphne was not one to sit still and gather papercuts. She was not bound by responsibility, but by the relentless curiosity that drove her to extreme lengths. People would say she was a wild spirit that would not rest until she found what she was looking for – and that was utterly true.

Daphne wanted something that belonged just to her – undeniably, justifiably hers. Because of this, she had started searching with a doggedness that startled even the most hardworking, searching for mysterious scripts to be followed, treasure maps to be hunted. And God had clearly favoured her, for after countless hours spent with locals along the towns of the Silk Road, she had ultimately found what she was looking for. She had heard many different wild stories, but one was always repeated, always along the same lines as such.

The locals would all shake their heads during the retelling, muttering about the unfortunate demise of the Han Princess Wang Zhaojun. They would all say how history's biggest mistake was sending the beautiful princess off to marry the leader of the Xiongnu Empire 20 centuries ago. What started as a simple ordeal to establish a relationship between two empires, they said, ended with a whisper of a disappearance so profound that even the best search parties came up empty-handed after 2 years of grueling effort. The princess was completely gone – wiped off the face of the Earth, taking with her a mysterious lute said to possess magical abilities.

Now, this lute was something of almost reverent obsession. All the locals knew of different legends – of how it could summon memories, recreate histories – magical stories. The myths and folktales always ended with a warning – that the lute was extremely dangerous. Anyone who heard it would be condemned in ways that couldn't be described. That was why no one had set foot in the yardang fields of Dunhuang for centuries, the rumoured resting place of the mysterious harp – no one wanted to risk the condemnation, real or not. But of course, everything about Daphne screamed brazen and unbothered. After all, she had never listened to any warnings before, and luck was seemingly always on her side.

Presently, after hours of painstaking walking, she finally found what she was looking for. The wooden structure beams seemed to be holding their breath, grimy jewels staring with unblinking eyes from the glints of undiscovered treasure. The ancient silken shades fluttered depressingly, sighing before settling down. Daphne felt a chill go up her spine – not just because of the temperature drops that happened every night in the desert – but something much deeper and unsettling. An abacus lay abandoned, mid-calculation on a half covered wagon, the cherry beads softly rattling, brilliantly preserved. Bolts of silk from Xi'An were stretched and strewn across the countless parcels, the edges fluttering slightly in the wind, a soft whisper in the silence. Jars of fermented camel milk sat sealed under centuries of dust. No bones. No bodies. The scene was not one of preservation, but abandonment – a market square where life had simply vanished.

Daphne raked her eyes over the scene, her breath hitching as she spotted what she was looking for: **the legendary Jade Lute**. The craftsmanship was truly amazing, that much could be seen as she stepped forward. The body was crafted from aged and polished maple wood, refracting light in pieces back to Daphne's gaze. It was inlaid painstakingly with ebony, ivory and tortoiseshell, and strung with lamb gut, a masterpiece of royalty.

Then, in a moment of unthinking madness, she picked it up. Her breath jerked to a stop as she suddenly remembered the possibility of the wood disintegrating after so long – but nothing happened. The wood was as solid as if it had just been carved, the strings still stretched taut over the sycamore soundboard, held in place by the ivory pegs. Daphne tentatively reached out a hand, and plucked one of the silken strings gently. The melancholy sound vibrated in the still air around her, dissipating just like the warnings from the locals.

Something shifted. It was imperceptible at first, except for the new tingling of her spine, the immediate drop in degrees. But when Daphne fully realised the shift, it was too late. The once arid air of the desert had started vibrant with a barely audible hum – drowning out the whistling of the wind. A lark flying overhead suddenly plummeted, its body jerking in awkward, thrashing, movements, eventually falling to rest at her feet, the body stone cold – and unmistakably, *dead*.

Daphne's body had clammed up without her noticing – she struggled to lift a finger. She could only watch as the change happened around her, as sound vanished and surfaced, warping in and out of existence. The rising sun cast long shadows against the protruding stones, the light twisting just out of reach. Daphne watched, mesmerized by the subtle movement, until she saw it.

The shadows weren't just dark. They were thick, with a silk-like fluidity, flowing and changing shape in the sunset. Robed merchants, armored guards, and laden camels could be discerned, the shapes blurry but undeniably people. It was the phantom caravan, woven from darkness and memory. Utterly silent, yet their movements seemed to carry the weight of centuries. Pebbles shifted at their feet, rattling a harsh whisper against the still air. From the direction of the old Northern Silk Road route, a single, clear, chime of a camel bell rang out. The sound was ear splitting, shattering Daphne out of her daze in a roar of decibels.

She staggered backwards, tripping over her own feet, scrabbling to get away, to go anywhere else. A choked cry escaped Daphne, but she found she couldn't turn away. The lute dropped from her hands, the hollow wood knocking against the stones. The pounding in her head grew louder, and Daphne curled in around herself, dropping to her knees. The lute, inches away from her, started playing of its own accord, the strings vibrating, melodies flowing from the soundhole, as if the Princess herself was sitting on the pebbles, patiently plucking. It was at this moment that the camel bell chimed a second time, closer now. Shadows advanced towards her, in perfect, silent unison with the lute's building melody.

Daphne was frozen on the outside, but her mind was an inferno burning everything to the ground. Desperately, she gazed around for anything, *anything*, that could help her, to no avail. The seconds stretched by, Daphne's thoughts speeding along as realization hit her. All the rumours were true. The lute really was magic – it was recreating history, showing her the ghost of the lost caravan that had once held the Princess. Daphne's eyes darted from the advancing shadows, to the still singing lute on the stones. The melody was no longer sorrowful, but *urgent*. The silhouettes moved faster, closer, ever closer. She could see the embroidery on the guard's robe now, the glint of the setting sun on a spear head that wasn't there.

The sound was the most terrifying part - the camel bell and haunting melody gnawed at her sanity, slowly shredding it. The shadows closed in: ten paces away. Five. The lead figure, stretched out a hand made of nothing but darkness towards her. Not to strike, but to beckon. With a final gasping effort, Daphne tore her gaze away from the hand, fixing it upon the lute. Reflected back to her on the sycamore soundboard, was the reflection of another woman. She looked young, but carried an ancient weight of sorrow behind her crown of faded jade. It was the missing princess. The shadow's hand was inches from hers. The bell chimed a final time, right behind her ear. And as the cold began to seep into her skin, Daphne at last understood the true curse of the Jade Lute.

It needed a player. After 2,000 years of silence, the lute had chosen its new musician. The phantom caravan halted, expectantly waiting. The final note of the Jade Lute hung in the air, echoing into empty space, and Daphne realized with a dawning horror, that it was now waiting for *her* to play it. She took a deep breath, steeling herself, fighting off the growing dread of the unknown, and reached out a hand.

A Boy and the Restoration of Time

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Favian Li – 12

From high above the desert cliffs, I watched the boy arrive. He didn't fall from the sky—he simply appeared on the cracked earth, as if time had spat him out. His name was Arin. He was far from home, though he didn't understand how far yet.

The land below me was supposed to be loud with traders, camels, and caravans. There should have been a road stretching across the world like a scar. But instead, the desert was silent. Empty. Wrong. Arin walked forward, confused, clutching the history book he'd been reading just moments before. He opened it. Pages that once showed maps of the Silk Road were blank. Entire paragraphs erased. Even the founder's name was gone. He lowered the book slowly, the world around him matched the pages, unfinished, incomplete.

He wandered for hours until he reached a small settlement. The people watched him too closely. A stranger with strange clothes. A stranger asking questions about a road no one had heard of. "Trade route?" a merchant repeated. "None here. Never was." Arin felt a cold weight settle in his chest. History wasn't just damaged; it had unravelled.

I circled above. I never interfered. My task was to witness, never to save. Birds like me sense when a story is shifting, when danger coils beneath calm sand. Danger was coming.

Arin started gathering scraps of information. A scribe with ink-stained hands whispered that long ago, there had been talk of a grand path linking far kingdoms. But the one meant to create it "vanished before his work began." A traveller claimed he once heard of a man planning to carve a road through the continent. But no one remembered his name. An herbalist said something stranger: "Someone erased him. Not killed. Erased." Each clue sharpened Arin's fear: If the founder of the Silk Road disappeared... maybe time was pushing him to take the founder's place.

The villagers began to distrust him. He asked too many questions. He knew things he shouldn't. He stared too deeply at maps that didn't exist yet.

One night, a group of men followed him into the dark outskirts of the town, clutching knives and muttering about spies and demons wearing human skin. Arin escaped by scrambling over broken walls, running until his legs shook.

I watched from above as torches bobbed through the darkness like angry fireflies. The next morning, Arin pushed deeper into the desert, determined to find where the route should begin. He reached a canyon carved by centuries of wind. Rock towers loomed over him, jagged shadows stretching like claws. A group of bandits had been following him for hours. They emerged from behind the rocks, six of them, carrying clubs, daggers, rusted blades. Their leader, a man with a scar splitting his lip, grinned. "Maps. Questions. Secrets. You're worth something." Arin backed toward a narrow ledge. The canyon wall crumbled beneath his foot. For a moment, I thought the boy would fall. But he swung his fist as the first bandit lunged, a perfect sucker punch. The blow caught the man in the jaw. Another rushed forward; Arin dodged, grabbed a handful of gravel, and flung it into the man's eyes. A third swung a blade, Arin ducked; it scraped stone instead. The boy wasn't strong, but he was backed up against a wall, he was desperate. He scrambled up a steep slope. Stones tumbled under him, but he climbed anyway. When he reached the top, he grabbed a loose boulder and shoved it down with all his strength. The rock bounced, then smashed into the bandits, scattering them like startled insects. They fled, cursing. The canyon returned to silence. The boy would survive, for now.

As Arin travelled, he pieced together fragments of forgotten history. He spent nights in ruined watchtowers, copying old symbols into the margins of his book. He talked to shepherds, traders, monks, anyone with a story about ancient routes. Slowly, a pattern emerged. The Silk Road wasn't just a road. It was a plan, one that history was waiting for someone to restart. And Arin realised something terrifying: He fit the missing founder's story. Not perfectly, but close enough. Whenever he hesitated, he felt the desert tug at him, as if time itself was nudging him onward. So, he began building. He mapped safe passes through mountains. He convinced villages to set up rest stops. He helped merchants connect their routes. He carved markings into stones so travellers would know the safest path. At night he collapsed from exhaustion. At dawn, he rose again, because the world felt unfinished until he worked. And above him, I watched. A silent witness to the first breaths of a road that should have existed centuries ago. But not everyone wanted the new road.

Word spread of a "boy who was rewriting destiny." Some feared it. Some hated it. A warlord from the mountains sent riders to hunt him, claiming Arin was disturbing the balance of kingdoms. They found him one evening near a half-built caravan stop. Arin ran, weaving through half-set stones, overturned carts, and newly raised tents. Arrows cut through the air. One skidded across the dirt beside him. He sprinted into a rocky ravine. The riders thundered closer. He reached a dead end. The rider leader raised his spear. Before he could strike, the earth trembled. A slab of rock, loosened by time and wind, cracked and collapsed between Arin and the riders. Dust surged upward. Horses reared, screaming. The riders retreated, shaken. Arin didn't question the miracle. He simply staggered away, coughing, heart hammering.

High above, I tilted my wings. Events like that do not happen without cause. Something in the world wanted the road restored. Something old. Something patient. Weeks passed. Then months. The road grew. Caravans began to travel. Trade flourished. Villages blossomed. The world knit itself back together. And Arin, the outsider, the suspicious boy, the survivor of bandits and warlords, became known only as: The Path-Maker. Not a hero. Not a legend. Just the one who repaired what was broken.

When the first full caravan crossed the new route, the air shimmered faintly. The world seemed to exhale. Time had healed. And the boy had fulfilled a story that someone else had been meant to complete long ago. Arin felt the air twist behind him. The world around him blurred. The desert, the mountains, the road. All of it folded like paper. He reappeared in his own time, the history book still in his hands. But now the pages were full. The founder's name remained missing... but a new section had appeared: The Path-Maker, identity unknown. Said to be a young traveller who appeared from nowhere, restored the ancient route, and vanished. Arin closed the book. Far away, in another time, I circled above the road he left behind, watching merchants, wagons, and dust rising like smoke. The world was whole again. And I, Araz the falcon, continued to witness, as I always do. Silent. Watching. Waiting for the next fracture in the story of humankind.

Silk and Sacrifice

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Xie Si Han Amber – 11

“Meilin,” grandpapa’s voice was a spiritless whisper, “Get up, come on girl.” I forced my eyes open to a world that was barely dawn. Across the riverbank, the mountains were just wavering shadows, still wrapped in a cloak of pure darkness. But the darkness wasn’t pure for long. A silent flower of orange bloomed in the midst of our little cotage, then another... and another. Before I could ask what they were, grandpapa lunged, and forced me flat on the cold, gravelly earth. Then a sound caught up to the light — a deep, spine-chilling roar that vibrated back and forth through my ear drums as the sky, now raining bombs, lit my eyes with neon lights.

Finally, after an eternity spent pressed into the mud, the lights in the sky faded, and the roaring sounds that once frightened me so only left a quiet chime ringing in my ears. But just as I was going to take a breath of relief, grandpapa’s grip tightened on my shoulder, hauling me to my feet. From the depths of the riverbank, he pulled out two sacks, thrusting the lighter one into my hands. At that moment, I knew he had been ready for this.

We walked for what felt like miles, leaving the intense atmosphere far behind us. My feet dragged until I saw a weathered sign, half caked in a mixture of sand and dust, its hand-painted characters barely legible: The Silk Road. The name felt like a whisper to another dimension. “Grandpapa?” I asked. “Where are we going?” The strength seemed to drain away from his face. “Nowhere,” he murmured. He tried to fake a laugh, but it felt brittle and empty. “Meilin, we just have to... you know, hang around.” And so we walked along in utter silence, until the low hum of voices suddenly burst into a swarm of chaotic shouts. Before me, stood a marketplace.

To my young eyes, everything in the marketplace gleamed with a richness I never knew — bolts of silk in crimson, gold, and sapphire blue shimmered under the warm glow of hanging lanterns, tiny porcelain vases painted so delicately that they seemed to tremble in the air, and Persian carpets, each rolled out onto the streets, with patterns so vibrant. My fingers itched to touch them all, but one item held me captivated: a long tide of deep emerald silk, embroidered in touches of gold, like fireflies dancing in the midnight sky. I reached for it without hesitation, my heart pounding with excitement — until my eyes sank down upon the price tag, sharp and unforgiving.

In an instant, the magic shattered. The scent of sandalwood and spices faded into the background, leaving the cold, damp reality pressing against my chest. I snatched my hand back as if it touched something hot, the silk slipping from my hands like a forgotten dream. Poverty wasn’t just a term found in the fallen ashes back at home — it was the iron chain that held me back, the silent wall between me and the beauty I could only admire from afar.

At that moment, grandpapa’s voice cut through the silence, warm and familiar. “Meilin, I don’t want you lost, so come back girl!” I lingered a moment longer, my eyes fixed on the silk. Then, with a sigh too quiet to hear, I turned and ran off.

When I got to grandpapa, I found him by a patch of muddied floor. He had been laying down a crumbly piece of cloth, and upon it, a sad cardboard scrawled with the words: Kailin’s Shoe Fixing. When he saw me, a genuine delight warmed his tired features. “I’ll finish the rest of the setup. As for you,” he patted me gently on the head, “you’ve endured enough for one day, get some good night’s rest.” In the wake of all that happened today, only grandpapa’s words acted as a simple kindness, deflecting all my sharpest pains.

As the months passed as quickly as does tides, the marketplace buzzed with the same loving energy. Stalls were as bright as ever, and the chatting sounds of customers grew to its fullest capacity. But, as one cannot escape the poverty one is assigned to, our little store, sadly, was unable to share the privileges around us. For no wave of enthusiasm ever washed our way; our customers remained few, and the earnings scant. I watched, my heart sinking, as the once vibrant smile that lit grandpapa's face faded little by little every day. A sharp frown that I tried to avoid started forming on my face as I carefully whispered the words: "I'm tired of being poor."

The next day, which was my birthday, Grandpapa told me that I could pick out one item from the market as my gift — just one. I didn't hesitate. The moment the words escaped from his mouth, I took off running. Weaving through the the crowded stalls, past elegant pieces of garments, mounds of fragrant spices, and an occasional camel or horse tied to a post. My eyes scanned everywhere, but nothing caught my fancy, nothing — not until I saw it again.

The emerald silk.

It was the same bolt of fabric I admired months ago, and my heart leapt the moment I saw it. I turned and called grandpa to come over. He hurried by my side, and when his eyes landed on the silk — and then the price tag — he shook his head.

I begged. I pleaded. I told him how much I wanted it, how perfect a gift it would be. But it was all in vain. His face was kind, but firm. And slowly, anger began to bubble up inside me — hot and sharp.

Finally, I half yelled and sobbed out the words, "Why can't you just work harder? Or why can't you just be one of those rich, retired grandpapas?"

The words hung in the air between us. I didn't mean them — well, not really — but they had already slipped out. Never coming back...

Grandpapa didn't yell back. He didn't even look angry. His face, weathered by years under the sun and brightened by constant smiles, just... fell. Like a paper airplane caught in a sudden breeze. The light in his eyes dimmed, just for a second, and then he sighed, a long, slow breath that seemed as heavy as the waves and as painful as a person who has just lost their dreams.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, but the words felt too small. Too useless.

He looked at me then, really looking at me, and for a moment, the noise of the market faded. The calls of the merchants, the clinking of coins, the sound of horses chewing on hay — it all vanished. It was just him and me.

"I work hard every day," he said gently. "Not because I want riches, but because I want to give you a good life — a life better than mine. That silk..." He gestured towards it with a tilt of his head, his voice softening even more. "It's beautiful. I see why you want it. But some things are more important than having everything you want right away."

I didn't say anything. My fists were still clenched at my sides, but slowly, slowly, they began to loosen.

He placed a warm, calloused hand on my shoulder. "How about this," he said, pointing to a smaller stall nearby, one I hadn't noticed before. "How about we find you something else? Something that is just as special — but maybe means even more because we chose it... together?"

I hesitated, then nodded. Not because I had forgotten the silk, no, but because I realised, at that moment, that the real gift wasn't the silk. It was him — his patience, his love, and the fact that he was always trying, even when I didn't see it.

We walked over to the other stall, and though I didn't know it then, that day would become one of the best birthdays in my whole life — not because of what I got, but what I learned.

The Leaves of Longing

Heep Yunn School, Chau Ching – 14

The canister was just a small, somber vessel of ancient bronze, crammed onto a shelf between her father's History of the Taklamakan and a box of dried-out highlighters. Li Na, fourteen and profoundly lonely, was supposed to be dusting. With a sigh, she picked it up. It was far heavier than it looked, cool and substantial in her palm, as if it held the weight of centuries rather than leaves. Its surface was a landscape of time itself—a mottled patina of malachite green and earthy umber bloomed across its shoulders. Below, the bronze shone through in smooth, worn bands, the colour of old honey, where hands had once clasped it, polishing doubt away.

The lid was sealed with a Fengyin mud seal, stamped with a winding road between moon and sun. A faded vermilion label declared its origin, and from the metal and clay rose a scent of petrichor and old parchment—the breath of slow time.

It was not a container meant to be opened lightly. It was a vault.

Beneath the bronze vault was a slip of rice paper, its script the spidery trail of a careful hand:

For the quiet heart.

One leaf, one life.

Let the water sing.

Let the mind be a clear desert night.

To drink is to remember.

To alter is to unravel.

The words 'For the quiet heart' seemed to pulse on the page. A quiet heart. Hers was quiet, she supposed. But it felt less like stillness and more like emptiness. One leaf, one life. Was this an answer, or just more of her family's mysterious poetry?

Her loneliness tightened. This was not simply another artifact. This was an invitation. She held her breath, and began to work at the Fengyin seal with her thumbnail. The clay-like mixture yielded slowly, like aged bark, peeling it back in delicate curls that released a concentrated scent of centuries.

The dark rim appeared. She lifted the heavy lid.

She plucked a single leaf, its texture like ancient parchment, and stole to the kitchen.

The electric kettle's grumble felt wrong. She remembered her grandmother's copper kettle, its whistle a silver needle stitching the quiet. Defeat tasted metallic. Then she saw the blackened stovetop pot.

She lit the flame and the water's song began—low, then rising, pure and plaintive. She poured it into her great-grandmother's celadon cup, a piece of green sky, chipped at the rim.

She drank.

The world did not dissolve. It bloomed.

The refrigerator's hum faded into the drone of a desert zither as new sensations painted themselves over the room.

Heat. The jangle of camel bells. She was amid a train of swaying Bactrian camels. A leathery-faced man passed, singing a beautifully sad song of a far green valley. She felt his loneliness, a vast and hollow thing, but also his simple pride. Then her gaze was pulled ahead, to the caravan master, his hunger sharp and acquisitive. She felt his thoughts as if they were fumes. More jade. Finer silk. Purer silver. His longing was not for home, but for wealth.

It was a polished, metallic ache, a hollow that swallowed the song behind him. His was a heart that had become a ledger, every beat a calculation.

She was a ghost, a passenger in the Taklamakan. As the caravan crested a dune, a vast, star-speckled sky unfolded. She grasped the two lonelines: for what is lost, the other, colder, for what is never owned—a desert where every grain is a coin.

She gasped. And the scene evaporated. She was back in her kitchen, holding the warm cup, a cold tear on her cheek. For the first time, she saw her father's obsession not as passion, but as its own kind of hunger. Was it so different from the caravan master's? It, too, was a transaction: life traded for footnotes.

That marks the beginning of her double life—a schoolgirl by day, ghost by leaf. She witnessed the two threads of the Road: the warm weave of connection, and the cold filament of greed.

In the bustling markets of Samarkand, where a merchant watered his ink, his eyes reflecting coins. He sat on his pile of carpets, deaf to the bartered laughter nearby, his world reduced to a balance sheet. He sat down on a pile of carpets, counting, always counting, deaf to the bartered laughter nearby. She watched a Chinese scribe, his fingers numb with cold, patiently teaching an Uighur apprentice how to mix ink for free, their heads bent together in a communication that warmed her. Here, the currency was care, repaid in shared understanding.

Then, the glitch.

In Dunhuang's cave, the monk's brush stilled. A silent scream pierced the sanctuary's quiet, snapping the golden thread of his focus. He frantically rolled his scroll. The sanctuary of shared wisdom was breached by a paranoia that felt borrowed and sharp.

'To the Blue Beryl Seas!' The Roman's cup chimed against the Persian's. Then his smile vanished. 'Your grin hides a weight. Where is the sapphire?' The accusation felt metallic, paranoid, a poison in the wine. It was the sound of a contract snapping, a friendship valued and found counterfeit.

A toxin was in the timeline. A ripple, amplifying the innate, sleeping greed—polishing it, feeding it, making it shout.

Li Na's father spoke of a visitor. Kiran, from Uzbekistan. 'Intense young man,' he said, not looking up from a pottery fragment. 'Aggressive. Spoke of historical theft, of rebalancing scales. Bitter.'

The pieces clicked. The rival. Another canister. Kiran wasn't just trying to edit history; he was weaponizing it. He was punishing the past for its inequalities, starving the heart to fatten the ledger. He saw only greed, blind to the shared humanity that gave the Road its enduring currency. He fed hunger and starved the heart.

Li Na only had three leaves left. She brewed the next with a new and sole purpose: to hunt. The vision came: a caravanserai. Kiran's spectral form, whispered to the caravan master. 'The Dunhuang monks have a king's ransom. They are liars. Betray them. Keep all the gold.' Kiran was sculpting greed into a blade, to sever the sacred thread.

With her final leaf, she chose. She journeyed to a Khotan night. The sutra scribe, Ananda, sat beneath a pomegranate tree, laden with a dread not his own—the fear that his life's work was just a merchant's trap.

Li Na, a mute spirit, spoke in feeling. She poured into him not just the future beauty of the words he would save, but the other path. She let him feel, for a fleeting second, the profound, hollow loneliness of the caravan master, a man who would die decades later surrounded by untouched silks and unloved gold. As she poured the truth into Ananda, it was

no longer observation, but a silent, urgent plea. Feel this, she urged, immersing him in the camelman's shared song, the scribe's patient touch— the fragile warmth that flows between transactions. And feel that, she whispered, laying bare the vast, silent desert of possession. Two futures shimmered before his spirit. For the first time, her ghostly witnessing became an act of hope: Choose the tapestry. Please, choose the threads of shared breath and meaning.

This is the choice, her presence whispered into his spirit. Carry the words and create a tapestry of meaning, or carry the weight and dwell in a desert of your own making.

Ananda's fear was joined by a resolve, hard as river stone. He touched his bundled sutras. His purpose became a quiet bell, tolling against the lie.

The brew spent itself. The cup held only dregs. The canister was empty.

That evening, her father murmured over a map. 'Kiran cancelled. He wrote, 'I was trying to cure a loneliness I only made deeper.'"

Li Na said nothing. She put the kettle on the stove and brewed two cups of Pu-erh. The steam, a frail bridge between them. She placed one beside her father's map.

He looked up, surprised, the scholar's hunger momentarily stilled in his eyes.

'Dad,' she said, her voice clear in the quiet room. 'Tell me about the people on the road. Not just what they carried, but what they carried inside.'

He blinked. Then a smile, old and deep as a desert well, broke across his face. The chase for citation-fortune forgotten. 'Ah,' he breathed, lifting his cup to meet hers in a silent chime. 'That,' his eyes on hers, 'is the only currency that outlasts the sand.'

And as he began to speak, Li Na listened. The tea was water and leaf. But in her soul, she smelled the rain on dry earth and the ink of devotion, forever woven against the metallic howl of greed.

The real journey— the one that mends the lonely tear in the tapestry— began not on an ancient road, but in the quiet of a once-lonely room, with steam from their cups weaving a new thread between them.

Etched of the Unspoken Road

Heep Yunn School, Li Lok Sum – 13

The air in Dunhuang, 658 CE, layered with incense, and murmured prayers. In a hostel near the cave temples, the young Han monk Xuanjian presented his *guosuo* to the cavern master. He spoke of his errand: to seek original Indian texts in distant Kucha, to correct translations fumbled by time and distance.

“With sincerity,” he asked, politeness veiling a thread of anxiety, “might I secure a protector for the road down south?”

The master nodded, and sent for a guard.

The guard arrived with dust still on his flaked boots. His name was Bhadra, a Tocharian from Kucha itself. When he reached for the advance silver, his sleeve fell back, revealing a badly knotted burn scar curled from wrist to elbow.

Xuanjian’s gaze caught on it, then flickered away.

“We speak Sogdian?” Bhadra asked, his voice rough with two languages.

“Sogdian,” Xuanjian agreed, the Chinese accent clinging, still, to his word.

Silk bolts waited in Xuanjian’s pack, payment upon safe arrival. Their duties were set: the monk’s spiritual blessings, the guard’s navigation and blade. Without other words, they left the hostel. The desert opened before them—silent, vast, where the past hung between their steps, unspoken.

The first night, they camped where the desert wind carved a dune. Bhadra placed his bedroll between Xuanjian and the desolate desert, then Bhadra built a small fire of dried dung.

The fire popped. Bhadra flinched, his hand drifting to his forearm. He shifted back from the flames. At meal, Xuanjian offered a steamed bun. Bhadra refused, chewing his dried mutton in the shadows.

When Xuanjian bowed to begin his evening ritual, Bhadra did not bow. Perhaps he prayed in his own way. The Chinese syllables hung in the cold air. As the chant rose, Bhadra’s jaw tightened. His gaze fixed far away, he stood, facing the horizon.

“I’ll check the camels,” he said in rough *Sogdian*, and walked off into the night.

Xuanjian’s chant faded into soft *Sanskrit*. The fire crackled. The desert was vast—and the past sat between them in the darkness, unspoken.

For the next five days, this was the pattern.

A week into the desert, endless yellow broke against polished dark stone. They came upon the ruins at midday: shattered walls, a half-buried plinth where a Buddha once sat.

Bhadra stopped.

The plinth was of stone, vines warping the side that remained. Broken at its base, it leaned between engraved patterns—once confluence, now fragmented remnants of spiritual sanctity.

Bhadra couldn’t look away, his body rigid. The wind through the ruins brushed his held breath. His left hand rose to his scar, silent.

Xuanjian’s head tilted. He took a step back, eyes moving from Bhadra to the plinth. He nodded. Perhaps the guard was pious after all—moved by ruins of faith.

A dead leaf fell in front of Bhadra. He turned away abruptly and resumed walking. Xuanjian followed.

Bhadra's fists were clenched. Xuanjian walked behind him, the silence between them now deeper, like a faded painted eye staring from a broken wall.

They left the ruins behind. The wind picked up, carrying a new scent—not dust, but of dampness and rain. By afternoon, the sky had bruised the colour of rusted metal.

The sky bruised to rust, then black. The wind arrived not as air, but as howls, scraping sand and rock like fractured blades.

Bhadra shouted something lost in the storm, dragging Xuanjian toward a crack in the rock. They sheltered in a dark cramped cave, Bhadra positioned between Xuanjian and the opening.

Bhadra's eyes scanned, the thunder like a war drum—tensing him for battle.

The wind screamed like dying horses. A rock split somewhere above.

“Bptt— Krrkk...”

Bhadra flinched at the sound, a choked cry escaping him.

“*Shàng yǒu shí!*” Xuanjian yelled—Rock from above!—the Chinese ripped from his throat before he could form the *Sogdian*.

Bhadra jerked back as if stabbed, his eyes wide in the half-dark.

His breath was shallow. The silence between them thickened. The storm raged outside. Bhadra's scar tightened.

The guard feared the storm, Xuanjian thought, his own heart hammering. That's all.

They stayed until orange-tinted light seeped through the cracks. The sandstorm passed, but something clung in the air between the left stones.

When they emerged, the desert had been rearranged. Dunes had migrated, paths were buried. They walked now in a newly scarred world.

They reached the first true oasis after sixteen days of travel. Green lashed against the yellow dust, the desolate replaced with the haggling sounds of trade.

Bhadra moved toward a trader's stall, his voice low in Turkic. Xuanjian lingered, his eyes drifting across the bronzeware, until he saw it.

Among the merchant's trinkets was a small bronze Buddha, its sheen blurred by heat, one shoulder slumped in weeping metal. It was Tocharian in style—Kucha, perhaps, or Kaashahr—melted not by time, but by intent.

Bhadra froze, his stare too long to be mere interest.

Xuanjian's hand went to his stomach. That figurine... the reports in Chang'an had spoken of melted statues sent back as tribute.

As a boy in the monastic school halls, he'd heard the reports: melted sacred gold, sold wonders in the markets.

He paled. His breath caught, not of cumin, but of slight nausea.

Bhadra glanced at Xuanjian, and turned away to the textile stalls, his steps deliberate, a guard's retreat.

Xuanjian followed without a word, the last glint of metal lingering behind his eyes.

With the life of commerce faded, they left the noise of the market behind. The silence between them now held a new weight—a recognised presence.

The desert began to shed. First came the mud in the air, then the stones, then the roar of the river itself—swollen and monstrous.

Bhadra tested the current with a pole, his scarred forearm tensed. He nodded once: they would cross.

The crossing demanded deliberate steps on slick stones. The waters warned of what could be. Yet near safety, a mishap: Xuanjian slipped on algae.

His heart dropped.

Cold shock swallowed his leg. Bhadra pulled him back, grip iron-tight.

They reached the shore panting, a moment of locked eyes.

He saved me. After everything.

Bhadra immediately pulled away, scrambling up the bank.

“Thank you,” Xuanjian said in *Sogdian*, as Bhadra turned away, compulsively washing his scarred arm in the river.

The silence settled heavier than before—born of that first touch. Xuanjian’s eyes stayed on Bhadra until he followed, wordless.

Nights grew colder as they climbed toward the foothills. The tension was a third traveller—watchful and silent.

The last night—they set camp at the foothills. The wind whispered, the cold etching painfully onto their moonlit slack bodies. And after weeks, they finally reached their last stop.

Bhadra finally collapsed. He slept, hard.

Yet a moment in the night, when the brittle stars flickered, a whimper—almost a coherent murmur—shot out from Bhadra’s twitching presence. Then, he started to sweat, curled stiff around his scarred arm. And then, a heart wrenching cry.

“Puwar! Pācer!”—Fire! Brother!—as if calling, helpless. For the lost.

Xuanjian heard one word from *Tocharian*—“Fire!”, a hell-tormented cry ripped him awake. But all that awaited was free of flame: a rigid shaking guard, and his own adrenaline pumping through his veins.

Then something clicked; the audible now gave clarity.

Brother. Fire. The burn.

The looting. The melted Buddha. The Chinese.

Me.

The survivor shook. Xuanjian almost reached out, then he paused. He took it back. He watched.

He carried something. But just held its weight, he held it until light rose upon the last, but first true horizon.

Bhadra woke up and packed his things, his gaze fixed, slowly scanning the horizon, a guard’s instinct. Their eyes never met, but it was different. Their presence lingered between them, mutual but distant.

The gates of Kucha appear at dawn, mud-brick walls in the distance. At the gate, Xuanjian handed the silk bolts. Bhadra took them, his eyes on the cloth.

Xuanjian’s mouth parted, then held silent.

Bhadra nodded, then turned away.

Xuanjian remained at the gate as Bhadra approached the city.

The watcher watched as the space between them grew distant one last time. The dust stood still. The silence held the weight of time, unspoken.

Remains.

The Tale of a Tea Cake

Invictus School Hong Kong, Cheuk Wing Yan Amelia – 11

The smell of dust and old leather and far away rain was what Zhang Wei was used to. He was a merchant who lived during the Tang Dynasty. The Silk Road was his world, but his heart belonged to the mist-covered mountains of Fujian. His journey, however, had an unique weight. He carried something in a simple silk bag that he wore close to his chest. Not something like a precious stone, no, it was a small, fragrant tea cake. This tea came from his family's garden. His father, while on his deathbed, had pressed it into his hands. "Carry our mountain's spirit to the desert's edge," he had whispered. "Trade it not for silver, but for a story from beyond the Jade Gate."

Zhang's caravan was a fragment of the Empire in motion: thirty horses, a dozen mules, and men from across the Middle Kingdom. There was Captain Luo, a former soldier who knew the Western frontiers like his own face; silent Li, the Tibetan guide whose eyes could read the moods of the high passes; and young and eager An, a Persian trader's son who served as their bridge to the languages of the west.

They had departed from Chang'an's splendour, their packs loaded with shimmering silk, bundles of sturdy paper, and fancy brass locks. They had already navigated the Hexi Corridor and traded for fine jade in Dunhuang under the watchful eyes of giant Buddhas carved into the cliff faces. Zhang's mind was sharp, but the tea cake was a personal pilgrimage.

The real challenge started at the Yangguan Pass. This is where China ended and the body of the world started: the Taklamakan, it was the "Sea of Death." The sound of the wind changed from a whisper to a loud and harsh scream that was full of sand. The sand dunes were huge, like waves of gold that changed shape all the time and covered up the paths in just one night. The days were extremely hot as if being inside an oven. Nights felt like being locked in a cold room. One afternoon, a big sandstorm came with an immense force. The people hid behind the trembling horses, cloths pressed against their faces. When the storm passed, two mules and a cache of paper were buried, lost to the desert's hunger.

That night, morale was as low as the temperature. "We risk our bones for tea?" grumbled Captain Luo, warming his hands over a feeble fire. "The Westerners drink milk and wine. They will think this is a dried leaf."

Zhang did not say anything. Instead, he brought out his brass pot. He poured some water from a skin pouch into the pot and carefully cut a few hairs from the tea cake. He warmed up the water, not too much, like his father had taught him. He put the tea leaves into the water, and soon, the air was filled with an earthy scent of mountain mist and green plants. He poured a cup for each man.

They drank in silence. The hot liquid was a revolution in that desolate place. An sighed, his eyes closing. "It tastes of... home." Captain Luo simply nodded.

The shared cup became a ritual. Each evening, as the stars emerged, Zhang would brew the tea. It was no longer just his story. It became the caravan's story, a moment to hide away from the consuming desert.

Weeks later, at the oasis of Khotan, they traded silk for fine jade. Zhang, following his father's wish, was not just a merchant, but also a storyteller. He found Ibrahim, a Sogdian with a weathered face, who had settled here years prior. In the shade of a luscious tree, Zhang presented not silk, but tea. He brewed it as Ibrahim watched with his curious, shimmering eyes.

As the steam rose, Zhang spoke of his home: the endless tiers of the tea gardens, the morning fog hanging by the peaks, the skilled hands of the pickers. Ibrahim listened, then sipped. A slow smile spread. In return, he began to speak. His voice, rough, spoke tales of cities further west, of Samarkand's turquoise domes, of the strange, cold northern lands where traders told stories of a midnight sun.

He spoke of a Greek physician in Antioch who used a similar leaf in a poultice, and of a calligrapher who prized the mind above all else. Zhang listened, his father's tea cake between them, a silent fuel for a truck load of words. The essence of a Fujian mountain for the unfamiliar memories of a world away.

When the stories were spent and the pot was empty, Ibrahim placed a hand on the remaining piece of tea cake. "This is not something that can be bought," he said. "It is an invitation. Leave a piece with me. Let it tell the tales of your mountains to those who pass through."

Zhang agreed. He broke the cake, leaving half behind. As he did, he remembered something his father had said, "The tea cake is more than a tea cake, it is a symbol of heritage, used as a bridge to share culture and stories. The greatest value in trading is not the materials, but the connection."

New Tales of China's Silk Road

Pui Kiu College, Cheng Yu Yan – 14

The desert absorbed noise. Sound fell into the sand and disappeared, leaving behind only vast silence. The crescent moon above was a curious, silver thing, hanging amidst the velvet black sky. A man ushered his camel-drawn carriages. His father had once called this animal, now old and grey around the muzzle, the key to their family's livelihood, and for three generations, that key had unlocked the road from Chang'an to the west.

But this journey was walking towards closure. The world was turning its face toward the sea. The great, humming hostels—once places of clattering dice, heated barter, and the musical clash of tongues—now stood like empty skulls, their courtyards whispering only of ghosts. The great empires along the Road were fracturing, the peace that once made the trek relatively safe was a fading memory, and bandits multiplied like desert scorpions after rain.

“One last time,” he murmured, the words lost in the camel's fur and the vast grand desert. “Then we walk the road home for good.”

Near the end of his route, he met a young Italian merchant whose eyes were wide with a mixture of exhaustion and wonder, the first person he'd seen for a long time. The man had come from Venice, drawn by legends of the East. He has saffron, silver, and a strange, revolutionary idea pressed into a sheaf of papers: sketches for a “printing press”.

“They say in Mainz, a man can make books not by hand, but by machine,” the Italian said, struggling with his few words of Chinese. “Imagine stories, knowledge, traveling not by one wagon, but by a thousand books.”

And he, despite their fractured conversation, understood the magnitude of the situation. He thought of the monk he met years ago, painstakingly copying sutras by candlelight for a whole year. After barely a split second's hesitation, he traded a small jade carving for a single, carefully copied page of the Italian's sketches.

The Italian left at first light, and the silence after his departure was a physical thing. Perhaps it was the absence of the Venetian's broken Chinese, or the sigh of his tired horse. Perhaps it was loneliness, or something else entirely.

He stood in the courtyard of the crumbling hostel, the diagram of the printing press folded small against his chest.

The paper felt alive. It held a future he would not see. In this lonely place, where the wind spoke only of endings, he had been given a seed of a beginning.

He would carry it east. That was his purpose now—not silk, but the ghost of an idea. But something in him rebelled against being the last person to walk the desert, against the silence that would follow his footsteps. He knelt by the hearthstone of the hostel, where centuries of travelers had warmed their hands. With his eating knife, he scratched three things into the soot-blackened rock. He etched the camel, a book, and then, with a surge of desperate, wild hope, he etched a train. He did not know the last shape, not truly. It came to his hand unbidden. A long, linked thing, like a metal centipede, rushing forward on a line.

A ship sailed from port to port, from one anonymous harbor to another. It bypassed the heart of the world. It would not stop for a monk or a stablemaster. It made the inner continent, the mountains, the deserts, the thousand small kingdoms and people, completely irrelevant. It would render them silent. The train was a prayer for the world to remember the places between the seas, for the Silk Road to wake up again.

He covered it with ash. A message for a future he would never see. A wish thrown down a well of time. *Do not forget us. Do not let the heart of the world go silent. Find a way to make it beat again.*

It was the year 2015.

The maglev train arrived soundlessly. Mary stepped onto the platform, her hand instinctively finding the small jade crane in her pocket—the same one her ancestor had traded centuries before, according to family legend.

She was meeting Chris, but found herself drawn first to the exhibit at the concourse's center—a single hearthstone, blackened by ancient fires, on loan from an archaeological site.

She leaned close. There, beneath the museum lighting, were the etchings. A camel. A book. And that impossible, prophetic train.

“Beautiful, isn't it?” Chris's voice was soft beside her. “We carbon-dated the ash layer covering it. Mid-15th century. The very end.”

“He was drawing the future,” Mary whispered.

“He was drawing a future,” Chris corrected gently. “One he hoped for. Connection, and continuity.”

Mary glanced at the words carved proudly into stone by the exhibit on the Silk Road: *150 countries. The world's largest international trade project in world history. Her smile was a quiet, private little thing. He carved one line for a train, she thought, and we answered him with an entire world.*

In the luminous silence of dawn, a new maglev train prepared to depart.

The Red Silk

Pui Kiu College, Zhang Zirong – 14

West of Dunhuang, 138 BC

The wind was the worst of it. It didn't just blow; it scoured. It took the skin off your face and the hope out of your heart, one grain of sand at a time. Zhang Qian felt his face pulling tight, the skin cracking like old pottery. He had been an envoy of the Han court, sent by the Emperor to make alliances. Now, he was just a man walking through a furnace.

Out of the hundred men who had started, there were only a handful left. The horses were gone. The gold was gone. The silk—meant to buy their way through the kingdoms of the west—had been traded, lost, or buried with the dead. All but one bolt.

Kao, his attendant, stumbled as he walked. He looked at Zhang Qian, his eyes sunken and desperate. “Sir, we have no water. Let us trade the last bolt. Even for a guide. Even for a promise.”

Zhang Qian didn't answer. He reached back and touched the heavy roll of fabric strapped to his back. It was dyed a deep, unbroken crimson. It was the color of the Han dynasty. It was the only thing he had left that meant he was still a representative of a great empire, and not just a starving vagrant.

“We do not trade it,” Zhang Qian said. His voice was a dry whisper. “We show it. It is a question. It asks: Do you know who made this? Do you know the people who can?”

They walked until they could walk no more. They fell, more dead than alive, into the hands of the Xiongnu—the very horse lords they had been sent to find and outflank.

They were taken to a camp of felt tents. The chieftain was a broad man with a scar across his cheek. He took the bolt of crimson silk and held it up to the sun. The light shone through it, glowing like a piece of the sun itself.

“It is pretty,” the chieftain said. He rubbed the fabric between his thumb and forefinger. “But it is weak. It tears in the wind. It rots in the rain. Why would a man die for a pretty thing?”

Zhang Qian stood as straight as his aching bones would allow. “It is not the cloth,” he said. “It is the fact of the cloth. It proves that my people, beyond this desert, can make such a thing. Imagine what else we know. Imagine what you have that we lack. This desert does not have to be a wall. It can be a road.”

He stayed with them for ten years. He was a captive, but he was also a witness. He learned their tongue. He mapped their lands in his mind. He studied the tall, swift horses they bred.

And in a small oilskin pouch, hidden against his skin, he kept his real treasure. A handful of alfalfa seeds. A cutting of grapevine. Things the Han empire had never seen.

The silk was the message. These seeds were the first answer.

When the chance came, on a night with no moon, he ran. He ran until the campfires were nothing but stars behind him. The wind was at his back, and in his hand, he held a torn scrap of the crimson silk—frayed, stained with dirt and blood, but still bright. Still a question.

Months later, a figure in rags approached the gates of Chang'an. The guards moved to drive him away, but the flash of crimson in his hand made them stop.

In the palace, Zhang Qian knelt before Emperor Wu. He opened the oilskin pouch and poured the contents onto the marble floor. The alfalfa seeds scattered like tiny stones. The grapevine cutting lay dry and twisted.

He told the Emperor of the Xiongnu lands, of the fast horses, of the kingdoms in the west waiting to be known. The Emperor looked from the seeds to the man, and in his eyes, a fire kindled.

The Silk Road began that day—not in the desert, but here, on the cold palace stones, with a handful of seeds and a scrap of red cloth that had refused to be bartered away.

New Threads on the New Silk Road

St. Margaret's Coeducational English Secondary and Primary School, Yip Lut Yin – 14

Twenty two centuries ago, caravans set out from Chang'an carrying silk, paper, and porcelain toward lands whose names sounded like distant thunder. The journey took months, even years, and every step left a faint memory on the stones of the Silk Road. Today, trains, ships, and fibre optic cables cross the same continents in hours, but the questions that travelled with those caravans have not disappeared: How do we trade without losing ourselves, and how do we meet strangers without becoming strangers to our own hearts?

Li Wei thought about those questions as the high speed train glided out of Xi'an, the modern descendant of ancient Chang'an. Her history teacher liked to say that the old Silk Road had “disappeared” in the mid 1400s, but that it had been “revived” in 2013 when more than a hundred and fifty countries began to cooperate on new routes of trade and infrastructure. To Li Wei, it felt as if a dusty story her grandfather used to tell had suddenly stepped out of its book and into the news. Now her school wanted a piece of writing for the “New Tales of China's Silk Road” competition, and her teacher had added a challenge: “Don't just describe the road,” she had said. “Imagine what kind of person it wants you to become.”

That was why Li Wei had agreed to join a youth exchange trip running along part of the new overland route. If she could not find a story by staring at a blank screen in her bedroom, perhaps she could find one in the rhythm of wheels on tracks.

Across the aisle sat Arman, a boy from Samarkand whose city had once dazzled travellers with blue domes and busy bazaars. He spoke Mandarin with a musical accent and used his hands so much that his stories almost turned into dances. Next to him was Sara from Mombasa, where a new deep water port had transformed a sleepy coastline into a forest of cranes, containers, and foreign languages. Her braid swung like a metronome when she laughed, and she carried a sketchbook filled with ships, street vendors, and her mother's café.

On the second day of the journey, their teacher, Mr. Zhang, gave everyone the same task: “Talk to someone from another country and find out one thing the New Silk Road has changed for them—for better or for worse. Then share in the dining car tonight.” The assignment sounded simple, but as the scenery shifted from Chinese plains to Central Asian deserts, Li Wei discovered that a road could change people's lives in opposite ways at the same time.

Arman said that new trains and logistics centres had brought tourists, jobs, and scholarships to his hometown. His cousin worked as a translator for international traders; his older sister had received a grant to study engineering in Beijing. Yet his grandmother complained that the bazaar no longer smelled of handmade dyes and spices, only of plastic and petrol. “Sometimes I think our city is like a carpet,” he told Li Wei, tracing patterns on the table. “Beautiful from far away, but if you look closely, some threads are new and shiny, and some of the old ones are broken.”

Sara's story was different but echoed with the same unease. Her mother's café had flourished since truck drivers and port workers from dozens of countries had started eating there. Sara loved listening to their stories and copying their faces into her sketchbook. However, rising rents had pushed many fishing families away from the seafront, and some of Sara's childhood friends now lived hours from school. “We gained a highway to the world,” she said, “but we lost the small paths between neighbours.”

That evening, the three of them sat together by the window as the sun melted into a line of copper on the horizon. Mr. Zhang walked past, checked that everyone was working, and moved on. Li Wei opened her notebook but did not write. Instead, she asked, “What if this road could listen to us? What would you tell it to do differently?”

Arman thought for a moment. “I would tell it to slow down,” he said. “Give people time to learn each other’s languages, not just each other’s prices.”

“I would tell it to pay attention to who is not sitting at the table,” Sara added. “The farmers, the fishermen, the kids who have never seen the inside of an airport.”

Li Wei stared at the darkening landscape, where stations sparkled like brief constellations. Suddenly, the idea for her essay arrived, not as a single sentence but as a conversation she had not yet written. She would personify the New Silk Road as a young traveller, woven from rail lines, shipping lanes, and digital cables, who had inherited the memory of the ancient caravans but had not yet decided what sort of guest it wanted to be.

When they reached the final city on the route—a coastal hub where ships from more than a hundred and fifty countries came and went—Li Wei’s imagination sharpened into scenes. At the youth forum hosted there, students from Europe, Africa, and Asia debated how to make trade greener, how to prevent exploitation, and how to protect local cultures from being washed away by the same tide of goods that brought them prosperity. Li Wei noticed that every passionate speech, no matter the language, contained the same hidden fear: that their home would become a station rather than a destination, a place where things passed through instead of a place where stories could grow roots.

The highlight of the forum was a visit to the data centre that managed one of the new undersea cables linking continents. Standing in the cold, humming hall, surrounded by blinking lights and looping wires, Li Wei remembered a story about how the old Silk Road had once carried not only silk but also ideas—Buddhism spreading east, astronomy and medicine traveling west. The guide explained that now almost all international information moved through fibre optic cables like these, thin as a garden hose yet capable of carrying the entire world’s voices in pulses of light.

On the bus back to the hostel, Arman joked, “So the new caravans wear neon vests and carry laptops.” But Li Wei could not shake the feeling that she had just seen the true heart of the modern Silk Road. It was not in the cranes or the rails, impressive as they were, but in the unseen conversations crossing borders every second.

That night, long after the others had gone to sleep, she finally began to write.

In her story, the New Silk Road appeared as a weaver made of light and steel. At first, it rushed across continents, proud of how quickly it could stitch distant cities together. It boasted that it had connected more countries in a decade than the old road had in a millennium. Yet wherever it went, it heard whispers: a grandmother missing the slow bargaining of the old market, a fisherman staring at a fenced off shore, a student who could not afford the train that thundered past his village.

The weaver grew uneasy. It realised that it had been measuring success by kilometres of track, tons of cargo, and numbers in bank accounts, while the old road had been remembered for something else: the foods, stories, and inventions exchanged between ordinary people. In the climax of Li Wei’s tale, the New Silk Road paused—not physically, because trains and ships could not simply stop, but ethically. It began to redirect some of its threads: building scholarships instead of just warehouses, supporting translation programmes, and funding cultural festivals where neighbours could meet face to face.

By the time she reached her final paragraph, the sky outside the hostel window had begun to pale. Li Wei ended her essay with an image: a girl standing at a modern port, watching ships arrive under cranes shaped like giant metal giraffes. In her hand, she held a piece of silk her grandmother had woven and a smartphone glowing with messages from friends in other continents. The New Silk Road, she wrote, was not the rails, roads, or cables themselves. It was the choice people made every day about what to send along them—only goods, or also respect; only profit, or also curiosity and care.

When she finally put down her pen, Li Wei felt exhausted but strangely peaceful. The journey had not given her simple answers, but it had given her a story in which the road was not just a path through space, but through character. Whether or not she won any prize, she knew that the real “new tale” of China’s Silk Road would be written in the way her generation decided to walk it.

Not All Treasures Travel in Silk

The Hong Kong International School, Jayden Huang – 12

There was something unusual about the crate. The crate was sealed carefully, too carefully.

Liang Wen noticed it as soon as it was loaded onto the caravan. The wood was rough, the joints were tight, and the chains bundled with care as if someone was hiding a secret. It was marked down as silk, yet when he shook the crate, it felt nothing like silk. Instead of a soft rustle, there was a dull hollow thud, the sound of hard objects knocking against wood.

Empty crates were common on the Silk Road. Goods were traded, stolen, and replaced all the time. But this one felt different. It felt heavier than it should have been.

“Don’t touch that!” The merchant snapped.

Liang Wen pulled his hand back. His job at the caravan was to count and record the goods. Nothing else. However, as the caravan moved west from Dunhuang, he could not stop thinking about that crate.

From the very first day, the journey felt uneasy. At night, the merchants muttered about border inspections and forbidden goods being moved. The Silk Road was a busy trade route, but there were many secrets.

At the next border, the caravan was stopped by guards wearing dusty uniforms. Liang Wen stood quietly as they checked the goods. He noticed the merchant pulled a guard and hurriedly whispered unfamiliar words. The merchant glanced around, then quickly slipped a small pouch into the guard’s hand. The guard nodded and waved them throughout without checking all the crates.

Liang Wen’s stomach tightened. Bribes were not only expensive, but risky. No one paid money unless they were hiding something important. His eyes drifted back to the sealed crate. For the first time, he was certain it was more than strange.

That night, under the vast desert sky, Liang Wen sat alone with his records. Something didn’t add up. Silk was listed in Chang’an, but the paper only showed up later in Kucha. No weights were recorded. No taxes were paid. Was it an accident, or was it done on purpose?

Liang Wen’s mind raced. The paper was not just material. It carried ideas, secrets, and knowledge. Not everything that traveled was meant to be seen. Some things were too powerful to be exposed, yet they could change the course of history faster than any army.

The next morning, soldiers appeared on the horizon. The caravan stiffened. Everyone was afraid of what might happen. Inspections didn’t happen often, but when they did, they were serious. The officer dismounted from his horse, his boots sinking into the sand with every step. “We will search your goods,” his voice firm.

The merchant forced a smile, but his hand shook. “Of course,” he said.

The crates were opened. The silk unfurled. Spices smelled sweet. Nothing wrong. When they reached the sealed crate, the officer tapped it with his boot.

“What’s inside?” the officer demanded.

“Silk,” the merchant replied, trying to sound confident. The officer gestured. “Open it.”

The merchant hesitated.

Liang Wen’s heart pounded. He stepped forward. “Sir,” he said, keeping his voice steady, “if I may—” The merchant’s eyes flashed at him. A warning.

Liang Wen ignored the warning. “This crate has already been taxed. Its contents are recorded and sealed. Everything is accounted for.”

The officer’s gaze shifted to Liang Wen. “And you are?”

“In charge of records,” Liang Wen said. “I record the truth, so others do not have to guess.”

Silence stretched. The wind rattled the chains. The officer’s eyes narrowed. Then he waved his hand. “Move on.”

The caravan exhaled in relief. But Liang Wen could not. His mind swirled with questions. What had he helped to hide and what were the consequences if they were caught?

That night, the merchant confronted him, leaning close. “You nearly ruined everything,” he whispered harshly. “You could be betraying everyone for all I know,” Liang Wen replied.

The merchant stared at him, then laughed quietly, a sound that seemed to echo in the still desert. “Do you know what’s in that crate?”

“I do not,” Liang Wen admitted.

“Nothing,” said the merchant. “And everything.”

The merchant reached for the crate and wrestled with the chains, metal scraped against the wood before it finally gave way. The lid creaked open. Inside lay wooden frames, fine brushes, shallow sieves—tools arranged with deliberate care. Beneath them were instructions, inked in a neat, unfamiliar handwriting.

Not silk.

Not spices.

But the knowledge itself—the craft of making paper.

Liang Wen stared, his mind racing. “If this spreads...” he began.

“Silk loses its throne,” the merchant said. “Bamboo loses its weight. Empires will change how they are remembered.”

“Why carry it west?” Liang Wen asked.

“Because knowledge should not stay buried,” the merchant replied. “It should move with people. Ideas can travel faster than silk.”

From that day on, the crate was both treasure and burden. Every shadow across the dunes seemed to hide an inspector. Every wind gust made ropes creak like whispers of danger. Liang Wen counted his heartbeats as if they were numbered, each beat a reminder that what they carried was not just wood and paper, but power.

Weeks later, they faced another inspection. The officer demanded the crate be opened.

Liang Wen looked at the merchant. The merchant looked at the incoming officers. Then he whispered, “Burn it.”

Flames licked the wood, curling pages into ash. Smoke rose into the night sky. The officer nodded, satisfied. “Looks like you have saved yourselves,” he smirked.

Liang Wen thought he would feel lighter, but he felt only weight. Had they destroyed something that could change the course of history? Months later, in Samarkand, he saw paper for the first time—rough, imperfect, unmistakable. The instructions, the techniques, the ideas—they had survived. They had travelled faster than guards, armies, or fire.

Liang Wen opened his records and wrote one final line:

Not all treasures travel in silk. Some travel ideas.

And the Silk Road moved on.

The Cartographer's Blood

Victoria Shanghai Academy, Li Furu Felicia – 12

The wind in Taklamakan didn't just blow—it sang. A low, mournful threnody that carefully shaped a veil of golden airborne grift, rising up from the desert grounds to greet the everlasting moonlit sky. To Leo Chen-Sterling, this was the sound of forgettance. It was the sound that had swallowed his father, and the mystery of the He Kingdom, both of which are concealed in this very map in his possession.

Leo laid out the parchment on his lap in reminiscence of his father, Elliot Sterling, and his many adventures with it. “This has to be it,” he thought to himself, carefully examining the map, “this is the only desert without a cross on it, as well as...the only desert my father wasn't able to survive.”

The map was an inheritance. A beautiful and chaotic symbol of Elliot Sterling's lifetime devotion to the disappearance of the silk road, of He Kingdom's origin, where the Chen-Sterling family's ancestry lies. In the centre, the character ‘和’ was written in bold Chinese cursive—Hé. Harmony. A nation once known for its unity through diversity.

“Another ghost chase, *Chen Dao*?” Yultuz, Leo's Uighur guide and translator, teases, fidgeting with his straw hat and taking a large gulp of Atkan Chai from his hip flask. The wrinkles etched on his tanned skin resemble a topographical map of Taklamakan itself, brought to life by the beads of sweat running down his forehead. “Y'know, there are many deserts on Earth, not all of them have a story.”

“Well, this one does,” Leo said, in a voice hybrid of both his British education and the Shanghai cadences of his mother. Much like how the He Kingdom was made to connect east and west through what was known as the Silk Road, Leo's Chinese name ‘道’ means ‘road’. He was mixed by blood, yet he didn't feel like he truly belonged anywhere.

As Leo was smoothing out the tattered edges with his fingertips, he noticed a new thread of words in Uyghur in the margin.

“Meteorite in 1400. The He Kingdom was buried amidst the chaos. Seek the Mingsha Dunes...Annals of Wu”

Next to it, there was a drawing of an 8 pointed star, much like the one you would find on a regular compass.

“Look, annals don't necessarily mean anything - the dunes are way too dangerous for you to go to.” Yultuz grunted, “We're here to look for clues through real cartography and archaeology, not riddles and magic.”

At the mention of ‘annals’, something stirred within Leo's mind. Annals of Wu...Could it be...Zhang Qian's Emperor Wu? From 126 BCE? Though it is unclear how they might be linked, Leo was sure the collision of surnames meant something deeper.

Grasping onto this possibility, Leo's fingers fumbled as he struggled to pull out yet another piece of crumpled paper from his pocket. This was his father's final letter to Leo before he set off to Taklamakan alone, and Leo held onto it everyday in hopes of Elliot's return.

Only until now did Leo realise, this wasn't just a vivid description of his father's endeavours, but rather a guide on what to do if Elliot wasn't able to make it.

“He isn't just a city, Leo, it's a synapse connecting the east and west, a result of the Silk Road. I'm going to the Mingsha Dunes today. He is in the light. Seek a permanent light source,

and you will find the first handshake.”

“Yultuz, please. The Mingsha Dunes are just east of where we are right now. I’m sure my father wouldn’t lie to me.”

“But if we come to a dead end, you’re on your own.”

“Deal.”

For the next three weeks, Leo and Yultuz would embark on a treacherous journey accompanied by nothing but stars and sand storms; and for three weeks, they would find nothing but more endless desolation waiting for them.

Until this morning.

Leo lifted his binoculars and peered through them to confirm his sighting. To the west, the horizon shimmered, blinding him so much he had to squint his eyes. But it wasn’t just shimmering, it had a rippling effect to it as well. “Look, Yultuz. Do you see?”

“*A fata morgana?*”

“No, the colour of the light is far too off for that to be a mirage.” Leo breathed heavily with excitement, “The remains of the meteorite. Father once read to me in a book that it was rich in iron, fusing the sand into glass. It must have formed over the centuries, with silicon dioxide reflecting the light. Yultuz, this creates a permanent mirage effect, and obscures what’s underneath. This is what father meant by He being in the light!”

Yultuz stared at Leo in awe, the shimmering horizon reflecting in his hazel brown irises. “A desert hiding a desert. Truly something only your father would seek.”

As the two carefully started towards the distortion, the air grew hotter and thicker, almost as if they were being embraced. At the same time, the sunlight split into prickly prisms, blinding them from moving any further.

And then, the ground gave way. It wasn’t a sudden collapse, but a well-disguised transformation. What seemed to be hard-packed sand broke and paved a way into what seemed to be a chasm. As the dust cleared, it was quite obvious that Leo and Yultuz were no longer on the surface.

“We walk.” Leo’s bold voice shredded through the eerie echoes of the chasm, the decision settling upon him with the weight of both their fates.

Surprised at Leo’s sudden daring attitude, Yultuz silently picks up his pace. The sun, reflected from a million surfaces all over, became an omnipresent, blinding furnace that only became brighter as they ventured further.

About an hour into this new territory, Leo and Yultuz found their first marker. It was a stone tablet, inscribed with flowing Sogdian letters. Though Leo could only make out the general meaning of the message, he knew it spoke of a kingdom where east and west are united through trade.

Leo gasped out loud. His father’s theories weren’t a fantasy after all.

Not much further from the stone tablet lay a skeleton figure, with a leather pouch hanging from his neck, and its bony hands extending out. It lay amidst a pile of porcelain and jade, of which Leo recalled was some of the most commonly traded items on the Silk Road, not buried but encased.

With trembling fingers, Leo carefully approached the skeleton’s neck and pried the pouch free, not sure of what to expect. Gently reaching in, he found that inside hid a lump of raw, unworked jade, as well as a piece of clay token.

“The first handshake.” Leo exclaimed under his breath.

Yultuz looked spooked. “Are you sure we should be doing this? Isn’t it better to not... disturb creatures in the afterlife?”

“Look at the direction he’s pointing towards.” Leo breathed, “I think this may be it.”

Too excited to explain any further, Leo leapt towards the heart of the Chasm, marked by a tranquil and majestic domain that stayed hidden in sunlight unless you knew where to look.

As Leo brushed off the surface of the door with his bare hands, specks of sand gave way to a smooth pattern engraved as the handle, the very same 8 pointed star drawn on his map. The material was not stone or wood, but a perfect piece of fine-cut jade, outlined with streaks of cinnabar red.

There was no key nor handle, just a hand-shaped depression in the middle of the star that perfectly went up to Leo’s chest height. Leo looked down upon his palm, imagining the collision of British and Chinese blood running up his veins happening right this second.

“The map is in my bones.”

Turns out, it wasn’t a metaphor.

Closing his eyes, Leo slid his right palm onto the depression, letting the cool and impossibly smooth texture embrace his warm skin, as if accepting some sort of invitation.

For a moment, all was still. Then, memories of trades that happened centuries ago came flushing towards Leo, everything all at once. Trade routes, religious ideas, poetry transmissions. All these long forgotten plans have finally arisen to the surface, this time desperate to be brought back and shared to the world.

After the flashbacks stopped, the domain faded away. All that was left was a tattered velvet coloured journal, with the word ‘和谐’, harmony, inscribed on it.

The final entry read:

“The meteor did not destroy the Silk Road, it preserved it. The council foresaw the Ottoman Empire’s plans, hence why they decided to seal their knowledge here, hoping for someone of both worlds to unseal and release the information when the time is right. Leo, you are a child of both worlds—exactly what they were looking for. Chen and Sterling, woven together.”

As tears started to blur his vision, Leo finally understood: he was not caught between the two worlds, he was the bridge between them. As a cartographer, he would map that space anew, reigniting the flames of the Silk Road.



Creative Writing
Fiction

Group 3

Friendship

HD Beijing School, Iris Zhao – 12

As the sun sinks below the endless Gobi Desert, painting the sky in amber and rose, a Buddhist monk in plain yellow robes walks slowly along the ancient Silk Road. The wind slices through the air, lifting clouds of sand, and his wooden staff taps softly against the earth. For days, he has walked alone, seeing no other travelers. He once believed deserts were empty places—until tonight.

As stars appear, the road narrows. Locals call this place the Critical Point, where shadows stretch unnaturally long and stories of lost caravans linger like ghosts. The monk remembers a warning from the last village: a cruel merchant who haunts this road, wielding power over sand and shadow, twisted by loneliness and greed.

Suddenly—hooves.

The pounding grows louder, steady and relentless. The monk clasps his hands and whispers a prayer. When he opens his eyes, a tall, gaunt man rides toward him. His faded indigo robes are patched and trimmed with cheap gold. His face is tight with restless anger, and his hands twitch eagerly.

“Hello!” the merchant barks. “I guard this road! None pass without my permission!”

The monk tries to step aside. The merchant slams his fist against the saddle.

“I’m talking to you!”

“What do you want?” the monk asks calmly.

“Your coin!” the merchant snarls. “Buy my wares—or you’ll never reach the next oasis. This road is mine!”

The monk murmurs, “So the villagers were right.”

“What did you say?” the merchant snaps. “You think you’re better than me? You monks always judge!”

He pulls out a truncheon carved with strange symbols and swings it through the air. The sand dunes melt and twist into monsters—clawed beasts, swirling shapes with burning eyes. They crawl toward the monk. He grips his staff, heart pounding.

Then voices echo in the distance.

Six travelers approach on camels loaded with sacks and crates. Their robes are thick and dark blue. A bearded man with bright eyes leads them. A guide in a yellow hat walks beside the camels, blowing a soft whistle.

“Turn back!” the merchant shouts. “This road is mine!”

But the sand monsters hesitate. The travelers’ calm presence weakens the spell. One monster collapses into dust when a camel steps near it.

“What’s happening here?” the tall traveler asks.

“A monk, strange sand creatures, and a merchant who blocks the road,” the guide says.

“Who’s talking about me?” the merchant snaps.

“No one!” the guide says, though some travelers chuckle.

Furious, the merchant waves his truncheon again, but the monsters shrink.

“I’ll return with something worse!” he yells, galloping into the dunes.

The monk bows to the travelers. “Thank you. That man is dangerous.”

The tall traveler smiles. “I am Marco Polo. We travel to collect stories.”

“The merchant has haunted this road for years,” the monk explains. “He uses magic to scare lonely travelers.”

Unseen, the merchant hides behind a dune, listening.

“I’ll come back when they sleep,” he mutters.

That night, as everyone rests, the merchant creeps toward their camp in a dark cloak. He raises his truncheon.

“There’s someone there!” a traveler cries.

The merchant slips away.

The monk stands, scanning the darkness. The wind carries faint footsteps fading into the dunes.

“Stay close,” the monk says. “Fear is his only weapon.”

A growl echoes. New monsters rise—bigger than before: a scorpion of stone, a sand snake, a dust wolf. The travelers gasp. The monk chants softly. The creatures hesitate.

The merchant steps forward, sneering.

“My creatures don’t fear prayers!”

He snaps his fingers. The scorpion lunges. Marco Polo swings a metal flask, striking its claw. Sand scatters.

“Fight back!” Marco shouts.

The guide throws a rock. Another traveler jabs with a stick.

The monk keeps chanting. The wind weakens. The creatures tremble and dissolve into sand.

“No!” the merchant screams. “Stop!”

His magic fades. He stumbles back, staring at his empty hands.

“How did you do that?” he asks.

“Your power comes from anger,” the monk says. “Peace breaks curses. What do you truly want?”

The merchant’s voice cracks.

“I just want someone to stay with me. This road is lonely. I thought if I controlled it, people would have to notice me.”

The desert trembles slightly. A child cries, but the merchant barely notices.

“Loneliness is a cruel curse,” the monk says gently. “But you don’t have to face it alone. Let go of greed, and people will walk with you.”

“Really?” the merchant whispers.

A sudden gust lifts him into the air.

“I’ll be back!” he shouts. “But I’ll try to change!”

The wind carries him away. Silence returns.

“Thank you,” the monk tells the travelers. “I couldn’t have done it alone.”

“That’s what travelers do,” the guide says. “We help each other.”

They build a small campfire. The monk draws a circle in the sand.

“Differences don’t matter if our hearts are open,” he says. “We are strong when united. Friendship is the greatest treasure.”

One traveler nods. “We almost forgot that.”

The night deepens. The fire glows warmly. Marco leans against a dune. The guide mends his yellow hat.

At dawn, the dunes glow gold and rose. A cool breeze carries the scent of an oasis. Tiny desert flowers bloom around their camp. Birds soar overhead, singing.

When they leave, their shadows stretch long behind them. In the distance, a faint trail of dust marks where the merchant went—this time, not a threat, but a new beginning.

The desert remains vast and quiet, but no longer empty. Under the morning sun, it feels full of possibility, where even lonely roads can lead to friendship.

From Code to Community

HD Beijing School, Nono Zhang – 14

Near Kashgar, the desert never stays quiet for long. One morning, when the sky was wide and blue, May believed she still had time to finish her fieldwork. She stood on a low hill, holding her tablet, guiding a drone across the dry land. This data was important for her research paper, and she was already behind schedule. Her professor kept sending short emails, asking for results. The pressure followed her even here, far away from the city. Then the wind suddenly changed. Sand rushed into the air like a wall. The drone shook, lost its signal, and disappeared into the yellow storm. May ran after it, but the wind pushed back. When the storm finally slowed, the drone was gone. She searched near some old mud walls, angry and tired, afraid that weeks of work were lost.

While digging in the sand, a local teenage boy appeared. His name was Kasim, speaking a little bit of English and pointed toward a cracked earth wall nearby. Together they searched again, and soon they found the drone stuck inside the broken wall. It was damaged badly. As May pulled it out, something else fell to the ground. It was a small copper box, old and heavy, hidden inside the wall. Curiously, they opened it carefully. Inside was a piece of silk, folded many times, covered with strange lines and symbols. May froze for a moment. She had studied enough to know this was not decoration. It looked like a coded map, possibly connected to the Silk Road. Her heart beat faster. This discovery could save her paper. Kasim stared at the silk too. He said the symbols reminded him of stories his grandfather told, about nomads, long journeys, and secret signs used to survive the desert. Sitting beside the wall, they talked and quickly understood that neither of them could solve this alone. They made a simple deal. Kasim would guide her through the land and help explain the symbols using local knowledge. May would help Kasim make a report, using her technology and academic support, to oppose a planned data center project that might damage local water and land. Their reasons were different, but their path joined.

The silk showed only one clear destination, not many. They traveled together toward that point. The journey was hard but focused. At night, May worked on her tablet, scanning the silk, zooming into details, and running algorithms to compare patterns. Sometimes the software gave confusing results, and she complained quietly, feeling the limits of pure data. During the day, Kasim watched the land. He pointed out small changes in soil color, wind direction, and plants. He told stories passed down in his family, about how travelers find water, how they avoid deadly storms, and how trust between strangers once meant survival. Slowly, May noticed that when she combined Kasim's stories with her data, the symbols made more sense. The code was not abstract. It was deeply connected to the land itself.

After several days, they reached a small valley hidden between low hills. It looked unimportant at first, but there was fresh water flowing gently, and green plants grew around it. The air felt calm, almost protected. May checked her analysis again, comparing the silk with their location. The truth became clear. This was not a treasure map. It was a survival guide. The silk marked places where water could be found, where people could rest safely, and where fair trade could happen. It showed paths built on cooperation, not control. The Silk Road, she realized, was never just about silk or gold. It was about shared knowledge, mutual trust, and helping each other stay alive in a dangerous world. Kasim nodded when she explained it. For him, this knowledge had always existed in stories. Now it was written in code and data.

Excited and proud, May worked late into the night. She combined everything into a simple digital model, a 3D map people could explore and interact with. It felt clean and powerful. Without much thought, she sent it to her professor. The reply came quickly. He praised her work and called it groundbreaking. But then his message changed tone. He said he had already contacted a company. They wanted to build an “immersive Silk Road experience” in the valley. A data center would be constructed first to support it. Kasim read the email silently. His face became serious. May stared at the glowing screen, then looked outside at the quiet valley. The real land was alive and fragile. The digital version was easy to copy and sell. She understood the danger clearly now. If she followed her professor’s plan, she would turn living history into a product. She would preserve the road in data, but destroy its soul in reality.

May made her choice quickly. Instead of replying to her professor, she logged into a global open cultural heritage database. She uploaded everything that she has collected, including the data, the images, the decoding process, and her notes. She labeled it clearly as public domain and named it “Silk Road Survival Code.” The response spread fast. Archaeologists, historians, and local communities all around the world have quickly noticed the project and began to discuss it. Under the growing public pressure, the data center project was paused. With the report May helped him prepare, Kasim applied for a small cultural heritage protection fund and became a community guardian. A few weeks later, May received an automatic notification. On the project page, new contributors had appeared. An Italian scholar added research from the Mediterranean side. A Japanese programmer improved the interaction design. On the world map, small lights showed visitors from across the globe. May finally finished her paper, which titled “From Code to Community: Reconnecting the Silk Road Spirit in the Digital Age”. She understood now that this road was not ending. Its real journey of exploration had only just begun.

New Tales of China's Silk Road

HD Beijing School, Phoebe Chen – 11

The lotus pattern sways gently in the evening breeze strung between the workshop's wooden beams and the digital loom's glowing screen. Lin Xiao hands me a warm cup of jasmine tea just like the kind my master used to brew, and we sit on the floor our legs tangled in pinky fuzzy socks. Outside, the Dunhuang sky blushes orange and purple, with a delivery scooter running by its horn blending with the soft hum of the loom.

"I showed Grandma the pattern today", Lin Xiao says sipping her tea. Her eyes crinkle at the corners just like how her grandma's did when she first touched the lotus silk. She cried. Sat there running her fingers over the petals for minutes shuttering about how it felt like my grandpa's hands were weaving again. He used to make her silk ribbons with lotus patterns back when they were young. He said each petal was a promise to stay together even when he had to travel for silk. I run a finger over the lotus petal real silk woven with digital precision. The gold threads are catching the last beam of sunlight like flecks of honey. For a second, I swear I can feel my master's palm on mine; rough for decades of sorting cocoons and adjusting warp threads. I hear her voice too low and warm as she hums the old Silk Road Ballad about caravans and starry nights.

Beside me Lin Xiao's phone buzzes and a photo pops up: her grandma smiling, holding the lotus fragment we found in the Dunhuang cave tears glistened on her cheeks. It's a small ordinary moment but it tugs at my chest like the way my master used to tuck a loose strand of hair behind my ear when I fumbled a shuttle.

This isn't just a pattern. It's the steam from jasmine tea curling in the air mixing with the faint smell of potato chips (Lin Xiao calls them workshop fuel, and we've gone through half a bag of them; there are already crumbs littering on the floor). Lin Xiao jokes that these crumbs are our fuel after half a day of work, and she laughs so hard at me when I mix a splash of jasmine into the microwave to offer her tea. It's the sound of her grandma's favorite that drifts over the tune mimicking the creak of the wooden loom. It's the way we stay up until midnight arguing over whether the lotus petals would be woven with three gold threads or four, until Lin Xiao's grandma calls to remind us to eat the dumplings left in the fridge (steamed pork my favorite; juicy, and warm; nothing like the dried mutton we ate during the blizzard.)

The digital loom beeps softly as if nodding off a long day's work. I tuck a loose thread back into the lotus just like how my master taught me fingers moving on muscle memory and LinXiao taps her phone to save the pattern. Tomorrow we can weave the second half she says, wiping a chip crumb from her chin, and I'll teach you to order dumplings on the app; no more sneaking to the street vendor and trying to pay with the jade hairpin. The vendor thinks you're a very committed cosplayer by the way.

I laugh, a sound that feels foreign and familiar all at once. It's been months since I stumbled out of that blizzard scared and confused clutching my wooden shuttle like a lifeline. Back then I thought the world had ended; my workshop burned, my master gone, the Khan orders weighing heavy on my shoulders. But here in this little space in 2026 I've found something I never expected, a home; not the kind with mud brick walls and charcoal fires, but one made of neon socks and digital looms, jasmine tea and shared laughter from worlds bound by my silk.

I think all the little moments that got us here: Lin Xiao teaching me to use the magic box to heat dumplings, her patience never wavering even when I accidentally burned three batches. Me showing her how to soften silk thread with tea, how to feel the tension in the warp with just my fingers, how to sing to the loom so threads listen better. The time old master Wei came back grumbling about digital nonsense only to stay for hours helping me fix the wooden loom in the storage closet, his calloused hands working in sync with mine as if we'd been weaving together for years. The day we took the bus to the Dunhuang night market, Lin Xiao buying me a sugar figure shaped like a lotus, and me teaching her to barter with the vendor in the Silk Roadway.

As the sun dips below the dunes painting the sky a deep shade of purple, we turn off the glowing screens and light a candle just like the ones I used in my Yuan Dynasty workshop, tallow melting slowly as it casts warm shadows on the walls. The lotus pattern glows in the soft light bridging past and present silk, patterns of loneliness and belonging. I take another sip of jasmine tea, and it tastes like home, the one I've woven here with a girl in neon socks a digital loom that sings and a heart full of stories.

Lin Xiao leans her head on my shoulder, and I can feel her smile against my arm. "Grandma says we're carrying on the Silk Road," she murmurs, "not the old one with camels and caravans but a new one where stories and crafts no matter how different our worlds are."

I nod because she's right. The Silk Road never ended, it just changed threads from camel caravans to WIFI signals, from jade spools to 3D printed shuttles, from solitary weavers working by candlelight to two people sharing potato chips and tea under a sky that's been watching over silk for a thousand years. It's in the way Lin Xiao's grandma passes down her favorite folk songs, in the way we blend digital precision with the warmth of human hands. It's in the small ordinary moments; the laughter, tea, the shared dumplings that make something old feel new again.

The candle flickers and I look at the lotus pattern, at the way the silk and digital threads are tangled together, impossible to tell apart. I think of master Lin Xiao's grandma, of all the weavers who came before us; their hands, their stories.

October 18, 1860

Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Chan Tsz Huen Evelyn – 15

Dufu once painfully shed tears in the realization that the nation is broken, though mountains and rivers remain. But as I see the blazing sight before me – dappling, vermilion flames crumbling this home I call mine into nothing; the serendipitous clusters of violet sprawling outside withering to ashes. I hear the cries of flaxen-haired soldiers charging into the Summer Palace, and now I know my world means no more. Now I know that fire ends the world, devouring me in humanity's bitter, devious grasp. Now I know that heaven's halation is not too far away, and perhaps there will be a day where I reincarnate to reunite with the people in my country I call the blood of my very own.

The flickering of flames slithering against my waxed, concrete skin like an uninvited invasion, and perhaps my life will end with a fate suspended in eternal limbo. I feel the heat radiating from within, and I curse myself for being unable to do anything at all. The saturated colors, once carefully applied and embossed with golden paint, a painter's blood, sweat, and tears washed away with one simple flicker. Grandiose splendour, now shrouded in ash and crumbs. Flames suffocate and choke me in a wicked, thorn-like prison. I braved the ravages of time that spared me no sympathy to relish in my beauty, but alas it all comes to a tragic end.

I feel mortified that there was once a time when I was revered as a replica of the most beautiful to have existed – Yang Guifei, a beauty so captivating she could topple kingdoms and have emperors kneeling at her feet for a mere touch of her grace. I remember how vividly the children crowded around me a podium where I pooled in splendour, their silver laughter chiming in distant reverberations. I remember the strange, ethereal-looking foreigners, golden wispy hair reminiscent and sapphire-blue eyes, bestowing me with silks in their honor. I remember the pride blooming in my chest – they spun tall tales of how they traveled from the direction where the sun succumbs in its drowsy slumber, the magnificence of the unknown West, and those were the golden days of the Silk Road. How often would they be able to revel in the beauty of this mythical land of immense riches, festooned with fine silks and adorned with unearthly stones? The Silk Road spun threads of fates from the world into the Tang, distant and intrepid travellers from far away swearing language and legacy in exchange for silk, gold, and the poison still lingering today.

Time was ever so kind to me, allowing me to witness every act in the rise and rebirth of foreign connection. There came the fall of the Tang: the muse of my creator's desires sentenced to execution, leaving secluded for centuries in ash and dust. Then came the glory days of the Han, revering me for my predecessor as they showered me in praise once again. I find there is a twisted irony that with every turn of history, greed, envy, pride ignited rebellions, and I was left drowning in the compulsive intoxication of hope once more. My artisans refused to spare me the right to speak, to tell my people to stay, nor did they grant me the privilege to turn the clock every time a dynasty crumbled to ashes.

For over a thousand years, Chang'an was a splendid conservation of the East and West. Time and time again, handcrafters, priests, and emperors alike placed me into display rooms, one more extravagant than the next. All around me was the hustle and bustle of life I had ever known, and sometimes I find myself longing for the days I basked in never-ending company where I met new faces every day. I used to observe flaxen-haired foreigners coming forward to follow the teachings of Confucianism and pleading Nirvana from Buddhism, over finding myself smiling as they offered me woolen carpets embossed with gold. But I recall the day they disappeared for centuries to come all too well. The visitors who used to come to admire me were gone, and all that came after them were crowds of monks hurriedly putting away scrolls and texts, spending their days burning incense and muttering desperately to the Gods among us. It wasn't long until they left me behind in the temple for good, until I realized the end of all that I had loved had begun.

Today is the day they came.

“Take it! TAKE IT! Take as much as you can!”

The air is thick with greed and lust, a fog that seeped through the glided, golden rooftops of the Western Old Summer Palace. I look at the sea of monsters I used to call my admirers storm into the room, their spears glinting wickedly in the afterglow. “FIRE!” Their commander screams, and they reply in unison as their footsteps clank off the castle walls, firing storms of arrows straight into the chests of the loyal guards who stand besides me. Fountains of vermilion blood spray into the air, their bodies betraying their kingdom as they meet their fates in the blaze.

I watch soldiers stuff priceless statues into their knapsacks, pushing through the intricate wood and tile with a hatred burning into their eyes I had not known. Men emerge from the back doors clutching terracotta sculpture and jade lacquerware, tearing away through the delicate silk that used to drape amongst them. I cry silently for my fallen friends, a sharp contrast to their jeering laughs with a hysterical edge. My home is dying before my eyes. The painstakingly crafted Baroque cherubs shatter on the ground, the laughingly ironic death of the respect my Emperor used to contain to the West. The mahogany beams give way with a great, rushing susurration as if the very spirit of the palace is stolen with the objects the invaders took.

And finally, it is my turn. Screams I am fated to never let out lodge in my throat as they carry me away, putting me in a carriage decked in unfamiliar velvet and scholars murmuring in a soft, incomprehensible language beyond my understanding. The new hands that secure me in the storage chest are sheathed in silk richly embellished with a golden crest. I become the mark of stolen legacy, the victim in the murder of a dream, and the unmaking of the thousand-year history of the Silk Road woven from reverence, poetry, and exchange.

They don't place me among familiar temples and libraries, and instead mount me on a stark pedestal behind a transparent plane where I become an object of exotic possession. A small card sits besides me, its letters a tidy, foreign scrawl I soon come to recognize: “East Asian Sculpture, Gallery 33” The years I spend in the Imperial British Museum enlighten

me in ways I cannot imagine. I feel the bitterly repulsive drug of desire for eternal praise, the same way those flaxen-haired foreigners poison my people's minds with cravings of opium until they choke on the lines between life and death. I adore praise – wanted and loved it until and failed to realize I needed it until I finally acquired it. What am I without praise? What is a moth without its allure to the tantalising flame? When a group of children stop to press their small hands against the glass, their breath forming a foggy mist, a fresh wave of novelty brings along momentary relief with the harrowing thoughts of the next time I will be abandoned. They have made an addict of me, trading the roots of my history and my home with the promise of admiration.

“What are we here?” I wondered aloud, knowing only the neighbouring statues, paintings, and jewels (all figments of my past could hear me. A thousand years of exhaustion clinging to my quiet voice, and I wonder when it will all end.

“The Silk Road led us here,” the statue of the Celestial Goddess sighs dreamily next to me, “the very same threads of connection sewing together dynasties and destinities together, weave together a forbidden cultivation the foreigners weave to distort our culture for foreign, unintended eyes.”

“We have saved your beauty from fading to obscurity,” the arrogant Venus-de-Milo sighed next to me, “your country's fate is not that far away, friend.”

My epiphany deepens with every ominous strike of the clock, woven through the long, slow hours on suffocating display. Silk wove threads of dialogue that could bend across mountains and deserts without breaking, embroidering our shared fates with civilizations that we didn't even know existed. Those threads have been snipped, and in place spun the narrative of cultural salvation.

Every fiber in my body yearns to collapse and give in to the century-long weight of the world. The Old Summer Palace was an ambitious dream built with marble, jade, bronze, and porcelain. For years, architects and common people honored the rich and lush tapestry of Chinese history, and immortalized it through an ethereal edifice while fusing together filaments of Baroque. And no one realizes how the threads of the Silk Road become a twisted net for greed, seeking to take time itself.

For me, my fate lies here, an eternal cage for my porcelain rivulets and fabricated smile. For my people, every fragment of their identity might very well be fading to obscurity.

How could I ever let them arrest the narrative of my civilization?

Progression

Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Lee Tsz Lam Charlotte – 13

Wei adjusted the bundles of silk on her back as the caravan wound slowly through the treacherous paths of the Hexi corridor, gazing across the rippling desert plains scorched by the searing midday sun. The caravan horses pawed the dust, their cracked hooves stirring billowing clouds of dirt that glinted in the sunlight.

She ran her fingers over the smooth surface of the obsidian mirror, its glossy black plane cool to the touch despite the sweltering heat. As Wei lifted the mirror into the light, memories coursed softly through her mind; from when her ancestors first traipsed across this sprawling network of roads millennia ago, to more recent memories of her mother taking her through the cluttered bazaars of the Taklamakan markets, with people trading everything from ornate lacquerware to earthy incense.

As the caravan's camels ambled forward, Wei's thoughts slipped into a trance yet again. How many generations before her had watched the same sun rise and fall across these very same dunes, their shoulders hunched underneath the weight of exotic goods? And how many more would come after?

Her mother had once told her that her great-grandfather had once crossed the Gobi desert with nothing but a pile of tea bricks and a jade pendant for good luck. Now Wei wore that exact same pendant, cold against her collarbone. His hands had touched it. His sweat had darkened the cord that the jade hung from. And yet now, she couldn't even remember his face anymore...

The wind shifted again, grainy particles of sand stinging her eyes. Ahead, barely visible in the desert's afternoon haze, stood the ruins of an old caravanserai, cracks showing up in the facade of the crumbling basalt structure. Generations upon generation of travellers had once rested within these four walls, negotiating over the price of assorted goods brought from far away.

Either way, it didn't matter anymore. Everything was gone now. But the routes they had carved into the soil with their footsteps and wheels would still remain intact, for centuries to come.

Present Day China, National People's Congress

Secretary General Li wiped the sweaty palms of his hands on the thighs of his silk dress pants, gazing across the empty auditorium. The guests and the media would arrive soon. "For the first time in over 2,000 years, we are proud to announce the revival of numerous ancient Silk Road trade routes through our newly implemented Belt and Road Initiative," he proclaimed, his voice resonating clearly across the hall. "Through this program, we aim to further promote global trade and interconnectivity of nations. We will invest in over 150 various countries and international organisations, hoping to cultivate multiculturalism in Asia and beyond."

"Of course, this is something that we today cannot merely view as a means for economic gain, for we should also acknowledge the rich heritage and history of this network of routes and how they helped to shape what we know as our nations today. We must pay tribute to the thousands of people before us, whose ambitions and aspirations influenced these networks. Likewise, we must also give our thanks to future generations who will come after us, as they are the ones who carry on our legacy."

“In the name of history, who are we to say what we’re worth? Centuries ago, didn’t our ancestors also believe their rule to be superior and unstoppable? Now we learn about their mistakes in history class and laugh at how foolish they seem to us. We may be proud to be part of something great now, but we should remember that in the flow of time, we will always remain bound to those who came before us, and those who will follow.”

Finally satisfied, Li picked up his cue cards from the lectern, slowly descending the steps from the stage, and placed them back into his leather briefcase, resting gently atop a black obsidian mirror.

New Tales of China's Silk Road

Pui Ching Middle School, Fok Ho Yee Kalie – 13

Twelve years, five months, and twenty-four days.

Every step crunched into the sand, following the path only visible, because of the many creatures that had walked before her own. She clutched the bridle of the sleek white steed, her head absently nodding to each movement, each closer and closer to her destination: Home.

The Silk Road is rather merciless to lone travellers, given how the strong winds forced specks of sand into Mulan's eyes. The blinding pain should've caused her to blink, should've caused her eyes to water, but there hasn't been any sight of natural liquid for the past two days. She'd made a note to ration her last bits of water for the faithful horse, though the thought of slaughtering it for a chance at drinking its blood still came across her mind every now and then. Another gust of wind blew through her bones, hot and piercing. It didn't help that the choppy haircut she'd ordained for the past decade had dust stuck to the ends of it, and that she had to shake her head like a feral dog so she wouldn't have a crown of dirt in turn. It most certainly didn't help, in fact, how breathing felt like someone was grating a slab of tree bark against her nostrils, despite the meek cloth the Emperor had gifted her, tied behind her ears and covering her mouth. A particular bird was adamant to follow her, one red like a fiery ember, with tailfeathers that shone brighter than any gold she could ask for. It cried its melodic cry, a sound she could never get tired of, and a warmth spread over her body. Not like the heat that burned into her flesh, it always seemed to come from inside her, in a way that made her feel as if she could conquer anything. She sat up straighter after that, a small 'thank you' for the energy boost, kicking her horse's side and even laughing as it raced against the sand.

One step, two step...three step...four...

She was kneeling in front of the Emperor, head bowed down. His expression wasn't easy to make out—she'd assumed it was something emperors trained for, to act like they knew something others didn't. His stroking of the beard added to the tension, his voice thick, thick with everything he's witnessed in the countless wars he'd fought in, thick with an emotion that seemed so distinguished in a way: bits of curiosity, bits of astonishment, bits of admiration, rolled into a fine cord that came out of his mouth. He asked her for her real name, because it certainly wasn't Ping, the one she used to enter the army. She answered Fa Mulan. He stroked his beard, for a bit more time than the last. He whispered and whispered, certainly not to her, and offered her a job at the palace, a job as a high-esteemed general. A beat. She declined.

More whispers echoed through the halls, shocked because who would dare decline the Emperor himself? Mulan tilted her head up for the first time since entering the throne room, locking on the beady eyes that had seen so much, and yet not enough to see her reasoning. She opened her mouth, and spoke. Spoke of how she took her sick father's place in the army, because he bore no sons. Spoke of how she killed—oh, how many she killed—because she'd let the world burn if it meant going home. Lastly, she spoke of how she missed the warm embrace of her parents, and that with her father's old age, she hasn't any knowledge of whether he's even alive after a decade of waiting.

The Emperor looked at her, his black eyes meeting hers with a look that could only belong to a father. He didn't say much, not anymore, but instead ordered her the best horse China could offer, and all the equipment she needed to make the journey back home through the Silk

Road. He did not, however, anticipate the dangers the Road itself held, as most emperors who had everything at arm's reach do.

One step...two step...three...

She was back in the present again, begrudgingly so. The scarlet bird had made itself comfortable on her shoulder, and she'd hate to admit enjoying the tiny weight. The three of them had already passed a sand pile...and another...and another...so far, the only other sign of life was the cacti that appeared every now and then. The white horse had slowed down to a steady trot, and Mulan wouldn't exactly blame him, not with the burst of adrenaline leaving her as quickly as it came. The sun overhead was dipping down, quicker than most would like him to, so if they could just find some place that's stable enough to hold their makeshift tent for the night, then she'll want to kiss one of those spiky green plants as a celebration. Every bit of saliva in her mouth had dried up, leaving her no choice but to drink from her last ceramic vessel, and later give some to the horse as well. He deserved it, didn't he?

But when she lifted the container again once his turn was done, it was empty, left with a few droplets' worth. She couldn't blame him, not at all, not when she was the one who forced him to go for three days on end. No, it was her own fault, and now they'll die of thirst in the middle of a desert. Perhaps whatever divine deity above can spare her some mercy and give her a good afterlife...

She flipped the vessel upside down above her face, narrowing her eyes to check, only to be met with a full jug pouring water onto her. She spluttered and spat, coughing up the liquid she could've choked on if she wasn't fast enough to react. Her hair was drenched, her clothes sodden, and she would've been gasping for air if it weren't the bits of sand that'll stick to her mouth. Something cawed behind her, then the scarlet bird tilted its head towards the soaked girl, with chirps so innocent she couldn't possibly stay mad. She paused, taking a good look at the bird. Then she burst out laughing, hitching the now-full vessel back onto the horse as she kept her gaze on the creature before her: A phoenix, and a mighty beautiful one at that, deciding to grace her with its presence. A blessing some could only dream of being bestowed upon, more so having their vessel contained at the phoenix's will.

One step...two step...

The journey home continued, with Mulan in a better mood than before. Her horse had noticed too, from the looks of him quickening the rhythm of his hooves. There was a certain lightness to knowing a phoenix was by their side, as that would mean the majestic bird would make sure they'd make it to their destination. The vessel never showed any sign of running out, and neither did Mulan's energy regardless of the past few days of treacherous hikes up and down. She was being led back down a certain hill, and took the moment to check the road ahead. Was that...smoke she caught sight of?

It couldn't be, could it? It must've been a trick of the light, or just another oasis (they'd passed by two in three days alone), most definitely not...?

Another stream of smoke floated up not far from the previous one, and before she knew it, Mulan dismounted the faithful horse. She ignored how the sand reached her ankles, how she should've ridden her horse a few more meters further. No, the sand had started to give way to cobblestone now. It was a village, her village, and she was finally going home after twelve years, six months, and four days.

She took off and left the Silk Road behind.

One...last...step...

The Journey of a Lost Trader

The King's School Qianhai Shenzhen, Madeline Fraser – 13

The desert became silent before it became dangerous. Jacob realized this when the wind stopped and the sound of the caravan's bells faded into nothing. The air felt heavy and the land around him looked the same in every direction. Sand stretched endlessly under the bright sky, with no trees, no buildings, and no signs of life.

Only hours earlier, Jacob had been walking beside camels and merchants, feeling proud as he guarded his valuable cargo. Now he stood alone, his heart beating fast, realizing for the first time that the Silk Road was not just a place of trade– it was a place where mistakes could cost lives.

Jacob had waited years for this journey. His father was a respected trader who travelled the Silk Road many times. When Jacob was younger, he listened to stories of faraway cities filled with gold, spices, and silk. He dreamed of becoming a great trader himself. When his father finally allowed him to join the caravan, Jacob felt ready.

He believed he was strong enough, smart enough, and brave enough to succeed.

Before the caravan left, his father placed a small wooden chest into Jacob's hands. Inside were fine rolls of blue silk, carefully wrapped to protect them from sand and heat. The silk was worth more than Jacob could imagine.

"Stay close to the caravan," his father warned. "Watch and listen. A trader learns from others before trusting himself."

Jacob nodded, but inside, he believed he already knew enough.

The caravan travelled for many days. Jacob enjoyed the movement of the camels, the noise of the merchants, and the feeling of importance he had when people noticed the chest he guarded. At night, the traders shared food and stories. Jacob listened but spoke little, thinking he would soon have stories of his own.

One afternoon, the caravan stopped at an oasis. Palm trees surrounded a pool of water, and travellers rested in the shade. Jacob felt safe. Curious voices and unfamiliar music drifted through the air. Wanting to explore, Jacob walked away from the group, promising himself he would return quickly.

Then the wind changed.

A wall of sand rose suddenly, blocking the sky. People shouted as the storm rushed toward them. Jacob ran for cover and hid behind rocks, pulling his cloak over his face. The sandstorm lasted longer than he expected. When the wind finally stopped and the air cleared, the oasis was silent.

The caravan was gone.

At first, Jacob believed they would return. He waited and called out, but no one answered. The sun burned his skin, and fear slowly filled his chest. He walked around the oasis, searching for tracks, but the sand had erased them.

As the day ended, Jacob understood the truth: he was alone.

That night, Jacob slept poorly. Every sound made him wake in fear. He clutched the chest tightly, wondering if the silk was now a blessing or a curse. In the morning, he chose a direction and began walking, hoping it would lead him back to the road.

The days that followed were the hardest of his life. The desert tested him in every way. The sun was cruel, and the nights were cold. Jacob learned to walk early in the morning and late in the evening. During the hottest hours, he rested in what little shade he could find. He took small sips of water, knowing that every drop mattered.

His sandals broke after several days. Using cloth torn from his clothing, Jacob tied them together. His hands became cracked and sore. His confidence disappeared, replaced by fear and careful thought. He tried to remember his father's words but wished he had listened more closely.

On the fourth day, Jacob saw a thin line of smoke in the distance. Weak but hopeful, he followed it. Soon, he reached a small group of nomadic herders resting near a shallow well.

They spoke a language Jacob did not understand, but they saw his dry lips and tired eyes. Jacob bowed deeply and offered a piece of silk as a gift. The oldest man studied the silk, then looked at Jacob and smiled. He waved him closer.

The herders gave Jacob water and food. He ate slowly, careful not to make himself sick. One of the women showed him how to find water by watching animals and plants.

That night, Jacob slept beside their fire, feeling safe for the first time in days.

Before he left, the old man placed a small charm into Jacob's hand. "This road is not kind," he said in broken trade speech. "Remember— no one survives it alone."

Jacob thanked him and continued his journey.

Several days later, Jacob met a Buddhist monk walking quietly across the desert. The monk owned very little and walked calmly, as if he did not fear the land. They shared water and rested together. That night, under a sky filled with stars, the monk spoke.

"Loss teaches us more than comfort," the monk said. "You lost your caravan, but you found yourself."

Jacob thought about this as he walked on.

At last, Jacob reached a large oasis town. Traders from many lands filled the streets. He heard languages from every direction and smelled food from distant places. Relief washed over him. He had survived.

That night, thieves tried to steal his chest. Instead of panicking, Jacob stayed calm. He spoke carefully and offered them information instead of fighting. After a long pause, the thieves laughed and left him alone.

The next morning, Jacob joined a new caravan. When he delivered the silk, the buyer nodded in approval and paid him well. Jacob accepted the silver, but it no longer felt like the most important thing.

When Jacob stepped back onto the Silk Road, dust on his boots and scars on his hands, he knew he had changed. The desert had taken his pride but given him wisdom.

The Silk Road was not just a path for goods—it was a path of people, knowledge, and survival. And as Jacob continued forward, he knew that no matter where the road led, he would never truly be lost again.

The Swallow's Path

Wellington College International Shanghai, Rachel Li – 11

The last rays of sunlight disappeared from the horizon of Qing Village in Chang'an; lanterns flickered like dancers in the night breeze as smoke rose from the chimneys with the scent of spices. Gan Wei and her siblings leaned their ears close to a peek hole in her room and listened for the bell that rang at six o'clock sharp every day; it was the special signal that meant Father was back. She dashed past her two younger brothers and flung open the door to see him holding three baked sweet potatoes as always, but his iconic gleaming eyes were dimmer than usual. Father rarely sat in silence, but he did so today.

"No more philosophical reasoning?" Gan Wei asked, while munching on her sweet potato, noticing her father's oddness.

"I'm afraid it isn't the day; I have more...problems to deal with." He replied, slouching in his chair.

"Well, if you're worrying about Mother's health, then don't—she has been taking her pills on time and she's finally eating today."

Father managed to squeeze a smile, gazing at his ill wife, then went back to staring at space. Gan Wei stopped. She knew Father was a serious man—he was the guide for Zhang Qian, Emperor Wu's most trusted military officer. But something wasn't right, and she was sure of it.

The night continued as usual; Mother started coughing after dinner and the twins begged for another round of Chinese chess while Father left them to fetch water for the next day. Before long, the village fell asleep as the soft buzzing of the cicadas faded into silence. But Gan Wei couldn't sleep. She tossed and turned under the covers until her back hurt, mind racing with anxiety about the secret she sensed her father was keeping. Finally, exhaustion took over her worries, and she drifted into a shallow sleep.

Just before dawn, Gan Wei woke to the faint rumble of hurried footsteps outside. At first, she thought she was dreaming. But then came the low murmur of men speaking. She slipped out of bed, careful not to wake the sleeping twins, and crept to the door. Through the crack, she saw her father standing with two soldiers dressed in the emperor's colors. One carried a scroll sealed with red wax; the other held a lantern that flickered across their stern faces.

Gan Wei's heart thudded.

"General Zhang Qian departs at sunrise," one soldier whispered. "The emperor commands your guidance on the journey west. Be ready when the first rays of sunlight shine through."

Her father bowed deeply, but Gan Wei noticed his hands tremble. After the soldiers left, Father remained still for a long moment, as if the calm air had suddenly become heavy. When he finally turned, he found Gan Wei standing behind him, eyes filled with tears.

"Baba... you're leaving?" She asked, voice barely hearable above the rustle of the cold breeze.

His eyes softened with the weight of the truth.

"Yes. A new mission. One more dangerous than any before." He knelt to meet her gaze. "The emperor seeks new trade routes beyond these mountains. Zhang Qian cannot fail. And neither can I."

Gan Wei swallowed hard.

“But the Silk Road... people say the deserts are filled with unexpected storms. And mother—mother needs you.”

Her father placed a warm hand on her shoulder.

“That is why I have kept this a secret, to not let you worry. But I suppose this is the best way of saying goodbye, for now.”

Father closed his eyes, then reached into the inner pocket of his robe and pulled out a small wooden charm shaped like a swallow.

“This bird always finds its way home,” he said, placing it gently in her palms. “As will I.”

But even with his reassuring words, Gan Wei sensed the tremor in his voice—the fear he tried so hard to hide.

By sunrise, the village gathered to watch them depart. The horses bit into carrots the soldiers were holding as Zhang Qian climbed into his saddle. Father joined him, clutching onto a bag of maps and burnt letters from kingdoms far away.

As they journeyed westward, she watched dust swirl through the air, glimmering with a golden glow from the sun’s rays. Gan Wei made a silent promise to herself:

Someday I will travel your path on the Silk Road, Father. Across deserts, mountains, and many secrets...I will return you to your home.

Weeks passed, and the village slowly settled back into its rhythms, but for Gan Wei, nothing felt the same. Every morning, she traced the swallow charm with her thumb, imagining the dangers Father might be facing. Every night, she lay awake, hoping for the faint sound of hoofbeats, pretending he might return sooner than expected.

But instead of the sounds of horses, something else arrived.

One evening, as lanterns lit up the narrow alleys of Chang’an, a trading cart entered the village—tall camels with bells tied to their necks, wagons loaded with silk scarves and jars of spices. The villagers gathered in awe, whispering about the traders’ long beards, their strange accents, and the shimmering gemstones they wore.

Gan Wei only noticed one thing.

A torn scrap of parchment fell from the side of a merchant’s saddle. It fluttered toward her like a wounded bird. She picked it up and froze. The parchment held a symbol—a swallow carved beside a burnt seal of the imperial court.

Her breath caught. This wasn’t just a scrap of paper, it was a cry of help that she might never hear again if she ignored it.

“Where did you get this?” She demanded, running to catch up with the merchant.

He blinked, confused, then shrugged. “Found it in the desert. Buried halfway in the sand. We thought it was just trash.”

Gan Wei’s pulse quickened. Father carried maps and letters. Could this have been his? Or worse—had something happened?

That night she spoke to her mother, who sat by the hearth boiling herbs for her cough.

“Mother, that parchment... it belonged to Father. I know it. Something is wrong. We can’t just wait.”

Mother’s weary eyes watched the fire flicker.

“Wei’er... the Silk Road is not a place for children. It is filled with storms, bandits, kingdoms at war, and feral beasts that hurt anything they see. Our village is small and insular—we are safe here, but out there....”

She coughed, clutching her shawl tighter.

“Your father and Zhang Qian are strong men. They will return.”

Gan Wei looked at the charm in her hand.

“So will I,” she whispered.

Waiting only felt like letting Father vanish into the desert forever.

That night, she made her decision.

Before dawn, she slipped outside, making sure her steps were furtive, as she wanted to avoid the village’s early risers. Gan Wei only carried a small cloth bundle: steamed buns, a water flask, and Father’s old compass. The cicadas buzzed in the thick summer air as she walked toward the road that led west—the same path that swallowed her father into its endless horizon.

But just as she took her first step onto the dusty trail, someone grabbed her wrist.

It was her younger brother, Gan Ping—silent and stern.

“You think I’d let you leave alone?” He murmured, tightening his grip. “If Father is in danger, then we go together.”

Gan Wei blinked. “But the journey—”

“Is exactly why we can’t delay.”

He pointed ahead. The Silk Road stretched endlessly before them, winding like a dragon’s spine through mountains and distant fields.

Gan Ping adjusted the strap of his pack.

“He followed Zhang Qian. Now we follow him.”

Gan Wei felt something spark in her chest—fear, yes, but also determination.

Side by side, they stepped onto the ancient road. The world ahead was vast and unknown, filled with strangers, secrets, and storms.

But she held the swallow charm tightly.

A bird always finds its way home.

And so would they.

WCIS Mia Teng Secondary Fiction 3

In The Knots of Silk Strings

Fingers of light reached through the curtains, and shadows danced around the hardwood floor as Evander pushed himself upright on the double bed. In the pallid light, he could make out his mother’s face, etched with wrinkles, the result of her long working hours as a seller of knitted socks in the bazaar. She managed to bring home enough to buy food, but not a penny more to save for winter’s icy breath. Evander slipped into his father’s boots and stepped outside.

As he walked through the village, the mist curled over the hills, and the fresh scent of pine and earth drifted through the air. When his feet hit the Silk Road, he saw a shiny, black object. Evander slowly approached it; the word “Steinway” gleamed in huge golden letters. A Steinway piano! The lid was open, revealing the silver strings lying on an iron frame. He removed his shoes, then his socks. Evander’s right-foot thumb pressed the first white key. The sound swayed, shaking like the uncertainty of a bird learning to fly. People in carriages, on horses, and on camels had halted, all of them staring in awe at Evander. Then he began his left-foot notes, his feet dancing in perfect harmony, his notes playing a delicate melody.

As the final notes resonated through the air, the crowd was completely immersed in the music. Evander had unleashed a wave of applause that surged at him like a tsunami. An elderly man in the front row, propped on his cane, was grinning from ear to ear. When the crowd had dispersed, the man shuffled to him, clutching a plastic bag. Evander peered into

it: freshly cut bread, a pineapple, and grapes. He nodded in gratitude, and the man slung the bag over Evander's shoulder. As he turned, Evander couldn't help but notice the words 'Cresst twine' tattooed on the back of his neck.

Just then, a girl, whom he had noticed merely as a face in the crowd, rushed towards him. Her hair was chestnut brown and tied back in a ponytail. She smiled. He smiled.

Silence hung between them until the melodic sound of her crisp voice shattered it.

"Hi! I heard you play. The composition was gorgeous!" she remarked.

"Th-thank you," stammered.

The girl's head twisted from side to side, eyebrows knitted.

"I think I know you..." she said tentatively.

His chest jolted with every heartbeat; words lodged in his throat like stones.

"I think I know you too..." he breathed.

"Lyra!" barked the man who had given him food. "Time to go packing. NOW!"

Her rosy lips formed a groan. She mouthed a brief 'bye' and left, chasing after the man.

The silence she left behind was as ominous as the darkening thunderclouds in the sky. He decided to go home.

As he swung open the door to the cottage, the smell of roasted potatoes enveloped him. His mother was frantically peeling potatoes with her back to him. Pots and pans were flying everywhere, and potato skins covered the floorboards like confetti.

"Honey!" His mother cried, dropping a potato. She hobbled towards him and seized the plastic bag from his shoulder. Looking into it, her mouth opened into the shape of an 'O'.

"Holy moly...where'd you find these?" she gasped.

"Off a stranger with a weird tattoo on the back of his neck," Evander explained calmly.

Her expression faltered, then softened as she looked at him.

"Tonight, we are going to have a feast!"

In their bedroom, the blanket had been turned over, a pillow was on the floor, and their family photo was lying on their bed. He launched himself onto the mattress; his eyes were locked on the picture. There he was, smiling serenely. His mother, lovely in a long white wedding dress, had one hand on his shoulder, the other reaching towards the left side of the picture. But the photo ended there, edges torn as if ripped by time. At the bottom, letters were scribbled in small writing. He squinted; it said 'twine'.

Over dinner, fragments of truth pierced his mind like shards of glass. He knew what he had to do.

"Mum, I've heard there is a lottery to win money at the bazaar," he lied. Her eyebrows were raised, but she nodded hesitantly.

He ran to the bedroom and reached for his bag with his feet, putting in the torn photo, a notepad, and a pen. His mother quickly followed and put bread and the pineapple into his bag.

Even though it was autumn, the biting night breeze gnawed at his flesh, trying to freeze him to the bone. He pushed his way through the hills, the moonlight spilling over the slopes. At the Silk Road, his feet stopped again. A faint figure appeared in the distance, looming and shifting closer. When they were a few meters apart, Evander summoned the courage to speak.

"Who's there?"

"Lyra!" screeched a shrill voice.

Evander's face relaxed. "It's me, Evander."

They sat together on the cobbled road.

“When’s your birthday?” Lyra questioned. “Mine’s April 17th.”

“April 17th...mine too.” He said, shocked.

They pulled half a ripped piece of paper from their bags and joined them. ‘Cresst twine’—the letters whispered dark secrets. Evander wrote ‘Cresst twine’ with his feet; Lyra traced the letters with her quivering finger. The phrase revealed itself: secret twins.

Evander’s vision blurred. His sister’s tears streamed in fountains. They held onto each other.

“My brother,” she breathed.

“We can’t live a lie,” Evander said in a low yet firm voice. “We have to know the reason.”

She nodded gravely.

The twins bounded towards his cottage, concrete crunching under scuffed shoes. They burst in. His mother froze mid-stir of potato stew, the spoon clattering.

“Mum—Lyra is my sister.”

The stew boiled over. His mother’s face drained of colour, and she sank into a wooden chair.

She whispered, “I knew this day would come. The tattooed man. He is your father.”

Evander waited for the message to sink in.

“You said he died.”

“That was to keep you safe. Your father is a merchant. We fell in love, but his family hated that I was a village weaver. When we had twins, they threatened him. So, we split. He took Lyra, I took you.”

Lyra’s knees buckled. “Why didn’t you tell us?”

“Fear,” his mother said, tears carving rivers down her cheeks. “Fear they’d take you both. Fear we’d never be whole again.”

As the clock struck midnight, they were packed. Evander put his tattered blanket in his bag, and Lyra found an extra loaf of bread.

They slipped out, steps light as moth wings. The dragon caravan waited at the village’s edge, its scales gleaming like polished silver. The driver, a dragon-scarred woman, took Lyra’s coins and gestured to seats between the dragon’s spines.

They rode for three days, listening to the wings’ low, thrumming hum. Wind carried the scent of jasmine and distant seas. They landed in a city of curved roofs and lantern-lit alleys. Dawn broke over the cobblestone square, and vendors were selling steamed buns. As they walked, black-haired people passed, speaking in a language as alien as the music that filled the streets. Lutes, zithers, and bamboo flutes sang in the air.

“A violin and a piano!” Lyra cried.

A man with a gentle accent let them play.

“Beautiful siblings,” he said, his words rising and falling with the music around them.

Lyra tuned her violin; the crowd murmured in anticipation. Evander removed his boots and socks; the crowd held its breath. She gave him a timing cue. A melody unfurled, heavy with the ache of years lost and never spoken. The crowd roared.

A man in a silk robe, leaning on a cane, pushed his way through. His hair, streaked grey, caught the light. His eyes—those eyes—burned with a familiar spark.

“That music,” he said, voice trembling. “It’s the lullaby I hummed to you both... the night we parted.”

It was him—their father.

He led them to the Hall of Azure Bells, a palace constructed from carved stones and painted walls. This was where the musicians had played for the emperors so many years ago. That night, with lanterns shining like captured stars, Evander sat at the piano, his hands moving as if through magic. Lyra held her borrowed violin ready. And they played. Her violin wept. His fingers wove tales on the piano. Every note was the echo of the past they both knew. Posters soon read: The Crested Musicians – A Melody Reunited.

On the seventh night, Evander spotted them. In the back, their mother stood, hand clasped in their father's. Their eyes met. In a tranquil courtyard with falling plum blossoms, their father spoke, voice hoarse.

“I’m sorry. I should never have let fear win.”

Their mother smiled, wiping a tear.

Once torn apart, they now clung together like silk spun tight, every fiber binding them into a single, unbreakable thread.

In the Knots of Silk Strings

Wellington College International Shanghai, Teng Shuqiao Mia – 13

Fingers of light reached through the curtains, and shadows danced around the hardwood floor as Evander pushed himself upright on the double bed. In the pallid light, he could make out his mother's face, etched with wrinkles, the result of her long working hours as a seller of knitted socks in the bazaar. She managed to bring home enough to buy food, but not a penny more to save for winter's icy breath. Evander slipped into his father's boots and stepped outside.

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“Mum, I’ve heard there is a lottery to win money at the bazaar,” he lied. Her eyebrows were raised, but she nodded hesitantly.

He ran to the bedroom and reached for his bag with his feet, putting in the torn photo, a notepad, and a pen. His mother quickly followed and put bread and the pineapple into his bag.

Even though it was autumn, the biting night breeze gnawed at his flesh, trying to freeze him to the bone. He pushed his way through the hills, the moonlight spilling over the slopes. At the Silk Road, his feet stopped again. A faint figure appeared in the distance, looming and shifting closer. When they were a few meters apart, Evander summoned the courage to speak.

“Who’s there?”

“Lyra!” screeched a shrill voice.

Evander’s face relaxed. “It’s me, Evander.”

They sat together on the cobbled road.

“When’s your birthday?” Lyra questioned. “Mine’s April 17th.”

“April 17th...mine too.” He said, shocked.

They pulled half a ripped piece of paper from their bags and joined them. ‘Cresst twine’—the letters whispered dark secrets. Evander wrote ‘Cresst twine’ with his feet; Lyra traced the letters with her quivering finger. The phrase revealed itself: secret twins.

Evander’s vision blurred. His sister’s tears streamed in fountains. They held onto each other.

“My brother,” she breathed.

“We can’t live a lie,” Evander said in a low yet firm voice. “We have to know the reason.”

She nodded gravely.

The twins bounded towards his cottage, concrete crunching under scuffed shoes. They burst in. His mother froze mid-stir of potato stew, the spoon clattering.

“Mum—Lyra is my sister.”

The stew boiled over. His mother’s face drained of colour, and she sank into a wooden chair.

She whispered, “I knew this day would come. The tattooed man. He is your father.”

Evander waited for the message to sink in.

“You said he died.”

“That was to keep you safe. Your father is a merchant. We fell in love, but his family hated that I was a village weaver. When we had twins, they threatened him. So, we split. He took Lyra, I took you.”

Lyra’s knees buckled. “Why didn’t you *tell us*?”

“Fear,” his mother said, tears carving rivers down her cheeks. “Fear they’d take you both. Fear we’d never be whole again.”

As the clock struck midnight, they were packed. Evander put his tattered blanket in his bag, and Lyra found an extra loaf of bread.

They slipped out, steps light as moth wings. The dragon caravan waited at the village's edge, its scales gleaming like polished silver. The driver, a dragon-scarred woman, took Lyra's coins and gestured to seats between the dragon's spines.

They rode for three days, listening to the wings' low, thrumming hum. Wind carried the scent of jasmine and distant seas. They landed in a city of curved roofs and lantern-lit alleys. Dawn broke over the cobblestone square, and vendors were selling steamed buns. As they walked, black-haired people passed, speaking in a language as alien as the music that filled the streets. Lutes, zithers, and bamboo flutes sang in the air.

"A violin and a piano!" Lyra cried.

A man with a gentle accent let them play.

"Beautiful siblings," he said, his words rising and falling with the music around them.

Lyra tuned her violin; the crowd murmured in anticipation. Evander removed his boots and socks; the crowd held its breath. She gave him a timing cue. A melody unfurled, heavy with the ache of years lost and never spoken. The crowd roared.

A man in a silk robe, leaning on a cane, pushed his way through. His hair, streaked grey, caught the light. His eyes—those eyes—burned with a familiar spark.

"That music," he said, voice trembling. "It's the lullaby I hummed to you both... the night we parted."

It was him—their father.

He led them to the Hall of Azure Bells, a palace constructed from carved stones and painted walls. This was where the musicians had played for the emperors so many years ago. That night, with lanterns shining like captured stars, Evander sat at the piano, his hands moving as if through magic. Lyra held her borrowed violin ready. And they played. Her violin wept. His fingers wove tales on the piano. Every note was the echo of the past they both knew. Posters soon read: *The Crested Musicians – A Melody Reunited*.

On the seventh night, Evander spotted them. In the back, their mother stood, hand clasped in their father's. Their eyes met. In a tranquil courtyard with falling plum blossoms, their father spoke, voice hoarse.

"I'm sorry. I should never have let fear win."

Their mother smiled, wiping a tear.

Once torn apart, they now clung together like silk spun tight, every fiber binding them into a single, unbreakable thread.



Fiction

Group 4



Asunder

Diocesan Girls' School, Lau Yi Fei Charlotte – 16

I

The September evening humidity wrapped around your ankles like damp socks you couldn't peel off. You shrugged your way off the MTR at Sham Shui Po, your schoolbag thumping against your hip with remedial Chinese grammar books and maths worksheets inside. Hong Kong was hardly a breather from bustling Manila. Outside, street lamps cut yellow through the steam rising from food stalls, diesel haze mixing with frying oil. You sidled over to that noodle stall you'd eyed yesterday and tried the classifier again: "Yat woon mai fun?" It still came out a bit off, your Manila accent twisting the tones, but the noodle stall auntie nodded once without so much as a side eye and turned back to her wok. A steaming plastic bowl of chili-flecked noodles greeted you shortly. Small wins.

You shuffled home while slurping the vermicelli, mind drifting. Lola's stories always scratched at the back of your mind during these moments—the ones she told over adobo back in Tondo, about Wei, the rich Shanghai boy from the family line who got sent off on a trade route with a donkey called Stubborn Cloud because his dad caught him reading smuggled Western books. "Too soft," Lola would say, her voice dropping like she was sharing a secret shame. The Hexi dust was supposed to fix him, scour away the city weakness, when his father thrust the reins forward, voice flat as the stone road ahead:

"Show some spine out there, or don't bother coming back."

Wei had snatched the saddle with a scowl, accustomed to sedan chairs and houseboys, not this swaybacked beast under endless dunes, Qilian mountains stark against the sky. On the first night, stars pierced the cold dark, wind carrying the dry scrape of tamarisk. With only the idiot donkey's labored breaths for company, he detected hooves approaching from the shadowed scrub. Ah—his silk robes betrayed him in the wind.

A reluctant sigh. He secured the jade sigil within his boot sole, then exchanged the embroidered finery for a herder's plain sackcloth by firelight. It carried the scent of goat piss, yet served its purpose.

The pursuers altered course at dawn. Efface yourself, the wind whispered to Wei—or it might have been his father.

II

The pass guards examined Wei's pack at first light, discarding the dried apricots without ceremony amid the chalky dust of the ramparts. "No tea bricks, no passage." Wei straightened, chin high from years of deference paid to him: "Article Seven permits a seasonal waiver for merchants like me." They conferred briefly and permitted him onward.

By midday he had joined a caravan; the master indicated a broken axle under relentless sun. "Repair it, or follow on foot." Wei chafed inwardly at the command, though not as much as his palms did as he bound it with leather from a camel harness—entirely unfamiliar labor for scholar's hands. The heat clung to his rough robes, but the merchants's stares cut deeper—

DEEPER even than the awful scar you'd sustained as a kid from a bicycle accident. You tried to shrug it off, marched doggedly through the school corridors; it couldn't be helped that you were the Chinese-Filipino kid with Lola's Shanghai blood running thin as watered-down adobo broth.

Morning assembly dragged through roll call and announcements. Then came the school queue for form collection: the mistress eyed your student visa stamp like it was fake under the fluorescent buzz.

Chinese class. “Your classifiers need to be crisp, Kai, or you’ll repeat the year.”

You scribbled out “yat go, yat wai, yat fo” in your notebook during break in the canteen line, the margin doodles a jumble of twisted lines...

Mere lines they were not, but Wei’s oasis diagram still induced scrutiny when thirst overtook the camp three days from the next source.

The camels stood empty of waterskins; merchants accused the Qiang herders of withholding their mounts; Wei tasted the flat metallic tang of blood. He had bit his cheek. Was it an impossible request for these people to simply listen to reason?

“Commonfolk—er, you lot—no, everyone! Look here!” Wei cried, exhausted.

Heads turned He drew a qanat diversion in the sand with a reed: a secondary channel with reed filtration. “An established method—excavate here.”

Doubts were voiced, yet the shovels turned earth. The Qiang herders proved much more efficient laborers than the merchants, and a modest flow appeared by midnight. The master allocated the initial share to him. The herders offered grudging assent, though one observed: “Han methods weaken in time.”

Wei offered a smile. He scrubbed off dirt from his palms with springwater. The scrapes stung; he grimaced

III

—from the salt and grease amid the clang of trays and steam vents. You stopped scrubbing the restaurant counters to attend to your phone’s alert: Tita texting from Tondo.

“Hong Kong eats soft kids alive. Speak full Chinese or we’ll ship you home.”

You sighed. The student council proposal sat half-scribbled in your bag—a plan to merge the Pinoy club with the Chinese debate team, creating joint events and shared reps to give mixed kids like you a real voice in school activities. The pages were probably creased by now—

by the time Jade Gate bazaar hummed with thick Bactrian voices rolling over the stalls, Wei’s robes were in an irreversible state of disarray.

Sogdian caftans hung striped like hazard flags in the wind; the pony-walks etched patterns on the salt pans: hours testing gait and gasp before any coin touched palm, air thick with animal sweat and brine. A stall merchant caught Wei staring too long. “You buying or just wasting air?”

Wei poured a cup of brackish tea from his flask instead, masking irritation at the rough tone.

“Guards at the pass—they stick to order. Papers first, then tolls. I’m just passing time.” The man’s scar-deep laugh boomed out, and he slid over a dried apricot. “Sit. You sound like you’ve been to the capital. Any news?”

He shook his head before thinking better of it and handing over a folded sheaf of

POETRY—smuggled photocopies of Li Bai verses for extra rice portions—swapped with the canteen auntie, who raised an eyebrow at your Tagalog lilt when you thanked her amid the sizzle of woks. “Those old poems—family keepsakes? The paper is yellow and all.”

No real accusation in it, just curiosity mixed with the wariness locals had for anyone who didn’t fit clean. You shrugged the Filipino way, loose shoulders, and stuffed the council pitch deeper in your bag where it burned hot against—

Wei’s shoulder, as the merchant Barzanes clapped it at the Dunhuang caves later that week, the murals flaking away like old skin under torchlight. But for now, they sat over

IV

“THE TEA, will you? I know the gates inside out,” Barzanes said, his voice gravelly from years of road dust amid the spice-scented smoke curling from braziers. Spice mounds glowed crimson under the torchlight; Wei traded scraps of raid-path news for tips on tax skips at the inner checkpoints, concealing his disdain for the merchant’s table manners. Barzanes tested him over a handful of figs: “Does rigid order bind men or just break them?” Wei poured another round of tea.

“It binds if you do it right.” Laughter boomed again, and the caravan creaked in response.

But the cavernous shadows hid a pickpocket’s quick slip: Wei’s boot-sole jade was gone clean by morning. Barzanes just shrugged when he mentioned it. “The road always takes its tithe. Keep walking anyway.” Wei swallowed pride, pressing

ON, and on and on you walked. Your student visa contact had messaged you right after school, a ping with a flagged notice: the council forms had triggered a lineage query from immigration. You had flagged a taxi right away, but the queue at the immigration office still loomed, seemingly unavoidable. You fanned out your passport, visa stub, and Lola’s notarized Shanghai birth record—the order had to be strict or it’d get rejected outright, the clerk enforced the exact sequence like

LAW, requiring Wei, to his annoyance, to recite his full lineage at the Jade Gate patrol halt. Sigil-less and dusty with wind.

“No jade proof? These papers look torn up,” the patrol leader said, squinting. Wei kept his voice steady: clan scrolls from memory, third son of the merchant guild, tolls paid in full last pass. The patrols exchanged nods and parted ranks. Utility outranked blood every time on

V

THE ROAD to renewing your visa was long; the immigration queue snaked through dawn fog the next morning; two desks over, a clerk rejected a jumbled stack of proofs with a sharp pen tap amid the hum of printers and shuffling feet. You caught the harbor salt on the breeze from the open window and restacked yours crisp: funds statement first, residence card second, Lola’s notarized birth docs last. The clerk’s pen scratched approval without looking up. “Next.”

Tita texted you as you stepped outside into the gray light: “Those Shanghai stories from Lola—true grit or what? Don’t let them push you out.” Her voice crackled over the line, half worry, half dare. You pocketed the phone and headed for the MTR.

Back in the carriage crush, you refined the council pitch, eyes tracing the faces around you: office drones with crow’s-feet exhaustion, maids gripping remit envelopes tight, students staring into the bright glare of an iPhone amid the sway and metallic screech of rails. Who barked clipped English at strangers, who nodded quietly in Cantonese? It was all an auditory map you read...

read in the Sogdian scar-glints around the second-night bazaar fires, where Uighur whispers spread about khan loyalty shifts. Wei poured tea again there, dodging hooded pickpockets in the crowd. Safe in a rented yurt, Barzanes halved a fig and passed half over: “Trust pools thin out here. You keep it up daily, or else.”

Wei bit his lip. A prime pony swapped hands for the scouts’ lead through the next pass.

The glorious echoes of the Dunhuang cave hid the jade-loss ache, but Wei walked taller into dawn anyway.

VI

A taller walk accompanied your step into interclass debate prelims the next week, hoping to gain experience. The auditorium smelled of old varnish and nervous sweat; your opener aimed to bridge Pinoy culture to the history of the Silk Road, but you fumbled a classifier mid-sentence, tones tilting wrong under the stage lights. The judges’ blank faces went blanker; the room held its breath through the awkward silence.

The coach pulled you aside after the loss in the empty hallway: “Content’s fine, Kai, but *practice*—no slips next time.” Lola’s voice looped in your head that night as you rewrote the pitch until midnight under your desk lamp: Wei walked those sands heirless and came back with something harder than jade. The student council vote hinged on getting this right, but the words all seemed to twist on the page, so terribly—

wrong, a word burned into Wei’s consciousness, stinging like his eyes from the dusk sandstorm that foamed the oasis yellow. Camels trampled tents in thirst-mad panic; a herder snarled right in his face: “It’s dig or die out here, boy.”

Wei shoved through flying grit, not even pausing to add: “There’s a shallow basin off the main tributary—line it with reeds, old qanat style.” The air itself seemed to shove back—a panicked digger’s blade nicked his forearm, blood streaking sand-hot down his wrist.

Dawn brought the saving trickle. Wei bound wounds in silence. A Qiang elder sized him up: “You’re useful now. Get steel on that belt next time.”

VII

Council vote night packed the gym with shuffling classmates and creaking chairs under harsh overheads, the air thick with teenage restlessness and basketball court polish. You laid the proposal flat on the head table—Pinoy club intros slid clean into debate team closers, joint events mapped step-by-step to give mixed students real seats at school decisions.

The chair flipped pages slow, testing the spine under everyone’s eyes. “This holds up solid. Let’s vote.” Hands rose uneven; faces like you tipped the tally your way just enough.

Coach’s words echoed as you walked out into the cooling evening: “Came through clean today.” The first real relief since the visa ping washed over you on the pavement.

Relief fleeting as Wei’s final barter at Dunhuang, where scrolls traded straight for camel berth on the next caravan leg amid the dry cave wind rattling loose stones. Barzanes sealed it over the deal: “Utility crosses any gate worth crossing.” Dawn patrol gave the nod—no sigil needed anymore, just the memory of proved worth. The road forked endless ahead, each turn demanding fresh proof all over again.

The throes of the gym glory faded into your walk home through sodium-lit streets, council seat ensured but the threat of the visa office still looming Monday. Tita’s follow-up call buzzed as you reached your building: “Proud of you, kid. “

VIII

Visa office gleamed under cold fluorescents Monday morning: long counter, clerks tapping forms in steady rhythm amid the low murmur of queues and rustle of papers. You joined the line with your stack of documents neatly clipped—council acceptance letter on top, funds proof, residence updates, Lola’s Shanghai birth record buried midway for ancestry proof. The clerk ahead of you got waved through quick; yours took longer as she methodically checked each page. She flipped to the birth doc, paused at the faded Shanghai seal. “Family from there? Old road?” You nodded, throat dry. “Lola’s side.” She stamped green without another word. “Renewed. Next term solid.”

Outside, harbor wind cut sharp through your uniform, gulls wheeling overhead against the overcast sky. Lola’s tales landed differently now—not Tondo myths but maps etched in blood under Manila skin and Kowloon steam. No big reveal, just quiet fit: Shanghai grit threading your stride. Roads didn’t end; they forked ahead, sequence learned.

IX

The Council's first meeting commenced the next week: Pinoy club reps eyeing debate kids wary across folding tables in the stuffy common room, fluorescent hum mixing with nervous coughs. Your proposed opener came out crisp—no accent slips, sequence locked from Manila stories to traditional Chinese logic as you walked them through the first joint event plan. Questions came fast from both sides; you fielded them steadily, your communication gaps closing real-time with nods around the table.

The Chair wrapped the meeting up early: "Solid start. Monthly from here."

Your handshake was tentative, but firm.

Firm was Wei's grip on Stubborn Cloud's reins as he pushed past Jade Gate, blisters fresh, jade long gone, wind carrying the salt sting of the distant sea. The caravan master's parting words stuck through final twists and turns: "Keep walking, or the dust always claims you back." He did—dust plumes followed him home changed, if lighter.

Lightly, Lola's old Shanghai family photo fluttered out from an envelope you received that month—a boy in simple robes staring out, eyes like yours under the dust. "My great-great-grandfather. Roads fork," her note read. "Family maps them."

The Silk Plague

ESF Island School, Ernie Tsui – 14

700 CE, 28th day of the 5th lunar month, Tang Dynasty

Worms. There were worms everywhere. The once-bustling city of Dunhuang had warped into a mortifying fever dream in less than fourteen days, with unbearable aridity curling in suffocating waves across the vast expanse of the Gobi Desert. Tiny, countless silkworms had infested the streets, crawling sluggishly between the cracks of the walls, the dip of dented cement, the narrow surface of wooden fences... Everyone knew a mere graze of the silkworm's touch meant death— yet there was nothing they could do.

Empress Wu Zetian had demanded immediate quarantine: no villagers were to set foot in or out of Dunhuang, and no goods were to be imported or exported through the looming gates of the Yumen Pass. This sent Dunhuang into a spiral of chaos, and the villagers' fates were officially sealed away with a bold red stamp on parchment from the palace of Chang'an.

No one really knew where the lethal disease originated. It started simple. Some beggar spotting a domesticated silkworm wiggling uselessly in the dirt of a dim street corner. Why would such a valuable item be there, discarded? They picked it up gingerly. The silkworm seemed to be in an unusual shade of sickly green, but was otherwise normal. To the beggar, it was a savior. A sign that they were favored by the divine beings above. As they made their journey back, the silkworm lay unsuspectingly in their hands. A ticking time bomb, silent yet deadly. Just the day after, the beggar was said to wake up with translucent skin spreading from his hands, as if it were made of silk instead of flesh. Their eyes were clouded, fine threads of silk blinding their whitening pupils— they could physically see the weakening pulses of their blood as breathing felt harder and harder, the revolting sensation that sent their stomach lurching in agony whenever they dared to take a bite of any type of grain—

No one noticed anything was wrong. After all, nobody was prone to notice a minuscule silkworm ever so visible on their wrist, were they?

On the fourth day, the beggar takes their final breath. Glassy eyes flickering dull as they stared into the sky, lifeless. That's when the silkworms latched onto them like parasites to a host. It fed off the whitened veins and multiplied overnight. A kind-hearted villager happened to find them motionless while returning from a recent trading trip. Whilst dragging their corpse back to the city for a memorial, the very same silkworm slithered into the hem of their sleeve. The villager was reported to have the exact same symptoms as the beggar, passing away directly four days after.

Upon hearing the news of being forcefully caged in the diseased area, Li Rui, an experienced silk merchant well-loved by the people, decided to flee. Having been in a panic, he simply stashed a week's worth of grain and some robes with delicately embroidered patterns— made of cotton, of course. He had long thrown away his cloaks of fine silk the second he realized it was infectious. People scrambled to obtain the scarce material, which was the symbol of power and wealth, hoping to sell it for a fortune. He didn't think to tell them how this very material was the root of their suffering.

Click. Li Rui spared a gaze at his bedchamber one last time before he turned and treaded out of the room, holding his jade talisman to his chapped lips and praying to Buddha for enlightenment. The instant he creaked his gates open, a bitter, sulfurous odor slammed into his senses like the harsh reality of the situation. Ashen-faced villagers stumbled blearily across the clearing of the square, broken whimpers escaping them as their eyes fogged out of focus every few seconds. Some were more conscious than others, wailing to the heavens for forgiveness or shrieking at innocent passersby for their cruel destiny. Bodies lay limp in eternal slumber, greyish veins mapping out the hollow slopes of their malnourished form. Despite carefully selecting a thick quilt and heavy-soled boots to protect himself prior to his journey, he flinched at the grotesque scene, a chill set deep in his bones that nothing could eradicate.

He gripped the strap of his duffel bag tighter with his calloused hand, exhaling through his nose. He'd have to get through these pests to reach his horse's stable. Just as he was about to leap on his stallion, a hesitant voice called out his name. Zhang Hao.

Zhang Hao had been Li Rui's accomplice ever since they were young— cliché, Li Rui knows. They'd even started their silk trading business together, but they'd drifted apart recently. Zhang Hao is a great friend, sure, but he was always too...unambitious. Reluctantly, he glanced back at him, drifting his gaze towards his muted indigo tunic, taking note of how he seemed a bit paler than usual. A bit more ragged.

"Rui! I haven't seen you in a while..." Zhang Hao trailed off, taking notice of his large luggage. "Where are you going? You know it's dangerous to—"

"Mogao Caves. I'll be safe there." He explained curtly with a flick of his saffron-dyed robe—a rare, imported delicacy due to the fact that it is specially imported all the way from Iran.

After a brief moment of silence, he blurted out an unexpected invitation. "...I suppose you can come too, if you want."

That request caught them both off guard. However, the other man recovers quickly and flashes him a crooked smile.

"Of course."

"Where exactly are the Mogao Caves?" Zhang Hao inquired as his own stallion trailed behind Li Rui's, running his fingers through his choppy raven hair as they travelled amidst the tumultuous mess of a city.

"Southeast of the city. I'm positive Buddha will be protecting the sacred place from harm." Unconsciously, he gripped his talisman tighter.

The entire city appeared to have a grey sheen of fog cast upon it, complemented by the faint coo of the rustling wind. Even with the ghostly presence of the breeze, the stifling atmosphere seemed to strangle them alive, as if a pair of unwavering hands were desperately clawing at their throats. Every direction they went, the watchful eyes of small specks of silvery silkworms tracked them relentlessly. Li Rui knew there was no true escape. Just the foolish thread of hope that they clung to while they waited for their impending doom.

How did it come to this? Li Rui couldn't help but ponder. Life outside of Dunhuang probably continued operating. No one would dare to question the Empress's orders—they were disregarded, deposited by the palace just like how he deposited his silk. Trash.

“We’re lucky we got to escape the area... You know, why don’t we go back to get some of the villagers here? They’ll definitely appreciate—”

“Certainly not.” He scoffs without thinking before quickly regaining his composure. “I mean, what if they’ve already been infected? We can’t risk destroying the only safe haven of Dunhuang at this time. I’m sure we can shelter some of them after the outbreak settles down a little.”

Looking a little skeptical, Zhang Hao slowly nods his head in agreement. “... I suppose so.”

It felt like a millennium until they reached the Mogao Caves. The peerless shrines appeared like a lifeline, a temple frozen in time where the Silkworm Outbreak hasn’t dared touch just yet. Empty patches of sand came across as almost unnatural without the presence of those damned creatures. Li Rui breathed a sigh of relief. Slowly testing the fine grains of sand for any signs of danger, they hopped off their horses to approach their “hideout”. Striking vermilion brands the graceful slope of the entrance, layering up several floors before blending with the earthy sandstone cliffs. For a brief moment, everything faded away as the impressive sight enamoured him. *I’ve been blessed by this sacred temple*, he breathes. However, the fragile moment was interrupted by Zhang Hao’s awkward cough.

“Uh- we should head inside before those silkworms catch up to us.”

Being snapped out of his trance, Li Rui steps into the elegant arched doorway wordlessly, with Zhang Rui following close.

The first day was tranquil, taking into account how the pair blatantly ignored the disaster outside. Rooms of the Mogao Caves were a luxury in themselves, adorned with brilliant frescoes that enhanced the picturesque grotto. Seeing the incomparable beauty with his very eyes, Li Rui kneeled in front of one of the monumental Buddha statues and clasped his hands together.

May I nurture wisdom and compassion to face this tragedy with clarity and courage.

May the power of the Enlightened One guide me so that harm is lessened and that this obstacle becomes my cause for awakening, as what I merit will come to me.

As he rose to his feet, brushing the dirt from his robe, Zhang Hao spoke up once again.

“Rui, are you sure we shouldn’t be helping the villagers too?”

“Of course we would, on a later date.” He sighed, barely able to suppress his mild annoyance towards the repeated question. How would they save the villagers when they couldn’t even save themselves? Sensing his discontentment, Zhang Hao never brought the topic up again.

For the following hours, they mostly unpacked their baggage and caught up with each other. It turns out that Zhang Hao had settled on farming, preferring to stay within the city, while Li Rui developed his silk-producing workshop, which eventually led him to success, if he did say so himself. Although Zhang Hao didn’t earn much, the crops he brought along were quite useful: the carrots were the perfect combination of sweetness and crunch, the dates rich and caramel-like... They shared a pleasant meal and exchanged small talk, with Zhang Hao doing most of the conversing.

“It must be terrifying for you, Rui, knowing how silkworms were the cause of all of this and how you owned a literal workshop of them. Since you’re a silkworm expert, do you know what might’ve made them infectious?”

“...Someone probably just accidentally imported some poisonous ones or something. Why are you not eating?”

“I’m not hungry.” Zhang Hao simply shrugs, picking at the hem of his tunic sleeve like a nervous tic.

Li Rui woke up the next morning at the sound of his door groaning open. A cloaked figure stands at the doorway, unmoving like a bad omen. The lingering darkness of the room makes it impossible to decipher who the intruder was.

“Who’s here?” He jumped to his feet, clambering to take hold of the nearest makeshift weapon he spotted.

“Rui, it’s me.”

Zhang Hao. Oddly, his voice sounds a bit croaky, and the absence of his usually cheerful tone was undoubtedly eerie. Before he could inquire about the weird clothing choices, the other man reached for the hood with a trembling hand.

His heart drops.

As the hood fell away from his face with a gentle slump, murky, clouded eyes stared back at him instead of the usual hazel ones— a telltale sign of infection. His back was hunched as if he were carrying the weight of the brutal truth. A dark cloud hung over the confined space, shifting as Zhang Hao took a hesitant step forward. Li Rui flinched.

“Stay away—”

Zhang Hao quickly recoiled at his command. His hands lifted upwards in surrender, making his worn sleeves dip down and revealing the crystalline skin underneath, greyish veins wrapped around his arms like wired restraints. It almost looked surreal in a twisted way, if it didn’t mean he’d drop dead in less than two days with filthy worms as a coffin. His heavy, laboured breathing echoed in the room, mirroring Li Rui’s pounding heart.

“Don’t worry—”

“Leave.”

“Rui, I just—”

“I said *leave*. I-I’m sorry, Zhang Hao, but you’re dangerous now. I want to survive this, okay? And you- and you understand, right? I mean, of *course* you’d understand. You’re smart. You can think logically.” Li Rui blabbered away, panting heavily as the words tumbled out of his mouth.

“Okay.” Zhang Hao exhales softly through his mouth, head dipping down to avoid eye contact and shoulders quivering ever so slightly. “I’m sorry, too.”

A brief pause.

“Farewell, Li Rui. It was truly an honour to meet you in this life. I hope I’ll meet you again in my next one.”

Li Rui stares at his retreating figure as Zhang Hao limps away agonisingly slowly. He doesn’t utter a word.

“There’s got to be something here.”

Back in the city of Dunhuang, the disease shows no signs of decline. Hundreds had lost their lives, and hundreds more were contaminated. A man stands in front of the now-abandoned silk manufacturing plant. Not one living soul had dared to enter that place ever since the Outbreak occurred— no one, except for him. Yang Qing knew he didn’t have much time left— death was waiting for him outside his very door. It was only a matter of when, not if, he dies at the hands of the manmade disease.

Upon entering the place, Yang Qing proceeded cautiously along the hallway, the sound of his footsteps reverberating off the walls. His father had been a worker in silk production and was one of the first to contract the incurable sickness. Moments before his death, Yang Qing begged him to reveal the truth about the manufacturing plant. The whole family always knew the production was shady: his father would leave at the crack of dawn, only to return to their cottage deep into the night, his aging, fatigued features marred by dark patches of swollen skin. Whenever they tried to ask about it, he would only smile grimly and change the subject— Yang Qing had always known his father simply did not want him to be concerned.

At the end, with his dying breath, his father explained it all: The owner of the manufacturing facility was greedy to a fault. Money-hungry to a point where he’d exploit the workers, forcing them to inject hazardous chemicals into the silkworms, which eventually led to the infamous Silkworm Outbreak.

Feeling the unfiltered anger coursing through his veins and the gnawing urge to avenge his father, Yang Qing made the irrational decision to track down the one who started it all. Eventually, he reached the end of the corridor, where the rustling of wrinkled paper caught his attention. It’s a map. More importantly, a map with directions. Inspecting it thoroughly, he narrows in on the tiny signature engraved in the corner like a sick invitation.

Li Rui.

He’s found it. He’s found him.

A knock on his door. Had Zhang Hao come back? Warily, Li Rui approached his azurite doorstep and unsheathed his sword. The worn lantern flickered in warning in the dim light of the room as his hand clutched the iron handle.

The hinge screeched in protest when he inched the door open by a fraction—
He plummeted to the ground as a silhouette lunged at him.

What—

His blade clattered to the ground. Pain shot up his spine and his legs flailed, kicking wildly at nothing but air.

Thwack.

The figure reeled, tumbling into the wall. Their lungs spasmed as they wheezed for oxygen. Li Rui took the precious moment to drag himself up to his feet. He’d long given up retrieving his sword, instead backing up to a defensive stance.

With his vision clearing slightly, he lifts his eyes to meet his attacker.

It was a man. An infected one. He wore a feral gleam in his eyes, lips drawn back in a manic snarl as he clutched his stomach in writhing pain. Li Rui could tell he was far gone—the man was bound to collapse any second.

“*You*. You did this to us. You—”

“What do you mean—” Li Rui jerked back at the rasp of his dying voice.

“Don’t— don’t interrupt me. You ruined everything. Tell me. Was it worth it?” He sucks in a shaky breath. “Was a few extra gold worth it if we ended up paying with our lives instead?”

“It was an accident!”

“Was *running away* an accident, too? You’ve known there was a problem with the chemicals. My dad— your workers were ending up sick left and right. You didn’t even bat an eye. And now? Now you decide on a great disappearing act as if that would ever make things better for anyone but *yourself*.”

“Don’t you dare pin this on me—”

“You *disgust* me. Do you— do you even know what you did? Trade routes shut down; my neighbors—our neighbors—lost their jobs—” His sentence is cut short by a violent hacking cough. “Our ancestors proudly expanded this network with their blood. Zhang Qian didn’t travel all that way 800 years ago for you to crumble it into pieces—”

The figure’s hand shot out to encircle Li Rui’s wrist as he stumbled again.

“Remember my words, Li Rui. One day, you’ll drown in your avarice, your ego. And when you reach out for the surface? You’ll realize that there’s no one to save you because you’ve killed them all. You killed them all when you decided to chase wealth above the people.”

“...You—”

Li Rui didn’t get to finish his sentence— the figure crumpled beneath his feet like a rag doll.

He slammed his door shut. How’d the figure track him all the way here? Were there others coming?

Trying his best to shrug off the thoughts, he dragged his hands across his face when something on his knuckles caught his eye.

A pale, iridescent-sheened silkworm glistening faintly under the harsh artificial light of the cave.

Perhaps this was the karma he deserved.

Echoes of the Lost

International Christian School, Kristy Chan – 16

The desert, though asleep, breathed slowly. Constantly moving, changing, shaped by centuries of wind and movement. It whispered tales of traders, commerce, and whole civilizations. To the west, the shadows of the Mogao Caves stretched, carved with devotion and patience. As the day dawned, the place felt alive – history illustrated in ochre cliffs.

Dr. Li Wen stood before the entrance of the cave, boots sinking into the loose soil. The air was warm, tasting faintly of salt and dust. She glanced towards her motley crew: Arjun Singh, skilled in decryption, and Mira Rossi, crouching in the sand with his camera in hand.

“Once, monks came here to meditate.” Li said under her breath, feeling a need to respect the integrity of the newly unearthed caravanserai. “They believed the caves were openings into enlightenment.”

Mira’s camera whirred. “And now we open them again to understand the story behind the silence.”

Li nodded, the corners of her eyes lined with fatigue, but also anticipation. The UNESCO markers and fencing behind them were a reminder of ongoing restrictions. The permit for excavation had been a hard won battle, as this site lay at the fragile border between history and new progress, at times nearly being swallowed by the Taklamakan sands. The rumour that brought the three of them here whispered that an unknown chamber had been found beside the grottoes, but that it had been walled off.

Li turned towards the cliffs. “Let’s begin.”

The first sound they heard inside the passageway was a drip; slow, deliberate, echoing through corridors long untouched by human breath. They advanced into the tunnel, electric lanterns slicing through the quiet dark. The chamber was small, but the walls revealed life. Every surface was splashed with colour: faded murals of bodhisattvas and travelers, cracked but still discernible. Arjun beckoned Li to the farthest wall, pointing at the thin fissure framed by prayer motifs.

They widened the opening with deliberate precision, meticulously breaking apart the carefully laid stone. The gap exhaled a sigh of stale air, before revealing heaped manuscript bundles, stacked tightly to form a solid mass nearly reaching the ceiling. Li recalled Wang Yuanlu’s description of his 1900 discovery in another Mogao shrine, how the picture was the exact same – “Heaped up in layers, but without any order, there appeared in the dim light of the priest’s little lamp a solid mass of manuscript bundles rising to a height of nearly ten feet...”

“Four hundred cubic feet of paper,” Arjun murmured with reverence. His hands shook as he reached towards the first scroll, delicately brushing the surface of the paper.

“Careful, Arjun. Let Mira record everything first,” Li warned. “The world will want to see this.”

Days blurred into one another. The three of them worked quietly beneath the hiss of desert wind through the entrance tarp. Manuscripts were coaxed out of their sandy tomb, wrapped in decaying linen. A small table beneath a gently blowing fan became their world. Arjun deciphered Kaishu regular script and cursive Xinshu running script, both elegant even after a thousand years of solitude. There were also Buddhist texts in Classical Chinese containing chants copied by monks, their prayers still clinging to the fibers of the paper.

One night, Li and Mira were beckoned by Arjun. “This language hasn’t been found here before. It’s from northwestern India, second or third century,” he said, pointing to the written sheets written in Kharosthi – the ancient script used along the trade routes of what was now Xin Jiang.

“Could this prove earlier trade contact than we thought?” Mira asked, leaning closer with the camera to capture the document fully.

Li brushed dust from the fragment of history. The ink had faded to a pale brown, but one word was repeated, clearly intentionally: Asha. “What does this mean?” she asked.

“It’s a name,” Arjun explained. “And it appears at the end of several lines... These might be letters.”

By the evening, Arjun had completed his translations. He spoke with caution, reading out the letters with a sense of awe and wonder.

“To my beloved brother in Samarkand:

The silks in Chang’an bring fortune beyond measure, yet none of it warms the heart as does companionship. Tell mother that I wore her lapis ring as I crossed the desert. I have heard the making of tea calms the night during chaotic times.” He trailed off as Li bent forward, eyes sharp.

“The letter – it’s not a monk’s handwriting. It’s that of a merchant.” Li said.

Arjun nodded in acknowledgement. “And we can see that Asha was not only literate, but traveled a lot. Look at the reference to Persian embroidery, and to jade trading in Khotan. Asha instructed buyers, shared herbal remedies, and discussed insights on the goods sold and shipped.” He said, pointing to the remaining sections of the letter.

“Asha isn’t a male’s name... this was a woman.” Mira said. Li and Arjun looked back towards the camera, the realisation dawning in their eyes.

“There hasn’t ever been a recorded merchant from this time period that was a woman. But this... this changes everything.” Li whispers.

The camp quieted as they settled in for the night, minds racing with their newfound revelation. Through the open tent flap, the copper light of the sun dimmed into shadow.

The next morning, they went back to the cave with a new purpose. They catalogued everything: Tang Dynasty silk fragments embroidered with Persian patterns, threads of brocade from Persia, bronze mirrors inscribed with Central Asian motifs, and agate from India shaped into prayer beads. Such diverse treasures, all connected through the Silk Road.

Li found herself pulled to the Mogao murals, their blended artistry seemingly watching with approval. On one mural, a monk painted with European lapis pigment knelt beside a Chinese bodhisattva, accompanied by angels with Persian wings floating above them.

“It’s astonishing. Cultures that were thought to be separate, meeting here in colour and cloth.” Arjun said.

“Dunhuang was always the crossroads of the Road. We just never knew how true that was.” Li replied, smiling slightly. For a moment, the desert seemed more kind and human despite its vast expanses, like it had always been there, waiting to tell its secrets.

In mid-April, storms began arriving from the northwest. The first one hit at dusk, a fine grit rising like smoke, turning golden air into darkness. Tents rattled with violence. Mira pulled camera cases to safety while Arjun and other labourers secured the site tarp.

“Cover the manuscripts!” Li screamed desperately, dust billowing and masking her voice. The wind howled like a feral beast, furious and immense.

As slivers of light flashed through the storm, Li peered towards the faint outline of figures painted onto cliff walls, their features luminous before vanishing. The storm lasted through the night.

In the morning, the desert was changed. The outer trenches had collapsed. The desert had left one gift for them, out of pity. A sealed box, small, lacquered, and remarkably intact. Inside lay a silk bundle, pearly white. Within it, a packet of letters written by the same hand, with the same looping strokes. Atop them was a hand mirror, oxidized to bronze patina green. Along its rim, two inscriptions were written, one in Chinese seal script, the other in Sogdian.

Arjun bent over the mirror. "It says - 'her world, reflected.'"

Back inside the tent, they started decoding the new letters. The words were stained in parts, but most remained crisp.

"To all those who may one day find my words: we came as merchants and remained as pilgrims. The caves were carved by faith, and compassion stretching across faraway lands. Men call this the Silk Road, while every thread was weaved by a woman's hands."

Li's breath caught after Arjun finished the translations. "She knew she was writing to us."

Mira lowered the camera. "Then she left this mirror so she could see who came after."

"Wait. There's more." Arjun said. "Her last message was - 'do not let these sands erase the memory of us. Tell them we traded not just silk, but stories.'"

"This changes everything. What she did was remarkable. History barely acknowledges the female traders of the silk road. But here they are; there's evidence of the real backbone of the road. It wasn't men, it was women." Li looked up at her team.

"Asha is the missing piece to our history." Arjun said, the enormous weight of their revelation settling in on him.

They decided to dedicate their report to The Letters of Asha. Mira recorded every single detail, her documentary evolving from simple observations into a homage to the story of Asha. Through her lens, Asha's letters came to life.

News travelled fast. Within days, messages came from the government, informing them that the excavation would be suspended for a new railway construction to be built as part of a modern Silk Road initiative. Officials promised selective preservation of history, but the team knew nothing of importance would be preserved properly.

During a meeting late at night, Arjun slammed their case file onto the desk, fuming with anger. "We can't seal it up again, we've barely skimmed the surface of everything!"

"We can't oppose the order outright, Arjun. They'll revoke our permit permanently." Mira said, always the voice of reason.

"Archaeology needs hard, cold, evidence that is undeniable. We can't just half heartedly finish the film and let it go just like this." Arjun argued.

"We have done all we can, Arjun." Mira said softly, reaching out a hand to calm him, but being shoved away in response.

"Enough. The Silk Road thrived because people found new paths through compromise. Have we learnt nothing?" Li interjected wearily. Arjun looked away, abashed, mumbling an apology. Mira merely nodded.

As the others slept, Li stood outside the tents, the desert air cool against her face. Across the sandy dunes, headlights of trains glimmered faintly, the new Silk Road carrying people westward, just as the ancient one did. She wondered, briefly, if Asha had also watched her caravans and culture fade in the same way.

On the twenty-fourth of May, they returned to capture the final footage. But the landscape had transformed entirely. The blinking coordinates of Li's Google maps were futile: their cave was gone. In its place stood a sandy dune, smoothed over by the winds. Only a single corner of tarp protruded from the sea of sand.

The three of them clawed through the sands on their hands and knees until exhaustion numbed them. Nearly nothing could be recovered, except fragments of fabric and a single, blank manuscript page. The trio stared at the sheet wordlessly.

"All of it, lost." Arjun finally spoke.

"No. Not lost. They are merely protected," Li says. "The desert has and will always be the guardian of the Silk Road."

"What will history remember if evidence disappears?" Arjun said, echoing a past argument.

"It will remember what it always remembers. Traces of it, formed from the interpretations that we give it." Mira spoke softly.

For many hours, they sat in silence, three silhouettes against the endless sand. Underneath them, the cave murals hidden beneath the dunes returned to their slumber, waiting to be found again in another century.

Weeks later, in Beijing, the National Museum of China unveiled the first part of the archaeologists' findings. A single glass display case held the recovered mirror, a few fragments of Persian patterned silk, and partial transcriptions of Asha's letters translated into multiple languages. They had gathered clips of their discussions, the moments of discovery, and the insights into Asha's remarkable life. They poured their hearts out onto the film, knowing it would serve as a tribute to every overlooked story of the Road. The finished product was imperfect, but it was nonetheless a representation of their resilient journey.

Mira's documentary accompanied the artifacts, her camera panning across the dunes, playing Li's voice.

"The Silk Road wasn't just a path for merchants and monks. It was a conversation across cultures, shaped by the connections and compassion of those whose names did not survive. Until now."

The crowds lingered, moved by the stories told. When the film ended, soft applause filled the hall. Sitting at the back row, the trio brushed moisture from their eyes at the sight of their own painstaking work.

"I wish we could have done more, to preserve more proof," Arjun said.

"We gave them echoes. Sometimes, echoes last longer than shouts," Li said, smiling faintly.

That summer, invitations came. Invitations to speak in lectures, to hold museum displays, all for recognition. Headlines coined them as Discoverers of the Lost Voices. But Li cared little for the applause. She spent her days reviewing images of the manuscript, reverently tracing each faded character until they blurred and faded in her mind.

Her messages with Arjun grew frequent, filled with thoughts and philosophies. "Perhaps history is not a line, but a circle; and we are merely threads passing through the same tarp, over and over."

Mira messaged their group chat with an idea - a New Silk Road Cultural Heritage Network, to link universities and museums along the Road's ancient span, sharing digital archives of texts and art. Symbolically, she suggested naming its first initiative "Project Asha".

Li laughed softly when she read the draft. On the opening page, Mira had written in both Chinese and English: "May those who walk after us remember."

Months later, Li returned to Dunhuang for a final visit, before winter closed the passes for good. At sunset, the Mogao cliffs shone with bright coral and gold. Pilgrims descended from tourist buses holding lit incense, placing them before murals painted by monks fifteen centuries ago.

Away from the crowds, Li trekked alone to the wild dunes beyond the fenced area, to where the coordinates once marked their cave of treasures. The winds had shifted the sands once again, reshaping the horizon, making it impossible to tell where their excavations began and ended.

She knelt, scooping a handful of sand onto her palm. She could see tiny flecks of silk sparkling within, threads as thin as hair, glinting like starlight in her palm. Faintly, echoes of voices reached her ears. Phrases in many tongues: Sanskrit, Persian, Chinese, blending into one timeless murmur.

“I hear you,” she whispered.

She turned towards the submerged caves. Inside those stone fortresses, covered by sand, manuscripts laid beneath centuries of prayers, ink still breathing faintly. They spoke of merchants who traded jade for silver, of monks who copied sutras under flickering lamps, of a woman named Asha who crossed deserts covered in silk patterned with dreams.

The desert wind sighed, restless. Li knew it would soon cover her footprints, as it had covered Asha’s caravan, and the countless others. Yet that no longer felt like loss, but instead continuation of the circle of history.

History, she realized, was not preserved in stone or paper alone. History lived whenever someone remembered that across the chasm of time, strangers once met here, at the fork of the Road, and chose to share rather than conquer.

As twilight deepened, she began the walk back, her figure shrinking against the immense sand and sky. Behind her, the dunes continued their slow dance. Before her, civilisations shimmered in memory.

Far beyond the horizon, where trains thundered westward along newly polished rails, the Silk Road; old and new; breathed again.

Blood Silk

Maryknoll Convent School (Secondary Section), Leung Sin Ying Alicia – 15

The first moment Princess Mei learned of her value to her father—three thousand bolts of silk, two hundred horses, and an alliance with Khan Arslan of the Western Regions—was the first time she had ever conceived of the idea of escape. Mei had been raised to be the perfect lady of the opulent court of Chang’an. She was taught to read and write poetry, to behave in proper court etiquette, but she was never taught how to defy the Emperor. Yet now, the path of obedience was her best chance for survival.

As she sat in her lavish gilded carriage on day three of the trip to the west from Chang’an, she was seated perfectly, as always, with her hands folded in her lap, her countenance peaceful behind her red silk bridal veil. Diplomats rode ahead, servants followed behind, and somewhere in the supply wagons were the gifts that would seal her fate: the finest silk in the world as if woven from the light of the moon, jade carvings worth more than the tax revenues of an entire province, and golden vessels belonging to her grandmother.

Mei touched the knife hidden in her sleeve and waited for nightfall. Six years of secret training with her bodyguard Ran had honed her mind and body. She spoke four languages, understood strategy, and had cultivated patience like a weapon. At sixteen, she was ready to defy the world.

As soon as the caravan stopped to make camp near the ruins of an old watchtower, Mei waited for the lanterns to be lit and the guards to begin their nightly routines before making her move to escape. She scanned the camp for Ran and caught her bodyguard’s eye and received a brief, barely perceptible nod. Then, as she had done on every other night during their journey, she stepped behind her tent to “do her business,” with Ran following at a respectful distance as a chaperone should.

Except this time, they kept walking into the darkness.

“Your Highness,” Ran whispered urgently to Mei, looking very worried and trying to hide her concern for Mei’s safety, “we talked about this. Once we leave, there is no turning back. Your father—”

“My father sold me like silk,” Mei interrupted, removing her elaborate headdress and ornate robes. Beneath her fancy clothing, Mei wore the tunic and trousers that Ran had carefully hidden away for her. “I am worth more than a man named Khan Arslan. I am worth what I choose to be.”

Mei remembered all the maps, landmarks and water sources she had learned which were her weapons of knowledge; at daybreak they made their way to the Sogdian Trading Post which Mei had previously selected as their initial shelter — a grouping of buildings that were made of mud-bricks, which is where merchants would congregate to prepare to travel through the Tarim Basin. After walking all night and into the early morning, Mei’s palace-soft feet were blistered and sore and her entire body ached. However, the thought of freedom gave life to her very veins.

“Two travelers alone will draw attention,” Ran cautioned as he scanned the market area for potential threats to Mei. “We cannot possibly escape if we are being watched.”

As she grinned, her head was full of ideas. “A caravan of merchants going west and won’t ask any questions. This guy is loading carpets onto llamas and dressed like a Sogdian, so it must be him.”

Rustam was perhaps thirty, his face lined with laughter and hardship alike, shoulders squared with confidence borne from survival along the Silk Road. Mei approached with her proposal: two people seeking passage west, willing to work, asking no pay. He looked at them with a look that made both of them uncomfortable.

“You’re running from something,” he said in Sogdian.

“An unwanted marriage,” Mei answered, in Sogdian letting him believe she was merely a merchant’s daughter.

He glanced at Ran’s calloused hands and military posture, then at Mei’s expensive boots, which were partially covered by her dirty cloak, and said dryly, “That must have been quite a marriage. Very well. But you work. I do not carry dead weight.”

For a week, Mei discovered what work meant. She loaded cargo, watered camels, ground barley, and tended fires. Her hands blistered, then hardened. The other merchants watched her with curiosity, but they never asked her questions, because on the Silk Road, everyone had the opportunity to recreate themselves.

One night, while collecting firewood, Mei looked up at the stars spinning around above her and heard the sounds of camels sleeping. Mei turned to Ran and said quietly, “Ran, how long have you been keeping watch over me?”

He let out a sigh and tossed a branch into the fire. “You’ve got to trust me. I’ve seen enough of the world to know that courage doesn’t come easy. I’ve worn a uniform as a soldier, been a mercenary, and even worked as a bodyguard before, but I’ve never seen someone who determines their own destiny like you have.”

Mei absorbed his words and realized that she had only ever viewed him as part of the royal family – someone who would always be there to serve them. But now, under the stars in the vast desert, he was beginning to show himself to be a man who’s been shaped by combat and betrayal. “What was it that made you decide to help me?” she asked. “You were free to stay in your own homeland with your honour and position as a man in the army.”

“Honor? In the Emperor’s court, honor is like a chain around your neck. I’ve lost many friends during wars for political reasons; I’ve witnessed families being torn apart to form alliances with people like yourself. When you asked for my help six years ago, I saw a spark in you, it was a refusal to be chained. That’s worth more than any imperial seal.”

Rustam, overhearing from where he was mending a saddle, chuckled softly. “Remember, princess, or whatever you are, the Silk Road is merciless on the weak. If you happen to drop that bag one more time, a bandit will likely take it and leave you bare in the middle of the desert.”

Mei felt that these conversations with Rustam were expanding her horizons and that they were not the same as being surrounded by court officials who were limited by their formal roles. They had all lived through life’s harsh realities and they had each gone through hard times as survivors, which made Mei feel less isolated with her own struggles.

By the time night fell, and they were gathered around campfires, the conversations revealed many truths that Mei had never been told during her time at court: There was a weakening of the Tang Empire’s hold on the Western Regions, local khans were becoming more aggressive, and there were rumors of rebellion in every direction. The Persian spoke of unusual military movements being observed near the city of Kucha; the Turkic brothers spoke about a cousin being conscripted, in spite of treaties that had been signed.

“Arslan’s ambitious,” Rustam remarked one evening while stirring the appearing embers in the campfire. “Marriages and alliances are tools to build power. But Arslan wants true independence, not a wife.”

Mei felt uneasy. If what her father sent her as a peace offering is a pretext for war, was she being sent as a pawn, or hostage, or a trigger for conflict?

Over the next several days, Mei found comfort and strength in the steady presence of Ran. He guided Mei through the perils of travelling, avoiding patrols, scouting water sources, and sharing quiet moments beneath the stars. They spoke of strategy, of courage, of what it meant to survive and to live freely. Slowly, Mei realized that she had never truly trusted anyone before, but her bodyguard had become her first partner.

Rustam contributed a lighthearted flavour to their adventures with his humour. One morning, as Mei hauled a sack of grain onto a camel, Rustam laughed and adjusted the load. “If a princess can haul this much grain without collapsing, I might just trade my caravan for a week of palace tutoring.”

Mei, trying to hide the case of heat exhaustion, said, “I will take a sword over a tutor.”

Rustam laughed and said, “Then we’re both going to learn faster than the Emperor believes.”

On the tenth day of their journey to Kucha, the two friends got their first look at the Imperial Guards.

“Play it cool” Rustam murmured. “You’re my assistant. Keep your head down, speak only if spoken to.”

But Mei spotted a captain in the Imperial Guard and she recognised him as one of her father’s most loyal soldiers. He approached Rustam and questioned him regarding his cargo and where he was headed. After a long pause, the captain looked through the caravan and spotted Mei’s face.

She saw the recognition dawn. Saw his hand move toward his sword.

“Go!” Ran shouted, and suddenly everything was chaos. Ran threw a knife that buried itself in the captain’s shoulder. Rustam’s camels panicked, creating a barrier of thrashing animals. The Turkic brothers, without hesitation, blocked the soldiers’ path with their cart.

“We’ll slow them!” The Persian trader yelled.

Mei ran with Ran dragging her, whilst Rustam shouted directions, with the sounds of fighting echoing behind them. Abandoning their caravan, they fled up into the hills, climbing until her lungs burned and her legs trembled.

When they finally stopped, they found themselves hidden inside a cave overlooking the road. Mei was crying, not due to fear, but because of shame. “Those merchants, they don’t even know me, why would they ever risk their lives for me? I offered them nothing.” She whispered, staring at the dust-choked road below.

Ran sat beside her, looking out over the horizon. “You were brave enough to run, and that’s enough for some people to follow.”

Mei shook her head, saying, “I was just a pawn in this game. My father, the Emperor... Everyone thinks of me as nothing more than a piece of silk for trade—a trophy to seal their deal. How am I supposed to have the courage to run away from all this when I don’t even know who I am?”

Ran’s voice softened almost to a whisper, “You are learning how to courageously stand up for yourself now; that is the most difficult part of the journey. To take a step for yourself even though the entire world sees you only as some leather cloth to be used to wrap around their power.”

They stayed hidden for two days while patrols searched below. Finally, Rustam asked, “Who are you really?”

After hesitating for a moment, Mei then chose to tell Rustam the truth rather than lie. “I am Princess Mei, the Fourth Daughter of the Emperor Xuanzong; I am being sent to marry Khan Arslan.”

Rustam’s eyes widened, but he laughed bitterly. “And I thought I was just smuggling stolen goods! Your father will think Arslan orchestrated your kidnapping. This could start a war.”

“Or end one,” said Mei as she began piecing together her plan; there was the marriage, but there was also the possibility of a rebellion in Hexi Province with the same timing.

The pieces in Mei’s head suddenly clicked. “What if my father planned to use this marriage as an excuse? Send me west, then claim Arslan broke the engagement or kidnapped me. That gives him justification to invade.”

“Use your own daughter for bait?” Ran was horrified.

“I’m the fourth daughter of a minor concubine. My value to the Empire is only what I can be traded for. But if that’s his game, then I’ve just ruined it. Without me arriving in Arslan’s custody, my father can’t claim betrayal. The war he wanted can’t start.” Mei answered.

“Unless,” Rustam said grimly, “he blames the Khan anyway. Claims you were seized en route. Your disappearance becomes the provocation he needs.”

“Then I have to go back,” she said.

“That’s madness,” Ran protested. “He’ll marry you off immediately, or worse—”

“Not if I arrive on my own terms. Not if I bring proof of his deception. Not if I present an alternative.” Mei turned to Rustam. “How far to Samarkand?”

“Two weeks, maybe less if we push hard. But why—”

“Because that’s where the real power is. Khan Arslan isn’t the only leader in the Western Regions. Samarkand is neutral ground. If I can reach it, if I can present evidence of my father’s warmongering to the merchants’ council, they can apply pressure. The Silk Road only works with peace. If the merchants threaten to close trade routes, even the Emperor has to listen.”

Rustam looked at her in a puzzled way. “You’re not just a daughter of a king? You’re a strategist!”

“You mean I’m my father’s daughter,” Mei replied. “I have decided to utilise the same abilities, however, somewhat differently.”

The trip to Samarkand was one of extremes. The cold of night was freezing, while the daylight was intense. They maintained a low profile and did not travel on the main roads, instead, they exchanged gold and silver for horses and used their skill and sound judgment to defend against bandits which surprised Rustam on many occasions. Ran’s conduct during the battle was impressive and his availability to come to a place of calm during Mei’s panic moments was invaluable.

They gathered allies: merchants oppressed by imperial taxes, local leaders tired of Tang interference, and a defector from Arslan’s court who confirmed Mei’s suspicions. The Khan had never wanted the marriage; the arrangement had been a trap.

During the evenings in the mountains, while Rustam slept or built up the campfire, Mei and Ran would quietly discuss loyalty, courage, and the concept of freedom, concepts that she had never learned while living in a palace.

By the time they reached Samarkand, Mei was sunburned, scarred, and changed. She was in the great hall of the Merchants’ Council with merchants from China, Persia, Sogdiana and Turkic merchants, and told her story with evidence that proved her father’s intentions. “I am worth three thousand bolts of silk as a bride. As an ambassador, I am worth so much more. You have the tools at your disposal: Protect me here, I will ensure the Silk Road remains open, and I will be the bridge that makes all these wars unnecessary.”

The council chamber fell into a tense hush. Hours passed, but the deliberations were fraught with interruptions and conflicts. One Turkic merchant stood up with his arms folded and stated in a loud voice, “How do we know for certain the Emperor will not send his troops to impose this? A princess may speak, but armies obey the throne.”

Mei met his gaze steadily, her heart pounding but her voice calm. “Because the Silk Road is older than any emperor. Trade will stop if you enforce tyranny. You will starve him, not me. I offer peace, but it must be chosen freely.”

The Persian spice trader, the same one from the caravan who had aided her escape, added his voice from the back. “And if the Emperor punishes you for revealing his plans?”

“Then he will punish the empire, not the people,” Mei replied, her eyes sweeping the room. “Peace is not the Emperor’s gift—it is the choice of all who walk this road.”

Mei saw the group of men mumbling to one another. She stepped closer to the edge of the platform and addressed the crowd. “I am not alone. See all the allies I have amassed. Look at all the merchants who have put their lives in danger to protect mine. My strength is not just because of my birth; it is due to our connections, our trust in each other, and our unified necessity for stability.”

When the council finally emerged from their private huddle, the head—an ancient Sogdian merchant smiled faintly. “Princess Mei, or should I say, Ambassador Mei, the council accepts your proposal. The Silk Road chooses peace. And the Silk Road chooses you.”

Three months later, Mei negotiated trade agreements, wore simple robes, and commanded respect through knowledge and courage. Ran trained local guards, and Rustam partnered in a trading company transforming commerce along the Silk Road.

Letters from Chang’an arrived—her father was furious but trapped. He officially appointed her imperial trade ambassador, claiming it had been his plan all along. Mei burned his letter and dictated her own terms: fair tariffs, respect for rulers, protection for merchants. The Emperor would accept them; the alternative was collapse.

As the sun set below the western wall of Samarkand, Mei stood with Ran atop the highest tower, facing east toward Chang’an and west toward lands she had not seen.

As the wind blew through her hair, she remembered the girl in the gilded carriage, the girl who thought freedom was running. Silk, she had learned, could bind or connect. Blood can be shed or spared, based on either fear or courage. Power could be enforced through fear, or negotiated through courage. The Silk Road is what people choose to make of it.

Her father would write histories that erased her defiance. Empires would rise and fracture as they always had. But somewhere along this road, merchants would travel without soldiers at their backs. Cities would trade instead of burn. Children would grow up never knowing how close war had come.

That would be enough.

In that moment, Mei wasn’t any princess or bride, but something more unique. A woman who had chosen what her life would mean.

And far beyond Samarkand, beyond emperors and khans, the Silk Road would continue not in silk or gold or blood, but in every quiet act of courage that turned fate into choice.

It had never disappeared. It had only been waiting.

When Roads Remember

Victoria Shanghai Academy, Lau Fong Hing Angel – 15

897 CE, Gobi Desert, 110 kilometers to Dunhuang

Jun kept his face wrapped, but the cold still seeped into the crevasse between cloth and cheek. Its numbing caress seized his muscles.

To reach Dunhuang, one had to traverse the Gobi Desert and arrive at the edge of the Taklamakan Desert. Dunhuang sat between the two vast lands, an oasis where eastern and western routes converged.

The expedition seemed grand when he first announced it to his family, with its promise of newfound prosperity, but the journey made him realise one thing: The desert was indiscriminately cruel to all men.

Jun was sure that grains of sand now circulated in his bloodstream. Perpetual exhaustion was etched into his face, his lips shrivelled into clumps of coagulated flesh around his mouth, his saliva turned viscous from dehydration. The calloused membrane of his body flaked into leathery patches akin to a reptile's scaled skin.

It was only after dusk, when the sharp clarity of the sky softened into an ombre hue, that Jun sought shelter at a threadbare caravanserai. There were two Chinese travellers huddled around an unvarnished dining table—the entirety of the inn's occupants. He sat down across them.

The man looked up from his bowl of stew and nodded stiffly at Jun in acknowledgement. Beside him, his daughter sat hunched, her knees drawn up and her gaunt elbows caged around them. She was almost skeletal, bony fingers absentmindedly picking at a splintered edge on the table.

Her father nudged a lump of coarse bread towards her, but she twisted her head away as if it were poisoned. There was an inkling of resignation in her father's fatigued sigh. A hollow rumble reverberated from her stomach, yet the sound elicited no reaction.

Jun realised this had been going on for some time.

"I'm so hungry," She whispered, hands pressed to her heart instead of her stomach. She repeated these words like a sombre mantra.

Yet she refused to eat the meagre foods provided to her, no matter how desperately her father pleaded that she had to eat.

"I want to eat Mama's dumplings," The girl said forlornly, staring at the stale loaf in front of her.

Her father gripped her shoulders and shook her, eyes leaden with frustration. "Your mother is gone!" He bellowed, voice hoarse.

The caravanserai went oppressively silent. Jun averted his eyes and tensed.

"You must eat, Nǚér. I beg you!" Her father slumped to the ground, pressing his forehead against the back of her hands.

The dim light emitted from the oil lamp cast a shadow across her face, accentuating the hollows of her cheeks. Her expression remained impassive. Finally, she blinked, and a glistening tear slid down her face.

The girl did not look up, but Jun noticed her fingers fidgeting at the frayed fabric on her sleeve. The trivial gesture reminded him of his youngest child twisting the hem of his shirt. His heart ached at the resemblance, as if a cavity were corroding it from within.

That night, Jun could not sleep. He sat up, wincing as the rigid mattress creaked. Instinctively, he reached into his coat and touched the letter in his pocket.

His children's calligraphy had softened the rough paper, seeped into the creases and folds. He reread it fervently and could recite each line from memory. The ink was the embodiment of his purpose; he studied it as faithfully as sailors once traced their fingers along their maps, navigating their roads back home.

His eldest wrote the main body, each stroke deliberate and sharp, eager to showcase his calligraphy skills. His youngest added a line at the bottom, written endearingly with crooked characters and puerile impatience.

Baba, come back soon! We kept your seat at the table.

Wind rattled the walls, and the entire caravanserai seemed to tremble. Jun imagined his children asleep back home, their mouths slightly open, their hair in disarray. He imagined their mother smoothing a blanket over their curled-up bodies. He imagined the empty chair at the table and felt, briefly, as if he had abandoned a sacred duty.

At dawn, the father prepared to leave early. He coaxed his daughter to her feet, packed their possessions into a small bundle, and offered Jun a cursory nod of farewell.

Jun walked towards the pair and asked, "Where are you headed?"

"Dunhuang," The man replied. "There's...work."

Jun nodded grimly. He remembered the day of his departure, and how his youngest son clung to his thigh, tears and snot forming a wet patch on his trousers. Working in a foreign land, with its innumerable necessary sacrifices, could be detrimental.

He glanced down at the small parcel of food he had saved—his last portion of handmade Chinese pastries. He originally planned on savouring it throughout his lengthy journey, yet there was little hesitation when he crouched by the girl and held out the parcel.

Her eyes widened, then flickered with uncertainty and suspicion.

"For the road," Jun told her gently. "Eat when you can."

Her father's mouth opened. "Sir, you—"

Jun stood up, decisive. "I have my own children," he explained. The two men shared a silent moment of mutual understanding, one brimming with unspoken sympathy and grief. Home was so far away.

The father bowed and uttered his words of gratitude.

As Jun turned away and mounted his camel, he caught, from the corner of his eye, the girl taking a timid bite from a mung bean cake.

897 CE, Gobi Desert, 60 kilometers to Dunhuang

The last caravanserai Jun resided in harboured many languages.

A stark contrast from the previous desolate monotony, the inn bustled with vigour. Occasionally, he heard boisterous bursts of conversations erupting from other rooms, sometimes in sharp syllables he didn't recognise, others in a rougher drawl he could vaguely comprehend.

Laughter and the soft clink of bowls echoed from the dining area as Jun headed towards it. It was cramped with occupants; some sat on the floor, miraculously balancing dishes without sullyng the vibrant carpet with sauces. Jun settled unceremoniously into a vacant seat.

He carefully unfolded his letter, which was streaked with tender creases as a result of his excessive ruminating. What had begun as a comforting ritual had now become almost intrinsic to him.

Sitting beside him, a man with deep-set eyes pointed at his letter, “Jia? Home?” He asked, his accent tilting the word into a gruffer sound.

Jun gently smoothed a dog-eared corner of the letter, nodding slightly. “Children,” he replied. When the man’s expression morphed into confusion, he bent his arms and bundled them close to his chest, mimicking a cradling motion.

The man’s face softened. “From wife,” he said, drawing out a cloth woven with floral embroidery, the fabric worn from years of affection and use.

Then, he pointed to himself and said, “Farid.”

“Jun,” Jun replied.

Across them, a woman with hands stained from dye displayed her crafts of intricately pleated cloth. The exotic patterns elicited gasps of admiration around the table. Another brought out a handful of dried fruits, urging everyone to try one. Jun tentatively bit into the foreign pulp and was surprised to taste a pleasant tanginess on his tongue.

In return, he showed his own country’s produce. Dried persimmons he grew and sundried in his own yard, and pouches of fragrant tea leaves. They marvelled at the bags, prodding and sniffing them as if they were alien treasures. The tea bags had been mundane and unremarkable to Jun, but seeing the wonder on their faces made him newly appreciate the artistry behind them.

“Green tea,” he pointed to the bags. “Oolong tea,”

“Pu’er,” he smiled at this one. “My favourite. It has a distinctive aroma and taste, musky like the air after rain and the soil of Earth. It’s delightful with tangerine peels.”

He mimicked a smelling motion and gave a gesture of approval. The others understood and picked the bags up, lightly smelling each one.

“Similar to oils,” Farid plucked a small ceramic container from his bag. It smelled like spices and tickled Jun’s nose, but felt refreshing.

When a strap came loose on one of Jun’s bundles, it was Ayla who held up a needle and thread.

“Fix?” She asked, waving her hands in a sewing motion. Jun handed his bundle over with profuse thanks. Her needlework was efficient, her stitches confident. He watched her nimble fingers work with fascination.

“Where did you learn?” He asked, gesturing to her needle.

“Mother.” She replied, smiling faintly.

It was near dusk, and rays of gold spilled in from the window, illuminating specks of dust into photons of light. The sunlight softened their wrinkles, and for a moment, it seemed as if hope and youth had been rekindled. Farid glanced out of the window, a wistful expression etched on his face. He raised his arm to the air and pointed to a faraway region in the distance. The light made his skin shine like burnished bronze.

“Home.” The word was murmured in many languages, in many tongues, yet the longing was one and the same.

The individual was insignificant in the vast desert, but huddled around a table together in a small caravanserai, their words would not echo meaninglessly in the dark, but be heard and reciprocated.

The next morning, Farid and Jun set off for Dunhuang. Jun left a pouch of tea leaves for Ayla in gratitude and farewell, and headed to the oasis he had been dreaming about for months.

Lush greenery appeared in copious amounts as they approached the outskirts of the city. It was Farid's idea to visit the Mogao Caves, where a plethora of dark mouths opened into stone. Inside, the air was dense with incense; murals of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas bloomed on walls.

A monk met them at the narrow entrance, the velvety folds of his robes gracefully draped across his shoulder. He bowed and greeted Farid in Arabic, then Jun in Chinese.

"Travellers," the monk said, clasping his hands together and bringing them to his chest, "This is a sacred space for all. Rest here and replenish your spirits. Let your hearts catch up with your bodies."

As he led them deeper, the hustle of the city dulled into an inconsequential hum. They arrived at a wide chamber with pristine stone walls, not a splash of paint or carving engraved on it. The monk's hand lingered on the stone.

"This chamber was originally planned to house travellers like you from afar," he explained. "We wished to share our teachings."

"These stones are like paper, they carry many voices. They stand, eternal, against time's eroding qualities," he added, fingers brushing against a small fissure. "Across centuries, the road will leave more than footprints."

Jun thought of his letter and felt the words settle in his heart, with a sense of grand enlightenment.

"Leave your marks if you wish, travellers," the monk gestured subtly to a few carving tools scattered on the floor. "Your presence will be acknowledged."

Carving the sacred walls of the Mogao Caves seemed blasphemous. Jun hesitated. As he turned to Farid, he realised the man already had a tool in his hand and a determined look in his eyes.

"People leave different kinds of offerings," the monk told him gently. "Words are important."

Jun felt a surge of passion rush through his muscles. He bent and retrieved a carving knife, clutching it tightly. He knew it deep inside his bones, he wished to contribute something that wasn't merely transactional, something more than commerce.

Farid and Jun stood shoulder to shoulder, two travellers at the end of a long stretch of road, both worn and weary, both cloaked in exhaustion and dwindling optimism. Yet each man knew the purpose of the journey, so each man never meandered from their designated paths.

The purpose was to make home a better place, and to ignite a hope for the future that would not fade.

At that moment, Jun felt the strange grandeur of it all: they were not kings, or generals, or nobles, but ordinary men who had traversed the desert for the sake of trade, and arrived to create something greater than profit.

He began first, hands taut as he engraved strokes of Chinese characters into the hard wall. His mother tongue was a beautiful language, and there were a million sayings in Chinese that could not be fully conveyed with translations.

*We crossed deserts chasing silk and trade
Survived on goods and on borrowed grain.
Yet we live for voices, for the touch of names
For letters folded like small, warm homes.
We carry it with us, this budding flame
And realise that the world is never monochrome
When its colours are shared with another soul
For ultimately, all roads lead to home*

The stone did not bleed when he finished. His lines were shallow and did little to erode the obstinate rock.

Farid had carved his words in Arabic, intricate flourishes that looked like the current of a torrential river. Their texts stood side by side, small and negligible compared to the other murals and grand inscriptions. Yet their hearts were full, satisfied.

Farid turned to him, invigorated, a grin blossoming on his face.

“For tomorrow,” He placed a palm flat against the wall, as if feeling for a heartbeat in the walls.

“For tomorrow,” Jun echoed. The walls seemed to thrum with warmth.

2013, United Nations Headquarters

A room full of microphones hummed under bright, fluorescent lights. Before the podium, a diverse audience of multilingual, ambitious individuals buzzed with anticipation. A projected map flickered onto the screen, with annotations made in neon markers circling specific landmarks.

Delegates leaned towards one another, trading whispers of heavy jargon. There was an irony in the composed, clinical way they spoke, as if the admiration of art and culture needed to be confined within technical terminology.

On the screen, another photograph gradually appeared. It was the image of a few archaeologists standing inside a cave, their faces half-lit with sparse light from a torch, their gloves pale against ancient stone. Underneath, a caption read: Dunhuang, the Mogao Caves.

The speaker mentioned the next slide, then tapped her microphone.

A close-up photograph of the stone wall filled the screen, and the unintelligible lines carved into it became comprehensible words.

“There are many documents in Dunhuang,” the speaker said. “Paintings, embroidery, poems. Evidence of trade and devotion coexisting side by side.”

She paused, letting the room settle.

“And then we find this,” She read the carved words out loud.

Yet we live for voices, for the touch of names

Momentarily, the room transformed from a conference hall. There was a gathering of travellers huddled around a table, exchanging small tokens from their homeland and watching as their crafts became wonders in another man’s eyes. It was the warmth of laughter, the joy of conversing, the inherent human urge to help others. It was the worn folds of a letter.

“It’s a traveller’s reminder,” she spoke with increasing intensity. She faced them, the audience full of economists, businessmen, ministers, and students invited to speak about the newly initiated Belt and Road programme.

We carry it with us, this budding flame

“When we talk about roads and cargo,” there was a building momentum in her unwavering voice, “when we mention tariffs, and the importance of industrialism and capitalism, we should also talk about what keeps people and cultures alive. Ideas travelled with merchants and craftsmen, and it was murals, printing, and carving on walls that helped these ideas outlive the bodies that carried them.”

“The past shows us that the exchange can be more than profit. If we are reviving routes, let us revive this essential philosophy too.”

And realise that the world is never monochrome

On the screen, the carved words remained. One in Chinese, one in Arabic, harmoniously engraved into the same plate of stone. The travellers who created them had not known that this room would ever exist; they had not known that strangers from all over the world would lean forward and analyse their spontaneous words.

When its colours are shared with another soul

They had only known the edge of letters digging into their skin, the longing ache of distance, the sweetness of being understood without the perfect words.

The speaker's hands brushed the screen, as if the troughs of the carved stone were tangible from beneath a screen.

For ultimately, all roads lead to home

“The word that appeared simultaneously on both engravings was, inevitably—” she stilled, then smiled fondly.

“Home.”

Creative Writing
Fiction

Group 4



The Story of the Nameless

G.T. (Ellen Yeung) College, Hei Yu Poon Kelly – 15

Sunlight burned into the sand, heating it until the fine particles occasionally gleamed and sparkled at the corners of your eyes. The coarse rocks that lined the roadside were scalding hot, while the tracks left by passing caravans were slowly buried— hidden beneath a fresh layer of fine sand, now vanished without a trace.

A strange tune could be heard, one meticulously crafted; unsettling at first, yet pleasant to the ear thereafter. It went something like this:

“For as far as the road stretches,
we merchants will follow the wind
till the end of time,
where we’ll leave our legacy behind
till the end of time...”

The tune was called “*The Story of the Nameless*,” the legends said. Names merge and dissolve with time; countless versions sung across the vast lands we call Earth. Yet what the bard sings, and what the people echo, will always ring true to their emotions. Just like how this mysterious melody carries an everlasting feeling, hidden within every note.

“What’s the meaning of life?” The girl sat lazily on the edge of the caravan, both hands gripping the sides tightly. The slow trot of the camels continued, a mundane, background noise that filled the quiet air.

“Answer that yourself.” The boy tsked in annoyance as a gust of wind blew some sand into his eyes. “Damn sand. Damn weather. Damn sun.”

“When’s the next caravanserai?”

“At least two days of travelling.” He sighed, audibly, irritation clinging to his every word.

“Well, the china is waiting to be mended. Can’t have customers protesting. Again.” Her legs dangled dangerously, her torso angled forward, as if she might jump from the caravan at any second.

“Mind your legs.”

“Whatever. It’s not that dangerous. Besides, I’m used to this,” she said, pausing before continuing, albeit a bit cockily, “a professional, I’d say.”

“Says the one who ended up in a coughing fit after some sand got into her throat. Which ended up stuck in her airway.”

He reined in the camels for a split second, avoiding the rock that was jutting out in the middle of the road, then loosened the reins, letting them fall back into pace.

She bristled at the memory of rolling off the safety of the wooden floor, remembering how the sand had clung to her like a second skin, and how the dull sting of it had prickled the soft of her arm.

“It’s been a while since we’ve seen other merchants,” he said quietly, a flicker of unease passing through his eyes, which was gone the next second.

“Maybe we’re going off track. Hah.”

“Not funny.”

“Genuinely though, what’s the point of being alive?” Her knuckles were white from gripping the edges. “It’s always just travelling. Endless piles of sand.”

“Beats me.”

“Would you be content if you were a rich emperor?” Her voice carried a note of genuine curiosity.

“Maybe.”

“You’d be surrounded by concubines,” she said, blowing dirt off her eyelashes, “with fabulous banquets to fill your stomach and silk clothes to cocoon you. You’d be safe and sound.”

“I would miss bartering.” His words held a hint of raw vulnerability he rarely ever showed.

“Hmm. Me too.”

The girl smiled, a grin that rounded her cheeks, and began humming a tune, a nursery rhyme her mother had sung to her when she was young, back when every day spent by her was wrapped in warmth and comfort.

The hustle and bustle of the market welcomed the duo— the faint hammering of metal against metal and the splatter of clay against wooden platters reaching their ears. They hooked the camels’ reins to a nearby fence, shoved some fresh greens beneath their muzzles, then gathered the china that had, unfortunately, been broken on the way.

“Something is amiss,” the boy said, frowning his brow. “No wonder there weren’t any merchants on the road. There aren’t many here either...” His voice trailed off, and the duo began to take in their surroundings more cautiously.

“The sultan has struck again,” the soldiers manning the passageway whispered fervently, “taxes have been tripled... We might as well be losing our jobs if merchants don’t pass by anymore.”

“Oh.” The boy’s voice felt small.

“Yeah.” The girl stared at her worn sandals, the ones that had accompanied her since she was sent out to be a merchant at the age of six. They had been huge at first, but now they were comfortable, snugly wrapped around the soles of her feet. She started to wriggle her toes, as if the childish action could ward off the grim sense of finality that had settled in the air.

“Let’s just get the ceramics mended.” He heaved his bag of plates and bowls over his shoulder and made his way to the fixer they often saw.

“Long time no see, young’uns! Got yerselves some fine china today?” The fixer grinned; crooked, missing teeth and all, while creases lined her forehead and chin. Yet her smile was as warm and radiant as ever.

The girl nodded, the corners of her lips lifting slightly as she took in the familiar sight of the fixer. She turned her head towards the boy, watching him set the bag of broken china onto the floor. He opened it and began to bring out each shattered fragment, piece by piece, delicately. The fixer swiftly but gently took the fragile porcelain pieces and started doing what she did best— fixing.

“Young’uns, take care o’ yerselves, ya hear me?” The fixer used a no-nonsense tone, her gaze serious and steady.

The young duo nodded quietly in response, their eyes tracking her every move, taking in how the intricate patterns of dragons and clouds came back to life beneath her old, skillful hands.

“Remember,” she said, “when times are harsh, the fragments o’ yerself that fell off deserve to be picked back up.”

The duo, still lost in the way the patterns danced along the edges of the vase, the sides of the bowls, and the rims of the plates, nodded once again. They were too absorbed in the present, in the way shattered pieces were pieced back together and made whole again, in the way the designs were mended to intertwine comfortably, as good as new. Yet they failed to understand that fixed things always remain cracked deep inside, just like how the new layer of porcelain only fills the surface of the cracks in the china.

“Finished!” The fixer chuckled, then carefully placed the mended china back into the bag.

The boy pulled out three gold pieces, but before he could hand them to her, she stopped him abruptly. “Young’un, don’t waste yer precious coins. Just...” The skin beside her eyes crinkled as she smiled wryly. “Remember me. A fixer in one o’ the caravanserais.”

He felt his hand tremble as he tucked the coins back into his pocket. The girl rushed to the fixer and wrapped her in a bear hug, tears shimmering in the corners of her eyes.

“I miss you already, fixer...” she said quietly.

“Ye gorgeous girl,” the fixer said, a hint of pride in her voice, “ye keep growin’ up, and one day ye’ll see that goodbyes aren’t the end.”

The girl nodded sadly as she and the boy waved their farewells. The duo carefully carried the bag of mended china, as per usual, to avoid damaging them again. Their gazes were downcast, a cloud of solemnity hanging over them. The camels grunted as the girl unhooked their reins from the fence, while the boy gently placed the mended porcelain into the back of the caravan, where cushions lay to protect the fragile merchandise.

“Let’s go.”

The girl nodded in response, then crawled to the corner of the caravan, while the boy settled at the front, one leg angled at the camels’ hindquarters to spur them on, while the other rested comfortably on the footrest.

“HALT!”

A loud voice struck their eardrums, and the camels reared up in terror. The boy did his best to calm them, then proceeded to peek out from beneath the shade.

“Yes...? Sir?” The girl stayed deliberately hidden as the boy answered; if it were an attack, she’d at least have a slim chance to escape the chaos.

“Thirty gold coins. Per head.”

It was a soldier who had halted them, bushy-bearded and squint-eyed. The badge pinned to the left of his chest made it clear who he was— one of the Sultan’s tax collectors.

“Two... four... six...” The boy counted out aloud. When he reached thirty, he placed the pile of gold onto the coarse palms of the soldier. He tried his hardest not to wince at the sum, nor to imagine how much silk they’d need to sell in order to earn thirty gold coins.

“You sure there’s only one of you?” The bushy-bearded soldier frowned at the boy suspiciously. The boy nodded calmly, however, a slight twitch of his eye gave him away.

“SEARCH!” The soldier roared, and four guards stormed into the caravan, thrashing and rummaging around for a stowaway. A moment later, one of them grabbed the girl by the scruff of her neck and hauled her onto the ground.

“Explain this.” The soldier glared furiously at the boy, while the girl sat on the ground, pitiful and silent.

When only silence followed, the bushy-bearded soldier sighed wearily, dismissed the guards, then shuffled over to where the duo sat.

“Listen, I’ll let you kids off the hook this time. Five gold coins for her. That’s twenty-five less.”

The boy nodded gratefully as he pulled out five more gold pieces from his pouch, relieved that the soldier still had some resemblance of humanity.

“I’d advise you not to head to this caravanserai anymore. Your gold pouch wouldn’t survive this tax war.” The soldier gave the young duo a bow, a common courtesy, saluted, then walked off, presumably back to his post at the roadside.

“Hey.” The girl settled down beside the boy instead of hiding under the piles of goods in the caravan. “Do you think we should just... stop?”

“Depends. This caravanserai is off limits,” the boy said, his frown deepening by the second, “and several others along the road would be too expensive to pass through.”

“Should we head back to China, then?”

The boy shrugged in response, then gently nudged the camels’ hindquarters to let them trot slowly. The merchandise in the back clattered about; the mess left by the guards still untidied. But a more pressing matter weighed on their hands.

“Heading to the Turkish cities would be too risky, no?” The girl’s knuckles turned white from her grip on the wood.

“Yeah. And it’s about time we went back to where we started from.”

“Let’s go back, then.”

The boy pulled the reins and changed their direction, while the girl began humming her tune once more.

“Do we have a home?” The girl’s voice was muffled, her face buried in a soft pile of silk.

“I don’t know.”

“I think our home is on the road,” she said, then drew in as much air as she could, momentarily deprived of breath by the suffocating silk.

“I hate the idea of settling down.” The boy felt an uncomfortable sensation prickling at his skin at the mere thought of a warm house, where everything is domestic, predictable, and fixed in a routine.

“Well...” She drummed her fingertips against the wooden floor in a rhythmic, almost melodic way. “Where are we supposed to go then, if we don’t settle down?”

“Don’t know.” He curled his hand tightly around the reins, clutching them with an iron grip. “Don’t care.”

“Yeah, sure. You totally look like you don’t care.” The girl was tired of asking questions that never had clear answers. “Let’s say we keep heading back. What then?”

“I don’t know,” he said, resting his chin in the palm of his hand. “Get a job in a shop or something.”

“That sounds... mundane. Boring.”

“We could always try it out.” The boy shrugged. “There’s not really much else we can do.”

The conversation died. All they could think about now was the terrible loss they were about to face. Negativity clung to them easily, and all hope for the future vanished in a split second. The girl felt her hair stick to her skin, damp and oily, but it was the closest thing she could call ‘normal’. It was the normal that both of them desperately craved and needed.

The boy glanced at her, noticing how her cheeks held a bronze glaze, and how she seemed to glow, warmly, sharply, just like the sun on one of the better days. But his thoughts were astray, miles away from how she was doing, what she looked like, and far ahead from the dull trot of the camels.

She met his gaze, head-on, knowingly. She was his anchor, after all. The one thing that kept him tethered to this life, to this earth.

They remained silent for the rest of the day, sometimes chewing on the dried jerky they'd brought, sometimes gazing out at the barren desert that stretched on forever. Soon, the sun set, leaving only dim clouds and a moon in its wake.

“Hey. I see a small lake over there.” The girl pointed to the patch of water, if it could even be called a lake, then hopped off the caravan and ran towards this temporary refuge.

“Wait up.” The boy quickly nudged the camels, then guided them to a tree beside the tiny lake. He hopped off, tied the reins to the trunk, then yawned and stretched his arms, easing the tension that cramped his shoulders.

“It’s been centuries since I’ve seen water...” The girl trailed off, then dove in headfirst, uncaring of whatever dangers might lurk beneath the surface. Water splashed outwards in every direction.

“Aman be... Oh man.” The boy stared at the chaos she’d made and fanned out his shirt. The splash had soaked him through. “What if there are parasites?!”

The girl pointedly ignored him, swimming in wide, joyful movements, her arms flailing. Not in panic, but in pure, unguarded delight.

“Look.”

The boy’s eyes followed where she was pointing. A flicker of movement caught both their attention: perched on the edge of a branch was a desert finch, preening itself, its beak tucked between soft cinnamon feathers, which lined its small body. Neither spoke, too entranced by what was happening.

The bird tilted its head, its pitch-black eyes glinting. It hopped once. Twice. For a heartbeat, it seemed to look straight at them.

Then, with a flutter too quiet for the wind to notice, it rose, spiralling upward on invisible currents, until it was just a speck against the sky, then gone without a trace.

“It’s headed east,” the girl said softly.

“So are we,” the boy replied.

The sun dipped low, spilling amber across the dunes, and for a moment, the sand glittered; not with heat, but with something softer, like a peaceful memory.

Behind them, their caravan’s tracks stretched faintly into the distance, but the wind was already smoothing them over, grain by grain, as if the desert was tucking their journey away. As to where, nobody knows.

“Do you think anyone will remember us? That we passed by, here, on the silk road.” The girl asked, her voice barely louder than the breeze.

The boy didn’t answer right away. He watched as a puff of sand got swept off the ground by a gust of wind, and spiralled upward, just like how the finch had, catching the last light, before vanishing into the sky.

“Maybe not,” he said, at last. “But we remember. And that’s enough.”

She began humming the old tune, the one about merchants and wind and legacies that last till the end of time.

And as the stars blinked awake above the endless road, the two of them sat in silence, not lost, not found, yet still simply here, together, as the world kept turning beneath their feet and time continued, not pausing for anyone.

The finch was gone. The tracks would vanish by dawn. Even their names might be lost. No, not *might*. They *would* be.

But as she traced a slim crack in the mended bowl, the one the fixer had saved with golden seams, she understood.

This was the legacy. Not wealth or riches, nor ceramics or silk, but the choice to keep going, to pick up what has broken, to walk beside someone, to travel with them, under an endless sky.

And somewhere, faint on the breeze, the first notes of “The Story of the Nameless” began to play, a fresh start, perhaps, or a quiet ending.

“What the wind remembers,
is neither squashed hope nor displeasures—
for what gets carried on,
is a new dawn.

Where new paths get woven,
and journeys get left uncertain.

For now,
the duo walks;
to wherever their fates allow,
where home is found in the wind, the sand, and the sky,
not in places meant to tie.”

The Jade Cicada

HD Beijing School, Jin Jin – 15

For as long as Kai could remember, the old wall in his Fujian village seemed to whisper. It wasn't a sound, but a feeling of distant footsteps and camel bells. Before his grandfather died, he gave Kai a small, green jade cicada. "It traveled the Old Silk Road," he whispered. "It remembers. Maybe you can teach it new songs."

By sixteen, the hum in Kai's heart had become a call he couldn't ignore. On the news, they talked about the Belt and Road Initiative—a new Silk Road of trains and ports. But Kai, holding his cicada, thought of the older road, the one made of people. He decided to walk west, to see if one boy could help connect a world that felt divided.

After much discussion, his worried parents agreed. "Take this," his mother said, handing him a phone. "And walk toward kindness."

The first part of his journey was through modern China. Truck drivers bought him noodles and said, "The road is not a path anymore!" He walked until he reached Xi'an. There, in a busy market full of lights and smells, he met Aya. She was a Uyghur girl with dark, watchful eyes.

"You walk for peace?" she asked, sounding unsure. "Peace is my grandmother making bread without anyone bothering her." She thought for a moment. "I'll walk with you to the edge of the desert. It is my grandmother's greatest wish, too."

As they walked, Aya drew pictures in a small book. She drew Kai's face, determined and dusty. When they parted, she gave him a sketch. It showed the two of them as a tiny bridge between different kinds of temples. "The Road is made of faces," she said, "not just miles."

In **Kazakhstan**, the world opened into a wide, golden steppe. He stayed with a family in a yurt, a round felt tent. To thank them, he helped fix their solar panel, which powered a single, precious lightbulb. The children loved his jade cicada. They gave him a small, carefully made felt horse. "For your journey," their mother said. The horse and the cicada sat together in his pocket.

In **Uzbekistan**, the cities shone with blue tiles. In Samarkand, he worked in a bakery below the ancient buildings. The baker, Rustam, had a son working on a new railway far away. "He sends money," Rustam said, "but I miss his voice." He gave Kai a large, flat bread stamped with a pattern. "Bread," he said, "always points your heart toward home."

Kai saw the new Silk Road everywhere—construction sites, new signs. But he looked for human threads. In **Azerbaijan**, a sudden storm hit a bazaar. Kai helped an elderly carpet-seller, Mr. Alizadeh, quickly cover his rugs. Grateful, the man shared tea and showed Kai a small, old carpet. "Each knot is a story," he said. He pointed to a faded golden thread. "This is the Silk Road. The connection." He cut a small piece with gold thread and gave it to Kai. "Connections are made by hand," he said.

The walking was harder than Kai ever imagined. In Istanbul, his phone was stolen. He was often tired, hungry, and lonely. One evening in a noisy Greek port, he sat on a pier, his feet sore. Huge container ships, like moving cities, passed by without noticing him. He felt like a speck of dust. He held the jade cicada. *Grandfather*, he thought, *I have failed. The world is too big.*

“That is beautiful,” a voice said. A girl named Eleni, with paint on her jeans, was sketching the port. He showed her his treasures: the cicada, the felt horse, Aya’s drawing, the bread stamp, the carpet piece. He told her his story.

“You carry a museum of kindness,” she said, amazed. She took him to her family’s home for a warm meal. That night, she painted. The next morning, she showed him. She had painted his jade cicada. From it, on a golden chain, hung all his other gifts, like charms on a necklace. It was a map of his journey made from friendship.

“The road isn’t just out there,” Eleni said, tapping the painting and then his chest. “It’s in here. You didn’t fail. You wove these people together.”

Her words lifted his spirit. He continued, through **Italy, France, and Germany**. He worked on a farm for a bed, helped in a bookshop for a meal. His collection grew: a blue glass bead from Venice, a small knife from a kind old man in Switzerland, a flower pressed in the Alps.

Two years after he began, Kai reached the end of the land: a cliff in **Portugal**. The sun was setting over the Atlantic, turning the water to gold. On a flat rock, he laid out his circle of treasures.

He held the jade cicada. The lonely hum was gone. Inside him was a new song, made of all the voices and kindness he had found. He hadn’t changed the whole world, but he had made real friends across continents. They had changed him.

The New Silk Road of steel and speed was behind him. But the Old Road, the one of human spirit—was now alive in his memory, in the scars on his feet, and in the quiet circle of gifts. The Road wasn’t finished. It was right there, in his open hand. It was just the beginning, waiting for the next step, the next story, the next act of kindness. And for the first time, he thought he could hear the cicada’s song soft, clear chirp, full of hope.

Sand and the Moon

HD Beijing School, Zhang Jin Chen – 15

The emperor of Tang summoned her to perform at court.

She would be reminded of that night months later when gazing at the moon. The night when she snuggled up to Mama, who had left for years, when she had been a girl. Walls are always made of sand in her hometown, Kucha. It could not be completed without the music of pipa, which was like a water drop, whose waves rippled through the void, spreading away with birds. While, the moonlight was like tranquil mercury flowing through the hair of Mama's... The night, the nights.

Yeah, pipa, she said to herself, I need to do something.

A porter was missed in the sandstorm the last day. There was no way for the caravan to find him, just like no way for him to get back to the team. Finding a dry body was not rare for the camel teams, so did them. She crossed the camp with bare feet silently, squeezing through camels slightly, looking for her pipa. Fortunately, she touched the pear-shaped body of it, its smooth wooden surface, and six metal strings. It was there, entirely there, and always there, actually.

“What’s it, Lutea?” She heard somebody calling her, and recognized who he was immediately in the blur of morning.

Guards in the caravan were not few, but Palk was not the same as those hairy and blood-drinking beast. He was quiet, gentle, with rare black hair, and , it was said that, had some special feelings to Lutea.

“Nothing Palk, nothing.” She answered, “Horrible weather yesterday, wasn’t it? Hopefully the biting sand can be as gentle as your wife!”

Just as what’s predicted, they didn’t meet any sandstorm in the following days, and didn’t meet the missing porter, either. On the way, they passed two more towns, signing that they could stay overnight in inns. But most of the time they had to camp out in the desert. The desert night was piercing cold. What was also there was only a pale moon and drifting sands. Sun, then moon, on the same dunes.

The moon was full again, shining upon the ancient road. The Kucha entertainer—perhaps named Lutea, or perhaps merely be called Lutea by her master—stood alone in the yard of an inn beside the way, gazing at the same moon that hung over her homeland.

She had just finished a whirling dance, earning cheers and a few silver coins from a Sogdian merchant caravan, few people knew she was also talented in that. The money was not hers, it would all be given to her master. The feel of the six-stringed pipa still lingered on her fingertips, but there was no instrument beside her now—only a small brass bell tied to her waist, tinkling softly in the night breeze.

She remembered, on a full moon night about a year ago, outside Pilang Old city in Kucha, her master had traded forty bolts of fine silk to a Sogdian merchant in exchange for her. The price was far lower than the legendary “one hundred and thirty seven bolts of silk” paid for a male slave, for she was just a thin, frail girl back then. After years, her playing skills had been so famous that from the emperor to the slaves, everyone in Tang empire knew that there was an entertainer in Kucha who was blessed with striking beauty and extraordinary skill on the pipa. She didn’t know, the merchants in Chang’an entered a bidding war to purchase her; She didn’t know that, the emperor issued a jade decree, commanding that she be bought to him. Her master had said, “I will take you to Chang’an, where gold and music fill the streets.” And so, she became part of the caravan.

The sky in the east was dead and silent.

The sound of the courtyard gate of the post station being forced open broke through the darkness, sounds like a watchman's clapper. Hazily, she remembered being herded outside the yard along with everyone else in the caravan. Almost immediately, the sound of cupboards being overturned and trunks being ransacked erupted from inside the building.

The guards were the first to kneel. Their weapons confiscated, they huddled behind her like frightened mice. This time, Palk was no different from the rest.

The men wore matching armor and carried tall banners emblazoned with a large eastern character she did not recognize. They seemed less like bandits rather than...regular soldiers. But in the pitch-black night, who could truly tell?

After they were gone, with the moon hanging lower than the courtyard wall, the group finally crept back into the main hall on trembling legs. The innkeeper and his wife had resisted fiercely—their blood was now a stark splash against the high wall. Everything was gone, taken as spoils of war, including that six-stringed pipa—the one that should have belonged to Lutea's mother but had been bought by her master.

No one wept. There was only a chilling silence, punctuated by furtive, flickering glances. Without almost any discussion, the decision was made. The guides picked up their knives again and pressed them against Lutea's throat. The message was clear: leave, or die. The food and fresh water were gone, the caravan had to lighten its burden. She glanced around, with a kind of numb cold, still trying to ask someone for help. She realized that Palk avoided her gaze, lowering his head, to fidget with the knife hilt. He had once said that when she played the pipa, it was “as if moonlight had found a voice.” Now, that voice and the faint light that once flickered in his eyes were extinguished together.

In the first pale of dawn, she gathered her skirts and left. They were supposed to be past Liangzhou already, yet she turned her back to the rising sun to walk. The sun arched over her head and sank again below the horizon, until she felt like a drop of dew, utterly evaporated.

She had been walking this road for nearly a year. From Kucha to Dunhuang, then to Liangzhou, and lastly nearing Qinzhou. She knew that if she walked forward rather than got back, just ahead, beyond Longshan, lay the Chang'an of her dreams. The camel bells, the wind and sand, the shouts of unfamiliar tongues, the beacon smoke from frontier towers alone the way... all have woven themselves into the fabric of her life.

The moon climbed to its zenith, bright and clear. She remembered the small piece lapis lazuli pigment—flaked from a mural in the Kizil Caves—that her mother had secretly pressed into her hand at night. It held no warmth, yet it felt more reliable than any promise ever made. Mother had said it was the colour of the sky, and the night sky above her now was no different from the one over Kucha.

She began to hum a Kuchean melody, wordless. In its notes flowed the snowmelt from Tianshan Mountains, the winds of oasis, and a fate she could neither name nor explain. She knew that Chang'an was not home. But where was? Perhaps home was right here—on the ceaseless journey atop camels, on the road woven from silk and dust, in this moon that had shone over Kucha and would soon shine over Chang'an. At that very moment, the sky above Chang'an was ablaze, lit by towering flames and the ambition of An Lushan's.

She walked into the sea of sand, feeling herself grow lighter and thinner, about to dissolve into these boundless, repeating grains. A single grain of sand, returning to the desert. The moon listened in silence, spilling its light across the repeated dunes and eastward along that long, long road leading toward the future.

New Tales of China's Silk Road

Po Leung Kuk No. 1 W.H. Cheung College, Wong Pak Lok Dexter – 15

It was madness. When that frayed silk from the West first appeared in our square, I knew I would follow it. I remember the day with a clarity that seems inscribed with a diamond-tipped stylus. The merchant—a man with a face dried by the desert sun and a voice roughened by the desert winds—was both suspected and feared. Our elders gazed at him with trepidation, speaking of *gui*—ghosts and tricksters—who roamed the dunes. As the weaver's son, I could not tear my eyes from the length of cloth he used to buff a trinket. It was an odd cloth, thick even compared with our best *luo* silk, patterned with knots that defied the looms of our towns, colored with a purple that hinted at distant mollusks and foreign dyes. It was a piece of a tale, a single word from a vast and untranslated vocabulary. As a weaver's son, I know the language of thread. And this one had a story unspoken. That frayed silk was a question, and my soul, uneasy in the confines of our town and the regular rhythm of our silk shuttles, required an answer.

My resolve was a silent, growing thing, fostered in the presence of my father's disapproval. "We weave for emperors and for scholars," he said, his hands—ever stained with the dye of indigo and madder—gesturing to the bolts headed for Chang'an. "We do not chase phantasms into the howling waste." The phantasm, however, had planted a seed. I started my preparations, not in the open, but in darkness. I began to weave for a quest, not for a client. The silks I produced were a statement, a passport, and a plea. The bolt was of common *ling*, yet its weave was so densely thick with thread that it was almost liquid, catching light with a low, pearl-like shine—a blank canvas. This was my "key," perfect and untainted, designed to open doors to the unknown.

"My name is Issac. I had nothing with me except a small, perfect bolt of my own silk—my 'key.' I had a small party: my cousin Bo, two camels, and Arslan, a guide who claimed the whisperings of the desert were intelligible to him," explains T. E. Lawrence. "The journal I kept began with less finesse: I wrote on bamboo leaves: I, Liang, third son of Wei the Weaver, start on this day. With me were Bo, too loyal to have good sense; two stoic Bactrian camels—Brother Stone and Brother Sand—and also the Uighur guide, Arslan, who reeked of mutton fat and spoke to the wind."

The passes west of Jade Gate consisted of sand. The Gobi collected bones from lost caravans. The truth of the desert: the theft of all senses. The quiet does not soothe; it weighs, a palpable and piercing echo. The sky is ruled by a tyrant sun, and night by a cold king. We found the caravan piecemeal: not as the complete skeletons of the lost, but in splintered pieces—the ribs of a caravan stiff and half-buried in a sandhill, the shattered aplomb of mule teeth hardened to iron, a lone stinking boot forever pointed westward. Arslan would kneel to these artifacts, his long fingers scattering sand, repeating, "This caravanner feared the quiet more than dehydration." Our path followed the cool stars: a world contracting to the circle of our tired group, the never-ending ridge of ochre sand, and the flashing, shining, incomprehensible cold map etched upon the sky.

Again, the world changed. Not politically. Not ideologically. This world overturned physically. Then came the mountains. They rose before us, a dragon's spine of ice and nothingness. It's more than a mountain range; it's a land of giants. Our air is thin, scratching

our lungs with every breath. Pounding headaches began in our heads, throbbing steadily. Trails were narrow ledges of stone over pits of scree and darkness. Screaming wind blasted passes, its own cry diabolical. Respiration required effort. It made us knot together. Our pathetic signal to the mountains began as a crimson ribbon draped across a rock outcropping. This ribbon, a ripping of Bo's emergency tunic, was more than a symbol of our presence; it was our proclamation of our humanity against the indifference of the mountain.

Yet as we descended, we entered another world—past green valleys and finally into endless grass and endless blue sky. This explosion of color left us blinking tears from our eyes. Green pastures rolled like an endless sea, spotted with grazing flocks of sheep that wandered like marshmallow clouds. We breathed air that was heavy and sweet, thick with the smells of earth and herbs, and could drink it. We had traversed the backbone of the world, and now, on this other side of it, growth seemed to flourish in prodigious abundance. We met people whose eyes were blue-green. These people dwelled in tents of soft felt that sprang up from the grassy plain like mushrooms and moved with an almost dance-like elegance on ponies that were tough and small. There was an intricate dance of communication. A smile was an international medium of exchange. We traded without benefiting from an understanding of language—a rock for a bed, a mirror for milk. Our jade pebble carvings secured us warmth by a fire, and a simple mirror of bronze, which reflected an understanding of a windswept face to a herdsman who may never before have seen it, secured us mugs full of sweet, fermented mare's milk. We were stumbling into a different grammar of bartering.

In a market that smelled of spices and sheep, that is where I found him. The marketplace was a chaos of sounds—of baas and barks and the grunts of traders speaking a dozen different tongues, of cumin and coriander wafting through the smell of the animals. And there, beyond the chaos, sitting cross-legged with an assortment of odd wares laid out before him, was a man sitting quietly through it all. His face was lined with dust, and his eyes had a light of a far-off sea. He was from a place even further west than his brother. Arslan, who spoke scraps of a dozen tongues, found that he could decipher that he was a Sogdian, from a place of oasis cities beyond the Steppes. His brother had gone east, and he had come from even further west, from the shores of a large inner sea. A crowd gathered, a sense of occasion in the air. Taking a deep breath, I loosened the ties of my pack. I unfurled my silk. The hushed murmur of the onlookers stopped as my silk shimmered like a captive ray of sunlight. In the clear light of the steppe, the length came alive. It wasn't merely fabric, but a subjugated ray of light, a testament to a culture that could tame the worm, the loom, and the dye vat. The Sogdian's eyes, his sea-green windows, opened wide. He hunched forward, not to touch, but to observe the immaculate, dense weave. And then, incrementally, he reached into his own pack and drew out a necklace. The blue of the beads rivaled the twilight sky above—a hue I would come to know later as a mixture of something far bluer than blue, flecked with bits of pyrite, a starry night wrapped up in a package, a captured piece of heaven itself, unfathomably deep and rich, a hue of a soil so unforgiving and barren that grasses would not grow. We traded our treasures without a word being spoken. I offered him the bolt. He put the necklace in my outstretched hand. It was heavy with the weight of the stones. It is in this silence that the road was fully born. It did not come through empire, but through this quiet clasp of hands across the reaches of time, this acknowledgment of beauty wrought in distant places. There was nothing in this moment of dictatorship from Khan or Caesar, nothing of taxation or domination. It was only this clean, fundamental transaction in wonder. My silk, bred through agricultural prowess, in exchange for his lapis, generated through mine and mountain. The road was not traced on sand, but in this flash of shared need.

However, the return home was easier. The mountains appeared less intimidating, the desert seemed less endless, because they were familiar now. I did not have any chests of gold; instead, I had something heavier—knowledge. This time, the burden was in my head. I was taking home the blue glass, weird seeds, and crude maps scribbled on dust. These seeds, those of alfalfa and grapes, were packed carefully in wax cloth. The maps were drawn on leather, indicating rivers that led to other unknown lands and markers for other cities that represented Samarkand and Merv. But most significant was the realization that the terrible deserts and mountains were merely an antechamber, or a corridor, rather than a barrier. I had returned home as a hero, but I felt nothing but vision. They saw the foreign jewelry, the foreign seeds, and declared me a hero. I saw the start. I saw our silk flowing west along the route I had pioneered, while the return caravans were laden with wool, silver, and new knowledge inscribed on parchment. I saw, in my vision, not a drip, but a stream: bolts of brocade and damask, vats of cinnamon, bundles of lacquerware pouring out. And pouring back, not only goods, but ideas: scrolls of astronomy showing differing constellations, scrolls of healers' knowledge featuring strange herbs, rumors of a prophet born in the desert, the ringing of horses bred for battle and for beauty.

I was the first. I drew the line with my feet. My line was a single, delicate strand, close to being obliterated by the next puff of wind. The true history of the Silk Road, however, would be written by the thousands who followed me, meshing my faint, isolated strand into a sturdy rope that would connect the entire world. Now, an old man, I sit with my fire. My lapis necklace lies on a shelf. At times, I hear the camel bells ringing from the new, bustling caravanserais outside our walls, no longer a town but a vibrant metropolis. I recall the Sogdian man with sea-silver eyes, and I wonder if he, too, has grown old under some foreign sky, speaking of this weird, luminous fabric from the East. My thread alone was just the beginning. Now, I watch the rope expand, swelled with the fibers of innumerable others: Persian cartographers, Tibetan horsemen, Byzantine goldsmiths, Indian philosophers, all pressing on, peddling, transliterating, loving, and warring through that highway we chose to take. The folly resided not in going, but in thinking the world small to start with. The deeper wisdom resided in secretly learning, with each quiet trade, just how expansive and deliciously interconnected it might be.

The Merchant of Shadows

Pui Ching Middle School (Macau), Wong Ieok Lam Zaira – 16

The Western Market of Chang'an was a fever dream of commerce, a sprawling labyrinth where the world converged in a cacophony of ambition and dust. Sunlight pierced the haze in sharp, golden shafts, illuminating the frantic dance of particles that tasted of parched earth and ancient travel. The air was a thick, suffocating tapestry of scents: the cloying sweetness of scorched sugar from the confectioners' stalls, the pungent, oily musk of unwashed Bactrian camels, and the sharp, metallic tang of Persian silver coins clinking in leather pouches. It was here, amidst the thundering chaos of heavy-laden caravans preparing for the long trek west, that Ming-Yuen stood, looking very much like a mistake in the grand design of the Silk Road.

He stood beside a shaggy, wild-eyed pony that looked more like a mountain goat than a creature of burden. The animal was small, sturdy, and entirely unimpressed by the grandeur of the imperial city. While the merchant lords around him oversaw the lashing of massive crates of green jade—stones so heavy they required four straining men to lift—Ming-Yuen's only cargo was a pair of lacquer-sealed chests. They were small, elegantly crafted from dark wood, and seemingly light enough for a child to carry without breaking a sweat.

“Out of the way, little ghost!”

The voice barked like a cracking whip. It belonged to Master Zhang, the caravan's lead guide, a man whose skin had been cured into a texture like old leather by decades of salt and sun. His eyes were narrow slits, perpetually squinting against a horizon that only he could see, and his voice sounded like heavy stones grinding together in a riverbed.

Zhang came to a halt, his massive frame towering over the boy. He eyed Ming-Yuen's meager kit with a mixture of confusion and open hostility. He poked the side of the pony with a riding crop. “You're the one the Guild Master paid a king's ransom for? Look at this beast. It's half-starved and carries nothing but air. We are crossing the Taklamakan, also known as the ‘Sea of Death’! We aren't taking a leisurely picnic in the Emperor's plum gardens. Where is your merchant's soul, boy? Where is your silk? Your tea? Your tempered iron?”

Ming-Yuen looked up, his face calm despite the intimidating presence of the veteran traveler. His voice was thin, but it possessed a strange, vibrating steadiness. “I carry the history of the wind, Master Zhang,” he replied softly. “And the songs the mountains sing to one another when they think no one is listening. I carry the ghosts of the provinces and the dreams of the city. My cargo does not weigh down the horse, but it may lift your men.”

Zhang spat into the dry dust at Ming-Yuen's feet, a gesture of profound dismissal. “The desert doesn't listen to songs, boy. It eats them. It swallows the screams of dying men and the prayers of the pious alike. If you can't eat it, wear it, or sell it for silver, it is a death sentence in the waste. You want to trade in whispers? Fine. But keep to the rear. Stay out of the path of the water-camels. And if your pony dies, know this: we leave you to the vultures and the shifting sands. I won't lose a single drop of water for a bag of poems.”

“I understand, Master Zhang,” Ming-Yuen said, bowing low. “I only ask that you do not judge the value of a chest by its weight until the sun goes down.”

The journey began not with a gallop, but with a slow, agonizing descent into a world of beige and bone. For weeks, the lush greenery of the interior faded into memory, replaced by a haunting palette of ochre and slate. The only music was the rhythmic, hypnotic thump of hooves and the dry, lonely rattle of harness bells that signaled the caravan was still moving, still alive. The Taklamakan Desert soon rose to greet them, a vast, undulating ocean of sand that lived up to its grim translation: *The Place of No Return*.

Ming-Yuen became a shadow among shadows. He spoke little, fading into the background of the caravan's daily grind. While the others spent their evenings arguing over exchange rates or nursing their sore joints, Ming-Yuen tended to his chests with the meticulous devotion of a priest at an altar. He would sit by the dying embers of his small fire, using a tiny vial of expensive nut oil to keep the paper of his scrolls supple against the desiccation of the air. He wielded a fine brush like a surgeon, repairing delicate ink lines that had begun to crack under the relentless heat of the Gobi.

One night, the desert itself began to speak. A low-frequency hum, haunting and subterranean, vibrated through the ground—the “singing sands” caused by the movement of massive dunes shifting in the dark. In the eerie light of a crescent moon, a young porter named Bo crawled toward Ming-Yuen's fire. Bo was shivering despite the lingering heat, his eyes glazed with the terrifying, vacant stare of sand-fever.

“Tell me it isn't all brown,” Bo whispered, his voice a dry rasp. “Tell me the world isn't just dust and bone. I've forgotten what the color of life looks like, Ming. Every time I close my eyes, I see only the sand.”

Ming-Yuen looked at the boy and felt a pang of ancient sorrow. He reached into his lacquer chest and pulled out a single piece of stained glass, no larger than a thumbnail. He held it carefully before the flickering orange flame of the campfire. “Look, Bo. Look through the glass at the center of the flame.”

As the firelight hit the glass, a splash of deep, crystalline ocean blue danced across the parched sand at their feet. It was a color so vibrant it seemed to pulse with its own heart.

“In the South,” Ming-Yuen began, his voice taking on a rhythmic, hypnotic quality that seemed to harmonize with the singing dunes, “the water is this color for a thousand miles. It tastes of salt and ancient power. There are fish there the size of houses, with scales like silver coins, that leap high into the air just to feel the sun on their backs before diving into the cool, dark depths.”

“Is it truly that blue?” Bo asked, his breathing slowing.

“Bluer,” Ming-Yuen replied. “And the trees there are so green they look like they've swallowed the sunlight. They stand in forests so thick that the ground never feels the heat of the noon sun.”

He spoke of the emerald forests of the Yangtze, the white mists of the Huashan mountains, and the red silk lanterns of the capital. One by one, the other porters and even a few of the hardened merchants drifted closer, drawn by the cadence of his storytelling. For a brief, miraculous moment, the dry, choking air of the Taklamakan felt cool and wet.

Master Zhang watched from the darkness. He walked over, his heavy boots crunching the sand. “Is that all you have, boy? Blue glass and tall tales? We are halfway to Samarkand and the water skins are stretching thin. Will your blue water fill a canteen?”

“No, Master Zhang,” Ming-Yuen said, looking up. “But it helps a man carry his canteen for another ten miles. Hope is lighter than water, but it carries a man further.”

Zhang grunted, but he didn't mock the boy further. He noticed that the men worked faster the next morning, their spirits bolstered by a vision they couldn't trade for gold. He stopped calling Ming-Yuen a "ghost."

But the desert is a jealous god, and it does not allow hope to go unchallenged. The strike came not with a roar, but with a sky that turned the color of bruised copper. The air grew deathly still, the silence more terrifying than any storm.

"Buran!" Zhang's scream was a desperate clarion call. "Secure the lead camels! Everyone down! Cover your faces!"

A terrifying, vertical wall of black grit hit the caravan with the force of an iron blow. The world simply ceased to exist, replaced by a vertical sea of stinging, blinding sand. Ming-Yuen threw himself into the dirt, burying his face in his pony's thick neck and locking his arms around his chests until his knuckles turned bone-white. The wind shrieked like a thousand banshees, attempting to peel his fingers back and steal his precious cargo. "Don't take them!" he screamed into the pony's fur. "Don't let them go!"

When the wind finally died hours later, the world had been rewritten. The dunes had moved like massive, slow waves, burying their landmarks and the ancient stone markers they relied on. Their water-scout had vanished into the grit, and the lead camels, carrying the primary water skins and dried meat, had bolted into the void. They were lost in a featureless wasteland.

"The markers are gone," Zhang said, his face pale under the layer of dust. "We have enough water for three days if we crawl. If we don't find the well at the red cliffs, we are dead men."

For three days, they wandered in a daze. Panic began to eye the private canteens of neighbors. Thirst became a physical weight, crushing the lungs. Just as the last of their strength began to fail, they stumbled upon an outpost at twilight. It was a brutal fortress of red clay, perched precariously on a jagged cliff—the territory of the Red-Eyed Yuezhi, a clan of fierce outcasts.

Sora, their fearless leader with a scar that ran like a lightning bolt from her temple to her jaw, met them at the base of the cliff. Her gaze was as hard and cold as flint.

"We have silk! Imperial jade of the highest quality!" Zhang shouted, his voice cracking with desperation and dehydration. "Please, we only need access to your well. We will pay triple the weight in silver!"

Sora didn't even glance at the shimmering cloth Zhang held up. "We cannot drink jade," she said, her voice like grinding gravel. "And your silk will not stop our children from crying in the dark when the winter winds come. We have barely enough water for our own. Why should I trade the life of my people for shiny rocks and rags? Go back to the sand. At least there, the end is quiet."

"You would let us die for lack of a bucket of water?" Zhang pleaded, dropping to his knees.

"The desert kills those who are weak," Sora replied. "You bring us nothing of value."

As the Yuezhi guards leveled their obsidian-tipped spears, Ming-Yuen stepped forward. He did not reach for a sword or a purse of silver. He reached for a rod of polished bamboo and a sheet of translucent, oiled donkey skin.

"I have a trade that has no weight, but can fill a room," he called out, his voice echoing off the high mud walls.

Sora narrowed her eyes. "What is this? A child's toy?"

"It is a bridge," Ming-Yuen said. "Give me until the moon reaches the zenith. If I haven't shown you something worth more than your water, you can leave us to the vultures."

Curiosity, a rare commodity in the waste, stayed Sora's hand. "Very well, storyteller. One night."

Ming-Yuen set up a small, folding screen against the fortress wall and lit his small oil lamp. As the moon rose over the jagged peaks, a shadow flickered to life on the silk. He used a hollow reed to whistle like the mountain wind and his own voice to mimic the thunder. He told the tale of the First Mother of the Yuezhi, a story he had gathered from a dying traveler months prior, mixing their local folklore with his own refined art.

The puppets didn't just move; they fought, they wept, and they soared. He showed them the Great Migration, the battles against the mountain spirits, and the discovery of the red cliffs. He gave the outcasts back their own history, polished and brightened by the lens of his imagination.

The guards slowly lowered their spears. Sora stepped closer, her eyes wide and wet as she saw her own ancestors' struggles reflected in the dancing shadows.

"You know our songs?" she whispered, her voice losing its edge. "How could a boy from the city know the laments of the Red Cliffs?"

"I know that everyone's song sounds the same when they are afraid," Ming-Yuen replied, his hands moving the puppets with frantic grace. "And even more so when they are brave. Your history is not just yours, Sora. It is the world's."

That night, the heavy timber gates of the fortress groaned open. The caravan was saved not by the silk they carried in their hands, but by the weightless dreams Ming-Yuen carried in his heart. They were fed, watered, and given a guide who knew the hidden veins of moisture beneath the sand.

They eventually reached the shimmering turquoise domes of Samarkand, not as broken victims of the waste, but as legends. Word had spread ahead of them through the desert whispers: the "Caravan of the Moon" was coming, led by a boy who could turn shadows into gold.

In the great markets of the West, Zhang stood beside Ming-Yuen. "I was wrong, boy," Zhang said, looking at the crowds gathered to hear the storyteller. "I thought a merchant was a man who moved things from one place to another. But you... you move the places themselves."

"We are all just carrying what we can, Master Zhang," Ming-Yuen said.

Decades passed, and the world changed. Empires rose and fell like the dunes of the Taklamakan. One spring evening, back in the bustling Western Market of Chang'an, a young, successful merchant found an old man sitting by the city gates. It was Master Zhang, long retired and nearly blind.

"Tell me a story, boy," the old man rasped, his spirit still sharp.

Ming-Yuen sat beside his old mentor and opened a familiar lacquer chest. "Master Zhang, it is I, the ghost."

The old man laughed, a wet, happy sound. "Ah, the Merchant of Shadows. Do you still have that blue glass?"

"I have something better," Ming-Yuen began, his voice weaving into the evening air. "This one is about a merchant who thought he was carrying nothing but paper, but was actually carrying the weight of the entire world."

As he spoke, the market grew quiet. The new Silk Road was no longer just a path of trade; it was the world's nervous system. The silk and jade were the skin and bone, but the stories were the electrical impulses that kept the heart of civilization beating. And as long as a story was being told, the road would never truly end.

Through to Constantinople

Stewards Pooi Kei College, Yau Sin Hang Wyatt – 15

Mina was sick of pistachios.

Sure, Mina loved the shade from the rows of pistachio trees, the sunset-colors of pistachio fruits, the smell of her house when her grandfather brought baskets upon baskets of the fruits inside to dry. But she was really starting to get sick of her farm.

Mina had lived on the farm for her whole life, and the only things she had really known were pistachios, her house, and the dirt underfoot. The thing she really looked forward to seeing though, was the book seller that came by once a month. On his camel were stacks upon stacks of books, each one filled with the latest research from Tabriz and Samarkand. Textbooks, celestial charts, annals, atlases – especially the atlases. Mina couldn't get enough of them, and she wasn't happy with just learning about the world through writing.

“Grandpa, can I go to all those places from the books? Especially Constantinople. It looks so cool!”

Her grandpa would always reply, “Mina, if you ever wanted to go that far, you'd need a hundred other people to cross the desert with you! The outside world is way too complicated for you. Just focus on the pistachios for now.”

Every time Mina heard those words, she would sigh and think to herself, “That's basically a no! Why would anyone even want to do that?!” Like a chain, her grandpa's words wrapped and twisted around the house, keeping the gates firmly shut. So, Mina silently studied her Greek, in preparation for a trip to the Ottoman Empire that she wasn't sure would ever materialize.

Now, as Mina took one last look at the receding pistachio trees, she silently thanked herself for the preparations she'd done. A hundred other people would, in fact, cross the desert with her, as the local messenger told her, for knowledge, for money, and for silk. She had planned to go to Constantinople by tagging along with a caravan setting off in Baghdad, so she made sure to read up on the sights she could see in those cities.

Reaching into the bag on the back of her camel for the books she wanted to read, Mina sighed. They were buried under a large shipment of pistachios, which she pushed aside. That was her grandpa's other way to discourage her from going, by limiting the amount of things she could buy. However, Mina had decided that she would go, pistachios or not, and so she begrudgingly took the nuts and went on her way. She couldn't believe how wrong her grandpa was. Keeping her on that farm for so long, just because he was too close-minded to believe that she could survive outside the farm!

When Mina started to leave the places she was familiar with, she could only think of one word to describe the long, dry stretches of land around her. *Empty*. Occasionally, there was a village where she would buy food from, or little oases and rivers where she would get water, but there was little else around. Still, Mina held out hope that she could persevere past the boring parts to prove her grandpa wrong. In the day, Mina rode on her camel, and in the night, Mina consulted

her manuscripts and dreamt about the things she would see when she got further along the Silk Road.

The path Mina took was still newly trodden, free from the cracked ground or overgrowth that plagued the roads she was used to. However, as the trail made its way through the valleys, fistfuls and fistfuls of sand also found their ways onto Mina.

On the first day, Mina could ignore the sand in her shoes. As the days went on though, the sand poured into her cargo, all over her camel's saddle, into every nook and cranny, and then some more. It itched at Mina, as if a thousand little worms had something personal against her.

On the sixth day, Mina asked no one in particular, "How long is this going to go on for? I must be almost at Baghdad by now, shouldn't I? Am I even going the right way?"

There was no reply. The sun continued its arc across the sky, a mocking smile seemingly aimed at Mina.

Mina sighed. "There's still a while to go, then..."

At one point, Mina felt as if she just stopped for a little moment, she would dissolve into a Mina-shaped sand dune. That was the only thought that kept her going against the sand and sun. Until Mina saw the slightest hint of green on the horizon, and until she could see a thousand other travellers like her heading towards the city ahead.

As she went forward, more and more streams of people converged together, until the road was less of a passage and more of a roaring crowd Mina had to weave her way through. This was how Mina knew she had left the tiny road she was taking, and arrived at the Road. The Silk Road.

Farms filled with dates and oranges stretched as far as Mina could see. Then, those farms gave way to imposing city gates, whitewashed until the walls gleamed. Inside the city proper, Mina could pick up individual languages beside her. Her own native Persian from people carrying pistachios like her. Arabic, which Mina was really bad at, dominated the conversations. Mina didn't dwell on the possibility of a language barrier for long. She was finally in a great city of the outside world, and she wouldn't let something like that make her nervous!

Meanwhile, people speaking in tongues Mina could only guess at rose from the street markets. Melodic languages drifted from people carrying crates of tea and silk, rhythmic ones filled by people selling amber and glass, a thousand different languages from a thousand different mouths. The only thing that united everyone was the fact that their cargo was equally new to Mina.

Baghdad itself smelled like opportunity. On the wind around her, Mina caught a whiff of manure from pack animals like her own, and a sickly-sweet scent from fruit that had been left under the sun for a little too long. Under all that, though, was the smell of old books, myrrh from the eastern coasts of Africa, sizzling eggplant and lamb, and above it all was the sharp smell of spices.

Entranced by everything around her, Mina wandered among the maze of buildings, until she heard the evening calls to prayer sound from somewhere inside the city. Suddenly, Mina snapped back to reality. She had totally forgotten that her caravan would leave at dusk!

During her exploration of the city, she must've forgotten to remember the skyline, as the landmarks she could see poking above the buildings were totally unfamiliar. Mina went to ask for directions from a girl leaning against the wall, but her Persian was just as bad as Mina's Arabic.

No use, then.

After giving the girl an apologetic half-smile, Mina ran off in a random direction. By what little of the setting sun she could still see, it was towards the east. Soon after, people started to light their lamps and the braziers on the streets. The Arabic lettering writhed in the flickering light, making them even less decipherable to Mina than they were before.

Defeated, Mina slumped onto a nearby ledge, when she heard a voice shout at her. “Hey! The lost girl over there – yes, you. Who else here looks lost?”

Mina froze, and looked at the man standing across from her. Following behind him was a cart filled with doll parts and stray supplies, and standing beside him was a little girl holding another doll. A doll merchant on the Silk Road and his daughter, then.

He continued as Mina stood up. “Don’t thank me for saving you, although you should be grateful that I decided to help you reach the caravans before they left. Or else, you would’ve needed to stay here forever, with how bad your Arabic is.”

Mina thought he looked trustworthy enough, despite his weird attitude, so she gestured for the man to lead the way. He spoke Arabic with a clear Egyptian accent, but the others could understand him well enough.

The three of them passed by store after store. Despite the noise around them, Mina had never heard an awkward silence so loud before. Trying to break the ice, Mina asked, “So... how did you know that I’m on the Silk Road? And how did you know I have bad Arabic?”

The man barked out a laugh. “No local would ever look as lost as you. As for the Arabic, did you think that you weren’t staring at those signs like you were staring at a painting?”

Mina wondered what his problem with her was, but she ignored it for now. She really needed to make it to the caravans in time, and her guide seemed to speak Arabic pretty well, bad attitude or not.

In just a few twists and turns, Mina could see the buildings starting to thin out a little, until she could see the twilight sky unobstructed again. At the same time, Mina could see their destination in the distance. Camels, people, and all sorts of goods, much more than Mina had seen in the markets. Without the surrounding crowds of the city, Mina could more clearly see how many people were travelling on the Silk Road. In the distance, she saw...?

The man interrupted her. “You have to repay me. I’m not going to help you for free, you know.”

Mina gave a half-hearted nod, and the man left. Mina sighed and put her interactions with him out of her mind, instead deciding to join the larger group in organizing her things. She had more important things to deal with than him, anyway.

As Mina found out, there weren’t any other important things to do except for travelling forward. In those hours when conversations died down, Mina noticed that there were more streams and springs around, and that the desert sand slowly faded away to dirt. The signs were now written in Turkish, the letters’ curves and arches matching those of the ruins that Mina’s caravan now rested below. Meanwhile, Mina got used to the sight of the man and his daughter travelling next to her. By fate or by pure chance, all three of them were travelling on the same caravan to Istanbul.

The man’s daughter, which Mina found out was called Khadija, bounded towards Mina, probably to ask something like she had done many times before. She was incessantly curious, and she always asked Mina questions about Persia. Even though Mina didn’t think she really knew that much about Persia, she would try her best to answer Khadija.

This time, however, it seemed as if Khadija had something to tell Mina.

“Mina, Mina! Do you wanna hear a secret?”

Mina shrugged. “Why not?”

“My secret is that when I grow older, I hope that I can travel as far and read as many books as you!”

Mina smiled at Khadija. “Aww! It’s always nice to meet someone else that’s obsessed with books. You can start reading more right now, if you want to. Do you want to borrow some of my books?”

Khadija sighed, “Of course I want to... too bad my dad doesn’t want me to read about places too far away from Egypt. Sometimes I feel... trapped, you know? I guess that’s just how life is though.”

Instantly, Mina was pulled back to that tiny pistachio farm in that little part of Persia. Mina had heard of Khadija’s story before, experienced it, and she wasn’t going to let it play out before another curious girl like her.

“Sorry. Khadija, watch the camel, will you?”

Mina stormed off towards the man she hadn’t talked to since Baghdad, her anger barely restrained by each deep breath she took. He wasn’t hard to find, as the man was sorting through the same bags of doll parts he had when Mina first met him.

Mina said to him, “So!”

She didn’t mean for it to be that loud, but she did smile at how the man jumped from his seat a little. Mina continued, “Whatever your name is, I’m here to ask you just one question. Why don’t you let your daughter read about the rest of the world?”

The man raised an eyebrow, turning to her. “Respect me by addressing me by my actual name first. It’s Babu. And why do you care so much about how I raise my child?” He then flashed a smug grin at Mina like he had made a witty retort. Mina absolutely hated it when people did that, so she didn’t even try to hide her frustration when she replied.

“Why do I care? I care because you are forcing your daughter to live a life of ignorance, just because you are too close-minded to let Khadija learn about the world!”

She had hit a nerve in the man, who she was not going to call by his actual name. He shouted back at her, “I’m not close-minded! I just want the best for her!”

Mina could feel her ears turning red. “Do you really want the best for her? Or are you just scared that she’ll leave you once she has the knowledge to?”

Clearly caught off guard, the man tried to say something, but it came out more of a squeak at first. “No, I... I don’t know. But if she leaves Egypt, how will I make sure she’s okay? And how will I find her again? I just want the best for her, and that means keeping her safe.”

Mina replied, more calmly this time, “I know you’re worried about your daughter. But I understand how she feels, and she’s curious. Sometimes, Babu, the best you can do for someone curious is to set them free, free into the world.”

Babu breathed deeply, and when he opened his eyes again, the smug glint in his eyes seemed to have gone out. Now, Mina no longer saw the man with the weird attitude in Baghdad. All she could see was Babu, who would’ve done anything to keep Khadija safe - but maybe a bit too much.

Babu sighed. “Thank you, Mina. I think... Khadija is going to have a lot more knowledge about the world after today.” Then, Babu turned around, leaving Mina alone with her thoughts.

Looking at Babu in the distance, Mina couldn’t help but think back on how her grandpa and Babu both had the same salt-and-pepper hair, the same wrinkles on their faces. The only difference was that Mina’s grandfather had learned to let her learn about the world sooner.

Sifting the pistachios through her hands on her camel, Mina realized that her grandpa had actually wanted her to go this entire time. Why else would he buy so many books for her, and why else would he let her leave on the Silk Road with barely a word? He really had loved Mina. But sometimes, loving someone meant that you had to let them go.

And he did.

The rest of the trip to Constantinople was uneventful, but Babu had warmed up to Mina a lot more. Most days, Khadija and Mina would read books and recite their favourite passages together. On other days, the three of them would recount stories about their lives back home.

When the walls of Constantinople rose ahead, Mina was in the middle of telling one such story.

“And my grandpa, he loved to tell me about how he didn’t want me to leave Persia. Could you believe he wanted me to go see the world this entire time?!”

That was the last one that Mina had told Khadija and Babu, when they left for the markets. Before they left, Khadija said, “My dad says that we can go to Persia after the next batch of dolls are done. Don’t forget to teach me more next time!”

Turning her back to face a waterfront overlooking the Bosphorus, Mina promised herself to go back to Persia, to thank her grandpa and to meet with Khadija and Babu again. One day, much further in the future, she promised herself to go to one of the universities in the capital, and hopefully become a historian or a cartographer. But today was not that day, and she had to see all the sights of the city that she had read about for so long. Laughing, Mina ran off into the streets of Constantinople.

The sun rises over the Silk Road. Light glints off of the minarets of the Hagia Sophia, and off of a drop of dew on a pistachio tree’s leaf. The light hits the eye of an old man in Persia.

The old man is laughing because his granddaughter is also laughing.

Fiction

Group 5



The Silk Anchor

ESF King George V School, Rakin Khan – 16

Chapter I: The Glass Horizon

The cranes at the Kwai Tsing container terminal rise and fall with practiced grace, like a calligrapher's brush strokes across a bruised Hong Kong sky. From my vantage point behind the glass of the observation deck, the world resembles a vast game of Tetris played with the wealth of nations.

My scanner, a sleek piece of black plastic that feels like an extension of my hand, chirps. Beep. Container 4492-J. Destination: Piraeus, Greece. Contents: High-density fiber optic cables. Beep. "The New Silk Road isn't made of dirt and camel breath anymore, Mei," Mr. Lau said, leaning over my shoulder. He smelled of expensive espresso and the ozone of air-conditioned rooms. "It's made of light. Data moving at the speed of thought. We are the gatekeepers of that light."

I nodded, keeping the polite, vacant smile of an intern. Mr. Lau liked metaphors, especially those that made logistics sound like poetry. To him, the "Belt and Road" was a seamless map of progress. To me, it was a mountain of digital paperwork. Behind his desk, a world map glowed with bright blue lines connecting Xi'an to Rotterdam—an efficient web designed to unite the globe. I often wondered what got caught in the webbing.

Chapter II: The Dust of 1912

Shao-Heng wiped the grit from his eyes as the caravan halted at the edge of the Hexi Corridor. Behind him, three hundred mules groaned under the weight of raw silk and pressed tea. Ahead, the horizon shimmered like a lake of fire.

He was the interpreter—the bridge between British trade envoys, Han merchants, and nomadic guides. He carried three languages in his throat, but today, they all tasted of copper and thirst. The local headman, a man with skin like cracked leather, pulled Shao-Heng aside, speaking in a low, urgent dialect of the mountains.

"The wind has changed," the headman whispered. "In the village of Wuwei, the black cough has taken the children. If you lead the caravan through the main gates, you bring the shroud with you. You must turn north, toward the dunes."

Shao-Heng looked at the British envoy, Captain Sterling, who was tapping his pocket watch. Sterling didn't see people; he saw a schedule. To turn north meant a three-week delay. It meant the silk would miss the autumn ships.

Chapter III: Grave Shift

The air in the modern archive was thick, tasting of dust and the slow decay of organic ink. I had been assigned to the "Grave Shift"—digitizing the company's 1920s-era ledgers.

I pulled a cart of ledgers, most of them mundane records of tonnage and tariffs. Near the bottom, I found a folder bound in silk thread that had turned brittle and black. Inside was a manifest from the Northern Route, 1912. There, in faded vermilion ink, was my family name: Lin Shao-Heng.

Next to his name was a frantic scrawl in the margin, a note in English written with a shaking hand: "Discrepancy in translation. DO NOT RECORD. DO NOT TRANSLATE."

I touched the paper. It was cold.

Chapter IV: The Neon and the Silk

That night, the neon lights of Mong Kok blurred against the rain-slicked window of our apartment. I sat across from Po Po, my grandmother. She was the keeper of our family's "small history."

"Language is cargo, Mei," she said, her voice competing with the hiss of the teakettle. She reached into a lacquered box and retrieved a small silk scrap covered in hand-painted maps. "Your great-grandfather knew that. The traders wanted the route kept open. They told Shao-Heng to tell the guards that the path was clear."

"And what did he do?" I asked.

"He lied," Po Po smiled thinly. "He told the merchants the guides had seen bandits to the north, forcing the caravan onto a longer, safer path. He intentionally mistranslated the maps. He saved the village from the traders, and the traders from the plague, but he was fired for 'incompetence' when they arrived late. He carried that 'failure' like a badge of honor."

Chapter V: The Optimal Truth

The next morning, the "light" of the New Silk Road was blinding. Mr. Lau called me into his office, where a draft community impact survey regarding a new high-speed rail link in Central Asia sat glowing on his massive screen.

"Mei, look at this translation," he said, pointing to a paragraph regarding the displacement of a nomadic settlement. "The local response uses a word that translates to 'stolen' or 'severed.' It's too emotive. We need to 'optimize' the language for the board. Change it to 'reallocated for regional synergy.' It sounds more... cooperative."

I looked at the screen. The villagers' words were raw. They spoke not of "synergy," but of the graves of their ancestors and the wells that had run dry because of the construction.

"But, sir," I said, my voice shaking. "The word they used, *khit*, it means a spiritual severing. 'Optimized' doesn't just change the tone; it erases their reality."

Lau sighed. "We are building the future, Mei. We don't have time for the poetry of the past. Just make the change."

Chapter VI: The Unbroken Thread

I sat at my desk, the cursor blinking like a heartbeat. Another container was logged. I thought about Shao-Heng in the dust of 1912, choosing to be a "bad interpreter" to be a good man.

I began to type. But I didn't use the word "optimized."

I wrote a report that included a three-page appendix on the linguistic nuances of the local complaints. I documented the history of the land and the exact weight of what was being lost. I used the word *severed*. I used the word *stolen*. I hit "Send" to the regional board, bypassing Mr. Lau's "approval" folder.

Chapter VII: The Weight of the Word

The fallout was not a storm, but a sudden, freezing silence. Two days after I hit "send," my login credentials failed. When I arrived at the office, my desk had already been cleared, my personal effects sitting in a nondescript cardboard box like a handled organ.

Mr. Lau didn't shout. He looked out at the harbor, his silhouette framed by the very cranes that now felt like giants marking my exit. "You were meant to be a bridge, Mei," he said, his voice thin. "Instead, you've become a barricade. The board is furious. You've introduced 'unnecessary complexity' into a billion-dollar acquisition."

“I didn’t introduce it, sir,” I replied, the weight of the box pressing against my ribs. “I just stopped hiding it. My great-grandfather taught me that a bridge that only carries one side’s weight eventually collapses.”

He waved a hand, dismissing me. “Go home. You’re too concerned with the ‘why’ when the world only cares about the ‘when.’ You’ve traded a career for a footnote that no one will read.”

Chapter VIII: The Ghost in the Machine

I walked out past the rows of blinking servers. For the first time, the “Grave Shift” felt alive. I had lost a career I never truly wanted, but the silence of the elevator ride down felt different than the silence of the archives. It wasn’t the silence of decay; it was the silence of a held breath.

In my apartment, the ghost of the terminal still hummed in my ears. I thought of the “Red Zones”—villages like Karamay, marked for “Total Asset Integration.” In plain English: demolition. I realized then that I hadn’t just sent a report; I had committed a digital heresy. I had tied the modern fiber-optic cable to the dusty silk of 1912, and the tension was pulling the whole map apart.

Chapter IX: The Hexi Corridor, 1912

Back in the dust of the corridor, Shao-Heng stood his ground. Captain Sterling’s hand rested on his pistol—a symbol of impatient power.

“He says the eastern pass is blocked by a massive rockfall,” Shao-Heng lied, his heart hammering against his ribs like a trapped bird. “He says a seasonal flood has washed out the main bridge. We must take the northern dunes to ensure the safety of the cargo.”

Sterling scowled, his eyes scanning the parched horizon. “A flood? In this heat? Are you certain of your translation, boy?”

“Quite certain, sir,” Shao-Heng replied. He was no longer just a translator; he was a navigator of fates. He was smuggling safety in the disguise of a lie, knowing that every mile north was a lash against his own future. He was trading his reputation for the breath of children he would never meet.

Chapter X: The Cost of Clarity

The “solution” did not come as a grand victory. It came as a slow, painful audit.

Because I had bypassed the internal filters, my report didn’t just sit in Lau’s inbox; it had triggered an automatic flag in the consortium’s Ethics and Compliance division—a department usually meant for show, now forced to look at the “linguistic nuances” I had laid bare.

I spent the next week in a liminal space. The “weight” of my words was heavy because I didn’t know if they would matter. I watched the news, waiting for a mention of Karamay. I felt the isolation my great-grandfather must have felt—the “incompetent” man who knew the truth.

Chapter XI: The Resonance

The storm hit Hong Kong at 4:00 AM. When the city woke, the news was not just about the typhoon, but about a “Strategic Pause” in the Central Asian rail link.

The report had leaked. Not through me, but through an anonymous clerk in the compliance wing who had been moved by the “appendix of ghosts” I had attached. The public outcry over the word *khit*—that “spiritual severing”—had become a viral flashpoint. Investors didn’t mind “synergy,” but they were terrified of “stolen souls.”

My “footnote” had become the headline. The translation was no longer a secret; it was a mandate.

Chapter XII: The Return to the Dunes

September, 1912. The caravan finally crested the ridge overlooking Lanzhou. They were twenty-two days late. The mules were skeletal, and Shao-Heng’s pay had been docked to nothing.

As they rode toward the gates, they met travelers heading east. They were ragged, but their eyes were clear. “Don’t go toward Wuwei,” one warned. “The city is a tomb. We only escaped because a rumor reached us—a story about bandits to the north. It forced us to take the long way around.”

Shao-Heng fell to the rear of the queue. He thought of his empty pockets and his ruined name. But then he saw a young girl among the travelers divide a piece of fruit with her brother, their laughter rising above the grit of the road. The “failure” in his heart blossomed into a great, quiet peace. He had lost the world’s respect, but he had saved the world itself.

Chapter XIII: The Unbroken Thread

I walked out to the harbor one last time. The rain had slowed to a thin drizzle, and the cranes—those giant steel calligraphers—were moving again. I no longer saw them as unreadable gods.

Back in Mong Kok, Po Po was at the table. She didn’t ask about the job or the “Audit.” She just pushed a cup of tea toward me.

“The Silk Road is long, Mei,” she whispered. “It doesn’t end just because you step off the path. It just means you are the one walking ahead of it.”

I looked out at the city. Hong Kong was a web of light—thousands of cables pulsing with the “cargo” of a billion voices. I finally belonged to it. I wasn’t a unit of labor; I was a link in a chain reaching back to the Hexi Corridor. I had found the “weight” of my own name.

I picked up my pen. I wasn’t writing for a board anymore. I was writing for the shadows that finally had a name, making sure that in the new world of light, no one would be left in the dark.

Tales on the Silk Roads

International Christian School, Ho Lui Charlie – 16

Tearing through the barren frontier is an army of a hundred men journeying westward. It is a marvellous yet ironic sight because it is the presence of an aching human pulse in a basin far too desolate to inhabit signs of life. The plain is soft and wet, and the lime-yellow grass stretches into an endless expanse. The soldiers are weary from weeks of treacherous marching, yet they persist without fail. It is something to disregard the extent of one's mental and physical fortitude, but to betray the emperor's orders is unthinkable. An imperial soldier's life hinges on that of the celestial emperor's—to be cherished, praised, or deemed worthy by the emperor is the ultimate goal. Thus, it is without a doubt that the chosen one who locates the 'heavenly horses' supposedly bred in the valleys of Ferghana would achieve something far greater than any trivial luxury—namely, the emperor's acknowledgement. Lullabies are fictitious for a reason, but perhaps tonight, the soldiers can rest together soundly on this dream, just to let it bear weight a little longer.

Across the frontier, a whistling soldier catches sight of a shell-pink flower, waving idly and lonesome behind the dew-dappled weed only a few feet away. It is a pentamerous flower, flushed with vein-crimson—a virgin beauty amidst the barren landscape. The soldier hesitates and lifts his hand almost imperceptibly. Perhaps he can save it as a present for his daughter back home. Perhaps she would hold the flower up to her ear and smile with innocuous delight, a simple joy that a father can only wish for his young. But the soldier looks back at his outstretched palm, coarse hands etched in grime, and shakes the thought away as if it were a futile, fleeting memory, shifting his gaze to the army ahead. There is no telling by the stars whether the voyage will succeed or if the men will make it out alive. Within the safe haven of the Chinese empire, survival is cradled and nurtured like fruit from the trees. But beyond the empire's walls, survival is uncertain; it oscillates on the brink of fate and the gods, teeter-tottering mercilessly until the fruit rots like a cavity boring into itself. This landscape is an endless vineyard of cruelty, especially for imperial soldiery. And beauty in the eye of the beholder, particularly in the vast territory of the Northern barbarians, is never to be sustained, let alone ferment; rather, it is surely to be hunted, sunken into, and torn apart without mercy.

One can only cradle hope for a certain period of time. Similar to a fire, hope burns brightest at its peak, yet falters moments later, flickering weakly and inevitably extinguished by the cyclical nature of time. All it can do for now is exist behind the scenes of ordinary life, scavenging in traces of charred soot that are hastily covered up by members of the peasantry. But perhaps, just perhaps, there is a flame that still lingers, one that persists for more than a decade, and it is no secret that all it takes is for one ignition to spark a wildfire. It is not long before the latest word in the imperial capital would be spread in hushed tones among the women rinsing garments by the river or among the gentry chatting idly outside the wards. Zhang Qian, the presumed-deceased imperial envoy, diplomat, and leader of the decade-long expedition to Ferghana, had miraculously survived the once-deemed 'hopeless' voyage, confirmed the existence of the heavenly horses, and returned to the imperial capital with only one remaining companion by his side. The tales Zhang Qian spoke of in the court were wondrous and were woven in a folk-like quality; the emperor listened keenly as he laced

together fabulous, faraway empires such as ‘Persia’ and ‘India’, places that the court diligently noted but didn’t fully comprehend. But beyond the surface of the leader’s tales, the emperor, who had been listening with great intent, had finally discovered a root, a root that trailed and sparked into a beautiful flame, a scorching flame that burned hot-white and burned brighter than anything else: the potential of trade with the West. The emperor would then reach out and pull the root with all his might, because the heat is meaningless when the flame is prosperous. And amidst the acrid smoke that billows out would lie the foundations for a new route, a journey birthed from the spirit of determination and the beautiful pursuit of glory, known otherwise as the Silk Roads.

There is a certain rhythm that seeps into a world when it is set ablaze with foreign language. It is a rhythm that unconsciously penetrates a person’s mother tongue and reveals itself in vowels and consonants unbeknownst to the merchant when he bargains deftly at the bazaars. It is a rhythm that cannot help but flourish in a market bustling with the rampant yells of street vendors and the clatter of camel hooves, a cacophony of entwined cultures because it is the rhythm of harmony—not through similarity but through the beauty of difference. The flame that ignited centuries ago now burns with ease. The land is much different now, and so are the people—with every passing day, merchants on caravans from the West enter the imperial capital of Chang’an, carrying wondrous luxuries like ivory and fur that gleam within the eyes of the Chinese elites. China’s most desired commodity, silk, spun from silkworm cocoons, was exchanged in return for such Western items.

Farther along the road and away from the bazaar lies a Buddhist monk, ethnically Sogdian and in his late twenties, standing idly at a temple entrance. There is an almost surreal tranquility that the temple brings—it is quite different in comparison to the lively and bustling markets ahead. The monk observes his surroundings with innocuous interest, noticing the way the sunlight bathes the temple in tangerine-yellow light, signaling the sun’s descent, and the way the soft murmurs of foreign language reverberate in the successive courtyards. The monk looks down at the ground and clutches his palms together in hope. He can only hope that Xuánzàng, his mentor, who was on a pilgrimage to India to obtain authentic Buddhist scriptures, can return home safely. There is great promise that lies in Western trade, and he can only hope that his faith promises the same.

Far along the route is a trembling man, ethnically Chinese and no more than fifty-three years of age, lying on the ground of his quarters. It is a windless night, and the air is crisp and dry. The lamps outside crackle with heat, but there is no warmth or laughter in the city of Turfan; rather, there is a pervasive feeling of doom that seems to sink its teeth into the land itself tonight. The man’s eyes are bloodshot with restlessness, and his tongue is heavy from coughing and incessant prayers. He pries his eyelids shut as he fiddles anxiously with a merchant’s coin in the palm of his hand, rolling it around until his palm is numb because he can no longer bear the feeling of his wife heaving with sickness beside him.

Wēn yì, or ‘the great disease’ as they called it, was a plague that had descended upon the Western lands centuries after the peak of trade and had wormed itself eastward into

the caravan routes, rupturing the arteries of the land as if it were a parasite, a despicable, predatorial entity. A few weeks prior, the man had urged his children to flee Turfan with cloths on their mouths, because their beautiful home was dying and their lives were a fragile, fleeting thing. The man had stayed behind to take care of his wife, who was among the first in the area to fall ill. People around him criticized his actions, but he paid no attention. As a merchant, life on the road was a prosperous but challenging commitment that meant years of absence from home, separation from his wife and children, and familial relationships that thinned across distance, narrowly surviving on crumpled letters sent back home that were often months-old, hastily written, and stained with traces of foreign wine and tomfoolery as they were cradled by innocent hands that simply missed their father's touch. Thus, the man's presence and loyalty tonight are the most he can do to make up for his children's longing, his wife's sorrow, and everything that he owes to his family that caused irreplaceable hurt.

The man leans over and casts a weary glance at his wife beside him. Her fingertips and toes are plump and blackened, and her chest heaves rapidly with blood trickling down the sides of her mouth and nose. His wife can no longer speak, but the silence is all that there needs to be, because there is an encroaching, quiet ache that permeates the air when a soul leaves too soon, especially when the soul is loved. So the man reaches out and takes her hand, intertwining it with his own tightly, because it is a sight too final to ever truly forget.

Further down south and many centuries later, there is a man, ethnically Lao and in his late thirties, hunched underneath the glaring sun as sweat beads down his neck. A torque wrench is wrapped tightly in his fist as he whistles under his breath, methodically adjusting the line of bolts. The air is filled with the sound of buzzing generator hums and the *pings* of hammering on the distant train tracks. After the man finishes his duty, he stands up slowly and lets out a satisfied groan, shaking his head in relief as he admires his work on the tracks.

The railway he is working on does not trace a new path, but rather follows an ancient one. The 'New Silk Road', the people call it. *Gone with the old, in with the new.* The man's calluses have seen the destruction of old and the construction of new. But perhaps, this is something different. There is something different about walking on a path that his very ancestors trekked on. One that he grew up hearing about in family gatherings and read about in textbooks. And when the man closes his eyes, he can almost feel the buzz, the magnificent energy that characterized the Silk Roads, the chatter and excitement over cross-cultural exchange that would last for many lifetimes, that would have an impact on him today. The man looks down on the tracks, tracing the lines that once connected caravans from Central Asia, Africa, and Europe all the way to the Chinese empire. The man smiles. *The old becomes new.*

The man shifts his gaze from the tracks, and almost instantly, he spots a flower growing a few feet away. The flower is cross-shaped with a vermilion hue and wavers idly amongst the bushes, minding its own business as it seems to drink in the intense, tantalizing heat of the afternoon sun. It is a beautiful thing. Perhaps he can give it to his daughter, because her favorite color is red. Perhaps it would look pretty behind her ear. It is her birthday tomorrow, and the man and his wife had saved up their earnings to purchase a beautiful crimson dress spun with authentic silk from the local mall as her birthday gift. He hesitates for a moment, feeling rather foolish, but eventually decides to pluck the flower.

The man reaches out and lightly tears the flower from the crumbly soil, holding the plant with improbable tenderness in his calloused, leathery palms, textured and hardened from years of hard labor. It is almost a comical sight—a man with thick hands holding such a little plant. Shaking away the thought with a bashful smile, he takes the flower by its stem and gently places it into his pocket, ensuring that the petals won't crease. He smiles because his daughter has something to look forward to tonight, and he smiles because he has decided to bring it back home.

Second Life

International Christian School, Wu Yi Ting Clover – 17

The Silk Roads—13th Century

The Silk Roads were a series of vast trade routes connecting countries across Asia and Europe. These roads not only carried precious silks and spices but also religions, cultures, and languages. On the road stretching between Kashgar and Merv, Li Wei, a young silk merchant, braved the stifling dunes and treacherous roads in pursuit of faraway lands. With each wavering step in the unknown textures of nature—complete with the heat of the day and the cold of the night—he only had one thing in mind: his destination. Even through all of the trials and tribulations he had to endure over the journey, it was all worth it in order to trade and set foot on new lands. The grueling journey taught him to persevere. Through ever-changing circumstances and weather conditions, he battled his way to reach Merv.

When Li Wei finally arrived in Merv after enduring perilous mountains and endless deserts, he was greeted with sights he had never set eyes on before. The city was filled with a buzz he had yet to experience; towering mosques pierced the sky, and pungent spices wafted through the air. Vibrant scenes filled his vision—carefully crafted buildings with the most intricate stone carvings were spread out over the horizon, and rich textiles in every color of the rainbow were draped over market stalls, fluttering in the breeze. Lugging his camel to the caravanserai for the night, he felt a weight lift from his shoulders as everything he had worked for was about to be accomplished. A symphony of languages reached his ears the moment he stepped into the inn, and he was sucked into a blend of various cultures. People in the inn were resting and chatting, sharing each other's cultures and stories about their travels.

Embracing the gathering with eyes alight and heart ablaze, he was ready to meet the merchant with whom he would trade his fine silks. To his great surprise, there was someone else standing next to the merchant. A girl with hair as bright as the sun and glittering eyes was standing next to him, piquing Li Wei's interest—every single aspect of her seemed to catch the light—it was as if the sun was a sunflower and she became the sun. When he set his eyes on her, everything else seemed to fade—even the goal he had long sought after. He quickly exchanged his silk with the merchant, acquiring luxury textiles and meticulously made crafts in return. Then, Li Wei began hammering him with questions. After finding out that she was his daughter, Yasmin, and that she was there because she wanted to learn more about the world, so much so that she learned the language of Kashgar, he was even more certain that he was intrigued and mesmerized by her. In the rest of his days at Merv, he found a way to take Yasmin out every day, conversing and exploring the city. They travelled through the bustling city filled with life, exchanging stories about the places they had been to. As she also wanted to explore the world, dreaming of distant lands beyond Merv, Li Wei was granted permission to bring Yasmin back to Kashgar with him because they had fallen in love. Her father blessed their union, urging Li Wei to take care of Yasmin.

On the journey back, they exchanged stories with the loudest laughs and cherished each other's company. He shared tales of the vivid scenery in Kashgar, its presence inhabited by mountains and lush plains. She shared about her life back in Merv—how supportive her family was and how stuck she felt living in one place her whole life. Li Wei noticed every detail about her. Looking at her with a gaze of melted honey, he noticed how she would tuck

her hair behind her right ear whenever she laughed and how she would scrunch her nose whenever she was nervous. He was willing to do whatever it took to protect her. Since the first time they met, he already knew that she was the one he wanted to spend the rest of his life with.

When they stopped under the pitch-black sky full of stars, Li Wei was beginning to worry because there was no caravanserai nearby. The silence of their surroundings amplified all sound. Suddenly, the sound of a rustling leaf filled the air; chills went down his spine. Without hesitation, he quickly took Yasmin into his arms and placed her behind him, making sure that she was shrouded. It wasn't until he heard another sound that he realized that something was really wrong. Just then, his worst fear came to life: a group of malignant bandits emerged from the shadows, ready to take lives for the sake of gold. Li Wei knew he was about to spend the last seconds of his life with the person he loved; it was the only thing he could take comfort in. One swift move from a slash of steel reflected in the moonlight led to pools of warm red dripping down Li Wei's body. They hit Yasmin too, the two of them hitting the floor in a thud, their blood intertwined on the muddy terrain. A single tear from Yasmin landed on Li Wei's chest as he kissed her left cheek with the remaining strength he had, holding her close even in his final moments.

“No matter what it takes, I will meet you in my next life.”

“I'm looking forward to meeting you again.”

Shanghai—21st Century

Under the sky that never seems to reach black, illuminated by the perpetual glow of neon lights and noisy billboards, Li Wen Jun walked along the reflections of dazzling skyscrapers in the Shanghai Bund. Due to the revival of the “Silk Roads,” his recent project at work involved communication with Turkmenistan, researching the ancient city of Merv. He was puzzled about a colleague at work. Something about the new translator, Jasmine, was unsettling, familiar, even. It was as if he had seen her before and knew her from a long time ago. She had glittering eyes and hair as bright as the sun, with a mole on her left cheek. The second he laid eyes on her, he felt a connection, wanting to know more about her. A wave of *déjà vu* washed over him; it was as if they had met before, as if there was an invisible string tied between them. The next day, he decided to meet up with her to discuss the project, but he had an ulterior motive: finding out exactly who she was and why she elicited nostalgia within him.

After work, they walked to a dessert shop near the office, named *jiǔbié chónghéng*—to meet again after a long period of separation. Opening the door for her, he scanned the QR code on the table and ordered a tangyuan, and she ordered a bowl of *niangao*. After discussing details about work, they went through a rollercoaster of topics. They found common interests in travelling and touched on topics ranging from food to philosophy. It was as if he could talk about any topic in the world with her—even one he had zero interest in—and he would still be content and happy. Even though he had just met her, he knew deep down inside that he could be with her forever. Throughout the night, waves of familiarity knocked them down. He noticed how she would tuck her hair behind her right ear whenever she laughed and how she would scrunch her nose whenever there were difficulties at work. He couldn't take his eyes off of her all night; he wasn't only mesmerized by her outward appearance, but the sense of belonging he felt in her presence and her comforting personality kept his eyes locked on her.

After the meal, a scene abruptly flashed through his mind of a girl on a carriage of sorts, maybe a caravanserai, laughing, then tucking her hair—but the face was blurry. Another scene appeared where there was a girl on the floor, and he kissed her left cheek. Meanwhile, Jasmine felt a sense of security around Li Wen Jun that she had never felt before; it was as if she had returned home, not to a physical place, but to a place of the heart. She knew something was different about him; something about her reaction and feelings when they were together was something new. No other person had made her feel this way before. Months of getting to know each other led to more relived memories; he wanted to spend each waking moment with her. They spent at least one day a week outside of work in each other's companionship, going on walks, trying new restaurants, and watching movies. With every smile, each unnoticed look, each slight touch, they became more curious, eager, and willing to spend time with each other. The messages sent were a cry for attention, a desire for the other person to sacrifice their time and give it to them, knowing that they would gladly do so. Wen Jun associated everything he did in his everyday life with her; whether he was listening to music or eating food, her face would dominate his mind.

One day after work, Wen Jun was walking Jasmine back home. As he listened to the sound of blaring horns in the distance, complete with rustling leaves in the Shanghai autumn, he reminisced about the memories they had together over the past couple of months. Over time, he realized that her presence in his life was unchangeable. As more memories of the past flooded his mind, he slowly understood that they were truly meant to be together. Not just in this life, but at every point in time when a piece of him was missing, she would be the one to fill it—past, present, and future. Fate was a strange thing—it liked to push people apart, then pull them back together—no matter the timeline. Though he was grateful that it always brought him back to the person he loved the most. He remembered those days on the Silk Roads like yesterday and never wanted them to slip away. They were a testament to the time they lived together and struck him deeply. He watched videos on reincarnation, and one thing that stuck with him was that people would have moles where their past lover kissed them—Jasmine had a mole on her left cheek, exactly where he kissed the blurry figure.

He stopped to a halt, then turned his head around, staring at Jasmine intently, asking, “Do you believe in a second life?”

Her face froze into shock. Slowly, warmth spread through her body, and tears welled in her eyes.

“No, not until I met you.”

Tears gushed down their faces, and Li Wen Jun ran like never before and twirled Jasmine around.

“I told you I would meet you again.”

“I loved meeting you again.”

Creative Writing
Fiction

Group 5



The Path on the Sand

Jiaxing Senior High British Columbia Offshore School, Wu Zixi Jessy – 18

When the first snowfall of the year fell in Chang'an, we set off. The emperor said they would seek out the Great Yuezhi and fight against the Xiongnu together. Zhang Qian led the way, holding a stick in his hand.

Beyond Yumen Pass, all that remains is sand.

The sand is yellow, and the sky is yellow as well. Sometimes when the wind blows, the sky and the earth get mixed together, making it impossible to tell which is up and which is down. Zhang Qian's clothes gradually turned the color of the sand, except for the tuft of red on his stick, which was still bright red and stood out sharply. I was riding on the camel, counting its steps. When I reached one thousand, I started counting again. The camel didn't understand where we were going. It just kept walking, step by step, with great patience.

On the day when the water was almost gone, we met another group of people.

They emerged from behind the dunes, as if growing out of the ground. The leader was named Hassan, with very pale green eyes like the water of the Wei River in autumn. He gave us water to drink. When the water bag was passed to us, I saw that he had a piece of cloth tied around his wrist, and the pattern on it I recognized — it was the kind sold regularly at the Chang'an East Market's silk shop.

When lighting the fire in the evening, Hassan began to play the guitar.

The sound of the guitar was muffled, like an old man's cough. But as I listened, I suddenly sat up straight — I recognized this tune! Last year on the festival of Ashura, that blind musician played this very piece. Only Hassan played it more slowly and in a more hoarse tone, as if this piece had traveled a long distance and was tired out.

Zhang Qian also noticed this. He asked, "Where did this piece of music come from?"

Hassan said that he learned it from the west, and the person who taught him this piece of music said that it was learned from even further west. It turns out that some things have traveled farther than people. If you keep walking further, you'll see more.

One night, in the market of Shelu, torches illuminated people's faces half bright and half dark. A girl was dancing.

She walked barefoot on the muddy ground, like a bird that was not afraid of the heat. Her dress was so strange. The sleeves were wide like those of the Han people, but the flowers embroidered on it, I dare say, there was not a single one like it in Chang'an. The drum was beaten so fast that it seemed about to fall over, but the flute played slowly, as if coaxing the drum not to cry. I was so stunned that I forgot to put the naan in my mouth.

Then she turned around — ha, I saw it! The jade on her waist gave a furtive flash. The light was gentle, like the piece of Lantian jade I had touched in my mother's jewelry box when I was a child. The wind blew the torch askew and the shadow jumped, and I saw it even more clearly: it was that kind of light, absorbed into the night and then emitted, soft and like a secret.

Zhang Qian's wine cup wobbled. The wine spilled out, spreading slowly on his old robe, as if a new patch was growing.

The girl spun even faster. The moonlight poured down, white and bright. Her silver bracelets jingled and clanged, like a drumbeat growing ever denser, so thick it felt like ten thousand horses were stomping on my ears. Suddenly, I couldn't breathe. It was as if the snow of Chang'an, the sands of the Western Regions, and the blue, blue sea I had never seen, all swirled together in this dizzying spin.

Zhang Qian stood up. The red tassels on his staff swayed in the wind, like a small ball of fire that refused to sleep. Suddenly, I understood: it turns out that things, just like people, would travel long distances. When they grew tired, they would lie down in unexpected places, allowing those who came later to recognize their homeland.

The flute sound broke off, like a string that had been stretched too tight finally gave way. The girl lay prone on the ground, her shoulders rising and falling as if she had just had a fight with the wind. The sand slowly settled, covering her footprints, gently, as if covering a dream. The surroundings quieted down, so quiet that the sound of sparks bursting could be heard — pop, crackle, one, two, scorching out tiny black holes.

Later, Zhang Qian sat by the earthen wall for a long time. He drank half a cup more of wine, his eyes was shining brightly, looking at the place where the girl had just danced, as if dancing shadows could still grow there.

After the show ended, I climbed onto the dirt roof. The desert nights were cold and there were so many stars that they were frightening. The wind blew from the west, carrying a smell I couldn't identify. I remembered what my father had said before we left: "When you get there, keep your eyes wide open."

I now understand what he meant.

There are certain things that can be understood without words. For instance, the gestures Hassan made when giving water, or the glimmer that flashed in the eyes of the dancing girls as they turned around. They are more direct than words, penetrating directly from the eyes into the heart.

We set off again.

The sun rose, stretching out the shadows of the sand dunes for a long distance. The road ahead was still far away, and behind each sand dune there was another one. The camel walked unhurriedly, and the bells jingled melodiously. This sound would travel far, reaching those places we haven't reached yet, greeting us in advance.

The wind was pushing us from behind, gently. On the sandy ground, our footprints formed a row, some deep and some shallow. Before long, they would be covered by new sand. But it didn't matter. There would be others coming behind, and new footprints would cover them.

That's how the road was formed.

The Imperfect Pearl

Jiaxing Senior High British Columbia Offshore School, Yao Yi Yolanda – 17

I am a pearl that isn't round. Morning light seeped into my sandalwood box when the merchant's daughter first touched me. There was ink under her fingernails—she was learning to write.

“Dad, it's not round,” she said.

Wang Wu, the merchant, was tying up his goods. “Things on the Silk Road don't need to be round.”

“Why?”

“Round things roll away,” he said, standing up. “Things that aren't round... they hold onto the road.”

He placed me in his leather bag, next to a flint, some salt, and a letter. The envelope was soft at the edges. It read: “Return in March. Don't worry. ——Wang Wu.” He never said which year.

The night before crossing Jade Gate Pass, Wang Wu held me by the fire. Mr.Chen, the camel rider, grinned when he saw me.

“Ever seen a round pearl?” Wang Wu asked.

“In Persian hands,” said Mr.Chen. “Round as a teardrop. And expensive.” He weighed me in his palm. “But on the Silk Road, the story is worth more than the shape.”

That night, Wang Wu put me in his right boot, beside his little toe. They said it was the safest place.

For seventeen days to Dunhuang, I learned his walk: left light, right heavy. His right foot was hurt long ago.

In Dunhuang, a jade merchant offered triple my price. Wang Wu shook his head. “This one is going to Fulin (the ancient Chinese name for Byzantium),” he said, patting his boot. “It has to finish the journey for me.”

Fulin. That was the first time I heard that name.

I stayed in Wang Wu's boot for two years, seven months, and three days. Until spring in Samarkand, when apricot blossoms were falling like pink snow.

Wang Wu lay burning with fever. He pulled me from his boot—stained with blood and sand.

“Sell it and see a doctor,” urged the innkeeper.

“It must go to Fulin,” he whispered.

“You won't make it!”

After a long silence, he said, “Then sell it to someone... who will keep going west.”

A Parthian merchant named Sascha came. He smelled me and smiled. “Yumen Pass sand, Dunhuang rain, and ointment for a foot injury,” he said. “I am a spice merchant's son. Scents tell stories.”

He bought me not as a pearl, but to collect the stories of the road. He tied me to a string of brass bells on his strongest camel.

From then on, every step had sound: Ding—dong—. Like a heartbeat.

At night, Sascha would tell me stories under the starlight. And I dreamed of the sea—not the sea of Hepu, but the Roman sea Sascha described: “Blue, with no border. White birds hovering above.”

Sascha fell ill in Antioch and sold me to a Greek doctor for medicine. The doctor took me to his sister Eirene, a scripture copier in a monastery.

Her hands were cold. When she held me, she was copying the Gospel of Mark. Then, she stopped and pressed me to her ear.

“It’s ringing,” she said.

Her companion laughed. “How can a pearl ring?”

“It’s not the pearl,” Eirene whispered. “It’s the road inside it.”

She placed me on her windowsill. Each morning, with seagulls crying and bells ringing, she would hold me and pray: “May those on the road be safe. May those who wait keep faith. May those who cannot reach the end still see light along the way.”

A young novice once asked, “Why do you always hold that pearl?”

“It isn’t round. It isn’t bright. It has scars,” Eirene said. “But because of that, it is real.”

“Is being real more important than being perfect?”

“Being real means you are not alone,” she replied. “We know the sand of Yumen Pass. We know Samarkand’s apricot blossoms. We know a merchant named Wang Wu once had an injury on his right foot... These imperfections make us fellow travelers with strangers from long ago.”

I stayed with Eirene for thirty years. One March morning, she did not wake up.

Before the end, she gave me to the youngest novice. “Sell it to someone going west.”

“But west is the sea, Sister.”

“Then tell them,” Eirene said softly, “the sea is not the end. It is the beginning of another road.”

For three hundred years I passed through markets. I sat on a Doge’s finger. I was set into a queen’s crown. Now I rest in a museum case.

The label says: “Tang Dynasty Pearl. Silk Road.”

They tested my age, analyzed my makeup, argued over my origin. But they never heard the sounds inside me—Jade Gate Pass wind, Sascha’s camel bells, Eirene’s morning prayers.

Until this afternoon.

A little boy pressed his face to the glass. “Mom, it’s not round.”

His mother knelt down. “Every place where it isn’t round... might be a story.”

“What story?”

“Like this little hollow,” she said, pointing. “Maybe in the desert, a grain of sand harder than itself wanted to leave its name.”

“Does sand have a name?”

“Everything has a name. We just don’t know it.”

The boy looked a long time. As the closing bell rang, he asked, “Do you think it misses home?”

His mother smiled gently. “It carries its home with it. Every road it walked became a part of it.”

After they left, the last light fell through the dome. Dust danced in the air—like Jade Gate Pass sand, Samarkand blossoms, sea mist.

And I understood.

Wang Wu didn’t reach Fulin. Sascha didn’t see the Roman sea. Eirene didn’t finish all the scriptures.

So what?

The best things on the Silk Road were never about finally arriving.

They were about,

The sand remembering a merchant whose right foot fell a little heavier.

The bells remembering a Parthian who believed scents tell stories.

The morning light remembering a woman who prayed for all travelers.

And me, a pearl that isn’t round, I remember it all.

Before darkness fell, I lay still.

I thought of Wang Wu’s letter: “Return in March. Don’t worry.”

So all the “arriving” was really for the sake of “returning.”

All the “journeying far” was really pointing “home.”

Every step forward was drawing one vast circle,

So that a thousand years later, a child could point and say, “Look, it’s not round.”

And his mother could answer, “But it makes the hearts of those who see it feel whole.”

This is the road I had to walk.

When the Silk Still Shines

Shanghai High School International Division, Guoshwan Nian – 16

A man, a boy, and a wolf ran across the desert.

The night hung menacingly overhead, watching with a thousand shining eyes and hanging curved, moonlit fang agape. The wolf simply ran harder, slipping perfectly into the night with welded fur of shadow, save for six glimmering emerald eyes that carved the dark open with a hot light.

On its massive back was a handcrafted saddle, and on top of that saddle was a boy in a man's lap. The boy slept, but it was a rough sleep. The man stroked him with one old, ragged hand. White spools of weariness intermingled his once shining black hair. The other hand rested lightly a coarse wooden coffin of a scabbard, sheathing a sword he hoped to never use.

Tied behind the boy, at the rear end of the saddle, was a locked wooden box.

Eventually, the wolf stopped its voyage. It bent down, and its partner slipped off. The boy was still in the man's arms, half-asleep. The man, who never really slept, gently put his boy on the ground. "We're here."

"Okay," murmured the boy, groggily standing up as he opened his sleepy eyes. Aquamarine, crystallized blue, reminiscent of the once clean oceans. "How much longer?"

"I don't know." The man averted his gaze from those blue eyes. They were too painful. "I don't know, boy."

The man took out a flashlight and flicked it on. Hulking metal carcasses emerged into the light. Skeletons of steel, extended to the sky with their outstretched, fleshless hands. Shattered bits of glass remained here and there, like glistening remains not yet consumed by time's ravenous appetite. The man pointed the flashlight downwards and they saw a crumbled concrete road, cracks long bled dry and now stuffed with sand.

"What happened here?" asked the boy. The man said nothing, simply continued to show the dead bodies of steel as he navigated a safe path forward. Cracked clock towers, crooked traffic lights, crumbled brick buildings with their rocky insides spilt out.

"What happened here?" repeated the boy.

"Back off!" roared the man. The boy jerked back and shielded himself with two arms... only to realize that he was talking to their six-legged wolf, who was curiously sniffing at one of the cracked cars.

"Thought you were talking to me," murmured the boy.

"Quiet, you," ordered the man. He turned back to the wolf and yelled "Oil is dangerous!" Sensing anger, the wolf reluctantly retreated.

The boy slowly put his two arms down. "...Dad, what's oil?"

"Shiny black poison, boy," responded the man. "Toxic if consumed. Nothing good comes from it."

"Dad, why?"

"Why what?"

"If people knew oil was dangerous, why did they have it around?"

"It was useful for... other things," said the man. "Machinery, conveniences, the like. You won't understand even if I told you. It was all the rage just a couple decades back, you know? Nearly drove people to their damn deaths."

“Is it still useful?” asked the boy.

“Never was.” The wolf returned to the man’s side, and the man scratched its chin. “Turns out, oil is toxic if consumed. Shocker.”

The man spun the flashlight around some more, his oily black eyes coldly analyzing possibilities. “Doesn’t seem that dangerous around here,” concluded the man. “We’ll make shelter here when the sun comes up, and once it gets dark again, we’ll leave.”

The next night, the boy was a little more awake. He blocked the desert winds with one hand and half-shut eyelids. He looked up at his father, then quickly looked back at the wooden box attached to the end of the saddle.

“Hey, Dad,” he whispered, as though the night would notice if he spoke too loudly.

“What’s in the box?”

Dad didn’t answer.

“What’s in the box?” he asked again.

“It’s a special item,” replied the man. “Think of it as a precious gift.”

“For who?”

“To...” the man paused. “To your mother.”

“Oh. But isn’t she...” The boy turned his head, looked at the box again.

“Don’t look back, it’s dangerous.” Sharp. The boy flipped forward.

They continued in silence for a bit. Looking at the rigid frame of the man’s back, the boy imagined (as any boy would) the image of his mother. What would she be like? Would she perhaps caress his cheek, when his father spites him with harsh words? Maybe give him her spare morsels? Teach him how to read and write? Anyone except his father? While the boy conjured fantasy after fruitless fantasy, the man just looked ahead.

Suddenly, the wolf’s six eyes caught something. It stopped.

It crouched. It growled, just so slightly. The man’s hands went to his sword’s handle. The boy watched. Dead still, all of them.

They waited.

Not a sound –

A soft, heavy foot into the sand. A foot that belonged to no one. A slow, mournful wail reverberated across the pitch black. The man loosened his fingers. “It’s safe,” he whispered. “So long as we don’t make any sudden noises.”

He gestured at the wolf. Slowly, still crouching its six legs, it walked tentatively on the sand. Another wail bellowed out from beyond, bottomless as the darkness around them.

“What is it?” asked the boy.

The man took out his flashlight and sliced the shadowed secrets apart. Right there, out on the sand, was the creature. Four human legs, four fleshy pillars with four human feet, slowly loomed over them across the sand. The boy looked up – that body was some blob, some amalgamation of flesh that never should’ve existed. Bone and skin and cartilage tied each other around in gruesome, unnatural angles. The thing wailed again, and only then did the boy realize that the body was a human face, with hollow eye sockets and tongueless mouths forever agape.

A cold shiver wormed down the boy’s spine.

“Not pretty, is it?” softly chuckled the man. He swung the flashlight around. A whole herd of those poor creatures, murmuring, wailing, plodding onwards without any real goal. “So much like us, yet so much different.”

The man realized that the boy was shaking. “Don’t be scared,” murmured the man, slowly hugging the boy with one arm. “They won’t attack, unless you provoke them. Lord, do they have a vengeance.” The boy’s shaking, unsurprisingly, only became worse.

One of the things suddenly shambled over towards their wolf. The wolf bared its teeth, but the sallow face simply whimpered and shambled on. With a crooked fleshy blob, a nose, it sniffed at the box. A deep, deep inhale, as though smelling something long forgotten.

Others began following suit. One shambling flesh-face after another, their four legs looming over the wolf and his company. The holes in their faces whirred, sucked, drew in the smell of the box.

“Dad...”

“I... goddamn it,” cursed the man. “Damn all the dead gods out there. To think they still...”

One of the faces suddenly opened its formless mouth wide. The bellow emerged from a bottomless anguish, a fathomless abyss of despair stretching on its face as it roared louder and louder until the very night shook with echoing despairing howls. As though the scent tore off long-sealed wounds and slit their mouths open.

The man cursed and immediately spurred the mutant wolf. Shrieks and howls bounded across the shadows, each scream outstretching sonic claws to seize them. The wolf ran, ran, ran as fast it could, while the swarms of things began moving their lethargic legs and charged towards the wolf with their mouths screaming so wide and bellowing so hollow that the boy could see flecks of blood spray from their agonizing mouths –

They did not stop running for four hours.

When the wolf – even with its unnatural endurance – finally whimpered with exhaustion, the man sighed and allowed it to rest.

“We shook them off,” He looked at the box and patted it, hesitantly, with one hand.

“Dad,” said the boy, still shivering. “I’m scared.”

The man looked back at the boy. Tears began dripping from the boy’s aquamarine eyes, like those clean oceans of old. Yes, the boy tried to stop them, but tear after tear, fear after fear just kept stinging. He knelt down onto the sand and just cried.

The man wrapped one old arm around his son and hugged him, letting his tears pour wastefully into his sleeve. Sobs punctured an endless, unforgiving night.

The box lay on the wolf’s back, forgotten.

“You know,” said the father to his son, as they traveled through another pitch black night, “we aren’t traveling a desolate road. Thousands of years ago, this road was a hub of trade, cultural exchange, and... no, I don’t you know what that really means.”

The boy waited patiently.

“Think of it like this,” continued the man after a moment of deliberation. “People, so many people you couldn’t even count them, swarming together. Think of all those people traveling this road, the road we’re traveling right now. Talking, or laughing, or arguing, or exchanging their goods with each other. Interactions with hundreds of different, unique people, with funny tongues and funnier customs. The world was large then.”

“What happened?” asked his son.

“Well, many things.” The man rambled on, like a desperate tutor who finally found a pupil that understood his teachings. “It was thousands of years ago, you know? People found different ways to traveling. Through the seas. Through the skies. Then the planet was dying. Then the people killed each other –”

“Why did people kill each other?” asked the boy innocuously.

The man paused. He thought, really contemplating that question. He gripped the scabbard of his sword, then hesitantly relaxed his grip.

“I don’t know,” he admitted after a while. “That was just a thing people did at the time.”

“Why don’t they do that now?” asked his son.

“Not enough people to kill,” his father replied simply.

“But why did that happen?” urged the boy. “What happened to all the people?”

The man shrugged. “Many different things. See, back in the older days, people were always killing each other. The numbers just keep growing. And the scale. It’s... like a pissing contest,” he paused, struggling to describe the carnage of the human condition to someone who never heard of either concept. “It just kept growing, you know? More killing, more and more and more, until they built the weapon to end all weapons, and –”

The man stopped, his heart stuck in his throat. He swallowed it back down.

“And then,” he continued, “One day, the people were just gone. In a blink of an eye. Destroyed.” He opened his hand, like the blooming of a bloodstained flower. “Just dead.”

They rode in silence for a bit, as the boy digested this.

“Now, not everyone died. Some survived. We’re one of the luckier ones, boy. We had a shelter, a small room to protect us. Most don’t. Most that survived were changed, mutated. The aftermath of the Ultimate Weapon. Like my dog here,” said the man, patting the wolf they rode on. “You know he had a name? That he was once small enough to be held in my arms?”

“Really?” asked the boy disbelievingly.

The man smiled a sad smile. “We used to play many games, him and I.” He shook his head, forlorn. “Now, he doesn’t even remember his name. So I just called him ‘wolf’, ‘thing’, insults basically. And now, not even I remember what his name was.”

They continued riding.

“And it’s not just our dog. It’s everything. Grass and grasshoppers and snakes and rabbits. It’s fine,” he added as the boy opened his mouth, “you don’t need to know what they are. They don’t exist now.”

The man paused for a bit.

“It even happened to humans,” he continued. “They were changed. Changed by the wars, and they could never go back. You saw them yesterday, remember?”

“Yes, I remember,” said the boy timidly.

“Yes, well... All I can say is that you and I are, as far as I know, the last two humans around here.” The man gazed upwards, where the clouds of shadow still obscured the moon and stars. “Maybe in the whole world. And, in just six or seven decades, we would be forgotten too.”

After three more nights, they’d arrived. In front of them lay a simple little hut-like structure of flimsy, rusting metal. So pathetic it looked, just sitting alone in the desert, that the boy struggled to find words to even describe it. Certainly, it didn’t look like anything worth traveling so many nights for.

“That’s... it?”

“That’s it,” affirmed the man. “Get the box.”

The boy touched the plain wooden box. He unstripped it from the wolf’s back. It was surprisingly light. Grasping the soft wood, the boy dismounted right after the man, his little fingers tightly clasping the fruit of their journey.

They approached the structure’s unassuming metal doors, sealing the entrance. The man walked up and pressed his thumb on an indent in the door. “*Access granted!*” rang a shrill, metallic voice, and the doors slid open.

“How does that work?” ask the boy in amazement.

The man didn’t bother explaining. He just walked to a hatch on the floor and flung it open.

They descended down the hatch, down a ladder, and let the shadows swallow them. First the man, then the boy. When they finally hit the floor, the man flicked a switch, and suddenly, the ceiling illuminated itself.

The light revealed a rather large room, spacious enough for dozens of people. The walls were still a sterile white, and on the sand-ridden floor, the boy could still see glimpses of a metallic floor. It seemed exactly the same as when they left it.

The boy looked to the sides and saw the words Nuclear Bunker laid out on the side of a wall.

Besides those words, there was almost nothing noteworthy in the room. They already used all of the food and resources packed in here. Now, it was empty, a sort of hollow empty that pangs the heart. No chairs. No tables. Absolutely nothing. There was just that little oblong rectangle of metal, standing upright at the very edge of the wall opposite the ladder.

The man already had one knee planted on the floor, facing a completely bare wall. His sword was laid out in front, still in its sheath. The man’s eyes were shut tight, as though actively trying not seeing what lay in front of him.

The boy, with the box, walked up to him. “Dad, where should I lay this down?”

“Ah, thank you,” said his father. “Lay it right next to me.” The boy did so.

The man unlatched the box and opened it.

Inside was the most beautiful thing the boy ever saw. It was a sort of... fabric, yet it was nothing like the rags he and his father strapped themselves in. This fabric was far gentler, far softer, far brighter than anything he’d seen. A floral, vivid pink, with the slightest stitched patterns of flowers. The boy had almost forgotten what pink and flowers looked like.

“Wh... what is it, father?”

“Silk,” said his father. He said it with unusual stillness, like a flaccid corpse. “Silk. One of the rarest commodities in the world, back in the day. Remember the trading rode I told you about?”

“A hub of trade and cultural exchange,” remembered the boy. “People talking, or laughing, or arguing, or exchanging their goods with each other. Interactions with hundreds of different, unique people, with funny tongues and funnier customs.”

“Yes.” The man’s coarse fingers slowly scooped up the smooth fabric. So gentle it was, seemingly slipping past his fingers like vivid pink mist of dreams. The boy stared at the fabric, mesmerized.

“Your mother wanted a silk dress,” spoke the man, out of nowhere. “She really, really wanted one.”

The man’s mouth hung open, trying to find the words. He couldn’t.

“This was the bunker she was supposed to be in,” mumbled the father, placing his hands on the wall. “We had a whole plan. A whole plan. Then...”

“I mean,” chuckled the father a little, a mirthless chuckle. “I couldn’t even recover her remains. No point in burying her. So we came here.”

The father draped the silk over his sheathed sword. The soft, rosy pink dressed the scabbard in dazzling smoothness. A tiny drop of color bloomed right there, such a tiny drop, and yet so pretty.

“I got your silk,” said the man. “Isn’t it pretty?”

A single tear leaked from his left eye. He didn’t even realize it at first, not until the tear fell from his bloodshot eye onto the floor.

Then followed another. Then another. Drop after drop, each sting unmistakably his. And just like that, he broke. Sobs wracked through his body, crashing out in wave after released wave of emotion. The man covered his face, letting the pain burst from his throbbing chest out of his wet-hot lungs, as all the more tears cascaded down his face. He finally cried, clutching that tombstone as he sobbed and sobbed and sobbed.

As his father broke down, the boy leaned his head on his father’s chest. He felt the rickety heart, felt the tears drop down on his own cheek, felt his father tightly embrace him as tears streamed on and on and on. The boy hugged his father, letting his father cry all his pain and aches and tears and bitterness on his shoulder. The two clutched each other, desperately clutched the only other living person in this dead, dead world.

Fiction

Group 6



The Journey to the Silk Road

Korean International School Springboard, Yuen Shun – 11

Camels live in the hot desert, they used to help people carry fruit, grains, and heavy things like bags full of rice. There was a Camel named Rocky. Rocky loved eating lots of grass. The whole day he was in the hot desert. He was very resilient and adaptable.

One day, he had a job, his job was to carry heavy things like a bag full of grain. He carried them all the way to the Silk Road. The Silk Road was hot and full of quick sand so he walked slowly. The Silk Road is full of sand from China to Europe, and Arabia. The road was a soft mountain of sand, where the people walked with the camels.

Some Silk Roads had a river, where people stopped to drink or fill water.

Rocky the camel found moving on the silk road very tough as it was hot and many times he used to get sunk in the sand.

He wanted to escape and one day at night he ran in the dark and escaped!

Finally, he managed to get out of the quick sand.