Fiction

Group 3

The Myth of Huangshan

British International School, Shanghai, Puxi Campus, Chen, Yu-chi Charlotte - 12

With her cheeks flushed, Elyse fluttered down to Earth. Her lonely eyes filled with sorrow, she was an iridescent angel from the realm of the Great Spirit. With a soft thud, Elyse landed, her white wings brushing softly against the dirt, her lips trembling softly. The soft-spoken angel landed on a mountain.

As the young angel laid down, she could feel the softness of the soil between her fingers, the vegetation providing a much-needed respite; her dark hair was splayed and her unblemished skin heaved in rhythm with her breath. Tears stained her face, and the soft blue of her eyes melted into tears. The drops of sadness flowed freely along her face, slipping towards the soil below. The redness of her tear-stained face enveloped her nose, an unending soreness slinking its way throughout her whole body. Elyse curled into a ball, her wings shielding her from the morning cold, acting as a warm feathered blanket. They delicately brushed across her face, softly, wiping away the remnants of tears, comforting the girl as her body racked with choked sobs.

Watching through her watery eyes, Elyse gazed at the blue-gray sky. The wind blew as the mist thickened, dampening her hair. The plants yearned for the wetness, and the insects too. Insects loved drinking in the sweet liquid; it was a feeling of paradise for them. I wonder, Elyse thought, was this paradise for Dina too?

The mountain, called Huangshan, was once the place where Elyse and Dina enjoyed life. This was their secret haven. They would talk with animals, giggling at their growls and snorts; they would drink in the sights of nature, with leaves and mud smeared across their delicate skin. She looked back towards the blue-gray sky.

"The sky matches your eyes."

That's what Dina would have said.

A lone tear escaped her eyes, which were clouded with sadness. But Dina is not here anymore.

She is somewhere better, prettier, and perhaps with better friends than Elyse.

Another tear rolled down her face, its surface reflecting the scarce rays passing through the mist, dripping into the soil. With heavy legs, Elyse stood up, the soil crumbling under her bare feet, and small twigs cracking under the pressure.

The angel could feel it all: the stones, the plants, and the trees. It was as if they were all watching her, waiting and anticipating her next move. As the soft mist started to disperse, the air was fresh with newfound humidity. She strolled through the familiar paths, climbed on rocks that she had climbed a million times before, her wings fluttering in determination. The mountain watched.

She held onto vines, newly sprouted with a fresh minty scent. She stepped onto rocks weathered into smooth stepping-stones. The breeze blew dark strands of hair out of the angel's face. The leaves ruffled and whispered sweet nothings of encouragement. Her blue eyes were lit with life once more.

I'm going to see her one last time, she thought.

It had been going through her head, the possibility of seeing her again. The hope numbed the pain in her throbbing heart, and the excruciating pulls of her wings attempted to carry her back to where she belonged. She knew her time was slipping away. She knew she had a limited amount of time on Earth before she had to return to her sanctuary. However, Elyse wasn't one to give up, especially not on Dina.

The sun began to climb overhead, the rays of god showering the girl, embracing her in warmth. Her wings ruffled again, pulling and yearning for heaven, knowing she had to leave soon. Elyse winced, planting her feet on the ground, toes curled to get a better grip on the smooth rocks.

She could feel it; she was near. She had almost reached the place that she had walked to a million, no, a trillion times with Dina before, hand in hand, giggling, while watching the sunset.

"The circle of life," Dina once said to her, sighing, "It never ends. You never know what life has to offer you."

Perhaps Dina never once thought about how Elyse would handle Dina's death. The bubbly tan-skinned girl was gone. Her laughter no longer lighting up the skies; her wisdom no longer leading others. Such a friend was to die for, but Dina died instead. How she wished it were herself.

Her thoughts lingered as she twisted her neck to look at their little cavern, hidden between the rocks. A curtain of fresh ivy vines, now sickly-green and withered, without any tending, covered the entrance.

Looking at it now, the cavern suddenly brought back a flood of good memories: how they would escape the harsh reality of spiritual warfare, how they would sneak away from their overbearing parents to indulge in the cavern's cool waters, and how every time Dina would have just the right thing to say to comfort Elyse's fears.

As Elyse continued to climb the mountain, what was supposed to be a golden landscape covered by slips of sunlight, was now slowly turning into a milky white, like fluffy clouds. Some of them brushed across her face, some landed on her lilac robes.

Oh, she thought. *Their texture is quite unique*.

The angel held out her hand into the misty air, feeling the water drops envelope her fingers. The mist was cotton–like, almost tangible, with a chalky feeling. Slowly, the angel felt her hand being coated in the small white particles. She blinked.

Elyse remembered.

Dina was incredible. She was always the brighter one of the two, but neither minded. Elyse was born into a family of Lords and Dukes; their expectations for her powers high. But no, she didn't reach those standards, Dina did. Dina, the daughter of one of the lowest ranking officials in the realm, had incredible powers in controlling particles. The moisture, the dryness, the wind – she could control them all.

They used to play at the top of the mountain. They would watch the sunset.

People always wondered why Dina wasn't the one born into the higher ranked family because of her powers, but neither one cared.

Elyse remembered when they would sit on the peaks of Huangshan, smooth rocks against their hips and their fingertips fluttering over tops of ferns, they would watch the sun set. They would watch the ball of golden light die down, the moon and stars rising to their glory.

Dina would conjure a ball of milky white swirls, microscopic beads of water shimmering inside, all at her will. "Mist," was what Dina said it was. Elyse would peer into the circular masses, watching pearly particles dance and twirl.

"They're just like stars!" Elyse would exclaim with childish excitement. The mist would expand and slowly wrap her body in sweet dew.

Dina would blush, Elyse thought. *Her eyes would be filled with pride, and the stars of passion in them would appear.*

Dina used to say, Elyse remembered, that *whenever I'm powerful enough, I would create a majestic mist that covers the whole mountain, just for you.*

A long–lost emotion resurfaced, the muscles on the side of her mouth cracked, like liquid fire running across cold ice. Her lips upturned in a very long time.

The mist lingered on her cheeks, holding and stroking them, as the snowy–white mist pushed her into an embrace. Tears sprouted in her eyes, leaping down her nose. It was her, it was the lively tan–skinned that had improved, and moved on, even in death. Her last wish was finally fulfilled, and it was for her.

So you didn't desert me.

She knew at that moment, that it was time for her to move on too.

She laughed, dancing in the swirls of pearly white, as she reminisced the memories they made together, on the peaks of Huangshan, their tears, their laughs, and their wishes.

It was daybreak, when Elyse came, the mist welcoming her in. It was dawn, when Elyse returned, the mist spewing her out, with one last hug.

Armor of a Forgotten Hero

Canadian International School, Lee, Lauren – 13

"Thirty six strange peaks,

Immortals with black top knots.

Morning sun strikes the tree tops,

Here in this sky mountain world.

Chinese people, raise your faces!

For a thousand years cranes come and go.

Far off I spy a firewood gatherer,

Plucking sticks from stone crevices."

–Li Bai "Dawn Vista On Huangshan"

The mountain is a bold statement of the slowness of time, of the reality of the ever–present moment, in a world of ticking human–clocks.

Stealing one last glance at the beautiful earthy peaks of the mountain range, and the orange–gold that stretched far and wide, Wang Shu then turned back to his makeshift workspace: composed of a surprisingly clean slate he found in the fields and globs of dirt held together by mud. Hearing wisps of laughter from out in the fields, he hastily shook his head and tried to block out the bright laughter, trying to calmly gather his belongings. Squeezing his eyes shut, plugging his ears, but to no avail. Like many times before, a soft smile crept upon him, and he dared to hope; making a mad dash to the field. He ran out, hoping to see his friends happily playing hopscotch.

But, like many times before, he was met with deafening silence.

Silence that gnawed at his insides. Silence that hung in the air like the suspended moment before a falling glass shatters on the ground. The silence was like a gaping void, needing to be filled with sounds, words, anything. The silence was poisonous in it's nothingness, cruelly underscoring what the world had taken from him. He was trapped in a beautiful prison.

Oh, how he missed them; though they would now be twenty, or even thirty by now! He missed his brothers and sisters, the family that took him in, the family that tried to cope with the utter hopelessness of their situation. The family of the forgotten children. Wang Shu sighed softly, turning back to his makeshift shelter, not even thinking about glancing back. The thousands of times he thought they had returned, the thousands of times he turned back to find their left–behind belongings, and the thousands of times he sat paralyzed by fear in the dusk, had wiped clean any possibility of hope.

Later that evening, as Wang Shu laid in the "forgotten–hand" billet that was now his by default, he hoped that sleep would be kinder to him. *How foolish of him, to have dared to hope.* Wrinkles and dark circles did little to hide the naiveness of a young boy. The sleep pooled on his eyelids, and the wooden buildings surrounding the mountain were filled with the soft sounds of the townspeople sleeping. The people he once knew. And the wind swooped up, over the heights, rushed and rustled through the tough mountain grasses, and gradually ebbed away through the crags to silence.

Sleep comes so that my dreams may live.

The laughter of the children echoed his open heart; with the frequencies only those who have loved and loved can hear. With his inner eyes, he saw their smiles and eyes that focus on the branches that sway in the gentle wind. For they are not the forgotten, not then, but brave heroes; the hearts elsewhere that yearn to be free, to return here.

Sleep comes so that my nightmares may live.

As Wang Shu scanned his mother's face for a reaction, the silence hung in the air like the suspended moment before a falling glass shatters on the ground. He expected her to crumple, wail, or dissolve into tears, but she did none of those things. Instead she put the letter down, got up and started to make a pot of rose tea. Her son was to be taken away and she was making tea like a robot. When she set out four cups he knew she hadn't taken it in. Sitting at the end of the row was his favorite, the blue ceramic one he'd made at his elementary school art fair.

A bolt of thunder jolted him out of his sleep, allowing an escape from his merciless captor. The thunderstorm that followed bequeathed a percussion of rain upon the rooftop, washing away his fear, as most storms in these parts did. Nonetheless, he refused to go back, refused to let his eyelids droop, and instead tried to remember.

The storm soon ebbed to nothingness, now the silence was as pure as the night air outside. It seemed as if every creature was sheltering, as if birds had either flown south or had better things to do than sing, and it sounded like there wasn't another human for miles. He had been here long enough to know that even in the night, there had to be more sound than that of his racing heartbeat.

Wang Shu hesitantly tucked himself into bed, trying to ignore the oddness of the situation.

Every hero eventually realizes that dreams come with price tags that have nothing to do with money. If heroic dreams were easy, if capes were free, everyone would have one and this world would be better already.

As he went back to sleep; he dreamt of a coin, old and covered in dirt, the engravings worn and the head of the king so tarnished as to be stolen from view. He held it in his left hand, watching the mud dirty his skin. So close to his face, the coin had the aroma of stale blood. Wang Shu turned to his right hand and in the palm was a new spring leaf, crowned by a perfect sphere of dew, reflecting an image of his face, softened and relaxed. When I turned back to the coin, the image of the king had freed himself and journeyed over to the leaf, igniting the growth of strong roots and new foliage that reached for the sunlight, robust, virescent.

On the back of the coin, it now wrote: "Join us, hero. It is your time."

"The birds have vanished down the sky.

Now the last cloud drains away.

We sit together, the mountain and me,

until only the mountain remains."

–Li Bai "Zazen on Ching–t'ing Mountain"

A Lovely Place

Canadian International School, Neo, Katelyn – 13

Mist spilled out of valleys and gripped the peaks like claws. Snow slammed against rock, sliding down in despair. A black-clothed figure watched sourly as the snow around him turned to ash. Then he narrowed his eyes at the towering mountain ahead.

Huangshan is such a lovely place. GuiCheng's black robes flew wildly, barely held to his body by a thick sash around his torso. He grinned. *I can't wait to make it mine.*

And he launched himself into the air.

The cold seeped through his clothes. Rock and snow blurred at his sides. Shadows extended into distorted figures and stretched out their claws. Frost crept onto his skin, covering the gold markings on his face. GuiCheng narrowed on a peak bare of trees with a narrow top.

Then a face pale and bright as the moon appeared in front of him.

He sucked in a breath and stopped. Silence flooded the space where wind had screamed. Snow fell gently, catching on his eyelashes. The owner of the face was floating in front of him. "It has been a while since I've had visitors." Their eyes twinkled. Mist-white hair flowed around them, their face neither a man's nor a woman's.

GuiCheng snorted. "HuangYue, you look well as ever." He surveyed them, raising a brow. "Pity I'm not here for a visit."

HuangYue's lips tugged up. "I'm aware of that."

He bared his teeth into a slow smile. "Then get out of my way."

They laughed, their voice like tinkling bells. "I am afraid I cannot do that."

GuiCheng growled, edging towards them. "Move. I'm not wasting my energy on you."

HuangYue tilted their head, regarding him thoughtfully. They lifted a hand and trailed over the gold marks framing his eyes. "GuiCheng."

A chill ran down his back. "Enough!" he spat. GuiCheng grabbed the whip at his side and brandished it. Dodging, HuangYue landed on the nearest peak and frowned disapprovingly. Dark mist swirled and the whip turned into a blade. He snarled and swung at HuangYue.

They blocked the swing. He charged. HuangYue leapt away, pale yellow robes spread like petals. GuiCheng hissed and struck again.

"GuiCheng, why are you doing this? This is not what you truly want."

"Not what I want?" GuiCheng laughed darkly. "You have no say in that." He slashed his whip. "This mountain happens to fit my needs," he drawled. "So don't take it personally!" A sturdy bow appeared in his hands, an ebony arrow already notched against it. "Isn't it *delightful* how one arrow can turn this magnificent beast into ash?" He drew it back and turned to a small pine tree that looked like a lotus flower. He grinned. "I won't make it painful."

Then he released.

HuangYue's eyes widened and with a wave of their arm, the arrow halted. It trembled, trying to break their spell. HuangYue gritted their teeth and clasped their palms together, grinding the arrow into ash. "GuiCheng, stop this *now*," they commanded and dropped their hands. "You are not like this."

They stiffened immediately.

GuiCheng smirked. He leapt out from the mist, swinging his axe. HuangYue flinched back.

GuiCheng laughed maniacally. "Dodged my swing? I'm impressed, HuangYue. Not everyone can do that." They jumped from peak to peak, GuiCheng missing HuangYue over and over. Trees shook. Snow fell. Cliffs crumbled. Tremors rumbled through the mountains. GuiCheng watched for an attack, but they remained dormant. His axe morphed into a whip and he lassoed a piece of loose rock. Grunting, GuiCheng threw it at HuangYue.

They moved to the side. Falling rocks boomed. "GuiCheng," HuangYue said quietly. He ignored them and swung at them. A wave of their hand and the whip shuddered to a halt. "You won't gain anything from this."

GuiCheng scoffed. "Nothing?" A saber appeared in his hand. "I'll be feared and respected once I'm done here!" He stabbed at them, but they pushed away. He swung at their abdomen, but they jumped.

He snarled and struck faster, but HuangYue easily kept up.

An itch formed on his skin and a fire grew in his head. He lunged at HuangYue, hissing. Then something in HuangYue's gaze changed. They blocked his blow and pushed against GuiCheng's exposed chest.

His eyes widened in surprise. His breath rushed out of his lungs and he floated weightlessly, crashing through trees, knocking down rocks. Then his back collided with a stone wall.

Blood spurted from his mouth and he slid down to his knees, red smearing against the stone behind him. His chest was on fire and his heartbeat echoed in his ears. Blearily, he saw ivory hair spill down. A small shimmer swam in pools of sadness. "Rest," HuangYue whispered, and placed a soft hand over his eyes.

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Gnarled trees filled the scenery. Smoke rose from cracks in the blood–stained ground and clogged the air. Rotten corpses, decaying trees, piles of bones littered the land. And yet in front of him, GuiCheng saw a pair of small hands tending clumsily to a plant. A boy spoke with a lilting voice as if he were telling a story. GuiCheng jolted. *The hands...the voice...no...why am I—?*

A shout interrupted his past self. He whirled around and saw a large, tattooed demon storming towards him. His legs went weak and he stumbled back, trying to run away. But he was still small, his legs uncoordinated. GuiCheng watched as his father clasped his neck and lifted his small body. *Save me...*

"Enjoying yourself, you filthy animal? Taking care of that *thing*?" He mocked, spittle spraying in GuiCheng's face.

He started shaking. "I...That's my..."

"Pathetic," he spat. "You're not worth *anything*." His father let out a burst of fire from their finger, setting the tiny plant up in flames.

"No!" GuiCheng shrieked, thrashing in his father's grip. "That's my best friend!" He spent weeks persuading the shoot to grow. "Please, father! Stop!"

His father growled and sunk his nails into his neck. "Quiet! My son wouldn't behave like this. You're a disgrace." Blood streamed down GuiCheng's neck. Wailing, GuiCheng kicked his father's arm. He hissed, and his grip loosened.

GuiCheng fell to the ground and scrambled away from his father. His father let out a blood-curdling roar and thundered after him. His chest tightened, his eyesight blurred. Hiccups came from his mouth as he sobbed, making it impossible for him to breathe. *I'm a demon. I am strong. I can keep going.* He didn't care as the ground burned the skin on his soles, he didn't care if gnarled bushes ripped his robes. He had to run away.

Soon, a figure as small as himself came into view. Yet he didn't stop and beg for help. Before he passed the figure, he saw a multicoloured gaze follow him. Then it shifted away.

He sniffed, tears dripping off his chin. *Why can't I fight back? Why am I not strong enough?* He bolted through the trees. *Why am I so worthless? I hate him!*

I hate me.

So he ran. And he ran and ran, his hate growing until its roaring was all he heard as he slew, leaving every battleground soaked with the blood of gods and demons and humans.

GuiCheng vaguely felt a warm hand rest on his face, and he opened his eyes. He was slumped on the cold stone. HuangYue leaned above him, their eyes searching his. Stone grey dotted with green. Warm brown speckled with purple.

Beautiful, beautiful eyes.

"Do you remember now?"

GuiCheng snapped out of his daze and scoffed. "How could I not?" He lay his head on the stone behind him. "My life flashed before my eyes." He stared at HuangYue.

"You smile, yet you are hurt. You laugh, yet you are crying."

He glared at them, but HuangYue merely watched him. "I killed so many beings," he muttered.

"Why did you do it?

GuiCheng looked away and swallowed. "Because I was greedy," he finally said. His voice cracked. "I wanted closure. I wanted reassurance." Tears blurred his vision. "I wanted people to look at me with awe."

"And why did you want to harm Huangshan?"

He hesitated and glanced around. Tall, grand peaks broke out of the mist. Trees stood with quiet pride as snow settled on bare branches. It wasn't the mountain worth millions of fearful stares he thought it to be.

"I don't know," GuiCheng whispered. Tears fell onto his face. "I don't know." He thought of his foolish actions, his pitiful self. He was broken. He had strayed from who he was but...he was back now.

"Huangshan is such a lovely place," he whispered.

HuangYue smiled. "Yes." Then he glanced at GuiCheng. "*He* is."

Waiting for the Water to Go

Canadian International School, Yue, Venita Yue –13

Qing was grabbing her brother Kuso's sleeve as they ran through the forest. She stopped before a cave and pointed.

'In there.' She said. 'Someone is calling.'

She's right. Somewhere deep into that cave, something was creating this horrendous sound. It could be a person's desperate call for help, or a beast's growl.

Inside the cave, the air was wet and crisp. Darkness was thick, but they were able to borrow the sunlight from the outside world to light their way. It was noon, and the sun was still hanging brightly up in the cloudless sky. Qing constantly looked behind her while their only source of guidance shrinks as the sound became closer and closer.

At the end of the tunnel was a stone buddha. About three times the size of Kuso and was covering another entrance behind. Light was shining through the Buddha's body, and it was glowing. At the same time, the air coming from the other side was blocked by it, causing the growl.

The siblings leaned on one side of the buddha to push it out of the way. Moss was growing from the bottom due to old age. It was heavy but they were able to move it until the sound was completely gone. They walked through the opening and arrived at a small bay facing the open sea.The fog dispersed into the horizon, touching the water's surface and leaving no gap for the sky.

However, in the distance, a statue of a golden chicken could be spotted standing solely on the surface.

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They came back the next morning, but it was not what they saw yesterday. Qing and Kuso were immediately absorbed by what was before them. Both stood silently for a while.

The water ebbed and a hidden town came to life.

'Wow!" Qing finally said. And before Kuso could stop her, she already walked down the stone staircases and onto the path that led into town.

'Qing—Wait!' He called.

On both sides, there were shops with billboards and signs, and three to four storied residences. Shops where supplied, but there was nobody.

'What is this place?' Kuso said to himself.

That was when they noticed the dancing smoke that curled up into the air with a delicious smell coming from a shop not far away. It was a shop with a wooden exterior and a sign that says Wonton Noodles. Kuso opened the door and triggered a bell that hung on the inside.

'Welcome!'

Before them was a young man that looked in his 20s. In the absence of silence, the young man took a good look at the both of them and finally said in a different tone.

'You guys are not from here, aren't you?'

Qing and Kuso shook their heads with innocence.

'What is this place? And where is everyone?' Kuso asked.

‘Let me grab you each a bowl of noodles first.’ He said.

Two steaming bowls of noodles. The wonton still glimmering with grace, and the pink of the shrimp could be seen through the glass wonton skin. They devoured it within minutes. Kuso felt a sudden sensation of coldness. He looked down at his feet and the water was at his ankle high. Qing also jumped with panic.

‘I will be gone soon.’ The young man said. ‘You guys should get going too.’

He thanked him, then grabbed his sister’s hand and ran all the way back into the cave.

They arrived back home. Looking over their fence, they could see their parents usually eating breakfast in the yard.

‘Who are you children?’ Their mother asked as they went through the front door.

As if time was just frozen.

‘What?’ Qing’s pitch was higher in disbelief.

This can’t be… Kuso thought.

‘I knew something was wrong with that place.’ He said, while trying to calm the storm that’s thundering inside of him. ‘We need to go back for answers.’

The sun rested in the middle of the sky, and dyed all things yellow with its ray of shine. The shadow of each tree ran over them as they walked through the forest, back to where they came from. They decided to wait until the next appearance of the town.

The sky was still dark, but the dim morning ray splits it in two. The world was quiet when Night exchanges for Day. They live in the same house, but they never meet. One leaves the back door as one comes through the front.

When the water was completely gone, they ran down the stone staircases, onto the streets of this town. In the distance, they could see that same young man walking out from his shop, holding a broom in his hands. He seems to notice them too, waving with his right.

‘Didn’t expect you guys to come back at all!’ He said, as Qing and Kuso caught their breath.

‘There’s a problem.’ They said.

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‘I don’t have answers, but there is someone who might know.’ The young man said after hearing their story. ’Keeper of the tower. Madam Mei Ying, a librarian that guards the books of fortunes. Everyone has their own book.’

In front of them was an intricate red Chinese wooden pagoda. A square tower with stories each separated by projecting roofs and bells dangling on every edge; always ringing in that crisp way that seems to echo on forever. Two guarding stone lions by each side of the door, and at the very the top, stood the golden chicken.

The traditional appearance of the tower seems to disguise what is on the inside. The ceiling stretched till the very top, with sunlight shining in. All four walls were filled by heaves and heaves of books, with stairs that seems to go on forever spiralling along. It was like an underground cave of a mad scientist.

‘How can I help you?’

The sudden voice of a woman scared the both of them equally.

She was a slim woman with pearl skin and silky black hair. She wore a red Cheongsam with black plimsoll shoes and a pair of glasses.

‘My name is Kuso, and this is my sister Qing. We would like to see our books or fortunes.’

Together, they walked up the wooden stairs. Passing the walls, Qing realised there were only two types of books; red or white.

‘Why are the books different?’ She asked.

‘White is for the alive, and red is for the dead.’ Madam Mei Ying replied coldly.

Her expression changed as she looked at the two books that belonged to them. It was neither white or red, but both! The red seems to slowly collide with the white, or devouring it.

‘Is there something we could do?’ Qing was desperate, with tears emerging from her eyes.

Madam Mei Ying silenced for a while, then said. ‘Two days from now, it will be the next full moon. Go to the peak of Huang Shan and ask the fortune writer to grant you a wish.’

Qing and Kuso went on their journey right away.

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The moon seemed to be so close to them that the ripples on the surface could be noticed. So quiet that a single sound could evoke thousands of birds.

There, an old man sat on the edge of the cliff, holding a book in his hands with a pot of fine wine beside him. They walked closer to him, and noticed the pages were blank.

‘Can you grant us our wish?’ Qing asked.

At first, he didn’t say a word. Then, still with his eyes closed, he said. ‘Oh! To have something that goes with my great wine!’

With hurry, Kuso searched his pockets to find their last remaining bun. He handed it to the old man. The old man smiled.

‘Under the cherry blossoms.’ He said. ‘Put your hands in the water and say your wish.’

In front of them, new land has risen from where it used to be a cliff. A red arc bridge led to a sacred place above the clouds, connecting the two lands. At the end of the bridge, a sakura tree in full bloom could be seen, with pedals gliding along the wind and down its branch.

Looking down from the edge, fast streams of water ran below, clashing with the rocks and wind to create a roar. Under the sakura tree, the falling petals tickled their cheeks, and the branches hovered over them like a tent. The tree glowed with life. A rock fountain was next to it, with two gold fishes swimming its body of water. Qing and Kuso looked at each other and Qing placed her hand inside. The water felt like a mother’s hand, as if welcoming her. The moon rested in the fountain and the fishes swan peacefully; they’ve finally united with their old friend, the moon. Qing took a deep breath.

‘I wish everything went back to normal.’ She said.

Contest in Magical Mountain

Carmel Pak U Secondary School, Zeng, Si Rui Dora – 13

I'm wandering in the mountains, astounded by the beauty of the view and almost forget what I'm here for. The shadows of the trees are whirling and crossing over one another, the nameless flowers are blooming in a peaceful and unassuming way. The moisture in the air, the sound of the cascade and the dew in the sprouted plants make everything wondrous. When I walk to the cliff side, I realise that I'm in the middle of a lofty mountain whose peak looms through the fog. The mercurial clouds are changing ceaselessly, one moment before it looks like a unicorn, in the blink of an eye, it changes to a monkey. Right when I'm enjoying the pleasing view, the incandescent glow of the sunrise washes away the darkness before daybreak.

My name is Zhang Zi Yi, I was an orphan before my master adopted me and raised me as 13th heir of Pine genre Kung Fu. I'm here, at Mountain Lu, because there's a contest. Mountain Lu is a magical place where mythical creatures live in, every sixty years (one circle of Heavenly stems and earthly branches), there will be a contest held to choose the next leader of the mountain, who shall guard the mountain, be respected and obeyed by every creature in the mountain. My master tells me to come here and join the contest.

Finally, I arrive at the wooden cottage. I see an old man with long beard and white hair, sipping a cup of tea, he must be Master Zhou. Then I see a girl who looks like at the same age as me, wearing a plain Hanfu and playing the Guqin. She looks quite shy and introverted. "Oh, Zi Yi, there you are! This is Wen Yin. Let's wait for another contestant, then I'll begin to introduce the contest rules," says Master Zhou. I salute and bow then sit down, staring out the window wondering what the next couple of days will be like. A while later, there's a loud noise coming from the door. A thin and short boy comes in, "So sorry, Master Zhou…I overslept again," stammers the boy as he bows. "Never mind, Bo Yong," says Master Zhou with a smile, "So let me begin to introduce you the contest rules. First, there are two tasks for you to do, you'll get one mark for each task if you win, the person who has the highest mark in the end will be the next leader of Mountain Lu. Second, you can only be helped by creatures living in Mountain Lu, no help from the external is accepted. Lastly, you cannot cheat or otherwise you'll be disqualified. Any questions?" Both three of us shake our heads. "Good," says Master Zhou.

"The first task that you need to do is to reach the top of the mountain by riding a creature called dragon–horse that is half horse and half dragon, please note that it can only fly 1000 metres above sea level. The highest peak is 1474 metres above sea level. So you need to figure out what to do after flying 1000 metres by yourselves," says Master Zhou. I tremble as I have to face my fear of heights. Oh dear…What am I going to do? I'm so unmoored. I breathe in and out over and over again, try to calm myself down. Then I decide to get familiar with the magical creature first. I recognise the dragon–horse instantly, its soft teal fur, horse's tail and dragon's head. It has eyes full of cleverness and mischief. It just standing there elegantly, gives me a gaze with scorn. There's a moment of silence until it talks, which really scares me. "What do you plan to do after the 1000 metres?" asks the dragon–horse. "I have no idea…" I say. It arches its long eyebrows slightly, and says "Hmmm, you can climb up the rocks if you want, but it's dangerous to do so as the slope is steep and treacherous." I begin to ponder but I still have no thoughts. The anxiety and worry creep into my mind. "Do you have any friends that can help?" I ask. "I do have some friends that can help indeed. They are the heavenly birds, the combinations of phoenixes, birds and chickens. They can carry you throughout the remaining journey," says the dragon–horse. "Such delightful news! Great, then it's settled. Thank you so much! I really appreciate it," I say in a high–pitched voice and with excitements.

The next day is clear with no fog but gentle breeze instead, it's the perfect weather to do the flying task. The flicker of sunlight is dancing merrily on the plants. "Ready, set, go!" Says Master Zhou excitedly. Just then, his phoenix flies high to the sky, bursts into a fire glowing blindingly, tarnishes and becomes ashes. "Don't worry, it will become itself again once the task is done," says Master Zhou with a blink. Right when I ride on the dragon–horse, it swiftly flies to the sky. The wind blows through my hair and the refreshing air make me can't help smiling. Time flies when you're having fun, we reach 1000 metres very soon. "I'll spurt magical flames as signs for you to jump. Don't worry, those heavenly birds will catch you," says dragon–horse. "Alright, thanks again", I say as I nod. A few moments later, I see gleaming flames coming out. I gasp and close my eyes then jump out of the dragon–horse. The feeling of falling is unearthly and heart–stopping, I'm so glad that it doesn't last long. In my disbelief, I'm caught up by the heavenly birds safely. I settle down and take a break, watching these stunning birds with glimmering tails.

Suddenly, I heard a ferocious bellow and a girl's scream. I'm already very near to the peak, but I still tell the heavenly birds to fly to the lower side and see what's going on. I feel aghast about what I see: a beast with lion's head and scorpion's sting is attacking Wen Yin, whose clothes are torn . I decide immediately what to do, I start doing the martial arts that my master taught me. The beast soon fall in unconsciousness. I tell Wen Yin to stay with me and the heavenly birds, she agrees. "Thank you so much for saving my life!" she says with thankfulness and her face flushes. "My honour," I smile. When we arrive at the peak, Bo Yong is already there. "Why are you so slow?" Asks Bo Yong. Wen Yin explains everything to him and Master Zhou. "A good leader must be courageous and help the people when they are in need. To praise what Zi Yi did, I announce this task has two winners, Zi Yi and Bo Yong," says Master Zhou. "Congratulations!" says Wen Yin. "Thanks, and sorry for your encounter," I say. "It's fine, I'm alright," says Wen Yin cheerfully.

The next task is to walk through the forest with no candles, lamps or torches, just complete and evermore darkness. The person who finishes first wins. It's midnight so we can't see anything clearly, we can only depend on one another. I walk slowly and carefully, avoid making any noise that can wake those beasts up. We walk separately for a while, so far so good. Right when the butterflies in my stomach disappear, I hear a loud scream again, this time it's a boy's one. When I find Bo Yong, I'm too alarmed that I literally can't talk. His face is as pale as sheet, both of his eyes are bleeding uncontrollably. I clap my hand on my mouth and tears begin to drop. "Oh my god…Wh…what happen? Are you okay?" I keep shaking. "The tiger–snake. I can't see anything now, but I'm alright," he says with a weak smile. I cover his eyes with herbal eye patch and carry him on my back. After a long haul of fighting beasts, we finally arrive. When Wen Yin and Master Zhou see us, no more words are necessary, we all know what happen. Fortunately, Master Zhou says he has some medicine to save Bo Yong's eyes. What a relief!

"To compliment the kindness of Zi Yi, I announce that the winners of this task are Wen Yin and Zi Yi. So, the leader of Mountain Lu is—Zhang Zi Yi!" says Master Zhou. Wen Yin and Bo Yong start clapping. "Thank you, but I won't be here without your help. So I would like to invite you to guard Mountain Lu together." I say. They agree and we all hug together.

A Race Between Time and Hope

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Apelbaum, Abigail – 13

As Xi Wang sat beside her mother on the hospital bed gently stroking her mother's arm, makeup rolled from her soft, kind, light brown eyes, onto her rough yet vibrant skin. All she wanted was for her mother to no longer be restricted by the barriers of her illness. It was clear, both she and her mother were in pain. As her mother cried to the sirens from a distance, the mountains did too, and both her mother's tears and the loud rain, wouldn't come to an end. It felt as though the mountains were mimicking her mother, but for what reason?

Xi Wang and her mother had settled down in a small, welcoming village on the side of a mountain in the north of China when she was 8 months old, about fourteen years ago. This village had always been a blessing, until 2 years ago. 2 years ago, Xi Wang's father was their whole life, until he wasn't. Her father was a problematic man. He had been in contact with the wrong people and made deals he had regretted. And this was all Xi Wang had known about her father's death. Regardless of what he had done, he was her best friend. He was the light that guided her through the dark, and he taught her to understand that there is some bit of hope in every situation. After all, hope was what inspired him to name her Xi wang. His death took a toll on his family and after months of trying to heal the wounds Xi Wang's father had made, nothing could get rid of the disbelief they had felt. Regardless of the events which occurred with her father, the hope which fuelled Xi Wang was never extinguished.

Not long after her fathers' death, Xi Wang's mother had fallen ill. She had a rare terminal illness, which took a toll on her body. Slowly but surely, her silky, long, black hair had begun to fall off. Seeing her mother in this state wasn't pleasant, but Xi Wang got used to it, until it came to the point, where nights turned into days, and days turned into months, and her mother's pain was unbearable, which meant she needed immediate care.

As the rain danced across the mountains, Xi Wang's mother had tears dancing across her face. It was like these mountains could sense her mother's pain, but that was all in her head, or so she thought. The next couple of weeks were spent in the hospital. They were tough and exhausting. The day soon came when the last strand of hair on Xi Wang's mother's head had fallen out, and this wasn't a good sign. They knew they would face challenges but as always a deep hope filled Xi Wang's body and she knew like all the challenges they faced before they could overcome this. A while after processing the whole situation, she and her mother decided they needed a distraction. Any distraction. So they watched the only news channel, on the old, rustic tv. As the news was shown, they witnessed something terrible. A landslide had just occurred from the top of the mountain, putting many in danger. It was frightening and just seeing this made Xi Wang tense up. She felt as though anxiety had taken over her body, and after everything that had happened in the past, she had no idea what was yet to come.

That same night it was cold and windy, and as Xi Wang laid down on the bed near her mothers, she had various thoughts running through her mind. "My mothers' last piece of hair had fallen off today, as well as the 'hair' of the mountain. My mother cried, and so did the mountain. It's like the mountains are trying to tell me something about my mother, but that can't be, at least I don't think." Xi Wang was unsure whether she was overthinking, or this actually meant something, but soon enough, she drifted off to sleep.

As the nurses spoke to one another in a very serious tone, Xi Wang overheard unsettling information about her mother. "Her immune system is extremely weak right now, her temperature is too high" "There is not much we can do, we need to find a cure and we must do it fast" Xi Wang's stomach felt as unsettled as the information she had just heard. She decided to take a stroll, get some fresh air, and clear her head. As she stepped outside, she was beginning to heat up. It was hot. Like there was a fire within her. It was getting hard to breathe and as she turned her head, she heard someone yell "fire, fire, it's coming from the mountains, someone help, please!" the voice was heavy as if her

lungs were being suffocated. Xi Wang ran back to the hospital, where it was safer. What she had witnessed was frightening, but she couldn't share her fear with her mother, at least not right now.

She held onto hope but at the back of her mind, she knew that the mountains had something to do with her mother, and any opportunity to help her mother was one she could not resist. And so on that day, Xi Wang decided to figure out what the mountains were trying to tell her. She had the slightest idea of how long she would be gone for, or where she was going, but she had to do it quietly, and fast, or she wouldn't make it back to be with her mother while she still could. Memories and thoughts and ideas were racing through her mind, yet as she attempted to process all that was happening nothing made sense. She began walking with the slightest idea of where she was going, with nothing but a bottle of water, and hope.

These disastrous events occurred on the same mountain which the village sat on, so climbing it couldn't be too hard. She began her journey at 9:23 am, while her mother was getting endless tests done. The time was now uncertain, but the sun was setting, and Xi Wang knew that wasn't a good sign. She had nowhere to sleep, and nothing to eat, but she did have hope. So she decided to settle down near a rock, and as she laid down, on the rough, uneven ground, all she could do was hold onto hope. Then, morning came, and she had to continue her journey.

She walked, and walked, and walked, but it felt like the walking was endless. An hour of walking turned into a couple of days of walking, and soon enough, Xi Wang was sleep−deprived and starving, so she knew she had to head back soon, or her life would end before her mothers. As she sat down on the hard ground, she looked up in hope of clearing her head, but as she faced towards the sky, all the clouds were oddly shaped arrows pointing towards her left. They were pointing to the rock near her. There was a large chance Xi Wang was just imagining this. She was starving, dehydrated, and exhausted, but regardless of what was wrong with her, her mother came first. Everything around her was spinning, and the spinning wouldn't come to an end. She walked towards the rock as slowly and steadily as her body could. As Xi Wang looked on the rock, there was nothing. Nothing. She burst into tears and began to lose hope. She crouched down onto the ground, and whimpered softly, as she lay down on the floor holding her legs to her stomach, and as she twisted from one side to the other, she saw it. There it was. It was what she had needed all along. It was the plant, the medicine her mother needed to heal. Xi Wang was ecstatic on the inside, but as she looked at it, she noticed there was something engraved on the ground. 'Time will beat hope, hurry'. The only thing going through her head was that she had to get the medicine back to her mother, and fast. Xi Wang's senses were right, the mountain was there to help her mother, "but was there enough time to do so?" Xi Wang asked herself. It was difficult for Xi Wang to get up, it was practically impossible, and now that time was running out, so was hope.

As she grabbed the plant, and finally managed to stand upright, she just collapsed again. The next time she opened her eyes, she was lying on a hospital bed, wanting a sense of relief, and as Xi Wang stroked her mother's arm the little hope which Xi Wang had left flickered like the remnants of a candle. As her mother's eyes began to shut, she held onto her mother's arm, as tight as she held onto hope.

A Giant Friendship

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Artzi, Aviv – 11

Once upon a time there was a lovely girl named Betty. Betty was kind, polite and generous. She had blue eyes like the ocean and long and straight dark brown hair. Her skin was white and soft as a baby's skin. Every day Betty would run in uncle Jeremy's farm with his dog. Betty was eight years old and even at that age she was the fastest in the village and even uncle Jeremy's dog couldn't keep up with her.

The village was high in the magical mountains and rumors about giants have been going on since three hundred years ago. Betty's family wasn't really big or rich. Her family was only Betty, her mom and uncle Jeremy. They didn't have much money, They were quite poor.

One day, as usual, Betty went up the magical mountain of friendship to get some water from the water well. The villagers gave each mountain an element based on events that happened a long time ago. The mountain of friendship was also the place that rumors about giants have started from. On her way up, she saw two old men and one donkey. It seemed like the two men were fighting about who's the owner of the donkey. Betty went over there to help find a solution to the problem. She asked what she could do for help but each one of them said it was stolen from him. Betty didn't know which one is lying and which one is telling the truth so she had a very simple solution in mind. She looked at the cheap knife that her mother gave her to protect her against bad people and she said, " If you both really want this donkey then I can cut it into two halves and you will both have the donkey". She knew that the owner of the donkey, the one that really cares about it would give up the donkey so that the donkey won't get hurt, and in a blink of an eye, one of the old men shouted,

" please don't! It's fine, he can have the donkey" with his eyes rolling down with sadness. Betty went to this old man and told him:

" Sir, I believe that you are the real owner of this donkey because you care about it." The other old man was mad but he was shocked by this little girl and her trick, but he knew deep in his heart that he really isn't the owner of the donkey. Betty kept walking through the magical mountain trying to find the water well. On her way she saw broken branches and fallen trees, she also saw some small, wild animals. The birds were singing, the squirrels were jumping and running around, the deer were playing with the bunnies. It was unusual because this mountain was known for signs of giants and it was known that giants hated animals.

Betty felt good for herself about the good deed that she did before. When Betty arrived at the water well, the area was sort of empty. All she could see is the water well and with a couple of meters' distance, trees all around it. Betty saw some broken stones that were a part of the well. The broken stones were shaped as a huge finger, from Betty's perspective. As Betty went closer, she was instantly shocked. The birds made a weird noise and flew far far away from the area, the deer ran away as fast as they could without making any noise and the squirrels hid inside the trees. She also saw bunnies hiding inside of caves under stones and looking at her as they were expecting something scary to happen. Betty tried to get the water from the well using her old, wooden bucket but she couldn't. While she tried and tried she instantly heard BOOM BOOM BOOM. She wasn't taking much of that for a note. She thought that it might be just the wind knocking some trees out because here, high up in the mountains, the wind was very strong. Betty tried once more with her rope and bucket to get some water but suddenly. She fell down! Betty was very stressed. The well was very very deep. As she fell more and more, the ground looked closer and closer. She knew that it was the end. Right before her body was smashed into the ground she started to float. Her body was a couple of inches above the ground, but she felt a strong force pulling her up and up. Now she started to see the ground smaller and smaller until she was in the sky and she could barely see the well. She could see a beautiful view and clouds. She still couldn't understand how she could fly. Betty looked above her and was shocked! A thumb and a finger big as clouds holding her shirt up like she was a light doll. She was terrified! "A giant!" She thought to herself without even looking at the big picture. Betty turned around her head and she saw something, something that she could never forget. She saw two eyes, each big as a half of her body, two ears that each one is big as her whole entire body and a mouth big as a cloud. Betty thought that she would end up badly or even for lunch. She shouted: " Please don't hurt me! I didn't mean to interrupt you! ".

The giant said in her strong and loud voice: " it's ok! I just hope that you are feeling better!" while putting Betty on the ground. Betty was shocked that she hasn't been eaten yet. Betty started running back to her home, shocked from what happened to her. When Betty was running, she looked back and saw the giant sitting down on the ground and saying silently to herself: " Well, I think I need to stay friendless for now" with her eyes rolling down with sadness. Betty felt bad for what she did and she started to run back to the giant. When Betty was just 10 meters away from the gian,she said "hey".

The giant was happy. She rolled her head to the side and saw Betty standing in front of her without being scared or terrified. The giant replayed,

"Hey". Betty asked her if they can be friends and the giant replayed, "Yes! I would love that!" Her voice was so loud that Betty had to cover her ears.

The giant apologized and Betty said: " you should never be ashamed of who you are".

what's your name?" asked the giant.

"It's Betty!" she replayed happily. "What's your name?" asked Betty,

"It's Mary", She replied. Betty created a password, which she used in order to meet with Mary. Only after saying this password, Mary would show herself. So it has been decided between the two. "Mary Mary show yourself, giant and small, friendship is the key to them all ". The two friends both went in their different paths, Betty back to her village and Mary stayed in this place. The next day, Betty snuck some turkey and some grapes from her house and was on her way to the same place that she met Mary in. When Betty reached the water well, she said: "Mary Mary show yourself, giant and small, friendship is the key to them all". Mary showed herself from behind the trees and she showed Betty a huge strawberry that she found in the woods, about three times as big as Betty and Betty showed her turkey and apologized for that the food wasn't much and Mary understood. They both laid on the ground looking at the stars at the sky. As for tomorrow, the same thing happened. Betty brought her food, Mary brought her food, the code was repeated and they both happily watched the stars at night falling. The same thing happened every day, until one day, uncle Jeremy noticed that something was wrong. He took his double barreled shotgun with him and followed Betty. When Betty said the code and Mary showed herself, uncle Jeremy jumped out of a bush aiming his heavy shotgun at Mary's head and was about to shoot without even thinking, but instantly someone was standing in front of his gun with her legs and hands wide open. It was Betty, the girl who wouldn't lose her friend so easily. Uncle Jeremy was shocked by Betty's act that he decided to retreat. Betty knew that now that uncle Jeremy knows she can't keep it as a secret anymore and she decided to bring Mary to the village. It was everybody's first time seeing a giant in real life. Some people thought of it as a myth or a dream. Most of the village loved the idea to have a giant living with them and it has been decided with the village leader. Mary will be a part of the village and Betty and Mary got to keep their friendship forever.

Bao and the City of Gold

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Banerjee, Aarussh – 13

Once upon a time, there was a boy who lived with his mother on the crest of a cold, high mountain. His name was Bao. Bao was a simple boy, he never had much. His father abandoned him and his mother when he was younger, and so he had no memories of him. Bao's mother worked as a cook in many households to provide a good life for him. Bao was slightly underweight, he had intense black eyes, he had short spiky black hair, he was of medium height and he always had a smile on his face. Bao had a brave spirit; he always stood up for himself and others; he wasn't afraid of anything. For his entire life, Bao had never visited any other place in the world except for his province. He was always made fun of for his father not being around, but Bao made sure not to let this get into his head.

Everyday Bao would go to school and have a good time there. He was a good student who performed well in class and he was also good at making friends. Bao also had his fair share of bullies, but everyone in the school and the province shared one common enemy, the governor. The governor was easily the most selfish person that Bao had ever met, even the people who serve and work for the governor despised him. He was a short man, with a grey beard, he possessed a pair of horrible teeth and he had a sharp mind. He struck children for not doing well in school and used to punish random street goers for no good reason except for his pleasure. He was a monster. Bao always kept in mind that one day he would overthrow the governor one day and give the title to someone worthy of it.

One day Bao was heading back home after a wonderful day at school. He didn't think anything could make it better. As he was walking, he saw a scroll on the street. It had text on it, but it was indistinct and he could read it properly, he proceeded to put the scroll in his bag and continue walking home. Bao always heard stories about mystical treasures and gold hidden in the mountains for thousands of years, this could have been his way to help his mother out. When he got home he quickly washed up, ate his dinner, did his homework, and then opened the scroll. He could tell that scroll wasn't made recently. Some of the corners were ripped off and missing, there were holes in the middle of the scroll blocking out text. Bao was truly intrigued. After examining it closely he realized it was a map. He had no clue what this map lead him to, but he did know the destination was nearby since Bao recognized the landmarks shown on the map. Bao wanted to pursue this map but couldn't since he would miss out on school he waited till the weekend came to follow the map.

The time had finally come for Bao to follow the map. It was a cold morning, the clouds were coming down. After his breakfast, he wandered through the mountains following the map. Some places were challenging to get through; some were too steep to walk up. Bao perspired through it all. When he was nearing the end of the map, he was really tired. It was at this point where he started to regret his decisions. He thought to himself, "what if this was for nothing, what if this is all just a joke?" He decided to go through the end since there was no point in turning back after how far he trekked. As he approached the destination, his heart started to beat faster, his palms were sweaty, and he was feeling a little dizzy from all the walking. He saw a door and at first had difficulty opening it. After a few tries, he was fed up. He tried to kick the door open, but it did no prevail. After many tries, Bao was frustrated. He didn't know what to do. He later then realized that the door had a lock. This wasn't a regular lock. On the scroll, Bao noticed that there were some special words he had to say. After he uttered the words, the door magically opened.

He walked in and he couldn't believe what he was seeing was real. An entire city made out of gold and completely abandoned. Bao being a smart boy stuffed his pockets with gold, closed the door, and left. He was bursting with excitement to tell his mom about the news, he thought he could finally get his mom out of her job and live comfortably. As he got back, his mom was enraged. He had been away for such a long time his mother was worried sick. Disregarding his mother's anger he pulled out the gold and showed it to her. She was as shocked as Bao if not more when she saw the gold. She was happy at first but was then concerned. She wondered if he stole the gold, and asked him to return it to where he found it immediately. Bao was upset, he thought he had done a good thing. He told his mother that he would return the gold the next morning.

As he was heading out, he noticed the governor watching him. Afraid of conflict, Bao speedily walked away. He came to a stop to check his surroundings, and saw the governor standing with 4 of his men. The governor asked him, "How did you acquire this much gold?" Bao told him everything out of freight. They were on their way to the city of gold. When they got there, Bao said the magic words. The door opened, and it was empty. All the gold, all the treasure, the glimmering city had disappeared. Angered, the greedy governor struck Bao on his arm. Bao, enraged, stuck up for himself and demanded an apology, then was struck again.

Bao came back home crying, he told his mother everything that happened. While she was angered, she couldn't help her curiosity. She asked Bao, "Is there a city of gold in the mountains?" Bao had enough. He took his mother trekking through the mountains to prove that it was real. Once they had got there, Bao said the magic words again. The door opened and there it was. Bao was angered so his reaction was subtle. His mother on the other hand was shocked. She went and hugged Bao, this Uplifted Bao's spirit.

Bao went deep inside the city, and he found a script. The script read, "To those whose hearts are clear, the city of gold will appear. But those whose hearts are evil, the city of gold shall disappear." Bao understood why the city of gold was missing when the governor came with him, it's because his intentions were evil. The governor was evil. When they got down, they made sure to confront the governor about this. After the governor was told, he took a seat. Instead of flogging Bao, he just looked at him. The governor now understood that in fact, he is evil, he is the dilemma of the province. The governor was deeply saddened. But he knew what to do. After a few days, the governor stepped down from his position and left the province never to be seen again. Bao and his mother were living comfortably after they sold some of the gold from the city, and that was their secret. The city of gold remained a mystery to the province, but not Bao.

The Legend of Zhang Li Le

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Chang, David Heewon – 12

"Grandma, Grandma! Tell us a story!", cried the young children of the Zhang household.

Grandma Zhang, tired as she was reluctantly wobbled into the living room and sat on the ornate blue chair. "Have you three ever heard the story about our ancestor Zhang Li Le? The one who slayed the Demon King and saved his village?"

The children looked at each other, shaking their heads. "No Grandma Zhang."

Her wrinkly lips started moving and whispery music crept out "Hundreds of years ago…", and the children were swept into another world.

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In a house in a village lived a boy. Not a large, beautiful mansion filled with food, money, and gold: it was a small earthen shack, falling apart at the seams.

It had a single room, and no door. It was only protected by a wooden fence. The boy slept on a pile of straw with his dog and worked hard every day, even weekends (at this the children gasped)!

This boy was a very humble and generous one, and his name was Li Le. This boy had strong, black hair. His eyes were hazel brown. He had broad shoulders and muscular arms. He came from a long line of farmers. One thing stood out about his family, they were all extremely generous people. Although he was poor, he was still quite respected and people in his quaint village all loved him.

One day, by some mysterious chance he stumbled upon a golden pig on a bright summer's day ("was it alive?", the elder child asked). Now, this pig of course wasn't alive but it was beautiful nonetheless, it had dark, shining eyes and gleaming crystal hooves. The most peculiar thing about this discovery was that he found it on the day that he turned 16, on the third sun of the seventh moon. He had just finished reaping his small harvest and was ploughing his field when he hit a gleaming object. He fished it out and took it to the village elder.

The elder was quite excited about this discovery and brought out the local shaman. The shaman saw the pig and immediately took it as a sign. He rushed through a quirky ceremony that involved many powders and perfumes. He told the boy that the discovery was a sign that he had to go out and face the demon king who had been terrorizing the village and taking ransom every moon cycle. He gave our young protagonist three items, a pear, a peach, and a beautiful blue silken handkerchief saying, "Use these items when you are in a dire situation and use them in this order: peach, pear, handkerchief."

With this advice and a new set of clothes, Li Le set out on his first adventure, stepping out of the village grounds for the very first time.

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Meanwhile, in the Demon King's lair a dark figure was eyeing Li Le through a bowl of water. "Send the mountain troll. Let us test this 'hero's' strength," his gravelly voice boomed and echoed across the cave.

On the other side of the mountain a large burly creature leapt out of a crater in a mountain. It landed swiftly, running towards Li Le (the youngest boy hid behind his brother upon hearing this). After only about an hour and a half, he stopped our hero right in his tracks.

Li Le ran, adrenaline rushed through his whole body and fear kept him from remembering a troll's weaknesses. But he did remember one thing, and this was the peach. He tore it from his pouch and quickly ate the glowing fruit. Li Le's eyes started to glow, and a comforting warmth filled his body. He looked up at the monster and it exploded into flames, screaming in wrath and agony.

Of course, the demon king was watching this scene for the whole time through his bowl of water. The scene instilled quite some fear in him. So as any demon would do, he caused more malice and evil.

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After 6 more days of walking Li Le reached the looming mouth of a giant cave. Dripping stalactites hung from the top and even a very small sound would echo and cause a huge noise. He knew instantly that this was the entrance to the demon lair. Before he went in, he decided to rest, so he set up a small camp just outside of the cave.

That night while Li Le was sleeping, a small army of goblins sauntered out of the cave. They were wielding clubs and crude shields and were making an enormous amount of noise. Despite this, Li Le was in a very deep sleep as he was quite exhausted by all his trekking. Seeing this, the goblins started ravaging his camp. They ate all his food and were going to start rifling through his belongings when one of them, drunk on fermented fig juice screamed at the top of his lungs and cackled about his shenanigans. This noise was able to wake Li Le up.

With a jolt Li Le leapt up and looked around his camp. He was of course shocked to see the sight around him. He grabbed a stick from the burning fire and tried to ward off these maniacal monsters.

Now, before we continue on with the story, one thing that you must know is that goblins are very cowardly and weak. This is why they are always in large groups. They are quite clever although they cannot be called smart. Other than being alone, they fear two things, horses and dogs.

Because the goblins were in quite a large number, Li Le didn't scare them at all. Knowing that his life was probably in danger, he grabbed the magic pear given to him and took a bite out of it. Suddenly, a large cream–colored horse appeared below him and a large hunting dog was growling beside him. This of course scared the goblins half to death and Li Le and his newly found 'pets' quickly disposed of them. As soon as every goblin was either dead or had retreated, the animals disappeared.

Li Le now realised that he had wasted enough time and finally ventured into the cave. For a few minutes, he walked through a decrepit, damp, and dark hallway. When he reached the end, it forked off into two different paths. He saw that the one on the right was more large and beaten. He took this as a sign that it was more used and after a bit more contemplation, went in.

Li Le soon came to a large stadium with goblins, trolls, demons, orcs, and small dragonets sitting on stone seats. A group of giant, armed demons that were mounted on wingless drakes surrounded a faint, looming figure on a throne. Li Le had no weapon and knew that he would be killed instantly.

"Why should we be afraid of him Biff? He's just a little boy," said a demon.

"Apparently he killed our strongest troll and killed a bunch of elite goblins," said 'Biff'.

"Well he doesn't seem to have any weapon now," said another demon.

"Yeah, he seems to be wetting his pants," said a big gruff one.

The demon king had had enough of this petty talk. "If you think you can kill him, go do it!" he shouted. Poisonous gas crept out of the drakes' mouths while spears drove toward Li Le. he dodged best he could but the gas was weakening him and he was getting tired. Soon enough, a spear met its target, driving through him (multiple horrified screams erupted from the children). The one who landed his shot (Biff) ran around the arena whooping. Without anything to do, Li Le took out the handkerchief. He wiped sweat from his brow and he was suddenly filled with a rush of adrenaline. We wiped the blood from his wound and it rapidly healed. Finally, he squeezed the handkerchief to dry it off and it turned into a giant, glinting halberd. Filled with courage, he rushed towards the now unprotected Demon King and ran him through. The weapon went through him like a warm knife through butter. Li Le had finished his quest.

As soon as the Demon King died, every monster and spawn of evil disappeared. Li Le ran back to his village. He was still energised from the handkerchief and made it in a few hours. He ran to the chief and gave him the demon king's jewel–encrusted crown and collapsed, entirely exhausted.

After this, the once poor village grew rich from the spoils of the crown and with the money tourists gave them to see the legendary cave.

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"And, even now if you try enough, you can still see the very cave that Li Le fought in, deep in the yellow mountains," Grandma Zhang ended her story. There was no response. All of them had dozed off. Chuckling, she hobbled out of the room and turned the lights off behind her.

The Story of Will and Silinco

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Donnitz, Yair – 11

It was a normal day in Grenfield High. Everyone chatted and gossiped throughout classes, everyone except one boy. Will Sadento was tall with fair hair and tanned skin. He was 15 years old and was bullied a lot by the older kids. He lived on Third Street and had no friends, but he was the smartest kid in his grade, maybe even the whole school. All he wanted was to stop being bullied.

His days at school were always the same. He got to school, kept his head in his computer and tried to get his work done without being tormented by Cole and his little cronies. This story is how he earned their respect.

It was a normal day for Will. He got to school and went to his homeroom class in the morning. This was when his day started going sideways. Cole and his group of henchmen left homeroom early and set up a trap for Will.

"Oy chaps," Cole said, "Here's the plan"...
As Will left his homeroom for English, they struck. Cole and his sidekick Henry lashed out to try and grab Will, but Will sent a kick their way and ran. He was relieved, and was congratulating himself, when he bumped into the other half of the group, Matty and Patty, who were twins. They blocked his usual route, grabbed him by the shirt and took him to Cole.

"We got him, Boss." Matty said while Patty nodded.
"Excellent," Cole said, with a mischievous grin on his face. "Now let me have a nice little chat with Willy boy here." He grabbed Will and slammed him onto the lockers. "Now listen here Will, I don't want to hurt a young chap like you, but I will if you don't cooperate," Cole said. "You know I hate you and you hate me, but I want to cut you a deal."
"Anything," Will whispered, "Anything at all!"
"Ok then," Cole pointed to the school bulletin board. "There is a field trip to China to see some mountains for a week and the big bozos over there are going on it." He pointed to Matty and Patty laughing at one of Henry's jokes.
" Survive that entire week with them, making sure they come to no harm, and we won't bully you anymore".
"And if I don't?" Will asked.
"Then I guess you might want to get some fighting lessons," Cole said, slyly.
"Fine" Will said, "but I better not be in the same group as them".
"Enjoy your trip!" Cole shouted, mischievously.

Will did anything but enjoy the trip. No electronics were permitted, no snacks allowed, and he was in the same group as Matty and Patty. They went on multiple plane rides and rarely stayed in one place for more than a few hours. It wasn't as good as it looked in commercials, but was better than riding in a car dreading what Cole would do to him. He could imagine Henry and Cole kicking and punching his brains out, laughing. He put the image away as he tried to get sucked into a movie. It was the only entertainment the plane had and he couldn't stand not doing anything for the next 13 hours. He started watching Harry Potter and attempted to relax…

"Ladies and Gentlemen, you may unfasten your seatbelts. Welcome to Beijing." Will woke up to the sound of people shuffling and speaking. He rubbed his eyes, and realized he fell asleep at about the hour mark of the movie. He unfastened his seatbelt and joined the crowd leaving the plane. He thanked the flight attendants as he left, and joined the field trip group as they got on a bus.

"Next stop, Hua Chu Jia Hotel!" the teacher, Mr. Brander said. When they got there, Mr. Brander said to get changed and pack their mountaineering bags and meet outside the hotel to begin climbing. They got outside quick enough and set out in their own groups. The twins hadn't bothered Will for the entire journey which made him think they were planning something awful, but Will tried to push that to the back of his mind and focus on navigating through the mountains.

As he followed the map, he kept shouting directions so Matty and Patty could follow, but didn't hear anything from them, so he continued. Left, right, right, straight, left, left, turn, straight, straight, right. Will began to lose track of directions and time. He hadn't heard any giggling or cracking from the twins for a long time and he was at a cliff, so he stopped and turned around, only to see no one behind him. He turned around again, heard a 'Boo' from the twins and screamed as he fell down the mountain.

In a big cave under the mountain, a scream was heard from above. From that scream, the bloodthirsty giants awoke.

In every story like this, there is always a bad guy that isn't really bad, and this story is no different. One of the giants named Silinco, wasn't evil. He enjoyed the fresh mountain water that trickled from a hole in the roof of his cave, and loved eating trees for food. He was caring and curious, which was why he took the unconscious Will from outside and treated his injuries.

Will woke up a day later to a roar from the other bloodthirsty giants. He took in the scene. He was in a cave that looked like some sort of home, and in front of him was a giant. He looked 20 feet tall and muscular. His clothes were baggy and ripped with stains that disturbingly looked like dried blood. His skin was pale and his veins and blood vessels were visible. There were nasty cuts and bruises on his face and a big wound on his chest. Will screamed and the giant shut his mouth with his finger.

"Shhh," the giant said, "They won't find you in here"
"What are you!" Will shouted.
"I'm a giant who isn't really evil, my name is Silinco and I'm here to help you save those two other humans from the other giants."
"Matty and Patty have been captured by your kind?!" Will whispered.
"Pretty much." Silinco calmly said. Will screamed again.
"I have 3 days to get them back, unharmed to the Hua Chu Jia Hotel and get back home to America, ok?," Will said. "I need to know where they are so please help me!"
"Fine, I'll help." Silinco said. "What's your name, anyway?"
"Name's Will. Will Sadento."

Silinco told Will that the twins were being held hostage in the middle of the mountain and he agreed to hide Will in his cloak in the next meeting, which was The Feast of Flesh. Will spent time learning more about Silinco and the other giants to understand their flaws. Those flaws were the things that would help them save the twins. When the next meeting was called, Will and Silinco were ready.

"Brother Silinco, there you are, please come join us in The Feast of Flesh!" The chief giant called out.

"Good luck." Will whispered, then hid in his cloak pocket. Silinco sat down, closed his eyes, held hands with the giants next to him and started to pray in a foreign, ancient language.

While this was happening, Will climbed out of the cloak and climbed onto the table. He took a knife from his pocket, and started to cut the ropes that bound Matty and Patty.

"What are you doing here?" Matty whispered to Will.
"Brother Silinco isn't bloodthirsty. He's a good guy and he helped me get here to save you, so shut up and stay still so I can cut you out of these ropes."

As the giants opened their eyes, the ropes had been cut. The giants could see Will Matty and Patty running away.
"Stop them!" the chief giant screamed. All the bloodthirsty giants got up and tried to run, but didn't realise that Will had attached metal clamps to their feet. They were that gullible.

“Dammit!” the chief shouted.
“Can’t we just eat the other flesh?” a giant suggested.
“I wanted human flesh!” The chief said. He started to scream...

When they got back to school, Will was a hero. Matty and Patty couldn’t deny his bravery when they told Cole what had happened. Cole had no choice but to respect Will for the rest of high school. Will was finally happy, and the story of Will and Silinco is still told to this day at Grenfield High.

Magic on the Mountain

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Goldbery, Ella – 13

"Dad, I'm home!"

The raging storm outside had resulted in wet library books and a soaked sweater, which I put down on the table as I glance around the living room looking for my Dad. He usually sits on the couch reading his newspaper waiting for me to come home. It's dark and quiet, too quiet, something's up. Turning the lights on I head upstairs looking to find it as empty and dark as it was downstairs.

"Dad, Dad!"

I cry out, he isn't replying. Maybe he's on a walk, I think but by the time the sun sets, my stomach is already twisting itself in several knots. Where is he? My head buzzes with infinite worse–case scenarios, anxious thoughts, and worries and then I see it, a note. I open the note to find scrawled words on crumpled paper, all in my Dad's handwriting.

Dear Felix,

You are probably wondering where I am. In the basement, there is something I have left for you. I am inside it and on top, there is another note.

Love,
Dad

Nervous, palms already sweaty, head aching with questions, everything is too confusing. I head downstairs to the basement, my hand on the doorknob not knowing what I was getting myself into. I look around the basement finding a book on the table that instantly catches my eye. The title reads, 'Tales from China's Magical Mountains'. On top, I find another note dusty and covered in dirt. The room is cold, my hands shaking. I read the note to myself and my brows furrow in confusion.

My blood bubbles in anger. I look back at the book. Grabbing it roughly, I throw it at the wall. It makes a loud bang as it hits the wall before falling and lying face open on the ground. The room starts to shake like an earthquake. A bright light comes from the book's direction and before I knew it, I start to feel dizzy and the room starts to spin. I fall on my knees battling the sudden heaviness on my eyelids to stay awake, but they ultimately close and when I open them again I am in a whole different place.

I look around and it looks just like the cover of the book I found in the basement. Is this what my Dad meant by the book helping me find him? I dust myself off and started walking. I haven't walked more than 100 meters when I get tackled and pinned to the floor.

I look up and see a beautiful girl looking at me. She gets off me but keeps a grip on my forearm. I start to ask her a question when she says, "We don't have much time if you want to get to your father, we need to rush".

I'm busy looking at her long chestnut brown hair, her bright green eyes, and mission–ready gear on when her question pulls me back to reality.

"Wait, what? What danger is he in? Who are you?"

The girl throws some of her gear at me and secures her own from the fall. "Put that on you, I'll answer your questions on the way we must be haste in our journey."

I do as she says, I try again to speak with her this time in a nicer tone than earlier, "My name is Felix and I was looking for my father when this magical book transported me to whatever this place is. You mentioned that he's in trouble, what do you mean by that?"

The girl keeps walking at a brisk pace, looking behind her back every few minutes.

"My name is Kora. Your father, he's in danger. I have been assigned to find him and secure him from his kidnapper. All I know for now is that the kidnapper is a woman and she wants to get the gem that is the source of this mountain's magic. Your Dad and I are the only people who know where this gem is located."

She pauses before continuing, "I live in a village at the top of the mountain. If that woman succeeds in taking the gem, the mountain's natural beauty and animals will disappear. It breaks my heart to think of this place being ruined, I and so many other people love it here… That's why I need your help with this. "

We hike on for a couple of hours, talking and getting to know one another. Before we know it, the sun starts setting. We set camp and go to sleep to gather our strength for the day.

We keep going like this for another day before finding signs that lead us to the top of the mountain. On our way up, I ask Kora about how she had come to live in these mountains.

"My only solid memory of my Mom was of her reading me stories of this mountain, I came here after she passed to feel close to her," she says.

"My mom also passed but I was young so I don't really remember her. It's just my Dad and I and he never really speaks about her," I reply.

She abruptly stops walking and tells me to stand still and be quiet. It seems we aren't alone, and the scratching noises seem to come from within a cave to my left. We go closer so that we're standing in front of the cave. Two big wide purple eyes open and chills go down my spine. A humongous mouth opens and Kora and I hide. "This dragon is the only thing coming between us and the final path to the top of the mountain, we must face it," she says in a confident whisper.

I nod my head, too scared to say anything.

"Ok so on my count, use your bow and arrow to stall the creature, I'll try to attack him from the other way.".

Kora gives me the signal and I shift quickly in front of her so that the creature sees me.

Kora creeps through the bushes while I distract the creature.

"Come on you creature!" I bellow. That does it and the dragon is looking me in the eyes now. At first, my shots are a bit wobbly from the nervousness but after a few, I get the hang of it. When she's close enough to the dragon, she takes out a sword and starts fighting the beast. Although I know that this is the worst time to think this, she looks really good when she fights.

"FELIX! Quick, shoot more arrows, we need to get him injured enough to leave without it running after us," screams Kora.

The creature comes closer and closer to me, while I become more and more terrified.

And then I hear a BOOM! Kora falls off the creature, her screams echo as she falls. I wince as I hear the thud of her body smacking the ground. I hurry over, firing my bow to the creature before sliding up next to Kora.

"Kora! KORA!" she's battling to stay awake. "Wake up, please WAKE UP!" my heart stops beating as I see her fade away in my arms.

"Please, stay with me," I say with a panic.

The dragon starts coming close so with every bit of courage I can muster, I take Kora's sword and before I put it through its chest I say, "This is for Kora!". The dragon falls to the ground.

I rush back over to Kora. I start frantically trying to resuscitate her by giving her chest compressions and mouth to mouth. Tears start streaming down my face as I ask her to wake up as if that would help. All this time that I spent with her, she had started to become someone that meant something to me, I couldn't just give that up.

"Kora, please wake up" I scream my lungs out.

Her eyes flutter open enough to say, "Felix, leave me here, I'm too weak and I don't think much can be done to help my situation. Continue, save your father before it might be too late" Kora said while slowly fading away.

The tears come faster now and I find it hard to breathe.

I refuse to leave her so I carry her up with me, maybe my Dad can use his medicinal knowledge to help save her.

I go up the mountain, following the path. I stop as least as possible but I'm starting to feel tired and need to put her down a couple of times.

I start climbing the final set of stairs and a bright blinding light comes from the top. I see the shadows of three people.

"Hello, Hello?" I call out hoping it to be my father.

"Hello, Felix," a familiar voice of a woman says to me.

I put Kora's body on the floor and walk closer so that I finally see two figures.

"Dad? Mom?"

The Guardian Dove

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Lau, Miley – 11

A cherry tree stood full of pink flowers, vibrant and beautiful. Its trunk although full of lines was towering over the small hut beneath it. Birds made their homes upon its branches, singing their unique songs, and with them sat Li swinging her legs, her raven black hair tumbling down her shoulders, wild and free. Eyes reflecting the petals surrounding her, the grass below danced to Li's singing, her voice was magical. Oh, how she lived a happy life.

Li's grandmother sat humming a small tune as she sipped a cup of tea. Birds sang their songs and the Four Sacred Chinese mountains loomed along the horizon. Of the four summits, Earth, Water, Wind, and Fire, the Wind mountain was her favorite because of its legendary tales. She lived with her two grandchildren Li and Wang in a small hut overlooking a cherry tree near the woods where her grandchildren would go. She had lived in this place as far as she could remember, it may be small she thought, but it was home. She got up to fill her cup but suddenly felt her legs give away from under her and she slumped down onto the ground.

Gleaming in the sunlight were rainbow fruits, each delicious and sweet. Wang crept closer to pluck the precious fruits. He held one red apple up to the bright sunlight. Closing his eyes he brought the treasure closer and took a bite to savor its delicious taste, but instead of pure sweetness a bitter sting soured his tongue, He quickly opened his eyes only to see his apple completely black. Unsettled, he ran back home.

Wang burst through the door and hurried to the living room. He looked at Grandmother's rocking chair, realizing she was not there! He frantically searched around the small house and finally found Grandmother sprawled across the floor. He dashed across shaking her shoulders.

"Wang? Are you home?" Li asked as she came through the door.

She looked around and saw Wang holding Grandmother. Grandmother opened her wrinkled eyes to see two worried faces staring back at her.

Grandmother smiled then said, "I'm ok children, there is nothing to be afraid of."

Li and Wang smiled uneasily back at her, deep down they felt something was amiss.

As night fell, the fire roared while orange and red sparks danced in the firewood. Li and Wang sat chatting to Grandmother, smiling and laughing, but something was strange about the atmosphere. "Grandmother, is the chicken ready?" Wang asked, Grandmother looked down at the chicken brown like soil. She shared the chicken around the table. The children ate heartily and when their stomachs were full, Grandmother knew it was time to tell her story.

Stars twinkled above the night sky as Grandmother searched her mind with so many meaningful stories. She looked beyond the children where the Sacred Wind Mountain stood and started to tell her tale.

"Once upon a time, a beautiful bird ruled over the woods, its wings were green like emeralds, its body more radiant than gold, its voice was so beautiful that when the sun rose all the animals would come and sit around the bird to hear her song. Nature would dance to the sound of her voice, it was heavenly.

One day, while she was flying and dodging all the tall trees, the bird looked up at the pure sky. Suddenly she crashed into a tree and fell to the ground. Unable to cry for help, she could only wait for someone to come to her rescue. Darkness came looming over the trees and the poor bird couldn't see anything, as the frogs stopped croaking she heard a sound. It was someone creeping closer and closer until finally, she found herself being lifted off the ground. She struggled against her kidnapper's hands but soon couldn't stop herself from falling into a slumber.

The bird woke up and tried to move her wings only to cry in pain. The stranger turned his head around realizing she was awake and told her not to be frightened because he would nurse her back to health. Day–by–day, she got stronger until finally, the bird was free. Before she flew away she granted the stranger a wish to show her gratitude.

After thinking for a minute, the stranger replied, "I wish that anyone who comes your way can get one wish as I did, but the wish must be used for a good deed."

So because of this, anyone who encounters the bird atop Wind Mountain will be granted a wish but only for good", said Grandmother as she finished the tale.

The next day, the sun awoke while a white dove sat on top of the small hut, it stretched its wings showing its beautiful feathers, white and pure. The sun shone overhead then as the dove took flight flying into the clear blue sky.

Li trudged up the mountain, "What are we doing?", she thought to herself as she considered turning back.

She suddenly remembered the empty bed and quiet hut back home. She looked ahead and finally made her decision while dragging Wang with her, embarking on their quest to find Grandmother.

The night crept forward and Li's legs grew tired. Finally, Wang fell onto the grassy ground.

"Li, we've been walking for hours yet I still know nothing about what your plan is!" complained Wang,

Li looked back at her brother and replied, "Remember the myth Grandmother told us about the magical bird on Wind Mountain?"

Slowly it dawned on Wang, "You mean her myth about the wish?"

"Yes," Li said.

"But that's crazy, Grandmother told us the myth just to entertain us and it's not true Li!", reasoned Wang.

"Wang, she told us the story the night she vanished. Is that a coincidence? I don't think so." replied Li.

"Fine! You can go but I won't!" as he started to back down the mountain.

Li sat beside a pond as the sun set over the horizon. She looked across the water and a beautiful phoenix flew down for a drink. Li was shocked but then remembered she was on a magical mountain without Wang.

Wang ran calling his sister's name louder and louder he shouted until finally,

"Wang! Where are you?" Li's voice rang.

"I'm here Li!" He replied. Finally, Wang saw Li run towards him.

"Where did you go?" Li asked.

Wang replied, "You won't believe what just happened! I found the mythical bird and made a wish!"

Suddenly they both heard a song soaring through the winds, dancing with the trees and making flowers blossom. It was so magical they decided to find the source. Tracing back to each flower blooming they followed the song to the river. The siblings stepped into a clearing and saw a dove on top of a woman's shoulder. Her hair flowed down to her waist. Noticing someone behind her, the woman turned and to their surprise, it was Grandmother!

Grandmother smiled, " My dear Grandchildren, how did you find me?"

"We found the bird of Wind Mountain!" Wang exclaimed.

"Will you come home with us now?", pleaded Li

Grandmother shook her head "My dears, my love for you two is as big as the sky and as deep as the sea, no words can describe my love for you but I must return".

Grandmother pointed a finger up towards the heavens, They gasped as Grandmother's finger was transparent. Suddenly the dove, resting on Grandmother's shoulder, flew up and began to glow.

"Children remember this. Every accomplishment you make I shall witness, Whenever danger finds you, I will be there to protect you. I will always be in your heart." With those words, Grandmother faded and the dove flew away.

A month passed after Grandmother's departure. Li was picking flowers nearby humming a tune. She carefully plucked up a daisy and put it in her basket. Suddenly, the ground turned black Li looked up and saw a huge tiger staring straight at her. It roared, baring its ginormous teeth but before it could take a bite a white dove suddenly flew down. A great white flash appeared, blinding the tiger but strangely it didn't blind Li. The tiger scurried away as the dove landed on her shoulder. It pecked Li's cheek.

"Always keeping her promise", Li thought to herself as Grandmother flew away.

The Merciless Mountain

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Ngo, Nili – 12

Ke–Ai looked up at the beautiful remote Chinese mountains in awe as the dark, camouflage green Jeep slowly came to a halt. Her parents, BaiYing and QiangDa, were prominent historians searching for a Chinese Empress's tomb.

"Ke–Ai, honey, why don't you rest at the hotel while we leave for a bit? It's been a long journey. We'll be back soon, I promise." The young girl's mother sighed, kissed her on the forehead, and left, wearing the same light brown trench coat she wore the day before and holding the fourth cup of coffee she had this morning.

Ke–Ai waited until she heard the lock click before she hurried over to the closet. "It's been too long since I've had an adventure, and even longer since I've had a friend. If I'm going to get one now, I better look presentable."

She paused for a minute. Her big, curious brown eyes lit up like matches, and a big, pearly white smile started to grow on her small round face. She picked up her favorite t–shirt and jacket and her unicorn backpack. She stuffed some food, a flashlight, and a large water bottle in the bag. Tying her long charcoal–black hair into a bun, Ke–Ai picked up the bag and set off to the abandoned castle where her parents were already studying the century–old artifacts. She knew it was a long way up and couldn't wait to face the challenge.

Her classmates always thought of her as a teacher's pet, but her teachers appreciated that she was patient and kind. Her mother put school before everything and would leave her little to no time to make friends. Her mother's disregard for a childhood with peers was what truly started this adventure.

Grunting and struggling her whole way hiking up the mountain without falling over from the harsh winds, Ke–Ai sat down on a nearby rock and closed her eyes. She was drifting off, but there was one problem. Apart from knowing she had to head up, she had no clear idea of where the abandoned palace was, and the hotel was already too far away to turn back. The fear of being lost made her shiver, and reality began to sink in. Though she was young, her dad insisted on teaching her how to survive in the wild alone. "Never panic, sweetheart. Always ration out your food," Her father would say. "Be sure to have a nearby water source." Tears running, the girl took out the five energy bars and the small box of raisins she had packed. After calming down and having taken a deep breath, she sorted out the food and was already on her way to finding a water source.

"Hello," whispered a soft voice. Ke–Ai screamed and turned around. No one was there.

A colossal wave of twinkling stars fell from the sky and diluted, only to reveal an elegant woman wearing a royal silk gown with her hair pushed up into a tight bun exposing the small, shiny golden tiara sitting on her head. She looked as if she was sculpted to perfection and put onto Earth right after. She opened her eyes, and they sparkled as she watched Ke–Ai. Still in shock, Ke–Ai was left speechless.

"Wh–who are you?" She stuttered.

"I'm here to help you; I've memorized this mountain pretty well. I've been watching you, and you look like you need some water. There is a stream just over there," The woman pointed to the young girl's left. "follow me."

Ke–Ai squealed in happiness and went up to hug the helpful dame.

"NO!" She shrieked, holding up her bony hands to block the child from coming closer. Ke–Ai had a puzzled look on her face and wondered why she couldn't express her thankfulness. She was a curious little girl, and she felt like something fishy was going on. So, when the mystery lady wasn't looking, she pulled her long, flowing dress. Ke–Ai screamed as something abnormal happened. Her hand had gone through the woman, and everything in a five–centimeter radius disintegrated. Instead of regular flesh, her skin was misty, like a cloud. As you can probably tell, this is not an everyday occurrence.

"Sit down!" The woman's 'skin' grew back, but she was still enraged that Ke−Ai didn't follow her simple order. The young girl sat on a nearby stone, scared of what the furious ghost−like figure would do to her. The woman took a deep breath. "I am here to help you. I'm not like you; I've been here for thousands of years, stuck on this cursed Earth, this doomed mountain. It's been a century since someone came to visit. In return for getting you back home, you need to help me with a quite challenging task. I know you're up to the job; I've watched you since you've arrived in this crazy place. You're a survivor."

Ke−Ai's face lit up in joy. It was always nice having a stranger complimenting you. "All I know is that I miss my parents, and they are probably back home already. I have been climbing this mountain, so I'm guessing that this is the direction where the hotel is." She pointed downwards to her right. "Before we go, I want to know where you come from. You aren't normal, obviously, but I'm a curious girl." The child paused for a minute and looked her up and down. "What kind of creature are you?"

The bizarre figure laughed. "I'm the soul of someone six feet underground."

The girl's jaw practically fell to the ground as she stuttered. "Y−Yo−You're a ghost? How will you help me if you're a ghost?!"

Ke−Ai started to get frustrated, and she didn't know what to do. She felt trapped.

"Ease, child, you don't even know my name. I'm Mi Tang, Empress of the now−forgotten empire of JinXin. Let's get you back down from here. It's getting dark; I want you to get back home as soon as possible. Things here get strange at night." Ke−Ai agreed. She and the Empress started heading back to where they assumed the hotel was. "Stop making so much noise! I can hear the dry leaves crackling under your shoes!" Easy for you to say, The young girl thought. You're floating over the dirty mud! She kept her thoughts to herself.

"Who goes there!"

A voice shouted in the dark. The Empress and the girl weren't able to get down the mountain before night fell in time, so they brought out the flashlight. It must have brought attention to unwanted visitors.

"Quick, run!" The ghost whisper−shouted. "The trolls come out at night!" Ke−Ai ran for her life without looking back. She felt the cool breeze from the magical being's floating, and she knew she was safe, at least for now. Several fast footsteps approached them, and the girl ran faster. And faster. And faster until she just couldn't anymore, and she collapsed.

"C'mon, Ke−Ai, you can do it! We've got to get out of here!"

Then, as she was about to get back up, something slashed her arm. She screamed in agony as she started to bleed out. But a small cut on her arm is no match for brave Ke−Ai and her survival instincts. She quickly tied her hot pink jacket around her arm and winced. She got up and held the injured arm, still unaware of all the events happening around her — a large green 'man' with sharp front teeth and pitch−black eyes was waving around a long machete, trying to cut MiTang just as he had wounded her. The Empress, smart and resourceful, picked up a sharp rock that she found on the ground and threw it at one of the troll's eyes with a flawless aim. Blood spat in every direction, and the young girl, her arm still aching, put her intact arm over her head to block the troll's blood landing onto her head as she screamed in horror.

Once her arm was disinfected (with the help of MiTang), it was already morning, and she knew that her parents must have been worried. Sure enough, a helicopter flew over her and slowly came down as they found the missing child. She looked around, a big smile on her face, the police swarming her and asking about the large gash on her arm. "I helped you. Time for you to help me." A malicious grin on the ghost's face appeared. Ke−Ai's parents came to hug her.

"I'm so glad you're safe, honey." The grin disappeared.

"Them! Their ancestors killed me! Ke–Ai, I need you to kill them for me."

"No! I can't!" Her parents looked around, confused. No one was there. Who was their sweet child talking to? The young girl picked up a similar rock that MiTang used to kill the troll and threw it at the Empress. The Empress growled as her real disturbing monster form was revealed, and she disappeared.

Ke–Ai got the adventure she wanted.

Dead Grains

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Wigisser, Alex – 13

Cutting through every grain I could detect. For my family to feed. My arms felt heavier after all the cutting, it felt as if I had two stones placed in each of my hands, weighing me down until I could no longer bear it. And though my body had been drained I only managed to acquire half a bucket of grain. I faintly didn't collapse on the ground. Bringing the grain home, I interrupted my way home with a short break. Much needed I sat down and remembered the tales that had been told of my village, the overflow of grain, the tall green endless grass, but now we inhabit a lack of grain and the dead grass, a ghost town it is, little to no one lived here. And those who did live here couldn't afford to leave the village, it's rock bottom here.

As I had arrived home I saw my greeting mother and my loveable grandmother. Showing my mother the grain I had collected for the winter, I saw her face drop not knowing if my grandmother would survive this winter. My mother's mind had been triggered as she didn't want or deserved the same death as my father. " YonGang was that all there was?" she asked in a panicked manner, I nodded in disappointment. Overthinking, my mother was beginning to get anxious.

Every Night and day I observed my mother grow more anxious. Her anxiety was entering me, sleepless nights hearing my mother's cries. I couldn't endure this for the winter. I tried every method I could to make anything soluble that would keep my family alive for the brutal winter. Nothing worked. The depressed state of my household was beginning to affect me. I had become hopeless. Will I be responsible for those who perish and be left to roughen under the soil of these lands? The thought of death, brought me to the corrupt trader of help, Zi Li.

Mr. Li was well recognised for securing a strong trustable word, but with a twisted trade. Though many used to come to Mr. Li for his words of wisdom, after the perishing of his wholehearted wife occurred Mr. Li had altered his ways of helping. I was still willing to get his word for aiding, even if it meant to sacrifice it all. As I approached his small home I saw him eyeing me down. As we exchanged words he told me the historic tale of the mystical city above mount Hua and the clouds. He mentioned the great crops and grain this land contained, but warned me of the dangers, along the way. And in exchange he demanded the grain of our entire household that we had acquired. This left me indecisive of what was the correct decision. Feeling every beat out of my heart, I was in pain, in pain of what could happen in both outcomes. But as I recollected the words of my deceased father who once told me "Who you are defines what you are willing to struggle for." I am YonGang Wong and I am willing to struggle for those who provided love and hospitality for me. I nodded. And so I gave him the grain, now my journey to the mystical city began.

The preparation began, not much to take. But one thing was crucial: the blessed Jian sword of my father. The Jian's value was priceless. The fierce edge almost too sharp seeing the Jian pierced your skin. The sheer shine of the Jian was enough to blind your eyes. It's beautiful. This was my honour for my village, it was my protection. As a young boy Father would teach me the ways of the Jian and the honour of it.

The time to leave was when the darkness of the earth kept everything quiet. The journey began, I followed the path to the top of the snowy capped mountain, and above the clouds. The highest peak was where I was headed. Thoughts flooding my mind on my own mother panic. As I pressed on I was experiencing brutal fatigue my hands could no longer close because it was too cold. Scraping all my force in my body I had arrived to the foggy clouds which had made me faint to sleep.

I woke up alerted I was warm and dry though I ended in snow wet and cold. To my surprise I woke up home comfortable in bed, but something was off, it was summer. Feeling the warmth penetrating my skin again, I ran out and to my surprise the fields were full of crops and grain. My village was beautiful. Checking all, I saw my mother happy as ever. And my… Father? It was him, tall, strong and handsome. That's my father, he was here alive and happy. I shed a few tears and ran to him in disbelief. As I arrived he comforted me with his words. The day passed I was still in awe. I felt safe at home. But still something was off. My father didn't teach me the ways of the Jian, which

he often did once a day. Which left me uncertain of my surroundings. That night I wondered if this place wasn't right; it was too good to be true. Days I spent here, I was growing fond of my improved home. As the days flew my parents sat me down. They exposed the secret of this place, it was the mystical city. My mind overflowed with illogical thoughts, I was blissfully comfortable. My parents then asked me to stay with them. My heart was beating quicker, the thump of it was getting louder and louder. I told them I would consider it and leave them with an answer. That intimidating night I was left with the decision to continue my life with my complete family or to go back to the deadbeat village.

As realisation struck me, I had realised that though it was the mystical city they weren't my true family, my father was still dead. These people are imposters to me. I had fooled myself, this was no beautiful village, it was my desire, this had all been a trickery and illusion. As I crept out the village I had been caught. I shouted at my 'father' telling him the truth I know behind this place. He had accepted the defeat, so he returned to his raw form as a demon. He abnormally grew taller and his bones started to pierce through his chest. He was long and skinny, his eyes and skin had turned pale, his hair became ashy and thin. All had turned into dust, the only light I had seen was my escape, and those poor trapped souls in this demonic city, which this creature fed off. With honour and pride in me I had my father's warrior mentality, and with no mind, I Graciously moved like a butterfly, but stung like a bee. The blessed Jian had trapped the soul of the demonic entity.

As I left the demonic city, I had freed the trapped souls. All souls were put to rest. Emotions flooded, I was relieved by the endless blue sky which hadn't been seen in time in my province. I reflected on what had occurred and concluded that a curse on my village had been lifted. As I approached my village, Mr Li stood with a sack of overflowing grain, which he collected for the winter. He gave it to me as he knew I had restored peace and beauty into our village. Mother was pleased to see the grain. But Grandmother and mother seemed to be brittle and skinnier, as I left them. But as my mother saw great change she saw a beautiful blossom ahead of us, she was at peace. Though I had restored beauty and peace, I hadn't been in peace, anxiety flooded into me, all memories of the demonic city replayed constantly. I talked a little less and drank a little more. The curse of the village vanished and had entered me. I am now deformed and fuelled by sadness and anxiety. But it was for the better good of the people I love and the honour of all.

The Eight Pillars Mountain

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Yahyagil, Peter Gian – 12

It was a frigid morning in the suburbs of China. Now we focus on Joe, a quiet man with horrible hygiene and is so lazy he became part of his bed. He has spent his time in China sitting on his bed and watching TV. He himself has never wanted more but also never wanted less, and he has a lot. This morning Joe said to himself "Why haven't I done anything, why have I never been famous or praised, I want that." Joe decided that he would climb a mountain, but not any mountain. The Eight Pillars Mountain. Joe's family and friends pleaded with him not to go but he had made up his mind. Joe unaware of the danger it held and set off on a journey to certain death.

Joe hiked as far as he could go. The journey was l bsuowong and treacherous, a man with a strong stature would have difficulty crossing the path and with Joe, sitting on a bed all day didn't help. It took months upon months to finish the journey to the mountains. The mountains were a mythical place and were hidden from the world as they were a connection between humans and the heavens. Luckily Joe had GPS and a phone and was able to cross through a secret portal to arrive there. When he arrived Joe nearly fainted at the sight of it. It was monstrous with eight towering peaks that flew high above the clouds, its terrain steep and slippery and the incline nearly impossible. Joe optimistically said "How hard could this be?"

Once Joe started the ascent he began to reconsider his choice, but when he looked down he decided not to. As he climbed more he became even more scared of falling to his doom. Joe had finally reached the top, his mountain climbing gear was brutally damaged and he felt like he could go no longer, Joe rested for a while and set off to climb the second peak, unknowingly walking right into a trap. As Joe walked a huge bird jumped out of nowhere. Its feathers gold and fiery with talons as sharp as knives and a beak of pure metal. Its eyes were filled with anger. Joe stood frozen by the fright of this beast.

Joe stared at this beast and ran. Joe didn't know where he was going but he ran into a forest nearby. He hid under a large boulder and waited for the bird to go. Suddenly the bird's head squeezed under the boulder to feast on Joe. Frightened Joe ran out of another opening and saw the large bird's head stuck. Joe ran for it and made it to the second peak, who knew what danger lurked there.

Joe scraped the floor as he cautiously approached the second peak. Joe wondered if the second peak had an even more frightening beast! Joe wanted to turn back but maybe it was too late. As Joe ascended the second peak nothing seemed to be there. Joe had his hopes as high as the mountain itself, no monsters had appeared for quite a long time and Joe was near the Fourth mountain. Joe's hopes died instantly as the earth shook as if a giant was coming towards him. Soon a giant tortoise the size of a hill with its feet as large as a truck and a dazed expression on its face. It wandered the ground until it caught sight of Joe, after catching Joe at the corner of its eye it dove straight at him. It lunged at Joe and he ran for it. The fourth peak trembled at the size of the beast, suddenly the ground gave way and half of the peak fell to its earthy demise, the massive beast with it. Joe unluckily fell too but as every story goes he caught a branch and he continued his everlasting journey.

Joe approached the fifth mountain without any peril and crossed it safely, the same was with the sixth peak which was where he rested from his near death escapades. As he rested he wondered if he should turn back, his scrapes and bruises, his cuts and wounds prevented him from thinking that thought any longer. He so longed the comfort of his bed and the delicious crunch of his nachos and the sweet sip of a chocolate milkshake. Behind him was a great bird beast and rocky terrain that you would surely fall off. Joe decided he had to keep moving forward, he slept in bushes on the sixth peak glad that his journey was almost over.

Joe approached the seventh peak, it was towering over the sixth peak the incline was so steep he had to use his climbing gear Joe heaved his gelatinous body up the mountain it took hours but he made it to the top. Joe arrived at the top and breathed heavy sighs of relief. As Joe continued forward out came a giant monster, a dragon. Its long elegant body was as large as the mountain itself. It flew high into the sky, the dragon had the face of a lion and its claws were as large as trees and sharper than anything you could ever imagine. This beast was larger than any other before, the dragon swooped down at Joe and Joe ran for his life. He hid in the mountain side forest but the dragon

tore open half of the mountain. Joe jumped towards the remaining half of the mountain but was caught in the mighty beasts hands and was taken to the very top of the mountain, to the heavenly realm.

As the dragon flew higher into the realm Joe started to open his eyes. The realms golden glimmer and the white puffy clouds. As Joe started to become amazed the dragon started to speak "You are held guilty for crossing these paths punishable by death." Then the dragon dropped him in a suspended cage. As Joe tried to get out the dragon came to him, he said "Your fate has been decided." The dragon smashed a chain and Joe fell to his doom. Then a second later the Dragon appeared and laughed, he caught Joe and brought him to the ground safely below the mountain. Then for whatever reason he did that Joe never got his answer.

Joe returned home and got cheers from his neighbors and family. Joe finally felt as if he belonged here. Satisfied Joe lay in his bed wondering why he ever did that. He wanted to be the best and to have lots of friends and be a celebrity. But why didn't he get up from his bed and try to make friends. That climb taught him a lesson. He didn't need to accomplish heroic acts to enjoy life with friends and family.

Nature's Sacrifice

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Yong, Casey – 12

There was a small oasis of untarnished nature and a mighty mountain was in the middle of it, it loomed over the world, the highest peak of the earth. It was ruled over by a cold unnamed guardian deity, the ruler of all nature and the mountain was its prized possession. The deity was very protective of it and had a small circle of paradise surrounding it. Any human who dared to trespass onto the mountain would die instantly.

The deity, Nature, sighed as another fearless human attempted to climb her precious mountain and as soon as it touched the lush green base, it vanished into thin air, its existence permanently erased. Humans are so puny, so tiny and idiotic; they already knew that climbing the mountain or even coming close would result in immediate death, and their curiosity still took over.

One day, Nature was wandering around the mountain in their human form when she heard quiet sobbing. Her ears perked up and fury stirred within them. There shouldn't be any humans around here, she thought. Her eyes darted frantically, her calm stroll breaking into a sprint as she ran around the mountain, searching for any humans.

She eventually spotted three shivering children, soot and ash covered the kids from head to toe. The oldest, a boy was hugging the two twin girls close to him, his hands covered in raw burn marks. One of the girls had a big gash across his forearm and on the border of unconsciousness. The other girl was mumbling nonsense to herself and her mouth was tinged with an unhealthy color. All three pairs of eyes widened in fear as they saw Nature standing there, brimming with anger.

"Leave." Her voice boomed across the meadows, hair flowing intimidatingly and eyes red.

The boy managed to mutter "W–we c–c–ca–n't," and looked at his twisted ankle. "T–there's a war outside, d–don't send us back outside. Please."

Something about those tearful orbs looking back at them pleadingly made Nature calm down. They knew human greed could put innocent and pure children into terrible situations the children did not deserve.

Disgusting, she thought but she left the children alone, the thought of killing or sending them back outside leaving their mind. If they're so weak, they'll die here anyway.

A week later, she was watching over their personal oasis once more but three irritating pests kept distracting her. The three kids she had unknowingly taken in.

She had learned the boy was named Ray, the girl with a gash Ophelia and the other Ari. They made a little life here with the natural plants and any resource they could find. They were kind hearted and polite so naturally, the spirits of the land could not help but assist them. It should have angered Nature yet she only found it...nice?

Huh? She thought to herself. I took in those brats out of pity, what am I thinking?

A month passed and Nature watched over the kids secretly, wanting to know what they were up to.

She approached them and when they saw her, they froze in terror and dropped the apples they were holding while picking them off trees.

"I come in peace," Nature spoke unconvincingly.

Ray was the first to recover and went on his hands and knees, begging forgiveness for trampling on Nature's turf and his sister followed suit. Something about the purity in the kids and their wholehearted apologies changed the deity's mind about killing them, they would be interesting at the very least

"It's alright. Pray tell, what were you doing?"

Months passed and Nature grew more and more fond of the children, they treated the world around them nicely and helped her with taking care of the paradise. They always left nice gifts like flower wreaths and picked fruit behind as sort of an offering.

One day, Nature felt her barrier being attacked, she peeked out and saw a bunch of weird weapons aiming at her oasis, firing what seemed to be man−made missiles. Usually men could never destroy her barrier but this.
This was different.

Her barrier was chipping away as each bullet landed on the thing that was keeping intruders out and if her mountain was destroyed…

One thing about the myth no one knew was that the mountain was the source of Nature's life source, the reason she kept it so close to her heart.

If she dies, nature itself would die as with her. Mankind would lose all the trees, flowers or grass but they could not know that because there would definitely be a lot of humans that would easily kill Nature.

She desperately tried to salvage the situation by putting her powers onto the barrier but it kept falling apart.

When did humans become so powerful?

Ophelia was dowsing water from the clear stream onto the roses before she heard a bang sound. Flashbacks from guns and war from home flooded her mind and she fell to her knees.

Not again...they found us, she thought as she covered her ears in shock, her head spinning.

No doubt her siblings would have heard it as well, and they would be panicking as well.

"Don't tell me they're coming to take us back, please, please…"

Nature felt nauseous, she had been holding the barrier for the past three days nonstop and if she took a break, it would be eradicated immediately and she would die.

Then, she heard a call from outside, "We will surrender if you give us the royal highnesses."

Nature suddenly remembered the children and realized they were the royal highnesses. Her eyes darted around the crumbling paradise and saw the kids holding their heads, covering their ears in pure, unadulterated fear. Whoever was outside definitely did not treat the children well, despite them seemingly being royalty.

"And what if I refuse?" her voice echoed.

"Then we will wreck this land," came the response.

Oh no.

She would never admit it but she adored the kids with her whole heart. They were the most lovely humans she had ever met and she would not let them get hurt.

Ophelia yelled, "Let her go! We'll come with you!"

When did she show up?

"I forbid you, you will not go with these people."

"Nature! If you die, nature itself will wither away too!" Ray retorted back.

She was stuck in a conundrum, she would never think of harming the kids but if she died, even while she was protecting the kids, the payoff would not be worth it.

What should she do?

"You don't have to decide for us, we'll decide for you," Ari said softly with a joyless smile as she walked stiffly towards the army.

"What are you doing?" Nature asked frantically, her composure falling apart, not unlike the barrier.

"You've been great to us, thank you," Ray nodded and walked calmly in the other direction.

"THESE PEOPLE WILL HURT YOU−"

"But we don't mind getting hurt at the expense of saving you," Ophelia was the most traumatized by the men but she, with a shaky bottom lip, surrendered.

Nature was furious, not at the kids, but at herself for letting them go.

As soon as the men took control over the kids, Nature saw the despair in the kids' eyes but they kept a straight face in an attempt to not alarm the deity. No, she could not let this happen so she resorted to her final plan.

A plan that would certainly kill her but it may save the children.

She lowered the barrier, letting the army into her land and used up her final energy, releasing a giant beam of light towards the army, massacring them, her body deteriorating by the second and the mountain crumbling to the ground.

At the end, the beam of light killed all the soldiers except for the children. They saw nothing around them except a tiny ball of light. It was the last, half dead spirit of the deity.

"Take my last remaining life source and become the new rulers of nature, you have taught me love and for that, I thank you. Goodbye," Nature whispered before she whisked away with the wind.

The children started bawling uncontrollably, their surrogate mother gone because she gave her life away to save them. As they wept, their flows of tears landed on the barren ground, it sprung grass. The life of the oasis returned, flowers blooming and streams gushing, the paradise came together and sang a requiem of sorrow, thanking Nature for her services and a hymn of hope, now these children would guide the world as the new deities of nature.

From then on, the now deities traveled around the world, wildlife and compassion seeping through their every step. They helped countries and cities find its love for the environment once again, and the paradise Nature guarded over had spread to the whole world.

The Mysterious Skeleton

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Zagury, Annabelle – 12

"...and in conclusion, that is one of the many reasons we should always be careful when handling dinosaur bones and other fossils. Now, class, the moment you have all been waiting for, the five lucky students that will be coming with me to China are... Elya Hope, Rhiana Watt, Aron Patterson, Tomas Clark and Jasmin Marshall. Congratulations! Please see me after class and I will fill you in with the details. For the rest of you, class dismissed." declared Dr. Marissa Raven among all the cheering and gasping. Dr. Marissa is a middle-aged good looking woman with long brown hair and often wears either a lab coat, formal clothing or tan, and khaki clothing.

"They are so lucky!" whispered a girl at the back.

"I wish I could be in their place!" someone muttered.

The five students walked up to the front of the class. As usual Rhiana Watt was walking in front of everyone while chewing on a piece of pink gum and blowing bubbles. Behind her was Tomas Clark, her so-called "boyfriend" according to Rhiana and her friends. Tomas had short brown hair and a pair of charming hazelnut eyes. Up next was Elya Hope with her big pigtails and thick glasses.

"Y'all pumped up for this trip?" asked Aron Patterson walking up with his shiny blue eyes covered by his blonde curls.

"Yeah, but I have no idea how I got to go," answered Jasmin Marshall, a clueless girl who somehow got lucky on the last test.

"All right, you five students were chosen because of the good grades you received and the effort given in the previous test. Now, while in China if you take just one step over the line, you will be in isolation for the rest of the trip and you will not be enjoying what awaits you when we come back to the campus," Dr. Marissa looked up staring at each of them in their eyes, "you will be representing this university in China, so I expect you all to be in your best behavior and display your professionalism as true palaeontologists throughout the expedition."

"Understood," they murmured.

"Okay, I will email you the rest of the information, we leave next Wednesday. Now, go home, prepare and pack." she continued while walking out of the room.

Early in the morning, the students all met at the airport with their baggage and equipment. The team grew bigger as the national palaeontologists' team joined the expedition which was a surprise to the students. They had a long journey on a plane to Huangshan Tunxi Airport and then traveled on an endless bumpy and rough jeep ride to a cave that was located right in the middle of the mountains. A radar scan had revealed that this cave contained a large number of fossilized skeletons.

When they arrived at the cave Dr. Marissa gave instructions on how to proceed. "Team! Welcome to the Mountains of the Yellow Emperor! Let's get to work and set up all the materials and equipment!" ordered Dr. Marissa.

"What is this place? Where is the hotel? Where is my private suite?" Rhiana complained while Elya rolled her eyes.

"Are you kidding me, this place is like paradise!" answered Aron, "Look at the view! It's like we're floating on clouds!"

"So, where will we be searching for bones?" asked Jasmin.

"In there," replied Dr. Marissa while pointing at the mouth of an underground cave. "We are about to load the equipment into the cave, and then we will get to work digging," announced Dr. Marissa, "so this is what we need to do, tie the ropes around that big piece of rock, make sure it's secure and then we will use the ropes to transport our equipment down into the cave. Do this slowly and carefully."

"Yes, doctor," everyone responded and got busy with their respective tasks.

Once they had just finished loading everything into the cave Aron suddenly shouted "Hey, guys! Why is the rope falling?!"

Crumble and crash! Everyone turned their head immediately towards the mouth of the cave and in a split second, the only entrance and exit to the cave was gone and it was now pitch dark.

"Ahhhhh! Daddy! Somebody help me! I am extremely claustrophobic! Where is everyone! Oh no, where is my phone?" Rhiana panicked. Click and clank, beams of torchlights shone all around the cave.

"Stay calm everyone, minimize your movement and stay where you are!" Dr. Marissa ordered.

"Listen up everyone! This is the current situation. We have been trapped inside this cave for fifteen minutes now because there was a malfunction with the rope that was used to bring down the equipment," announced Dr. Marissa "we have called for backup but they claimed that it will take them at least five days to remove the rock, hence we are stuck here for five days. Luckily, the university prepared us for any situation, therefore, we should have enough water, food, and sleeping bags to survive. So there is no need to panic. Let's not waste our time here. I have contacted the campus to permitted us to start searching for fossils. Any questions? No? We start in one hour. For now, relax, eat, gather some strength before we begin."

They all plunged into the project, ignoring the fact they were trapped. Towards the end of the third day, to everyone's surprise, the students and the team of palaeontologists found an immense skeleton. They were all bewildered by their discovery as after running all the analysis they could with the equipment down in the cave, they were unable to identify the dinosaur species of the skeleton. The DNA found in the bones had a strange sequence and the few cells they found within the bones had intense radiation that no one had ever seen on a skeleton. There was also an extra bone near the head, that according to the results, had contained and created a very hot substance that was likely to have been fire. Within the cave, they also found burnt rocks near the skeleton.

Elya, Jasmin and Tomas came up with a theory that fitted with all the evidence and decided to approach Dr. Marissa about it.

"Dr. Marissa, Tomas, Jasmin and I looked through the data of the skeleton that was found and we came up with a strong hypothesis that fits in with all the data we have, though you might not enjoy it," started Elya. "We believe that this skeleton belonged to a dragon. Please, hear us out, we have evidence to back up this idea. For example, the extra bone near the head, we believe it was where the dragon turned air into fire, and we even have strong proof for that, all around the cave there are burnt rocks and the same types of cells as the fossils were found on top of the rocks."

"No, NO!" exclaimed Dr. Marissa, "it is not a dragon, this skeleton probably belongs to an undiscovered species of pterosaurs! There is no such thing as dra−" though before she could finish her sentence, Dr. Marissa suddenly fainted.

She remained unconscious for five hours due to the shock and denial of the theory on dragons had brought to her. (She later claimed that the reason she would not accept this theory was because her parents had always placed pressure on her to be perfect and receive top grades.) They taught her there was no such thing as a miracle or magic or even luck, only logic and ideas that were proven is the truth.

Dr. Marissa finally woke up five hours later with a clear mind. "While I was asleep..." she began saying seconds after she regained consciousness "...I dreamed that I was in a world where there was magic, where we all had magical powers. There were dragons, magical creatures, and miracles. It was like a sign from the universe to tell me that I have to believe Elya, Jasmin and Tomas, that they are right. Even though I don't want to accept it, I believe they are right. They came with a hypothesis and found strong evidence to support it."

"Elya, Tomas, Jasmin, may I see your evidence again," ordered Dr. Marissa with a smile.

Five years later, Dr. Marissa Raven has published a study about a skeleton that belonged to a dragon and continues carrying out numerous expeditions discovering more fossils of dragons and mythical creatures. She has established a laboratory and institute that specializes in dragons and other magical creatures that were discovered and proven. She also educates students as well as world–renowned scientists about dragons and the unpredictable side of science. Dr. Marissa Raven has opened up a new era of scientific discoveries. In the lab, she has also invited Elya Hope, Rhiana Watt, Aron Patterson, Tomas Clark and Jasmin Marshall to work alongside her. She is now known as the Dragon Queen.

Coming Down, Bound By Silence

CCC Kei Yuen College, Kwok, Wing Chi – 11

It was on the third night, that the unusual incident occurred. It happened when Mike, Alice, and I wanted to take a break from the activities at the various temples in town and explore the perimeter of Mount T'ai. Actually, what we did was quite dangerous, as it was an eerie twilight, and we couldn't see our footing at all.

Heading around the I was following Mike, and like most boys our age, he wears scuffed Vans. In the low evening light, his shoes seemed to flicker into a bright silver– silver or gold patent– they looked like a king's slippers from so long ago. That was when I first realised that there was something really wrong, and that we were in some kind of trouble.

Mike turned around, but I couldn't see his face anymore. Instead, he had the appearance of a terrified, bearded middle–aged man, face glowing pale white. Black, sticky fluid oozed from his mouth. His silver hair was long and loose, flowing freely around his shoulders….and he was hovering.

I suddenly felt a fear, stronger than anything I have ever known, and I let out a prolonged scream. The ghost then shape–shifted into a glowing figure, cast adrift, emitting the essence of pure loneliness. The transparent figure floated up toward Tai Shan's peak, then disappeared behind a rocky crag. I felt the warmth of my body seep down to the forest floor.

It wasn't the visual effect of seeing a ghost that was so scary, it was more the empty, frozen, horrible feeling of solitude, abandonment: there was the sense that someone was lost in time and space.

Alice and I started shaking, took one look at each other, and then burst into a sprint. We were going straight back to The Grand Hotel! We stumbled a bit on the path, but kept going at top speed. While we ran, we were dead silent, and we could only hear the urgency of our breathing and the rustling and snapping of twigs..

When we finally got back to our shabby rooms (over 200 RMB!), we were simply terrified, and we were in a total panic. Of course, our top priority was to lock the doors, make sure that we were alone, and catch our breath. Calm down a bit. After that, we needed to find Mike. Had the ghost inhabited his body? Did he decided to climb to back up the steps or was he simply lost on his way to Dai Temple? It was so hard to recall exactly what we remembered about the last time we saw Mike.

But Mike came out of his room when we knocked on his door….'Hey, I couldn't find you guys, so I came back to the hotel. Was it fun? Huh…?! What's wrong with you guys?!'

We were so thankful that Mike was safe and intact, waiting in his room. We definitely weren't about to ask how he got there.
We told Mike to grab what he needed and we would explain everything later!

Urgently, we packed up the bare essentials, like our wallets and passports, and called the front desk instead of going through the patient process of downloading a local app. We told the front desk that it was a real 'emergency' and we needed to get to Jinan City. We didn't bother to pick up our rooms. We abandoned some of our things and ran out the front door of the shabby, little 'Grand Hotel'.

Waiting in the Grand Hotel's parking lot for our driver to arrive, were not able to relax at all, our hearts beating through our chests, and we paced in a tight circle.

Waiting those six minutes for the taxi to arrive, I remember that we were even too scared to draw attention to ourselves, and when the taxi driver's headlights became visible at the bottom of the parking lot, we all breathed a sigh of relief and crammed into his silver, seven–seater van. The driver could tell by our appearance that something was very wrong, and he us if we were in serious trouble; I think he was wondering if he should take us all to the police station.

We didn't dare to look back at T'ai Shan– the mountain itself. Descending, winding down the hills of Tai–an, we finally started to talk after ten minutes of silence. We realised that Alice and I had all heard similar noises as we ran down the path: a faint crying or weeping, punctuated by grunts and screams. Mike, on the other hand, had no recollection of ever leaving his hotel bunk! His memory had been wiped clean.

Alice and I told our stories in whispers, with hesitation, because we knew that no one would believe us. We didn't want to get labelled. We made a pact not to tell others or disclose our experience to the media, because of the social isolation we were sure to experience. We didn't want people to say that we were liars….and we didn't want to get called 'crazy'.

Of course, while we were preparing for our pilgrimage to Tai Shan, Alice had mentioned the legends of several ghosts. T'ai Shan had been a place of sacrifices for centuries, as the unofficial centre of an ancient cult. Those sacrifices usually took place at the top or at the base, near the little hill that we had been navigating in the darkness. Alice told those stories as if it were a reason to try camping out in the forest instead of renting a room in a ramshackle guest house near the base of the mountain.

Yes, in retrospect, it was as if Alice thought hat we should try our luck at running into a ghost, especially when we started walking off the beaten track by the end of the second day. Alice even told a few different biographies of kings, rulers, and emperors who were known to have made sacrifices there.

The gruesome depictions of who or what got sacrificed….. I thought they were all just dumb old stories at the time. I even remembering chuckling a little bit when Alice got to the part about an unhappy ghost trying to pull hikers into one of the streams.

Finally, it was eight long days before we found the courage to Tai'an town and pick up the rest of our things. We took the train back, and we insisted that Alice's dad (a businessman from Jinan) come with us, because we were just too scared to go back there by ourselves.

When we got the run–down Grand Hotel, I would have to say that it was nothing special and nothing appeared out of the ordinary; the hotel was continuing business as normal.

Then, just was we were about to pull out of the parking lot, we heard a grumble. A single, solitary man appeared from the brush. He seemed to be elderly or homeless. However, he was very different from our 'noble ghost' and his appearance pulled at my heartstrings. I felt sorry for him. He stared at us, silently.

'Should we give him a few of our Hong Kong snacks? I really don't want to eat the ones that were left in the hotel room.'

'No, just leave him be…' Alice's father suggested.

We all felt uneasy (instead of relieved) descending the hills of Tai'an for the final time. We knew that we would never go back in our lifetimes. I didn't bother asking the others if they thought they'd return or plan a family vacation at T'ai Shan….we were NEVER EVER going back.

At that time, I didn't worry about the occasional, shivering feeling of isolation that all of us would experience in the coming years. I simply remembered my pact, made with Alice, coming down the mountain. I said nothing at all.

The Cloud Gate Of Past Souls

CCC Kei Yuen College, Saim, Muhammad Wasim – 13

This is the story of a young apprentice named Wen, a gifted soldier–in–training, a boy who had unknown powers, and a humble soul. It was the time of the state of Qi, and his father had been a legendary crossbow specialist–– a great warrior–– in General Jiang's army. His father had been defeated in battle but once!

In fact, both of the boys' parents came from humble upbringings, but he was not of royal blood.

The hexagonal fortress town where he lived was non–descript and far away from any of the larger Qi settlements or river ports. Nonetheless, the boy had extreme confidence and a very strong spirit. The boy's willingness to fight and innate sense of heroism soon become well known in the district, and he inspired many young men just like himself to defend the fortress town and small moat surrounding the craggy, small, ancient mountain. He had an unyielding, fearless quality.

Some of the wise men who lived in small caves and crags on the east side of the mountain said that the mountain was truly sacred, and had to be defended against evil at all costs. The reason was because of a gate, an ancient invisible gate that was situated on the south face near the peak. The oldest of the sages was said to have moved to all the way from WuDong over 80 years ago in order to aid and protect the invisible gate!

The men on the mountain called this gate 'The Gate of Past Souls'. Even as a young boy, Wen had become fascinated with the idea of a floating, cloud gate. He swore to protect all of the entranceways and approaches to the mountain, keeping evil away from a mythical gate that he had never even seen. Naturally, he wanted to protect his home and family inside the fortress walls, but he also wanted to protect the purity of the mountain's magic.

What were the two main rumors surrounding the Gate of Past Souls? The first mystery was that it could help anyone forget their past. Sometimes, young lovers with broken hearts would search for the gate, hoping to be able to forget their lost loves and move on. This was the most popular reason why young people sought out the mountain, coming from as far away as Linyi to seek healing and clean slate.

However, the apprentice had also heard a second story that was even more enticing, and this was the one he that drew him in. It was the story of a white witch–– a beautiful sorceress– commanding a wayward army of lost ghouls, lost souls. The boy knew that he would meet her one day, even though any person who walks through the cloud gate has to be truly desperate; it would have to be someone willing to fall off the mountain ledge, someone willing to have their soul splintered. In other words, that person would have to be willing to die to meet the white witch, and going to the white witch could only be a last resort where all other efforts have failed.

Finally, just a few weeks after the boy had turned eighteen, his fortress town came under a vicious, surprise attack. It was an effective band of fighters, and they were solely interested in possession of the potential magic of the mountain. They wanted to glean it for themselves, and they knew they had to eradicate the town at the foot of the mountain. They called themselves The Rogues.

It only took one brief instant in the early morning light for the mountain fortress to be surrounded by the ruthless, evil, infantry of The Rogues, numbering nearly 400 men.

With the town temporarily fortified, Wen knew he had to act quickly. He seemed to discover unbounded courage, like the compounded courage of his ancestors before him. He grabbed his tools and began to wriggle through an old tunnel that criss–crossed beneath the fortress walls, even though he knew he would emerge in an opposing thicket where several of the attacking army's horses were grazing. If he startled the horses, he would be found out!

One hour later, Wen emerged from a rabbit hutch *ever so slowly* just in time to see the opposing army prepare 2 massive cannons, built on a mountain of sand and mud. They were getting ready to bombard the fortress and all of the families inside. Wen prayed for their safety.

Then, Wen became to crawl up the vertical slate wall of the south wall of the mountain, even though he would be totally exposed. Anyone who looked at the mountain now could see him there, stuck to the side. Just one hit from a well–aimed arrow would knock him off the rock face. However, he was fearless. He was dehydrated, cold, disoriented…. and he continued his climb.

Wen was unable to call out for the Gate of Past Souls in a clear voice, especially considering the mountain echo. But he thought about the white witch, whispering for her. He urged his heart to feel love for her. Sure enough, after 3 hours of slow climbing, a cloud gate appeared and a white witch spoke to him:

'Over 400 men are attacking the town, but I am holding them back. Yes, I can deliver the final blow if you are willing to take the risk…' she murmured, shimmering in the crisp moonlight.

Wen nodded and held out his hand, as if beckoning toward a bride or companion.

Her icy nails wrapped around his smooth fist, and she squeezed tightly.

She pulled him off the side of the mountain and onto a blue–green cloud that hovered there, impossibly.

At that moment, one of the Rogues noticed the immortal couple and shouted for reinforcements. Arrow began to zing through the air, most hitting the south face. But it was already too late. The white witch beckoned Wen inside, and he seemed to step through a window in the sky. As soon as the cloud gate closed shut behind him, a houling ghoul army came rushing out of the mountain caves, screaming. It sounded like a freight train going off the rails. It was an unholy army that was impossible to defeat.

Within five minutes of fighting, the leader of the Rogues was sliced in half, and so the Rogues' morale was completely erased. They tried their best to escape, grabbing what remained of their leader's body, heading back down the mountain valley to the coast. They left so quickly that they abandoned 200 fallen gang members behind them, lacking any courage or dignity in the end.

For this fortuitous victory against a massive private army, Wen's father was made Gatekeeper and Captain of the fortress defences.

Although the people of the fortress town claimed that they could, occasionally, see Wen's face in the pale morning light or in the wisps of small clouds that flickered near sunset, Wen's father was never able to speak to his son again, and wondered if the gift of immortality or even the protection of their homes from The Rogues…..or even his victories in the General Jiang's army….was really worth it all in the end.

Wolf's Journey

CCC Kei Yuen College, Shreesh, Abhinav – 11

In the closing years of Chu Kingdom, their peaceful mountains were consumed by constant conflict. The fires of war raged on. The war spread deep-- deep into the most remote areas and far away from the coast, the rivers, and towns. Local people called this interior mountain land 'Daiguzhen.' They didn't understand why anyone would want to invade such a remote, impoverished place.

In a lost corner of Daiguzhen (no one knows how to find it, exactly), there is a hidden valley. In the middle of that valley, there is a sunken well. The story I am about to tell you starts in that well, in the centre of the mountain valley. I think it's all gone now, as it has been made into a reservoir.

A timber wolf had thrown himself into the well, depressed. His master had left the town over 2 years ago; gone off to war and never returned. Wolf knew that his master was surely dead, and he lost his own will to live. He did not know that an important battle was encroaching upon the mountain valley, because even reaching the next town took three days of hard travel.

So Wolf was sitting at the bottom of the well, showing no will to live and feeling sorry for himself. He would let out a weak 'howl' every few minutes, a sorrowful echo that bounced off the mountain walls.

A young girl heard his cries. Looking into the well, she said: "I think there is going to be trouble here in the coming weeks. Are you able to stay with us, help us? I think I can even hear cannons if I listen."

She then dropped a letter to the bottom of the well. She dared not tell anyone about the letter, because it was a forgery and she herself had written it! Looking at the pitiful wolf, she said:

'Um…it's a letter from Minister Changping. It says that your destiny awaits you and that you are supposed to 'search for the peak that is bathed in light'.

(The young girl, searching for ideas when she forged the letter…just ended up quoting one of her favourite poets.)

The wolf woke up and slowly climbed out of the well. He then started on his way over the first two peaks, moving in a steady, northerly direction. He felt such a deep despair that he didn't want to stop and rest.

However, after Wolf crested the second peak (both peaks had been cloudy, overcast), the wolf noticed a man running up the mountain, running in fear. It was an injured soldier, un-armed. Therefore, the wolf continued down the mountain in a quiet way and very soon came upon a Qin invasion, locked in a series of vicious sword clashes.

Wolf saw a group of tall men fighting with long spears, kicking up dust. Wolf instinctively knew that the soldiers moving in defensive moves, using swordwork, were his own countrymen. The larger men using spears were the Qin invaders. With this new fighting technology, they took the Chu by surprise. You could see lots of cuts and injuries, and sense the desperation. It was a long, drawn-out, pathetic battle.

Wolf was so exhausted by his journey, but managed to launch into action. He attacked the largest man. There was no time for the leader to turn round, and the wolf soon had a death-grip on the man's arm.

"What's the matter, you dirty stray? Nothing to do today?" groaned the Captain. He couldn't get Wolf to let go, but he also didn't flinch. Didn't the Qin soldiers feel pain?

With Wolf's help, the defending Chu soldier was able to strike a death-blow while the Qin leader was distracted. Then, together, they moved on to the next Qin soldier. They narrowly dodged a spear as they closed in. Having a wolf at their side, a wolf raised in these mountains, was an unfair advantage. The Chu soldiers soon triumphed over the invaders.

The oldest Chu soldier invited the wolf back to their camp, commenting on his battle skills: "Fighting side-by-side with you, Old Wolf, we can begin to defend these mountains. How did you ever find us? Has word of this battle already reached Daiguzhen?"

Wolf was very honest when he told the Chu soldiers that he was on a personal journey, 'looking for a bright peak' and had been in depression since his master went off to battle, over two years ago. Wolf hesitated to tell the soldiers the man's name, because he really didn't to hear any confirmation that his Master as dead. He wouldn't be able to bear the news.

"Listen Wolf, we would never lie to you. We have really never heard of this man. But why don't you stick with us if you have nothing else to do? It felt good to finally be able to fight back today! We have been in retreat until now. Stay…and help us."

Wolf agreed and stayed with the Chu Division. In the morning, the group walked back over the peak they had just lost the day before, and just as they started down into the next valley, the mid–day sun came out, shining brightly. This was surely the 'peak bathed in light'.

A mountain meadow in full bloom was their next stop. It didn't surprise anyone to come upon the remains of battle, a battle graveyard from years ago. Wolf was disgusted by the skeletal remains (as much as a wolf can be disgusted), broken swords, lost shoes, and dented helmets strewn about. It was a sad scene of defeat. The Chu Kingdom had really taken a hit at this place. Their soldiers had been killed without mercy.

An eerie scene for such a beautiful meadow. However, Wolf noticed an owl perched near the edge of the meadow, watching the men intently. (Animals often notice other animals that escape the eyes of humans). Wolf wondered why Owl was so high up the mountain today? But just as he approached Owl to say hello, she opened her expansive wings and descended to the mountain valley below.

'Listen, I think she was spying on us. There must be another Qin Division in the valley. Are we able to fight them?'

'Thank you, Wolf. We wouldn't have noticed her at all…..and, no, we had better take a few weeks rest. Some of us are seriously injured, Instead of continuing into the valley, let's look for a temple up here. Some of us have lost a lot of blood.'

The Chu Division of sixty men was able to find a monastery behind the adjacent peak, a peak even brighter than the one they had just crossed. Wolf got his spirits back and was even able to laugh. Over the next few weeks, Wolf found that he loved playing with the soldiers as they convalesced at the monastery, and he learnt a few new tricks about battle, as well. By the time the division started down the mountain, they were in fighting form and had a new–found confidence. Wolf was their terrifying, secret weapon.

The men told Wolf that Minister Changping had raised over 50 000 men in total, but even that would not be sufficient to defend the Chu Kingdom against the Qin Empire. In fact, the only reason the Qin had not bothered with these mountainous districts before was that they were quite meaningless; they were not strategic, and they were poor. Fighting for them was not even worth the loss of men. However, the world was changing. Now all of the Chu towns and villages were under threat. That threat would never subside, especially since the Qin Empire had superior weaponry.

They tried not to think about the impossibility of their task, now. It was time strengthen their skills and their spirits. Wolf remember the young girl's words as he sat at the bottom of a well, only weeks beforehand, lost in sadness in Daiguzheng: she had said to 'search for the peak that is bathed in light.'

To wolf, that peak turned out to be the company of men, working side–by–side in a fighting division. It wasn't an actual mountain, for he had been surrounded by beautiful mountains for all of his life.

People always say that wolves can only be tamed by one master. However, there were likely many wild timber wolves who fought alongside the Chu, some of them with enhanced magical powers. There is simply no other explanation for how the tiny Chu Kingdom was able to stave off invasion from the Qin Empire for so many decades.

And, yes, there are many eye–witness reports of battles involving magical beasts just like Wolf. Will there ever be another kingdom as mythical and magical as the remote mountain Kingdom of the Chu?

Tales from China's Magical Mountains

Chinese International School, Cheung, Charlotte – 12

Reports to finish, graphs to make, emails to reply. John exhaled heavily, as he flopped his head into his pile of printed materials. A third empty cup of coffee rested next to him, his drowsiness hinting at the necessity of a fourth or a fifth. His breath reeked of a disconcertingly stinky mix of coffee beans, the extremely faint flavor of mint mouthwash and saliva in general. In search of a break from the totality of pressure and frustration in life, the next morning, he headed up to Huangshan.

He looked up to the sky – the sun was yawning but he was up anyway. The Chinese characters announced solemnly, his arrival at the "Front Gate". He began his stride up to the cable car station, but he froze in his tracks – his brows furrowed, eyes widening.

Something was amiss.

Gone was the iconic magic and beauty of Huangshan – instead, the uninvited noise from tourists loudly squabbling to each other banished the sacred serenity. A vocal bargaining between stall owners and the tourists about the price of an ice drink pricked his ears, like the unrelenting buzzing bees.

Completely exasperated, here he was to experience the search of a gone silence, yearning even more for the peace that was always absent from his daily life. Where was the mesmerising beauty of Huangshan that enticed generations of poets and artists? He wondered. While the walk up to the zenith seemed to be infinite, the remix of multiple languages and dialects of tourists became the background tone, setting the mood of his journey. The Baizhang Spring and the A–shaped Waterfall were simply close by, but John could not see anything more than what met the eyes. The Baizhang Spring failed to dazzle him, the cascading silky waterfall was no more than a source of bitingly cold splashes.

As he popped into a cable car, he was only hoping that the peace would come upon him. Now, the unclosable windows made him feel more claustrophobic than ever, the noise poured in through the gap, smashing his eardrums like a pie was being thrown at his face –– and he could not jump out of the cable car. The closer he was to the blue sky, the muddier and unappealing the brown trails became.

He buried his face in his hands, gritting his teeth. Why was this happening? He came here to escape from chaos, and all he found was more chaos! "Oh, this is enough chaos for one lifetime," he thought. Huangshan used to be that paradise where crowds were nowhere to be found, the peace and beauty prevailing above all else – however, he now found the crowd utterly unavoidable. Had he known all this would be harassing his eardrums, wreaking havoc with his psyches, he would have stayed at his office desk to continue with reports, graphs and emails. Even the suffocating working life his boss psychopathically put him through would be better, better than seeing his dreamy portrait of Huangshan smudged before him. They, the ruthless tourists, contributing dabs and strokes that nobody asked for.

"You have arrived at the Greeting Pine," a pre–recorded voice commanded. John followed like a robot, walking towards the Greeting Pine with no expectations. Here they were, freely dancing in the wind. The pines were waving with enthusiasm, eagerness and energy, standing in their old age as trees.

John boarded another cable car, and the Stone Flown From Afar caught his eyes. The stone reached the sky, gently penetrating and dipping into the clouds with its tip, like a Chinese pen dipping lightly into a bottle of ink. He dazed at the ethereal structure.

After another little ride in the car, he had arrived at the Cooling Platform. Walking to the center of the platform, he felt the wind blowing towards his face, ruffling his hair, and brushing his legs, a cooling sensation sweeping across his whole body. He didn't even mind his shirt flapping against his chest.

Another cable car trip later, the Begin–to–Believe Peak almost made his eyes pop out. He couldn't believe it! How did these – how did these rocks hold together, in a straight fashion, when they were almost floating, hovering over each other? It was almost as if levitation had allowed the rocks to defy gravity!

He went higher and higher and higher, and the cable car doors opened at last. As he stepped out of the car, the biggest, tallest, most grand of them all was revealed – the Lotus Peak.

He had been missing out. The wind greeted him and brushed his cheeks lightly as he watched the waves of clouds soar smoothly through the air – looking next to him at the "Greeting Pine" and below him to the little staircases, the imposing peaks and those trees that nobody cared for but managed to flourish with their own inner strength, witnessing the changing of times in its ancient history. He felt like he was atop the entire world, a godly feeling empowering his mind, like he could do anything –

The fog was engulfed by a gentle but sudden whoosh of cold wind, just as he had wished for the fog to disappear from his sight, leaving a collection of peaks in its wake. John felt awash by a void, the sense of nothingness and emptiness – as he stood speechless and with a serene feeling.

He peered down at the scenery below his feet, the green of the lush grass, the brown of the peaks, the white of the clouds and the black of the granite staircases. Another light gust of wind breezed past his face, and he felt...reborn, like a wave had just washed his soul, and the pressure of the documents and reports on his shoulders just wafted away like a cloud of smoke. Looking out of the cable car he was in, John opened up the window and let the birds settle on the edge while chirping. Brown birds, black birds, and white birds all flew away from their cables, and came to join John on his cable car, while they sang their joyful songs. He thought of it – he used to hate birds chirping. He thought they were nuisances, creations of nature that had voices to bring disruption and unhappiness to people. But now, it was a kind of naturally created music, that he had learnt to listen more closely to, and he slowly appreciated it.

On the way to the airport, he reflected upon the power that being atop the Lotus Peak had given him. The imposing peaks, the persistent trees, the steamy springs – they had survived the harsh wind and rain, the freezing snow and hail, and the ferocious sun. After tens of thousands of years, they still stood confidently, not withered by the tests of time or the tests of whatever disaster nature threw their way. They all toughed it out, despite what was going on around them, and learnt to find the peace in their inner selves.

Drifting into a deep slumber, a poem about another mountain his mother read to him when he was little spoke to him, quietly and gently:

"Since I cannot be born again,
on days when my heart grows grim, I leave my quiet house,

and go away to the mountains.
On the day I return from a nameless hill,

in house and the village,

I am reborn."

The next morning, John awoke with a spring in his step. A first cup of coffee rested next to him – its emptiness didn't hint at the necessity of a second, instead it hinted at his energy. His breath smelled of fresh apples, refreshing mint mouthwash and a good granola bar. "All clouds float, don't they?" John smiled to himself in his office, looking at a picture of him in Huangshan on his desk. Thinking of going back to Huangshan again, he felt that serenity wasn't far, but it was close to his heart despite all those daily nuisances

Does the rainbow actually exist?

Chinese International School, Fung, Annalise – 13

"Now students, Huangshan was originally named "Yishan" because of a legend..." The teacher droned on about Huangshan, which was their Chinese History topic for the month. "Lily Chen." Lily heard someone calling her name, but couldn't quite place who the voice was. "Lily, you should really pay more attention in class! I've been calling you for the last 2 minutes, yet you just noticed me," the mysterious voice said.

Lily glanced at the speaker and spotted a man who carried himself with an arrogant air, wearing a jade belt and a cloth scarf on his head. Lily, who had just learned about this man in her previous Chinese History lesson, widened her eyes in shock as she stammered in disbelief, "W–wait...are you Li Bai?"

Li Bai laughed heartily and nodded his head. "Yes Lily, I am indeed Li Bai." "Wait, but why are you here? Shouldn't you be writing poems?"

"Yes, I am supposed to be writing poems, but I need inspiration! I need your help to go find a beautiful rainbow that is set in one of the most dangerous parts of Huangshan, but I don't know how to get there. The last time I saw the rainbow was when I was a baby, and I don't remember anything other than that spectacular sight I saw." Li Bai smiled as he thought of that gorgeous rainbow.

"B–but, how am I supposed to know how to get to the rainbow? And why did you even pick me to help you?" Lily asked.

Li Bai, providing no answer to any of the questions, only smiled mysteriously and stood there. Suddenly, there came a faraway call of the phoenix. Li Bai smiled, satisfied, and summoned Lily onto the wind carriage.

Lily stepped gingerly onto the wind carriage, and WOOSH, in the blink of an eye, the view from the carriage had changed from Lily's classroom to the beautiful mountains of Huangshan!

"Lily! Look over the edge of the carriage! We're currently passing by the magical pine trees. Here is the Greeting Pine!" Li Bai shouted excitedly, eagerly showing off his childhood 'home town'.

Lily glanced over the side of the carriage, and saw the pine tree beckoning to her!

"Welcome home Li Bai. And welcome newcomer! According to this form that Li Bai submitted, your name is...Lily Chen," the Greeting Pine exclaimed excitedly, beckoning them over with its long branches, "and you have been summoned by Li Bai to help him find a rainbow in Huangshan. Now, let me give you a hearty welcome to Huangshan!"

Li Bai whispered, "Lily, you have to be careful around the Greeting Pine. It is so talkative and could keep us here for hours telling us about the scenery and history of Huangshan! We have to rush if we want to get to the rainbow before sunset."

"Oh please," Lily pleaded, "can we just stay for a little while? Although I would normally find the scenery and history of Huangshan boring, the Greeting Pine speaks so animatedly I can't help but listen!"

Li Bai shook his head wearily, "fine," he said, "we can stay for 5 minutes." Lily squealed with excitement and rushed to hug Li Bai, "thank you!"

The Greeting Pine smiled and said, "Well, did you know that Huangshan was originally called–"

Lily cut the Greeting Pine off mid–word, and said, rolling her eyes, "Ugh, I've already learned about this at school!"

The Greeting Pine just smiled and said, "Yi Shan. in 747, the name was changed to Huangshan by an emperor's order, as the legendary Huangdi, literally translating to Yellow Emperor, wanted to emphasize an association between Huangshan and himself."

Lily stood there, her eyes open wide with curiosity, and said, "wow, I did not know that!" "5 minutes is up!" Li Bai said, "time to continue our journey!"
Lily nodded, and climbed back into the Wind Carriage.
"Bye!" She shouted.

The two companions sat in silence, when Lily suddenly shouted, "Li Bai! I see a monkey!"

Li Bai looked around, confused, but laughed out loud when he spotted something. "My dear Lily," he said, "that is the famous Weird Rock of Huangshan! People say that it looks like a monkey watching the sunset, don't you think so?"

Lily focused intently on the rock for a while, and nodded her head, "Hm, that's true! Wait, that reminds me, it's almost sunset! We have to rush in order to see the beauty of the rainbow clearly before dusk falls!"

Whilst both parties were nervously watching the sun's slow descent into the mountains, Lily spotted a person soaking in the hot spring. Li Bai, noticing that Lily was looking at something, looked over to see what was attracting Lily's attention.

Li Bai, after a few moments of confusion, realised that it was Xuanyuan Huangdi. "Lily," he said, "that is Xuanyuan Huangdi. He is currently rejuvenating for 21 days, so we better not disturb him!"

Lily nodded her head and sighed, slumping down in her seat, "I really wanted to go try that hot spring! That way, I could brag to my friends that I went to the Hot Spring in Huangshan when I get back home!"

Li Bai, knowing that Lily was extremely disappointed by not being able to rejuvenate herself in the hot spring, reassured her by saying, "Lily, don't worry! I think we're near the rainbow now, so get ready to see the most breath–taking view of your life!"

Lily nodded half–heartedly as she thought of the warmth that she could have surrounded her if only Xuanyuan Huangdi wasn't rejuvenating right when she got summoned by Li Bai to find this so–called 'gorgeous rainbow'.

Lily looked around. She was defeated! She didn't know where the rainbow was, and the sun was only a few minutes away from setting. If she didn't spot the rainbow soon, Li Bai would never get to see the rainbow again! As she looked around, trying to spot the rainbow, she saw a stream of white water falling from the sky. It was a waterfall!

"Dear friends, I assume you must be looking for the rainbow. It is nearby, all you need to do is fly your wind carriage over to where I am, and you will see it. I have been watching this rainbow for such a long time, it is nice to finally have some company," the waterfall said.

Lily was so excited to finally see the rainbow that she didn't even comprehend that a waterfall was talking to her! "Wait, Li Bai," she said, furrowing her eyebrows, "this waterfall that is leading us to the rainbow is trustworthy, right? I've read many stories about how the spirits in Huangshan lure visitors somewhere and then the visitors are never to be seen again. Supposedly, they tell the visitors to prove that they are adventurous and force them to walk across the Bridge of Immortals. However, many people fall off and die. What if...we're about to become one of those visitors?"

Li Bai laughed, "Don't worry Lily," he said, "this is the White Dragon, and long ago, it released a torrent of water, flooding villages all over Huangshan. So the emperor punished the White Dragon, and turned it into a waterfall! However, after the White Dragon's punishment was over, it wanted to stay a waterfall, as it felt bad for what it did to the village. Now, the White Dragon provides fresh water for all the villagers in Huangshan."

Lily thought, “The White Dragon seems like a trustworthy person! Or dragon, to be precise.”

When the wind carriage flew to where the waterfall was, Lily and Li Bai were astounded by the beauty that stood before them. They stood there, speechless, as they took in the rainbow. Tears started streaming down Li Bai’s face, “thank you so much,” he cried, “thank you for helping me find the rainbow again!”

As Li Bai stood in front of the rainbow, entranced by the beauty of it, Lily realised a sea of clouds was underneath the rainbow. She thought, “wow, that looks so fluffy, I’m going to jump on it!”

She creeped to the edge of the wind carriage, careful not to disturb Li Bai from his trance, and... “3, 2, 1”, Lily shouted, “yayyyyyyyyyy!!!”

As she jumped from the carriage onto the clouds, she heard the White Dragon shout, “No, Lily, don’t! You’ll be brought back to the mortal world if you....” The White Dragon’s voice faded as she fell through the clouds.

Lily landed on hard plastic. “Where am I?”, she muttered. The joyous screams of her classmates brought her back to reality. “Lily! You finally woke up! You passed out for 1 hour, we were so worried!”

“Now now, don’t surround Lily, I’m sure she needs some fresh oxygen and personal space if she wants to recover quickly,” the teacher warned the class.

Lily swiveled her head to look at her teacher, only to see her wink and mouth the words “you’re welcome.”

Tales from China's Magical Mountains

Chinese International School, Jan, Sydney R – 13

Chinese legend has it that there was once a kind, noble Yellow Emperor, otherwise known as Huangdi, who was admired by all that met him. For a long time, he ruled a village in China's Southern Anhui province, not far from an ancient forest in Mount Yi, literally meaning black mountain. The forest was no ordinary forest however, it was well believed to be the land of the gods where mythical creatures and autonomous spirits lived together as one. The area was covered entirely with a beautiful, silver mist that glistened in the golden glow of the rising sun, and veiled the secrets hidden within the forest.

Years passed and the emperor had heard a rumor about a spring of immortality that lay just atop of Lotus Peak – the tallest peak of Mount Yi – which rose high above the thick sea of clouds. Gradually, he was consumed by an undying desire for eternal life. Ignoring his advisors' warnings, he dressed in his finest clothing, abandoned his people, then set off alone into the forest to hunt for the magical spring.

Feeling weary after his daunting, but successful journey, he heaved himself into the spring of immortality and fell asleep in it for forty–nine days. Everyone believed he had ascended to Heaven, and the mountain was later renamed to Huangshan in his honor. But what they didn't know was when the emperor woke up from his long nap, he had yet to pay the price of immortality.

2000 years later...

"Ow," I grumbled, "that hurt."
Already covered in mud, I rolled onto my back and spread my arms across the forest floor.

"You did it, Mei Ling," I said to myself, then let out a sigh of relief, "you ran away from home for the first time."

The argent, full moon rose high above the endless darkness, shining through the silver mist and casting shadows in where its luminescent light couldn't reach. My eyes were puffy and my short, brown hair curled inwards, framing the sides of my face. Eventually, my breathing returned to normal, but my skinny legs still ached from the long run. Despite being in the forest countless times before, still, the shadows of twisted pine trees and strangely shaped rocks sent a shiver up my spine. When I was finally confident that every creature had fallen asleep, I rested my eyes and let my mind drift to a memory from earlier tonight.

> I was back in my room, dirty laundry scattered all over the place, *exactly* how I liked it. It had been three hours since the sun disappeared behind the mountains, and most fireflies were awakening from their long slumbers. Suddenly, I heard a frightening gasp coming from my mom, who stood angrily outside my bedroom door.
>
> After just five minutes of lecturing, I had had enough.
>
> "Look," I hollered back at her, clenching my fists, I channeled all my rage and screamed my lungs out, "I know I'm not the perfect little girl you wanted me to be! I take my books with me into the forest and I read alone for days on end. Unlike those other kids in the village, I don't need friends, I don't need dad, and most importantly, I don't need *you*!" I pushed past her, snatched my coat, then slammed the door behind me and dashed into the ancient forest.

I was quickly brought back to reality by a man's voice hovering above my head as I lay on my back.

"Are you lost, my child?" the stranger said, in a calm voice that also expressed his concern. When I didn't respond, he added, "Where are your parents?"

With my eyes still shut tight, I told myself over and over that everything would be fine, until it felt true. My heart pounded faster against my chest as I slowly opened my eyes.

My jaw instantly dropped at the sight of him, not from fear, nor from his unusual attire, but because his body was completely translucent. I could just make out his amiable, brown eyes, crooked nose, long–flowing moustache and beard, and warm smile. He wore a traditional black, ankle–length robe made of silk embellished with beautiful golden swirls in the shape of dragons, and a brown, silk belt wrapped around his waist. His hair was tied back in a small bun topped with a garment only worn by the...

To my surprise, I was no longer afraid of the spirit itself, but more shocked with who he was.

"You, your the... Ye–yellow Emperor!" I exclaimed. As he nodded his head, I continued, "According to legends, you should have ascended to Heaven long ago. So why are you still here?!" My eyebrows had scrunched together as they always did when I was deep in thought.

"Come with me," he said with a kind smile, "since I can't bear to leave a girl your age alone drenched in mud, I'll tell you my story while we head to the best place to watch the sunrise."

After I had taken all the time in the world to just stand up, the emperor then muttered something under his breath. Suddenly, the mist around us began to gather beneath our feet, lifting us off the ground inch by inch, until we floated high above the forest. The moon began to fade as the horizon became a delicate, golden thread. I bent over and was greeted by gigantic koi, formed from the silver mist below. They were the size of airplanes and swam like a pack of lively dolphins, occasionally jumping up to brush the sky, then diving back into the endless sea of clouds. It was like living a fairytale, silently riding on our little cloud across the sky towards a single peak that stood taller than all the others.

"Are you going to tell me the reason why I found a thirteen year old girl alone in the forest at night?" the emperor abruptly asked. Feeling embarrassed, I reintroduced myself and explained the heated argument I had last night.

As I told him that I'd rather be alone for the rest of my life, we arrived at our destination. I hopped off the fluffy cloud and watched each breath turn into a puff of smoke as soon as it entered the freezing atmosphere. To my left, there was a natural hot spring which I had to resist cannon–balling into. On my right however, I was left wide eyed and staring in awe. The sun rose above the horizon, spreading warmth throughout the forest. Glowing rays of sunlight pierced through the mist below, changing it from a dull silver to a warm, glistening pink.

"What a sight to behold," I thought, but for some reason, I had an empty feeling lingering in my soul.

It was like the emperor saw right through me when he asked, "You wish you could share this moment with your mother, don't you?"

Thankfully, the emperor didn't wait for my response before carrying on, "When I woke up that morning in the spring, my skin had become pale and transparent. The forest god was already waiting on the other side of the bubbly water, and informed me that by transforming into a forest spirit, I had indeed become immortal, but that also meant I could never set foot outside the forest ever again. At first, I was overjoyed, spending most of my days exploring the forest. However as time passed, I began to miss my family. Day after day, I sat on the edge of the forest watching my children grow into gracious adults. Though as life went on, and I saw the last of my children's souls ascend to Heaven, towers of regret began to buiId within my heart. Desperate, I repeatedly implored the forest god to release me from this dreadful curse, and yet he refused to every time. I've been alone in this forest ever since."

I didn't realize I had been crying until the emperor reached over and used a gentle hand to wipe a tear from my cheek.

"I want to go home," I said in between sobs, "please, take me back."

On the way home, I didn't pay much attention to the tall, stone pillars, nor the thunderous waterfalls that I usually would have been delighted to see. The sky was a brilliant blue by the time we made it to the edge of the forest that overlooked my little house.

"Come back to see me anytime, Mei Ling." the emperor said, lightly patting my head once before disappearing into thin air.

When I turned to face the porch of my house, there stood a lonely woman staring blankly right at me. She wasn't wearing her usual blue dress and her dark hair had become a bird's nest. Hot tears streaked across my face as I sprinted full–speed ahead, making my way through the golden rice field, towards my mother, who waited for me on the other side with wide, open arms.

The Sound of Home

Chinese International School, Liu, Kaitlyn – 11

4 years ago…

"What have you done?!" Mother's cries woke me up in the middle of the night. I hurriedly ran downstairs, but there was no sign of mother. Wrapping my hands around my body, I made my way out the front door. A blast of cold wind rushed into the house, sending shivers down my spine. I peered across the river, squinting against the strong wind. In the dark, I could make out the grey figures of mother, and...father? I could hear mother crying in the distance. I rushed across the wooden bridge and approached them. There, lying on the ground was father, with a masty gash across the entire left side of his body...kneeling next to him was mother, squeezing his shoulders, so tight that she was trembling. I could hear mother's voice clearer now, cowering in fear, "Please. Oh God, please. Why'd you go? The mountains are dangerous. Don't leave, please..."

The next morning, he was gone. And mother's soul, though still alive...left with him.

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Ever since father died, mother was never the same anymore. Mother would stay in her room the entire day, not doing anything, just lying in her bed. I wish I could be mad, leaving me alone to fend for myself, but seeing the few black strands of hair left in the midst of white, and the wrinkles on her face, deepening, day by day, I forced myself to hold back. Instead, I made things. Shell necklaces, flower crowns, strings of pebbles that would jingle in the wind… I brought them to the market everyday, but often came home, my pockets as empty as ever. Everyone was poor. No one can eat seashells and stones. So, I hung all the leftover wind−chimes on my window frame. Everytime the wind blew, our entire house was filled with the sound of the pleasant clinking and clanking of the pebbles.

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Mother was lying unconscious on the floor when I walked into her room. I called Uncle Chen from next door and he carried mother to Doc. Zhang, who lived next to the market. We waited outside of the Doctor's house, exchanging nervous glances to one another. I didn't have the money to pay for the expensive doctor.... What if Mother died? I would have no parents, no home, no anything. How would I live?

I trembled in fear, feeling tears forming in my eyes, raging with sadness, and fury but mostly fear. All the feelings bubbled up inside me, like a volcano, about to erupt. Droplets of tears slid down my face and fell onto the floor, *plink, plink*. I was sad, angry, hungry... so I ran. As fast as my legs could take me. I ran past the market, past all the grey and white houses. All the way till I was far from the village, not daring to look back. Finally, coming back to my senses, I realized that I was at the foot of a mountain. The mysterious Yellow mountains – Huangshan.

I looked up and the bright morning sun forced my eyes into a squint. The tall mountains towered over me, making me seem smaller, and weaker than ever. The shark peak poked a hole through the sky, barely visible under all the clouds. Without thinking, I grabbed the nearest rock with my right hand, and started to climb.

By the time I got to a small cave on the side of the mountain, the sun had already set, and my hands were covered in scratches. I found a small cave, and leaned my back against the cold, hard stone wall. Before I could think anything more… I had already fallen fast asleep.

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I woke up with the sound of a buzzing bee surrounding me. I swatted it away, and I carefully lifted myself to my sore feet, and slowly stepped out of the small cave...straight into a ginormous rock.

I stumbled back a few steps and rubbed my sore head. The rock was shaped oddly, almost like a human...with wings. I reached out a hand and felt my coarse fingertips brushing against the surprisingly smooth stone. Before I could observe the statue closer, the entire rock simply disappeared into thin air, to be replaced by a muscular young man, wearing yellow and blue robes. But, he looked strangely familiar… he had the same broad shoulders, and tough jaw that father had. *Could it be?*

"Hey, Zhang Hao." The man spoke, with a voice, exactly like father's. Coarse, but warm.

"Hey, Father." I acted like it was completely normal to see Father suddenly appear from a stone statue, but I had no space in my head to think. All I could do was stand there – dumbstruck.

"Come. I will explain everything." Father gestured for me to follow him, towards a rocky hanger on the side of the mountain. I sat down next to him and gasped in awe at the sight. Tall jagged mountains shot out from the endless oceans of fluffy white clouds. Each mountain had a unique shape, telling a different story.

"Do you know the tale of the *Immortal Showing the way*?"

"No."

"It's a old legend of Huangshan..."

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Immortal showing the way

The beautiful Huangshan attracted many people to come visit. Among them were said to be immortals, like the Yellow Emperor, the Dragon King and even the Eight Immortals.

Once, on the day of the annual gathering of the Eight Immortals, one of the Immortals – Han Xiangzi was late. Another Immortal, Zhang Guolao flew into the sky to look for Han Xiangzi, but to find Han sightseeing on the Mountain – He was enjoying himself so much that he forgot the gathering! Zhang told Han that they had to get back to the gathering, Han, not having any other choice, turned a stone into a statue of himself, so he would know how to come back next time. The stone, therefore, was named – Immortal Showing the Way. And according to legend, the statue is still there, in the depths of the mountain, and one touch of the stone, would grant immortality...

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"Every year, men from all over the village would go up the mountain, wanting to prove themselves a hero, and achieve this immortality. But, no man ever succeeded to find it. There were too many beasts and creatures that lived in the mountains, and most men came back injured, whilst many never came home..." Father took a deep breath and sighed, "I wanted to try. So that night, I secretly left and tried to find the rock. But unfortunately, I bumped into a ferocious tiger along the way. I managed to kill it in the end, but the tiger had left a deep gash on my leg. I wobbled home as fast as I could. By the time I got home, I barely had any energy to take a single step. I'm sorry I couldn't say goodbye..."

"It's fine. I saw you...That night, I mean." I let out a heavy breath, and lowered my head.

"Oh yeah, I did too...why did you come here, climb the mountain?"

I clenched my fists and bit my lip, I started explaining. About mother, and how I had to sell things at the market. Then about how mother suddenly fainted, and I didn't know what to do… "I...I was just so scared. I would be alone if she left, and I..." I broke into tears and father placed his hand on my shoulder.

"Hey, it's gonna be fine. Life is hard. There will be obstacles that block your way. But how will you know what the result will be, if you don't even try? Come on, kid. Don't let your fears bring yourself down. Think on the positive side. Hmm?"

"Well, maybe I−" Before I could finish my sentence, father had already disappeared, along with the stone statue. Maybe I had imagined it all… But, what father, real or not, had said was true. I couldn't just give up like this. A lot of people still needed me. I couldn't leave them.

I started to climb home. Maybe it was me, but climbing down the mountain seemed almost *easier* than climbing up. The statue. I don't think it granted immortality. It was *showing the way*, towards hope, and life. In the blink of an eye, I had already gotten to the village entrance. In the distance, I saw a small body, carrying a basket, crossing the bridge across the river. It was her. She was fine. And there, I heard it. The *clink clang*, echoing across the entire village − It was the sound of home. Brushing off the dirt on my clothes, I ran. But this time, I wasn't running away from my fears, I was running towards my fears, and I knew, I was going to conquer them. Bravely, swiftly − like a warrior.

Escape from Jiuhua Shan

Chinese International School, Liu, Sarah – 14

A thick mist swirled around Jiuhua Shan. The mountain was the highest among all the Yellow Mountains and the most sacred to the Buddhist faith. The pine–covered peaks seemed to stretch upwards to the sky, sheltering the ancient monastery nestled against the side of the mountain, seemingly abandoned by its former inhabitants. Dense clumps of pine trees clung precariously to the rocky slopes, almost obliterating the narrow pathway that man had built several centuries ago leading up to the monastery. Parts of the path were almost impassible to human beings.

Huang Rongxi lay slumped against an old tree trunk, exhausted from his steep climb. His right arm hung limply by his side, blood seeping through the bandages covering the faded grey of his imperial uniform. Huang had walked for days without food, the pain from his wound growing ever worse as the days passed. The slaughter during the battle against the Tang army had been so intense that Huang saw no chance of surviving the onslaught against his own depleted unit. One moonless night, he slipped out of the camp and crawled into the dense undergrowth at the base of the mountain. For two days, Huang slowly climbed higher and higher into the Yellow Mountains, evading any paths which might be used by any imperial troops. He was convinced that by now, any search party would have given up the hunt for a deserted soldier and began to gradually slow his pace.

On the third day of his escape, Huang decided to take shelter in a low cave, almost hidden in the midst of the silent forest. As night fell, he closed his eyes and tried to block out the numbing pain in his arm. The next day, Huang woke up early, disturbed by the sound of rustling leaves outside of the cave. He immediately moved to draw his knife from its sheath, but instead of an imperial soldier, he saw the face of a young boy, standing at the entrance of the cave. "My name is Hao Jingcheng." said the boy in a gentle voice.. I live on the mountain and I know somebody who can help you." "Go away boy, I don't need any help. Just leave me alone." Huang grunted. But the boy persisted. "But you are bleeding through your bandage, and you won't last more than a couple of days on the mountain." "I already told you to leave me alone." Hao continued to badger the man. "I'm going to take you to the monastery at the top of the mountain. There is an old monk that lives there who can tend your wounds." Ignoring Huang's protests, Hao began to lift the soldier by his good arm. Eventually, Huang gave up the fight and limped out of the cave, supported by his young rescuer.

Towards evening, Huang and his new companion reached the top of Mount Jiuhua. As the sun began to set, tiny snowflakes fell from the sky, gradually forming a white blanket across the mountain. The rays of the sun had painted the sky deep shades of red and pink, forming a backdrop to the ancient Shaolin Monastery which clung precariously to the edge of the mountainside. By the time the pair reached the foot of the stairs leading up to the main gate of the monastery, Huang was on the brink of collapsing. Suddenly, a tall figure of an elderly man emerged from the gate. "Who is this soldier, Hao?" asked the figure. "And why have you brought him here?" "I found him hiding in a cave alone. His arm is badly injured, we need to help him. " Hao pleaded with the monk. Shi Liangxin looked warily at the injured soldier. His saffron robes billowed in the cool evening breeze. "Do you realize that imperial troops are roaming around the mountains searching for deserters? We must hide him in the monastery, so I can fix up his wound.." ordered the monk.

The next morning, Huang opened his eyes and gazed at the sight of an enormous golden buddha which seemed to stare down at him with pitying eyes. All around him were piles of fruit and other offerings. The scent of incense penetrated his nostrils when suddenly the old monk entered the room with a bowl of steaming hot chicken soup. Huang tried to sit up, but the throbbing pain in his arm forced him back down again. Shi said in a gentle voice, "Try not to move your arm, it needs time to heal. But we can't stop long in the monastery since the imperial soldiers are climbing up the mountain. If they find you, they will kill you, and kill me for helping you."

Two days later, Shi quietly slipped into the room where Huang was fast asleep. Gently shaking the soldier's arm, Shi said, "Wake up! We have to leave now! The soldiers are close, and there is no time to spare! Follow me to the temple. Hao is waiting for us there." Huang reluctantly got out of the bed and shuffled towards the door of the tiny room. Hao beckoned the soldier from the temple steps, urging him to hurry. Shi followed closely behind, carrying a few small bags of food over the shoulder of his wiry frame. Within moments, all three figures had passed through the broken down rear gate of the monastery. They had barely walked a kilometer when they suddenly heard the yelling of soldiers from the monastery. As the monk stole a glance behind him, Hao clenched Huang's hand tightly signaling

his wounded friend to move faster. Huang smiled at the boy and picked up his pace as the sun began to sink behind the Jiuhua Shan. The dying rays of the sun seemed to illuminate the whole mountain, casting the three lonely figures in deep shadow. As darkness fell, Shi motioned his companions to stop and rest, "It's getting dark now, we should take cover somewhere and eat some food, but we can't light a fire. Let's rest under that rocky ledge and later try to get some sleep.." The three desperate figures ate quickly and tried to snatch a few hours of sleep under the watching stars of the night sky.

When Huang opened his eyes the next morning, his vision focused on the figure of Shi praying to Buddha in the cold morning air. It was early and the mist gently swirled among the peaks of the opposite mountain. Hao was already awake, packing the few little belongings ready for the journey ahead. Shi's prayers were suddenly interrupted by the sound of pebbles falling down onto the ledge. Hao signalled to Shi, his finger pointing upwards. Before any of the three companions could make a move, a tall figure dressed in imperial uniform emerged, carrying a long sword of the officer rank. Huang immediately recognized the officer from his own regiment. Captain Lu was infamous for his brutality towards the common soldier. Lu looked at Shi with menacing eyes, "Monk, your status will not protect you for helping a deserter to escape from the army. The penalty is the same for both of you – death." Lu moved towards Huang, the sword raised above his head. As Huang pressed his body against the rockface of the ledge, Hao suddenly launched a sharp rock towards the Captain, and just as Lu turned to face his young assailant, Shi grabbed Lu's wrist and wrenched the sword from his hand. A furious Lu struck the monk heavily on his head, pushing the old monk towards the edge of the precipice. "Let your precious Buddha save you now, monk!" yelled Lu. But, the Captain was ignorant of Shi's training as a Shaolin monk, and in a moment, Lu was hanging over the ledge. Lu grabbed Shi's long sleeve, but it was too late, his grip loosened and his body slipped over the ledge.

"We must leave now!" Shi quietly exclaimed. Hao peered over the precipice and suddenly turned to his companions. "My uncle's village is beyond the next mountain. We can reach it in two days if we hurry and take a shortcut through the forest path." Shi nodded and motioned his companions to set off along the forest path. By nightfall, they had reached WaiTong Shan and spent a few hours resting before continuing their journey to the top of the mountain. The next morning, the sun rose early, casting a long shadow across the valley below. By late afternoon, just as the sun began to sink over the horizon, they finally reached the top of the mountain. With a gesture of his hand, Hao pointed to a collection of small, ramshackle farmhouses in the distance. "My uncle's village!" said Hao in an excited voice. Shi smiled, "It looks like a place where we might be safe from the war and people like Lu." Huang let out a sigh of relief, "Maybe at last all of us found a home in the Yellow Mountains."

Lost in Huangshan

Chinese International School, Luo, Hoi Yi Rachel – 12

"Mum, I don't want to go! I hate hiking!" Elizabeth whined. "No, you've got to go! Doing exercise is good for you! You always stay indoors, going hiking in the Huangshan Mountains will be just what you need," she said firmly.

An hour later, they were hiking up the mountains. Elizabeth's mother was ahead gaping at all the sights she saw. Elizabeth, on the other hand, was struggling to keep up with her; she looked as if she would collapse any minute. Just as she was about to take a break, a thick mist engulfed them. "Mum! Mum! Where are you?" Elizabeth cried. She expected her mother to jump out and scare her. However, her mother was nowhere to be found.

Elizabeth took a deep breath to stop herself from having a panic attack. *Don't panic*, she thought to herself, *you won't survive a minute on this mountain if you get all panicky.* She slowly retraced her steps and found her way back to the village. When she got there, she tried to ask for assistance, but she didn't speak Chinese so nobody could understand her.

Then, a girl in pigtails about her age went up to Elizabeth and asked, "Are you alright? You look like you're lost." Elizabeth stared at her in shock "You can speak English?" she asked. The girl smiled and said, "I learned to speak English at school. I'm Lin. How can I help you?" Elizabeth replied sounding embarrassed, "I'm Elizabeth. My mother and l got separated while hiking up the Huangshan Mountains. Can you help me find her?" Upon hearing this, Lin's eyes widened in surprise. "My parents are lost in the Huangshan Mountains too! I tried to find help, but it seems that no one here could help me. Maybe we could go find our parents together! " she exclaimed. "Sure! But we will have to gather supplies and provisions first," Elizabeth answered. After an hour, they gathered all the supplies they needed, but it was already dark, so they decided to head out on their quest at the brink of dawn.

The next morning they set out on their quest to find their missing parents. Despite being concerned about her mother's wellbeing, Elizabeth couldn't help but notice the grotesque–shaped rocks, granitic boulders and ancient pine trees that surrounded them. Nonetheless, she had no time to stop to admire the magnificent scenery. As they were hiking they encountered a crossroad, and Elizabeth asked, "Which path should we take?" "I'm not sure which path is the correct one," Lin muttered thinking hard. Suddenly, she cried in shock, "Elizabeth, look! That pine tree just turned its head! I think that it's showing us the direction! " "That's not possible! Trees can't communicate!" Elizabeth exclaimed, shaking her head in disbelief. However, her jaw dropped as the pine trees slowly turned their heads towards her as if they had heard everything. "Oh….oh you're right, they're moving!" she stuttered. Lin shot her an I–told–you–so look. "Let's follow the path that they showed us! Come on!" Elizabeth said. While they were hiking up the path, they came to a dead–end, "We can't go this way! I think that we need to climb up the oddly–shaped rock mountain to get to the top," Elizabeth commented, "Could you give me a head start?" Lin hoisted her up on the rocks, and they started climbing up together. Just as Elizabeth reached for the rock ledge, she heard Lin cry, "Help! I'm about to fall!" Elizabeth turned around, Lin was dangling on the edge of another rock, with hundreds of feet below her. Elizabeth stretched her hand out and Lin immediately grasped onto it like her lifeline. Using all her strength, she tried to pull Lin up. They struggled for a while, but at last, Lin was finally safe. After hours of sweat, they finally made it up to the top of the mountain. For a while they sat there in silence, enjoying the glorious view of the red and orange majestic sunset.

Lin suddenly broke the silence and said, "We should set up camp here. Let's light a fire." After they had the fire up, they began to warm themselves by it. "Tomorrow we'll continue to search for our parents, but we must be careful not to get lost in the seas of cloud," said Elizabeth. However, her thoughts buzzed like angry wasps in her head, as she was beginning to have doubts about this mission. *Two 12–year–old girls out in the wild who had no clue where their parents were. What if they couldn't find them? Did they know what they were doing?* Lin saw the worried look on her face and comforted her, "Don't worry, we'll find our parents, I promise. " They smiled at each other simultaneously. Lin passed Elizabeth a white bun. She looked at it confused and asked, "What is this?" Lin laughed and replied, "Your dinner. It's mantou, Chinese steamed bun." As night fell, the black sky was illuminated with bright shimmering stars. They snuggled in their warm sleeping bags and soon fell sound asleep.

Early next morning, Elizabeth was awoken by the savouring smell of food. She sat up, rubbing her eyes, and found out that Lin was grilling something by the fire. She stared at the sausage looking food with a perplexed look. Lin said, "Don't worry, it's just lap cheong, Chinese sausage." They devoured the chewy but delicious breakfast as they watched the golden sun peeking out from the seas of clouds in the horizon. It was a marvellous sight. In fact, this was the first time Elizabeth had ever seen the sunrise. She could have stayed there all day, but they had to get going.

After walking for a while, they realized that they had inevitably gotten swallowed by the seas of clouds. Fortunately, they managed to spot each other's rays of light from their torch. All of a sudden, they heard a gurgling sound. "Elizabeth, what's….what's that noise?" Lin asked, trembling. "I don't know, but I'm sure it's nothing," she stammered. Elizabeth tried to stay calm, but she was quaking in fear. They walked forward hand–in–hand nervously looking out for danger.

"Lin, I..." Elizabeth began, but she stopped mid–sentence. She felt a black shadow looming over them.

Elizabeth slowly turned around thinking that they were in trouble. To her surprise, she saw a small hot spring bubbling. The chain of steam mixed up in the mist made it look as if it was a monstrous creature. "Elizabeth!" "Lin!" voices rang out from the hot spring. They would have known that voice anywhere. It was their parents! Elizabeth rushed into her mother's arms, "Mum! I'm so glad I finally found you!" she said in joyful tears. "Lin helped me find you..." she trailed off.

After they'd all calmed down, Elizabeth's mother began to tell the tale of how she ended up in a hot spring. "Well, I got lost in the mist, and I wandered to this resort. Here I met Mr. and Mrs. Chan, who also encountered the same problem. Since I didn't have a way down, my only choice was to stay here," she concluded.

"But why didn't you come down to the village and look for us? " Lin asked. Her mother sighed heavily, "We're sorry, we wanted to, we really did, but the mist was too thick and the wind was too strong. We were afraid that we would get lost again, so we decided to wait until the mist passed. We didn't realize that it would take such a long time," She said. "Let's go back down to the village tomorrow morning," Mrs. Chan said.

When they arrived the next morning, Mrs. Chan took a deep breath and sighed contentedly, "It's so good to be back home! Even though I've only been away for a few days, it felt like ages," she commented.

The next few days went by in a flash. Lin showed Elizabeth all the parts of her village, took her to try traditional Chinese food, explored the markets, and she even taught Elizabeth how to speak Chinese!

When it was time to leave, Lin gave Elizabeth a friendship bracelet made out of colourful pebbles that she collected from the mountains. She had made one for herself to wear too. "I made these friendship bracelets for us! Wear this and you'll remember our memorable adventure," Lin said.

On the airplane, Elizabeth looked at her bracelet with a wide grin on her face. It was truly an unforgettable experience. She would remember Lin and the magic of Huangshan forever.

Tales from China's Magical Mountains

Chinese International School, Yuan, Zachary – 11

Thunder clouds loomed across the sky, plunging everything into imminent darkness. Lightning speared down from the clouds, crackling and shuddering. A huge shadow loomed over the jagged mountain tops, moving swiftly. The rain poured down, churning the mud. Three children trod along the rain–soaked trail quietly, peering from left to right, as if looking for something. At last, the little girl spoke, "Where are we?"

"I have no idea! Why come to this muddy filthy place?" asked a boy.

The other boy, the oldest of all, walked onwards with a determined look on his face, ignoring the questions behind him. The wind and rain battered them, furiously, to stop them from continuing. But he knew something important was waiting for them.

The storm seemed to get stronger as they climbed higher. At last, they reached a cave.

They clambered into it and peered around. An eerie silence met them and darkness swallowed them. Through the dim light, they saw some straw and a few pebbles.

Suddenly, a rustling noise told them something was wrong. The older boy whispered, "There's something in this cave."

A creature let out a loud growl. Before the older boy could move, something barreled into him, knocking his breath out. He lay there, unable to move as he was pinned down by a graceful and sleek clouded leopard, which seemed to be mumbling to him...

Tom woke up with a start. His mother peered at him with a fuming face that looked like a tomato. She cried, "Why did you oversleep again? We are visiting Huangshan today, don't be late!" Then, she stomped off.

He was in a hotel room in Huangshan City, Anhui, China, with his younger brother John, younger sister Sophia and parents for the summer holiday.

"Hey, Tom! Do you know that Sophia and I had the same dream last night? We were at a mountain and there was a creature," said John loudly.

Tom jumped, and said cautiously, "I had a similar dream!"

"Wow! This place looks amazing from the bottom!" exclaimed John when they arrived at Huangshan.

People were crowding around a gigantic pine tree. Tom heard a tour guide saying, "This is the Greeting Pine. It is over a thousand years old."

Tom, John and Sophia followed the path towards the cable car station and hopped into a cabin. The view was breathtaking as they flew towards the lush green mountain peaks.

Half an hour later, they were approaching a small dusty door of an ancient hanging temple, having left the cable car for an old village.

The door creaked open.

They walked forward cautiously and peered around.

A gigantic tripod cauldron was sitting in the middle of the room. A rack of candles glittered faintly in the dark. The red poles reached from the bottom to the top, with golden dragons circling it. Drawings of people in traditional Chinese robes hung around the room. A Buddha sitting in front of them. And...

All of them froze, their faces pale with terror. John shivering, took a step backwards. Sophia clutched Tom's hand tightly, but no one made any sound. Next to the Buddha, lay a clouded leopard, the fur lying smoothly on its pelt, glistening and shining. Its eyes bore into theirs, but it didn't seem threatening, nor astonished at all.

The clouded leopard tossed its head back, lifted its chin, and said quietly, "A new threat arises, the Dragon King wakes, you have to beat him, for everyone's sake. You will meet him at the sea of clouds. If he prevails, the killing starts, and he will haunt everyone to the heart. So do well youngsters and win this fight, with all your wisdom and all your might." With that, it lifted its lean body and padded into the darkness.

Finally, Tom broke the silence, "That was the same clouded leopard in my dream last night. But what does it mean?"

They stepped out of the temple, still shaking and felt the cold breeze brushing past them. Then, they continued walking up the mountain, climbing a path of crumbling stone steps.

Towards the end of the stone steps, there was a huge Black Tiger pine tree. It lay motionless but when they walked closer, the tree suddenly moved and started to talk, "I am wet, yet I am dry. I am feared, yet I am enjoyed. I am scorching, yet I am freezing. What am I?"

Tom replied calmly, "This is an easy riddle. It is sand. Beach sand is wet and enjoyed, while desert sand is dry and feared. Desert sand can be scorching at day while freezing at night."

The tree said, "Smart boy! Here are a bow and two arrows made from my bark. Use them wisely!"

They continued hiking upwards, none of them said much. They started to distance themselves from the human world below. Finally, John broke the silence, "Look at the world beneath us. It is covered by the clouds."

Tom looked at them with wide eyes, "How could we forget? We are supposed to meet the Dragon King at the sea of clouds!" He hauled himself over a rock and found himself standing on a flat piece of ground. Clouds whisked around his feet and under him.

"You are here at last!" said a voice echoing through the mountains, generating a thunderous noise.

A massive shadow loomed over them and an enormous dragon with a necklace on it swept out from the clouds.

"You have got wild imaginations, youngsters," said the dragon, "but death awaits you here," without waiting, it struck with its tail.

John ducked, but his shirt was torn. He sat up and wiped his sweat with his sleeve. The dragon gave no time for hesitation. It tried to attack Sophia, whose instincts guided her to shoot at the dragon with the bow and arrow.

The arrow struck the small box on the dragon's necklace. Three souls fluttered from the broken box and one flew into the bushes. A phoenix appeared and blinded the dragon with its glow. The dragon let out a roar of pain and stumbled around blindly. Then, another soul fluttered towards the stone monkey on the peak. The monkey came to life and bounded off to break the dragon's claws. The dragon, blinded and claws broken, thrashed around wildly. Tom grabbed the bow and the last arrow, aimed, and hit one of the dragon's wings, bringing the dragon down onto the cloud bed and making a thunderous crash, generating lightning and thunder. The last soul sped towards a tree and transformed into the clouded leopard they met before.

"Well done youngsters. You have saved the world," whispered the clouded leopard. It suddenly turned into an old man dressed in yellow. "I am the Huangdi, the oldest ruler of China," he said. "When rulers are alive, they go to Huangshan and drink the elixir of life from a mysterious hot spring. After they die, their soul will return to Huangshan, the gateway to heaven. The elixir will help it stay in the current world as an animal. However, I fear the power of the Dragon King and his ambition to retake the world for himself one day. I feel that we should all leave this world to prevent any fatal accidents from happening again," said Huangdi.

As the three children turned, they saw the monkey turning into a strong man in a dragon robe. Then, the Phoenix turned into a female in a golden robe and replied, "Emperor Wu Zetian from the Tang dynasty agrees with you, Huangdi." She looked at the children and said, "You have stopped the destruction of mankind. Keep your good job and try to make the world a better place."

The person in dragon robe nodded, and said, "I am emperor Kangxi from the Qing dynasty. You have braved all the challenges. We believe in you. Please use your knowledge and skills wisely and you can change this world in a positive way."

All three of them nodded. Finally, the fallen dragon turned into a bold and muscular man. He roared, "You have ruined my plans to conquer the world. But deep down, Emperor Qin Shi Huang admires your courage. I will be watching you, so make wise decisions." He gave Tom, John, and Sophia a hard stare and stepped into one of the clouds, dissolving.

Huangdi said at last, "Great job saving the world and remember our words." He winked, stepped back, and disappeared into the clouds forever.

The three felt clouds covering them, swirling and twirling, and they heard the talking of a few people.

The three of them sat up with a start. They were all sitting in a cable car at Huangshan and a man dressed in uniform was patting them awake. Tom, John, and Sophia stumbled out dreamily and neither spoke until John broke the silence. "You were in my dream," he said to Sophia and Tom.

"Same!" said Tom. "Perhaps it's not my dream, but our dream..."

The Tale of the Faceless Creature

Diocesan Boys' School, Leung, Ching Hang Wesley – 13

There once lived an old and wise hermit. He fed on wild berries and bugs and drank water from creeks and waterfalls. He was also very mysterious, because he had been living in the forest for more than 10 centuries and had seemed to stop aging at the age of 90. He lived in the heart of the Amazon forest. Though there were a lot of local tribes nearby, he never interacted with them. Maybe it was because for every 10 years, a child from each tribe would disappear and yet return 5 weeks later to their homeland as a juvenile. When questioned where they had gone, the juvenile would say that a tall and queer creature with no face had snatched them while they were playing in the heart of the forest. The creature would take them to a pocket dimension and made them live on human remains as he would. However for some strange reasons, the creature would not eat or even touch them. It would just leave everyday and come back with people of different races. To them it had been 15 years, but to the people in the tribes, it was just 5 weeks.

The tribes had started to suspect the hermit for the queer disappearance of the children as he lived in the heart of the forest and had been very aloof with them.

'Bizarre stories!' a famous host of an American show had heard the stories about the unnatural disappearance of children and decided to interview and shoot a documentary about the legend.

Upon arriving at the Amazon forest, the tribe members of respective tribes refused to disclose about the details as they were afraid that the creature with no face would come after them. After failing to get a story about the strange mystery, the host of the show and his crew planned to leave, until they stumbled upon the old hermit. The host asked the hermit if he knew anything about the rumors. The hermit replied 'I know many things, even some that are not supposed to be known by a lowly hermit like me. But yes, I do know the story, I even know about the origin of the faceless creature that has been kidnapping children of local tribes.' Full of joy, the television host begged the old hermit sincerely with the shooting. Seeing how eager the host was the old hermit agreed to tell the story provided that the host had to do him a favour.

'The faceless creature wasn't always faceless, nor was he always a monster. He, like you and I, was once human, with the name John Mills. He had a handsome face and was like any other ordinary man except for the fact that he loved cursed objects, antiques. Yes, he liked things like Annable The Ghost Doll. I as his best friend, thought it was silly. Nonetheless it was a harmless passion of him, until one day... he was cursed himself. I wouldn't forget that night, the night he got cursed.'

'It was a splendid Autumn night, John and I were on a study trip in the Amazon forest with our classmates. One day, we accidentally bumped into a young boy from a local tribe. The boy was friendly and kind. He offered to bring us to his tribe because a powerful storm was coming our way. We kindly declined him and went on our merry way. But we should have followed him because the storm did hit us hard that day. Only John and I in our study group survived. We did not have any food, so we started eating the berries that we could find and drink from the creeks. However, after 5 months, John could not bear not having no meat. Right then at that time a wild boar appeared and John planned to hunt it down. So he took a stone and attempted to kill it, but because it was too dark, we could not see properly. John killed what seemed to be a boar, so we immediately made a fire and tried to roast it. After some time when we gazed upon what we were cooking, I was struck with fear! John had killed a woman from a local tribe! Instead! I of course, refused to eat. John, on the other hand, was so hungry that he devoured the woman as if she was some roasted turkey. Right at that moment, an old man came and saw John eating that woman. He was struck with horror and took some dirt and threw it at us, chanting some weird dialect. We thought it was nothing as the old man hurried off right away after that. Not long after, John told me he felt sick and his facial features started to disappear. His mouth started to grow wider and wider uncontrollably. He also started to grow taller and taller, until he became the creature that he is today– a faceless monster with the endless desire for human flesh. I was not being turned into a beast like him, but gained immortality for some strange and explicable reasons. However I felt very guilty so I decided to seclude myself away from society and avoided any contact with the tribes nearby.'

'Though I don't know why he kidnapped children from the local tribes and set them free 15 years later. Maybe it was because he wanted younger siblings as he had told me he always wanted some. He freed them when they turn into juveniles because they were too old, I guess. So this is the story of John Mills– the story of the faceless creature.'

The old hermit had finished his story and the host of the show was satisfied. The host thanked the old hermit and went on his way for the helicopter. The old hermit smiled a friendly smile as the host and his crew left. However soon his kind smile would turn into a sinister grin as he began to transform. He grew taller and taller and his facial features melted away, until he was the faceless creature.
You see John Mills was never the faceless creature, the old hermit was. John Mills was just one of his many dishes on his dining table. The pilot, the host and his crew who were supposed to fly home became sights unseen and his news unheard since then– as if they just vanished into the unknown.

Stone of Souls

Diocesan Girls' School, Au, Cheuk Yi Cherry – 13

...T'was her, who swept the Mountains. T'was her, who reaped everyone's soul. T'was her, spreading fear across the mountains… Beware… beware...

★★★

Mei clutched the snake with a razor–sharp claw, as her prey writhed, trying to escape from the menacing sharpness. She was a fowl, with long, black feathers and a colourful crown. She pressed the prey onto the floor of twigs and leaves.

"You should taste hmm… sweet..."

She closed her eyes, and placed her beak on the snake's small head, as if she was kissing it.

Except she wasn't kissing it.

She was sucking its soul, inhaling the inner powers of the fresh corpse with her hard, crooked beak.

The snake flinged itself vigorously, clinging onto its last ties of life, gaping for his last breath… then he stopped moving.

Mei smiled in satisfaction upon her feast. The colours of her crown became more vibrant than ever. Cackling, she strutted away, and went on to hunt for her next victim…

Trees shivered; winds hissed.

Beware, for Mei is on her next target… beware…

★★★

Plop.

ZiShan plucked a plump peach from the lush, viridescent tree as he precariously tip–toed on a dry branch. The young man nimbly jumped off, and slipped the fruit into his sleeve.

This was no ordinary tree, for it was remarkably tall; the fruits were surrounded by a soft aura; its bold trunk, its evergreen leaves and gigantic, fleshy fruit were distinct amidst the Mountains.

Under this tree lived ZiShan and his companion, Zhong, a monkey. He was resting on his master's shoulder, composed.

"Come on, Zhong. We promised my aunt at the Peonium at noon today." ZiShan smiled.

The duo, man and monkey, roamed the Mountains everyday, and paid occasional visits to the Peonium. The Peonium was a pleasant clearing, free from the densely–packed trees and rocks of the Mountains where they lived.

Zhong blinked with his soulful eyes, as they walked into the woods.

It was a place of ancient souls, where the creatures dwell with the sweet sounds of flowing water and birdsong in the pine trees. Rodents and beasts wandered, winds breezed gaily. A new smile paints itself upon the duo's faces, their skin semi–illuminated by the dappled light. The lamb–white clouds wrapped her arms around her enchanted and enigmatic children.

They arrived at a cool, flowing stream by a boulder of rocks, where the waters seemed to shimmer and the current was at a slow pace.

"...Help...me…" a trembling voice whimpered.

ZiShan turned to see a fowl, feathers drenched in blood, lying beside the rocks, unable to move.

"Dear! What happened to you?"

He caressed the vulnerable creature, and moved closer to examine. She had been cut open in the chest, her baby–pink flesh caked with blood. Upon this sight, his eyes clouded with sombre — as if he himself, had been pricked in the heart.

"A… bear and I got into a fight… and he… did this to me..."

"Oh no… maybe I can help. Here. Take this peach."

The young man took out the peach from his sleeve and placed it beside the fowl's crooked beak, as he ripped off a corner of his beige tunic and wrapped it around the wound.

"Rest well, lady fowl. It is unfortunate that we have to leave now, for we have to arrive at the Peonium before midday. Take care."

Then, ZiShan called upon Zhong, and left.

Little did he know, that this fowl was the fowl whose name was feared.
He just helped Mei. *The* Mei, who brought nothing but grief and death to the forest.

Mei pecked the glowing peach and nibbled. She drank the sweet, luscious juice…
And the wound started to heal.
In a few moments, no flesh was seen, the blood on her feathers magically drained away; she felt her powers stir… she felt stronger than ever before.
She twitched her brows in suspicion. This was no ordinary peach.
Then she returned to her usual behaviour, ready to hunt. Not for animals, but the peach.
Trees shivered; winds howled.
Beware… beware…

★★★

Zhong frowned in utter disgust when his master helped that fowl. He saw through the wounds and blood; he knew instantly who the fowl was.
That bloody chicken. Shan — STOP. DON'T HELP HER. NO. WHY ARE YOU GIVING HER THE PEACH — WOW. YOU GAVE IT TO HER. THANKS!
The more Zhong thought about it, the more enraged he was; he got so mad that he ran away.
Why didn't I stop ZiShan from helping her? I came here to kill her, now he saved her life.
He sat under a tree, and buried his head in his furry palms.
Think, Zhong. Think.
He recalled what had happened before he came to the Mountains…

The Jade Emperor looked down at the Mountains from his Cloud Palace, and shook his head. Death. Soulless creatures. Fear. All over the once–peaceful region. He saw the creature suck countless animals' souls; he saw her insatiable greed for power.
He called upon General Zhong,
"This fowl is at large. I need you to go down there, and restore peace to the Mountains."
"Zhong shall try my best." He was a bold, strong General of the Cloud Palace of Gods, and he kneeled down with his sinewy limbs.
"Do not disappoint us." The Emperor added.
He transfigured himself into a monkey, and met ZiShan, who eventually became his companion…

… "Zhong! Where are you?"
Before he walked away with ZiShan, he glared at Mei — he wouldn't disappoint anyone.
He knew he wouldn't.

★★★

Plop.
Zhong sneaked up the tree near their cottage and plucked a peach.
Sorry. I had to do this.
Zhong scuttered away with the fruit in his arms, still softly–glowing, and disappeared into the depths of the Mountains.

Mei lurked, in hopes of finding the peaches which awakened her power, making her stronger than ever.
It's been days. Still nothing close to that fruit that guy gave me. Where. Is. It.

"MEI, HEARD YOU WANTED THIS PEACH, HM?"
Her eyes sparkled. She turned her head, only to find the familiar pine trees around her.
"You… know where it is?"
"I HAVE IT WITH ME NOW. MEET ME AT THE Peonium."

Mei rushed to the Peonium, expecting to see a bold creature of some sort —
Except it was a monkey. ZiShan's monkey.

"You have the peach?" Mei pressed, glowering.

"Very well. I do." Zhong waved the peach at her.

"Hand it to me. Now."

"No."

"Do it."

"No."

Mei, enraged, pounced at Zhong, who swiftly dodged. He ran, picked up a sharp stone and stabbed it on her wing.

She let out a screech and stumbled backwards for a split–second. Regaining balance, she charged at Zhong, who sprinted across the clearing. She dug her claws into his flesh in a fury. Zhong seized Mei, and bit her in the neck as hard as he could, pushing her a thousand miles away. A sharp pain struck him in the chest; his head was heavy. He felt the world collapse onto him, yet he clinged onto the remaining strength he possessed.

"Don't disappoint us."

He stood, picked up another stone, and sharpened it with another rock quickly. Mei, squawking in agony and frustration, limped towards him, tightening her blood–dipped claws.

"GIVE IT TO ME NOW, YOU SCANDAL!"

Zhong rushed forward and took a sudden leap. He screamed, jumped into the air and sent the stone down the flesh —

'NO—'

ZiShan dashed over from the other side of the Peonium, and vigorously thrashed Mei onto the hard ground.

But it was too late.

The stone pierced through ZiShan's chest; the cut clean, the blood fresh.

He just killed his master.

"Everyone… deserves a chance… including her… Promise me… Don't… kill… her… " he breathed.

Zhong's eyes watered, as he caressed his master's cheek — he had been so kind… yet his hands were now red with his master's flowing love… But he couldn't let his emotions override. Not now.

"I promise."

Zhong stood up and transfigured to his General form.

Eyes alight with hatred, wet with tears, fiery with determination, he pointed a finger at the writhing fowl, and shot a cold blast upon her, turning her into stone, sealing her evil deeds from this world once and for all.

The work is finally done.

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In great sorrow, Zhong buried ZiShan in the Peonium, and stood a grave with fresh flowers.

He transfigured himself into a monkey again, and rested by his grave.

Dear ZiShan, this is for you.

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Day by day, year by year, he watched over the evil fowl and his kind master. He made sure the Mountains were peaceful: free from blood, free from fear, free from soulless creatures —

Until his blood, his sweat, his tears — all turned into stone.

Till this very day, the statue of Zhong is still watching over Mei. Their spirits and souls, sealed safe in their statues, still remain, forever, and ever.

Author's note:

The names of the characters and places in this story symbolises something in the Chinese culture:

Young man: ZiShan, 子善 (Son of kindness)
The monkey: Zhong, 忠 (Loyalty)
The fowl: Mei, 美 (Beautiful)

Peonium:
Inspired by the flower "Peony" and the word "Pandemonium"
Peonies, 牡丹, is a popular flower in Chinese culture, and is often associated with beauty, even though it is often interpreted as a gaudy or superficial flower.

- *Here, it represents how beautiful Mei is on the outside, yet her heart is evil and greedy, and how it will be a permanent mark/ reminder for the people who go there.*

Pandemonium represents the battle that happened there.

Peach tree:
In Chinese culture, it often represents immortality and is considered the tree of life. It symbolizes Mei's obsession with power and her 'immortal' will to seize the fruit.

Two Lines Away

Diocesan Girls' School, Chan, Tsz Kiu Rella – 13

This can't be happening again, I thought as I glanced outside the window. *Why does writer's block keep happening to me?*

I sighed and tilted my head upwards, staring at the drifting clouds that would pass through my head if I wasn't inside a cable car. The closely-packed mountains came into view, sharp edges protruding on all sides as trees lined up on a perfectly vertical axis. I glanced down; the foot of the mountain was nowhere in sight as thin mist did its purpose like a blusher. Staring at the scenery before me, I felt alarming tranquility for a brief moment; everything was so surreal, so ethereal. My pessimistic self almost seemed despicable compared to the serenity of the surroundings.

My friend told me to take a day off and 'stay away from urban areas at all costs', saying that it would inspire me and help me get unstuck. That was how I ended up alone inside a cable car, travelling up the seemingly endless mountains in the city of Huangshan.

The cable car rose and travelled alongside the clouds. I fished my phone out of my back pocket, about to demand an explanation from my friend for wasting my time when I should be at my desk working on my laptop. When I looked up from my text of complaint, the sky was dark and —

Wait. The sky was dark? It was midday just a minute ago.

Turning on the flashlight on my phone, I realised that I was stranded on the peak of a mountain, all alone save for occasional chirps in the dark. My claustrophobic nature took over and I yanked the door open, scanning the surroundings as much as my eyes would let me. My heart involuntarily beat faster as I recalled news about women walking alone in the streets after midnight and they were never seen or heard from again.

Someone tapped me on the shoulder. I whirled around, startled, thinking that I really was going to get kidnapped when that person let out a yelp.

"Sir, would you please turn off the light? It's even brighter than the moon,"

Realising that I just shone my 'flashlight' straight into his eyes, I muttered an apology before stuffing it back into my pocket. I still kept a fair distance from him though, but his polite and somehow innocent tone made me lower my guard just a bit.

"Who are you?" I asked, squinting my eyes. He had long hair, and from what I could observe in the pale moonlight, it was silver — almost white.

He puffed his chest out and held his head up high as he answered, "My name's Li Bai, a Chinese poet."

Right. And I am a time traveller coming from the year 3050.

"No really, who are you?" I asked, expecting him to burst out laughing and say that it was all a joke.

He looked at me like I just lost all my brain cells. Maybe I did.

"I just told you," he raised an eyebrow.

Stubborn, I thought, but decided to play along.

"Do you want to stay at my place for now? Dawn won't come for a while,"

As much as I was unwilling to follow a stranger, I had nowhere to go and a shelter was better than nothing. After what seemed like an hour, we arrived at his household and I stumbled in, craving the feeling of sitting. I glanced around while he was busy lighting up the candles: it was a one-room wooden house with a table, a chair, and a bed, but that was it. Rows of sheets lined the walls and I inspected them, eyes travelling from piece to piece until it landed on one on the table.

‘Thoughts In The Silent Night,’ it read.

My eyes widened in realisation and I glanced at the man pacing in front of me, my thoughts all over the place. How could he be alive? I thought he was dead.

“It’s unfinished,” he remarked, looking at his work. “I lost inspiration,”

I chuckled. “Looks like we both are in the same situation then,”

“You write as well?” he asked, his mouth stretching into a grin. “Can you help me with it? I really want to finish it but I have no idea how to continue,”

I pursed my lips, remembering the exact words that followed, but held myself back from spitting them all out. “What was it that made you want to write this poem?” I asked instead.

“Family,” he replied, almost immediately. “And friends. I was exiled back then because I was an advisor for the enemy of the Emperor. I haven’t seen them for so long…” he stared out the window.

Seeing him like this, guilt blossomed in my chest. I recounted the days when I locked myself in my room, cancelling plans I made with my family at the last minute just so I could focus on work. It soon turned into heartache as I remembered how they were always the ones who stuck with me whenever my friends turned out to be not what they seemed.

Sure, no family was perfect. We argued, we fought. We even stopped talking to each other at times, but in the end...family was family, and the love would always be there.

Speechless, I fiddled with the hem of my shirt, a fresh wave of realisation knocking me over.

“That’s why I came here,” he continued, looking at me. “I guess I wanted some peace and quiet. It’s beautiful, don’t you think? And if you look close enough, you can see the stars at night, which just brings out the moon even more. In a way, it’s like a sea — except it’s shiny.” He said, pointing out a window.

A full moon was present that night; a symbol of family reunion in Chinese traditions.

I nodded, shifting my gaze back at the half–written scroll. “You can express your feelings,” I suggested, motioning to his work. “You said you miss your family, right? Write it. Tell them what you think. How you feel.”

He scrunched up his face. “It won’t be popular if it’s the same writing style every time,”

Oh, you’re going to be popular all right. “It’s not about popularity,” I crossed my arms. “Every writer wants to be successful — who doesn’t? But why do we write? Because we love writing. And why do we love writing? Because words express our feelings that we can’t normally express during a normal conversation.”

“But — ”

“Nope. No ‘but’s.” I interjected, dragging him to his chair. “Don’t write for anyone else. Write for yourself and yourself only,” I handed him a brush. “Amaze me.”

He sighed overdramatically, but still took the brush from my hand. I stepped back, not wanting to pressurize him too much. He pondered for a moment, then finally lifted his brush to write.

I glanced at the paper over his shoulder and sure enough, there were the two sentences that I remembered so vividly from the textbook. I smiled, and so did he.

“Well!” I clapped his shoulder. “There you have it, big boy.”

“I guess,” he agreed.

I looked outside the window and my face fell. The moon wasn't the only source of light anymore and I still had no idea how I had gotten here in the first place. As encouraging as it was to be able to help a famous poet on his way to fame, I couldn't help but worry that I would never be able to apologise for my negligence towards my family.

"Listen," I started, my voice low. "This might sound crazy, but I'm not supposed to be here. I don't know if I'm hallucinating or something, but — "

I was about to say 'but you are supposed to be dead', but that would surely dampen his spirits and whirl us into a state of panic and confusion.

So instead I said, " — I have to go."

He nodded, and if he found me suspicious, he didn't say anything. "I will see you again, right?" He asked, standing up and opening the door for me.

A light smile tugged at my lips. "If you're lucky,"

Of course, we never saw each other again. But when I stepped back into the cable car and it started moving downwards until it touched the ground — my world's ground, I thanked every holy thing I could think of that one, I wasn't trapped in whatever that place was above the clouds; two, seeing him finishing his work with such enthusiasm and passion reminded me of why I started my book in the first place; three, he reminded me of what mattered most.

So as I exited the city of Huangshan, I took my phone out and sent a quick text, saying that I would be home for dinner tonight.

No more cancelled plans. No more missed calls.

Legends of Miracles

Diocesan Girls' School, Cheung, Bethany – 13

"Once upon a time there lived an old woman in the mountains of China, near the village of Wang, who no one had seen for the last six hundred years. She had an herb that could cure any illness, from the worst fevers to the most subtle of tremors. Up, up, up on the highest peak, near the clear mountain stream, legend says you'll see her picking this very herb, which has leaves of shimmering amber and veins of the brightest sapphire."

The rain fell as she climbed.

Pale hands against slippery gray rock. Hauling herself up, up, up. Grabbing, searching for a handhold, a way to pull herself up to the next ledge– and as she found one her foot slipped again, and she pulled herself up by the root of an old, gnarled tree that spanned the desolate slope, hands slick with sweat and rainwater. Her tiny hummingbird (she named it Yin) hovered beside her, trilling its sweet song into her ear.

All this way for something that might not exist. All this way to chase a faint wisp, a cobweb, a story passed on from mouth to mouth until the details were blurred and embellished, over and over until two things remained: there was an old woman on this mountain (who hadn't been seen for the last six hundred years and was almost certainly dead); and she had an herb that could cure any illness.

It was only for her brother that she kept on climbing, that she kept chasing that insubstantial wisp of hope, that she still clutched at the thin straw that there *might be a hope for him*. For baby Kang (who used to giggle so when she made him small toys of twigs and branches) that she hauled herself up rocks and roots, leaving bleeding cuts and scratches and blisters and bruises on her hands (once delicate and soft like petals on a flower). For her brother in the makeshift crib in the tiny hut, wheezing and sputtering, choking and coughing up blood as her mother wept beside the crib (rivulets of tears like rainwater down the slope) that she dared climb through the damp mist, up the mountain where the old woman lived.

Up and up she climbed.

Tiny rocks dislodged, sending avalanches of pebbles and gravel down the mountain. Yin squawked (more of a squeak, for a hummingbird). She clambered up boulders and trekked up winding, snake–like paths and mossy steps where she didn't have to depend on all four limbs (blessing of blessings). Picked berries for food and sipped rainwater from conveniently shaped rocks. Sometimes she'd pass grinning skulls leering at her with their empty eyes and shudder. That could be her if she didn't succeed.

She'd always wanted to come to the mountains, though. They'd been portrayed by an infinite number of poets through the ages, sketched by ever so many acclaimed artists, stood near her village like mighty giants protecting them from war (though if they did, why had her father have to leave for war, leaving her with mere memories of his voice?) There'd been long, epic tales of people going on quests in the mountains. Some succeeded. Some failed. Some no one knew of but had likely joined one of the skulls on the ground. (No one had succeeded in finding the old woman in six hundred years; of that she was certain.)

She'd never dreamt that her first– and most important– visit of the mountains would be for this. For going on the exact quest so many thought impossible.

As she climbed, Yin sang its song. Chirping and humming, a simple tune, really. Five notes, maybe less. Chirp, chirp. On and on. The one thing that never changed about her journey. Yin was always there. Singing its song. Telling her it would be alright.

Higher and higher. As she climbed, rain blurred her vision. The rain, pelting down on her. Like tears, like sorrow, beating down on her. The sadness from home, weighing her down. Grief.

"The hope that he'll survive... It's a very small chance. All we can hope for is a miracle."

"I'm sorry, but at this rate…"

She blinked the raindrops away. No use feeling hopeless now. Prove them wrong. Stay strong, don't cry.

Out of nowhere, rocks started falling. Pelting, roaring, crashing. Down, down, down. Knocking her over, sending her tumbling down. Sending her crashing onto rocks. She lifted her head up to continue her climb; a rock crashed down again. Plummeting.

She climbed and fell and climbed and fell and when the rocks seemed to stop falling she couldn't keep her eyes open and she was about to fall asleep—

In her dreams she fell too, but it was endlessly this time, down a dark, dark pit.

Falling down, falling down. Hopeless. There was no herb, no hope. She couldn't get back up, could she? Couldn't stand, couldn't move; was she even alive? Could she ever climb back up? Did she even want to get up? Could she find the strength to even move an inch anymore?

Somewhere inside her head she heard screaming. A baby, yelling their head off, shrieks punctuated by long retches and chokes. A baby— her brother. Kang. Death's grim shadow loomed over him, and she knew she had to move. She had to wake up. Wake up. Keep on climbing. Don't stop. Stay strong.

Suddenly she heard Yin singing its cheery tune above her head, pecking at her hair ("Would you stop that!") and she decided.

She would climb the rest of the mountain. Even if she had to battle an army of demons and tigers to get there. She would get a cure for her brother. She had to. As a sister— if it wasn't an obligation, it was something she'd do of her own free will. No one wanted their sibling to die.

When she finally— finally!— got onto that last ledge, got to the top and saw no old woman, no hut, no telltale golden glint of the herb (an herb no one alive had ever seen, probably)— she started feeling actually helpless.

She stood next to the clear, crystalline stream, Yin's abysmally optimistic tune in her ears. Looked up at the billowing clouds. It looked like success. But there was no old woman, was there? No herb, no miracle cure, no help.

There had been an infinitesimal chance of success anyways. It had always been a cobweb, a wisp, a feather just out of her grasp. A straw she could grab at, a chance that she took that he could live. And there she was, watching the feather float away. Waiting for the miracle. Waiting for the feather, the feather floating away into the gray, solemn sky, to drop into her hands.

She let the tears fall. Let it all out. What good was staying strong, anyways, when there was no hope left? What good was it? What good was bravery, strength, hope if it was all for nothing? Feathers, ha. They were all gone now.

Somewhere Yin let out a chirp, sharper than anything she'd heard from it.

"Shush."

Yin let out another cry, crystal clear and bright.

"Shush. Don't you know? None of this was worth it after all."

Then she saw it.

Sparkling amber, almost gold, with a glossy sheen that seemed almost artificial, with veins of the brightest blue she could imagine. There it was, lying below the undergrowth.

The leaf.

The miracle.

———

When she grew up, she'd tell her children an old legend, of the leaf of amber and sapphire. Every time she told them the tale of the mountains; details got blurred and embellished.

But it always ended like this.

"The old woman had died, but the leaf sprouted from a seed; a seed planted by the old woman– the guardian of the mountain– six hundred years ago. A seed that would only grow at the tears of someone who came with bravery and strength and hope.

And most of all, love.

Forever

Diocesan Girls' School, Hui, Hiu Yan Sarina – 13

He was an Emperor.

No. He had *invented* Emperors.

A magnificent, almost omniscient, mind, leaps ahead of his time; his glory shone beyond his people and his land. He had no enemies; there were only followers, basking in his protection and prospering under his rule.

Was there anything this godlike Emperor could not solve?

He sat upon his grand throne. His subjects gazed adoringly as ever; yet, they whispered bewilderedly amongst themselves, keeping their voices nearly inaudible so he would not catch their words.

Was this really their Emperor?

His robes were intricate, but the golden fabric failed to conceal the frail, weak frame that jutted painfully through wrinkled, spotted skin. His expression was as regal as ever, but his features were twisted, even distorted, from years and years of wear. His gaze surveyed the grand hall, but it displayed only hollowness.

Time was a savage predator.

He denied the pain; he languished in his lacklustre livelihood that was obvious to himself as well as those around him. He was determined to maintain his divine image for his subjects, if not for himself.

Greatness could not die.

An elixir of eternal life.

The wanderer's words whirled in his head as the Emperor stared in incredulous shock.

'It is a heavenly paradise that lies hidden above a sea of clouds; it possesses an unearthly beauty, a blessing to the eye that is not meant for the mere mortal. It is the very pinnacle of immortality; the birthplace of the one and only elixir that is the becoming of all deities.'

Yishan. 'The Black Mountains'.

His very core seemed to flare with a sudden restoration of youth as he pondered this sudden blossom of Hope's bud. Rationality urged him to brush this shallowness off his thoughts, but his aching bones drove him further.

'Only you, my lord, are deserving of this elixir. Only you of all mortals are qualified for this quest.

'You will become a god.'

Thunderous cries echoed throughout the kingdom.

It was the day of destiny. The skies paled before the Emperor's eminence as his people screamed out celebratory cheers, for their beloved Emperor would soon wrestle himself from the very hands of Death.

Long live the Emperor.

As he waved goodbye to his loyal people an old woman stumbled onto the ground before his feet, spat out by the unwelcoming horde.

'My lord,' her voice was choked by violent sobs. *'Don't go. Please. It will be the end of you.'*

'And why is that?' His smile was that of pity.

'The law of the gods must not be forsaken,' she pointed at the skies. 'Mortals must not cross the path of immortality. There is a price. There is *always* a price.'

But the aggrieved crowd had swallowed her once more.

Far, far away, on the concealed peaks of Yishan, the first drop of rain fell.

Are you afraid of the dark?

Fade into nothingness, stark

Naked with none but unknown.

And so you linger. But now

The world will not know of how

You reap the seeds that you've sown.

At long last, his ascent was at an end. He was at the peak of Yishan.

The Black Mountains were more beautiful than anything he had ever set his sight on. Deeply grooved gray peaks jutted from waves and waves of fiery clouds, which flamed with all the colours of newborn dawn. The rocks were barely shadows in the haze of receding mist, half–buried by lush green life. Rolling combers of white swept leisurely over the gorge, dissipating as they lapped gently against rocky slopes. Mild sunbeams threaded through the treacherous boulders, bathing his fatigued body in mellow comfort.

He inhaled the thin, fresh mountain air. The traveller's words had indeed been truthful: Yishan was fit for even the gods.

Within the heart of heaven's crag

Where clouds form sea and boulders jag

Borne from sheer will and craft divine

The power to break Death's design.

Cleanse your mind, lord, and show your worth

Nine years upon the journey's birth;

With greatest joy the gods' call sounds

And you will welcome sweet life's bounds.

With the traveller's parting words echoing in his mind, the Emperor melted into the shadows of rock.

Like a part of the mountainous terrain, he sat at the edge of the plateau. The sea of white disguised the yawning gorge below; it kept rolling, rolling, rolling across the skies, until his mind was dulled, his senses blurred. It was unbearably mundane at first; his sense of time was disorientated, and his days were both horribly dragged-out yet surprisingly fleet.

He tried to 'cleanse his mind': for hours he hung on the brink of consciousness, gazing at the breathtaking scenery and emptying his emotions. But the thirst for immortality burnt unceasingly in his chest, flaming and flickering and all-consuming. He felt no hunger, he needed no sleep; the only hunger was of heart.

Furtively, the summer heat absconded from the Black Mountains; green faded into hay-yellow, dusted by specks of scarlet. In the morning chill, thin sheets of frost slyly crept over the oddly shaped boulders. His movements were sluggish, presumably from the chill; but strangely, he never felt the effect of temperature on his body.

A wavering cry drifted mournfully into his mind.

His eyes were open in a flash and he scrutinized the gorge. Nothing. Just an empty expanse of white, white, white.

A fierce shudder scrambled up his spine as he closed his eyes again.

And yet the cries went on. Hollow, dreadful cries, screaming perpetual misery. Screaming searing, vehement regret. Screaming to be set free.

White thawed into lush green; wisps of blue seeped into heavy gray skies. But spring did not thaw his stone-hard body, nor did it thaw his stone-hard will.

The melting snow revealed the strangely-shaped boulders, gleaming in the light after winter's polish. Occasionally, the helpless cries would be carried to him in the thin mountain air; but he had learned to shut out what he didn't want to hear, learned to shut out the surge of hopelessness that would've consumed him otherwise. Whenever the cries sounded, however, the bizarre rocks would seem oddly...*human*.

Time passed.

Get out. He was going mad, mad, mad. He would tell the voices to *get out, get out he said!* But they never listened; they just kept drilling, mourning, lamenting, begging. *Get out. Get out. Get out.*

He kept raising his arms to cover his ears; but he *couldn't*. He couldn't move his limbs, nor any part of his body. He never questioned it, never tried to struggle against his invisible restraints. The immobility had become natural to him, for he didn't remember the last time he had actually *moved*.

Over the years, unusual things had happened to his vision. He could not see clear outlines, he could not see any form of colour; he saw only the strange boulders that had remained his company for the past nine years. And there were moments when he saw not dead rocks, but *spirits*: translucent *spirits*, in human form, looming behind the rocks, looming above the peaks. Just *staring* at him. *Why were they staring at him?* He felt no surprise at these apparitions; instead, they were as natural as his people had once seemed to him. It was almost as if he was...*part* of them.

Nine years upon the journey's birth;

With greatest joy the gods' call sounds.

The last lament echoed. Echoed.

Echoed.

With an almost audible *slam* the senses flooded back into the great Emperor, washing away the dullness, the mundanity, the indifference that had hypnotized him for too long. Colours washed over his clouded eyes: the sea of clouds, the jutting rocks, the fresh green leaves…

It was *gorgeous*.

He inhaled the thin, fresh mountain air. The traveller's words had indeed been truthful: Yishan was fit for even the gods.

Except...who *were* the gods?

He looked down at his torso. His body was gone.

Instead, there was rock.

Violently he started to twist and turn, arching his back like a windblown weed; but the boulder that had swallowed his body would not budge.

He cried out for help; but all he could see were boulders, boulders, boulders. Exactly like his own.

He struggled harder. '*I mustn't die. I must become immortal…'*

The spirits of the rocks…

It all dawned on him like the harsh winter frost.

Hopelessly he looked down the lethal ravine. Surely he could still struggle forward an inch––but no. He would not let himself forward.

Because greatness could not die…

And you will welcome sweet life's bounds.

He was an Emperor.

His descendants went on to crown him *Huangdi. The Yellow Emperor.* And Yishan was renamed *Huangshan* in his honour, for they knew he had risen to godly immortality at the peaks.

Does it matter if no one notices a solitary rock gazing out into the sea of clouds? Does he know that he lives on in myth?

Long live the Emperor.

Yin and Yang

Diocesan Girls' School, Kwok, Gianna – 13

The winter is a cold one. Li Bai feels it in his bones from the plummeting hail that coats every stretch of soil, from the cold that bites at his heels, the scathing, restricting arms of the North wind only choking him further and further. A thick sheen of fog lingers above the undulating ranges, faint splatters of dim red, yellow and blue tainting the white canvas, barely visible in the blinding sunlight. The flickering shards of iridescent light tattletale on the caves' inhabitants, dancing on the tip of a peeping tiger's muzzle or the dissipating wisps of tobacco smoke at times. But, despite the clamor and cheer that goes on above him, Li Bai's eyes remain stubbornly fixated on the scroll before him, unbudging and glaring.

An intent gaze continues to burn into the shreds of paper. He longs to weave braids into his wife's grayed hairs, longs to come home to two steaming bowls of dumplings, filled to the brim with scalding winter melon soup. But the ever–present cacophony of metal clanging against metal and the thunderous onslaught of galloping hooves, reminds him painfully of why he was forced to leave. He has heard rumors, all carrying the same dismal message, be it a slip of the mouth from a benign villager or the embellished flags streaking across the valley, the tails boasting the vibrant colours of "An Lushan", the metallic tang of spilt blood suffocating at this point. And so, he waits. Waits for this brittle winter to come to its end and for the melee, to abate. He clings onto the inkling of hope that he'll be able to feel the creases of his wife's face under his fingers, a map so intricate yet familiar to him, like the back of his hand.

But these days, it's been harder to wait. Despondent for any source of warmth, he fumbles for the mottled flask tucked neatly between the rags, and takes a bold swig. The tepid liquid trickles easily down his throat, leaving trails of artificial warmth gauged in his stomach. The kick surges within him, the taste long–lasting enough to ward off the tendrils of worry for now. The words unfurl from his mouth with ease, soon black streaks on the white scroll.

To drown the old sorrows,

We drank a hundred jugs of wine,

There in the beautiful night.

The reedy tune of the dizi resonates within the valley, a hollow and rare sound. With supplies so scarce around these parts, the raw bamboo, carved by skillful hands into a slim flute, catches Li Bai's attention. A swift hand skims across the small of his back, laden with gold trinkets, the gesture so light he could have mistaken it for the brush of a dove's wing. He doesn't falter to turn, and greets the newcomer with a mustered smile, his grip on the flask loosening.

"I haven't seen someone greet me so informally in ages."

The melodious tune skids to a halt, a low voice in its place. Li Bai only smiles back weakly in response, eyes unfocused yet wistful.

"Certainly, this is the wine's doing. Or perhaps not. Who's to say? It's not like you meet Han Xiangzi everyday."

"You are an interesting man, Li Bai. I have heard far–fetched tales, saying that you've become a lunatic of sorts, with the growing heaps of wine flasks. But all I see here is a man driven by grief."

Li Bai lifts his head slightly, to look into Xiangzi's glittering eyes. The man's eyes are shadowed, though swaddled in robes spun from pure gold, they are of no help in concealing the wizened, dark truths that lurk beneath.

"Your mentality is imbalanced. Or, as some might say, you have lost the balance of Yin and Yang."

"Perhaps," he cocks his head. "But I have my reasons. I hail from the North, and my wife waits for my arrival with a heavy heart every passing day."

“That is still no excuse for your loss of control,” Xiangzi replies, with his back a tad bit too rigid.

His lip twitches with annoyance, as one hand reaches into his robe pocket.

In Xiangzi’s grip lies a ripened pink fruit, as round as a baby’s bum. An aureate hue emanates from it, buzzing and humming.

“I am sure you realize what this is,” Xiangzi asserts.

A peach of immortality.

Throat suddenly dry, Li Bai only nods. The sheer possibilities that skim through his mind leave him breathless; living long enough to see the war cease, buying enough time to cross the province’s borders, and most importantly, making up for the lost time with his wife.

“Take my place at Her Highness Xiwangmu’s banquet, and you will be able to indulge to your heart’s content.”

He doesn’t even hesitate, gulping as he gropes for the fruit..

“Meet me by the stone steps when the moon is high, I will be here awaiting your return,” Xiangzi says with a smug smirk. And with that, he stares upwards into the seemingly hooded peaks, still and stoic like a statue.

“When will his eyes be opened? Not only to his fortunate surroundings, but also to his wrongdoings?” he mutters under his breath. But the words are not heard by Li Bai, and only hang in the wintry silence.

+

Before Li Bai knows it, the soil beneath his bare feet is no longer muddy, engulfing darkness in its place; his thin shawls now replaced by grandiose robes. He feels the dizi digging into his backside, a tell−tale sign of what happened.

“Han Xiangzi, you are rather late.”

A haughty voice cleaves through the deafening silence. Piercing ebony orbs amidst the suffocating darkness meet Li Bai’s, and unspoken schemes graze his ear.

Suppressing a shiver, he shuffles forward unsteadily, eyes downcast, while the figure emerges from the darkness. As he reaches to gather his robes, about to sweep into an apologetic bow, a slender hand grips his chiseled chin.

Xi Wangmu jerks his face upwards roughly and leans close. The honey−sweet aroma of peaches from her hot breath fanning him.

Her stone−cold eyes bore into his, lingering for a mere moment. Though it is fleeting, the familiar flame of mischief flickers behind those long eyelashes.

“You look....different.”

“It is no wonder, after all I haven’t had the chance to taste Her Highness’ fresh peaches in quite a while,” Li Bai shoots back defiantly.

Wangmu’s tight−lipped smirk stretches into a toothy smile, but the saccharine facade crumbles a bit, her glance lanced with daggers.

“Of course, it is my pleasure to serve and have you. Come, accept my offering to you,” she hisses, grip loosening and hands beckoning.

Li Bai hears the cold seething, sees the narrowing of her eyes. But above all that, he tastes the aroma of cloying peaches on the tip of his tongue, and the promises they hold. The sickeningly sweet songs that speak of peace and prosperity, wealth and fortune that are all−encompassing. And so, he stumbles towards her outstretched hand. Stumbles a bit further into the fantasies of perfected possibilities, and into the chasm of greed.

He staggers with an eager desire, but just as he grasps a hold of the sweet fruit, just as his fingers curl around the fresh flesh, it disappears before his sight.

Alike the peach, the gold trinkets too disappear from his knobbly fingers, his robes reduced once again to a barely adequate scarf.

Only the imprint of Wangmu's last words to him, hurriedly snarled in his ear, remain engraved in his mind reverberating back and forth in his eardrums.

"Did you really think I wouldn't notice, puny mortal? Deceit, greed, it doesn't matter. You have fallen for the temptation of ephemeral bliss one too many times, regardless of it being in the form of peaches or wine. You have lost the balance of Yin and Yang– that is the biggest sin of all."

Li Bai's bare feet dig into the cold stretches of land, but his hand is cocooned by a warm grasp.

"See there?"

The very same gold–laden hand points upwards, towards the mountain ranges. Li Bai's eyes follow Han Xiangzi's trail, and they settle upon a dazzling myriad of colors.

Framed against the obsidian–black night sky, a thick layer of white mist unfurls with vibrant hues, a startling range from crimson red, daffodil yellow to azure blue.

"It's been there all along– the Buddha's Light. You didn't notice it earlier, when it was in blinding daylight; yet when placed against the night sky, it shines with clarity and resplendence."

Just like Yin and Yang.

For the first time in many winters, Han Xiangzi's words bring a smile to his face.

For the first time in many years, Li Bai discards his mottled flask of rice wine, his dog–eared scrolls, and inhales the crisp winter air.

For the first time in many decades, Li Bai truly savours the beauty in the balance of Yin and Yang.

"I understand now."

The Heart of the Mystic Mountains

Diocesan Girls' School, Wong, Hingis – 13

My life has always been about travelling, loving the rush of joy I felt at exploring places I have never been before and revisiting old favourites. Having heard a lot of tales about China's magical mountains, about those wispy translucent clouds and those sharp peaks cloaked with mist, I wanted to witness the unearthly mythical sight for myself. And now, I'd finally made it there.

Clouds with a faint spectrum of colours that looked like shimmering wisps of fluffy cotton candy against the night sky floated about as the smell of fresh pine wafted through the air, lilting notes of sweet music filtering through a forest of varying greens. Everything felt so peaceful compared to the confusing mayhem of the world I left behind.

The mountaintop I stood on overlooked the rest, dozens and dozens of others connected by intersecting rope bridges. Creeping tentatively towards the edge, I shuddered as the world seemed to fade out of focus, stumbling back to safety as my vision swam before me.

The whole universe looked as if made up of dots and lines up here, I thought disbelievingly. It was truly a sight I would never forget, dotted with splashes of black and white and all the shades in between and decorated with silvery moonlight.

The myths always said that there would be dragons. Tons of them flying and swooping about, their scales reflecting the silvery moon shining against the inky backdrop of the night. I wonder...

I was still lost in thought whilst looking at the glistening diamonds that glittered brightly in the sky, when the path in front of me that led to the next mountaintop suddenly flared up in a glow of warm orange. Short beige poles I hadn't noticed before now had flames crowning them, the fiery orange–yellow light becoming white hot, licking at the poles as they danced and swayed with the wind.

Desperately wanting to explore the other mountaintops, I forced down the aching pit of worry threatening to overwhelm me that came at being this high up, making my way to the bridge and braved a wavering step to test my weight.

It seemed to hold.

Carefully, slowly, I started making my way across, cautioning not to proceed with haste. Almost halfway across the bridge, a faint breeze embraced me with a gentle hug, bringing with it the comforting scent of fragrant flowers.

It's okay, it seemed to reassure me. You'll be fine.

Despite this, ominous storm clouds were gathering in my mind, veering it off course. *What if something happened to me? What if I fell? What if I never made it to the Heart of the Mystic Mountains?* Shoving these thoughts into a pitch black pit that would never see the light of day, I continued to inch my way forward with painstaking focus. The other side was finally within reach–

CRACK!

"W–what was t–that?" I said shakily, as the bridge began swinging from side to side as the wind picked up its pace. I looked back, catching sight of the wooden boards being ripped from their places as the gale howled relentlessly, the bridge rapidly falling apart right before my eyes.

*I **have** to get out of here–*

The sound of wood connecting with rock echoed in my mind, the "crack" playing over and over again. Abandoning the need to be careful, I ran, fear spiking in my chest as my boots hit the wooden boards. Rain had started to fall down, the gentle droplets of water that felt cool to the touch landing on my face and soaking my clothes becoming freezing cold within seconds of contact. Although fueled with adrenaline, my body still became numb within minutes. Blood pumping furiously in my veins, I could hear my own labored breathing as I fought to escape the raging tempest's attack, my breath coming out in rapid pants and forming clouds of mist in front of me.

The wind was stronger now, more insistent, tugging at my hair, my shoes, my clothes, not seeming to care that I could plummet to my death with one small misstep. A brief flash of lightning striked through the ominous sky with a loud crack, and then everything went dark.

Too dark. I can't se—

And then I was falling through open air, slipping through a gap in the bridge that hissed at contact. The mountain's unforgiving currents swirled around me, whipping about faster and faster, increasing speeds as I gained momentum following my descent. Gravity pulled me down, down and down, until it felt like I could fall no further. And yet, I continued to plunge towards certain death.

But all of a sudden, I wasn't plummeting anymore.

I'd been caught by some sort of moving...creature? I writhed and kicked and clawed helplessly, but it trapped me in its claws tightly, the sharp points digging into my clothing uncomfortably. My eyes tried desperately to focus on my surroundings as we flew through the wind and the rain, but I was unable to see anything through the darkness except...*bits and pieces and slivers of light. Like looking through a piece of fractured glass. The lights had an orange tint to them. That must be the fire from the pol*—Something sharp dug into my arm, something that urged my eyes to close and my body to relax in spite of how *wrong* it felt. "There was a hole," I giggled, "Fluffy cotton candy...dancing fire crowns...and...a pointy thing that poked at m..e." I murmured dreamily, before I fell into the haze of sleep.

A prickling light shone into my eyes, causing me to grimace at its intensity. Blearily, I sat up. *Where am I?* Radiant rays of sunshine hovered over the land, dark shadows swooping across the pale aquamarine canvas. *I couldn't place my finger on it, but it all seemed oddly familiar.*

"What am I doing here…"

A voice interrupted me, sounding most impatient. "Long story short, you, a puny little being, managed to make it more than halfway across the bridge——that's where the traps start automatically activating themselves. You made it further than most, so I had to save you from certain death blah blah and all that. Guardian's rules and all that stuff y'know? Now, explain yourself."

Turning around slowly to prevent the insistent pounding in my head from getting worse, I gaped at the speaker. "You...you're a *dragon?"*

"I'm *aware*. What did you expect?! Just get on with it." The golden dragon replied, looking pointedly at me and gesturing with a claw airily.

"I just wanted to see the sights for myself since there are so many myths. Please please please let me stay. I'll do *anything*." I forced out, not stopping to draw a breath.

The dragon sighed as I looked hopefully at him, beseeching him with my eyes. "Fine, I'll take you to the Guardians for their verdict. *It's not like we get many visitors anyway...they all pass away to the Spirit Realm before they even come close to entering...*"

He motioned for me to climb on his back and then we were off, soaring through the clouds that parted seamlessly as we passed. Even the sunshine seemed to bend to his will, glowing brighter and warmer than ever before. The dragon slowed down after passing by thousands of forests, landing at the edge of a jagged cliff. As he saw me looking at a cave tucked away from the steep edge, he sighed resignedly and beckoned me forward. Luminous orbs floated about, and its walls were engraved with writing.

"The Guardians of the Mystic Mountains have sworn to always protect other beings and use their powers for the greater good, never ever revealing the mountains' secrets to the World Below The Clouds for fear they would be destroyed. Those who pass th—"

"Well come on now, we don't have all day, do we?"

The dragon pressed its claw to the wall. It parted with an unwilling groan, revealing luxurious gardens with blooming flowers, plants weaving along the walls of the houses, gushing waterfalls ending in crystal clear ponds. It was all I had ever imagined and more. Looking up, I could see dragons all the hues of the rainbow twirling and gliding, and feeling the tingling feeling of something magical at my fingertips, I knew I had made it. *"The Heart of the Mystic Mountains…" I breathed.*

The Unexpected Eelements of the

Discovery Bay International School, Chipner, Laura –14

“Chuna Hua, come on we need to get up before dawn!”

Jin Li exaggerated to Chuna Hua. Jin Li always was putting herself in the leader position of the group, making sure her friends were aware of the current situation.

“ Okay listen. Jin Li. We will get up this mountain, well eventually.”

Chuna Hua exclaimed with a deep sigh.

“What. Do. You. mean? We need to get up this mountain before the strike of dawn!”

Jin Li raised her voice as pasionaintly as she could.

“ The sky right now is as gloomy as you right now. We can't possibly head up!”

“Well just because you insulted me doesn’t mean you are right but… I am going no matter what.”

“Please just wait a little longer.. Jin Li please!”

Jin Li walks down the muddy path of the mountain bottom and looks back to Chuna Hua. Her look is of regret and sadness but she knows this is what she must do.

“They don’t know this yet but...grandfather, I will make it, even if my friends are left behind. I will get there.”

Jin Li looks down at her locket as a shape tear rolls down her face.

“ Okay... up I go”

Jin Li takes in a deep sigh and disappears into the thickness of the lush mountains.

“ Jin Li!”

Chun Hua calls out in despair.

“Guys we have a problem!”

Chun Hua rushes into the mahjong parlor at the t mountain bottom where the boys are.

“ Why, what's wrong?”

Wang Lei, looks up from his intense game. He looks at Yi Bo up and down and gives him the death stare.

“Guys! Please Jin Li just went up into the death defying clouds of the mountain and disappeared, she said she had to go up and wouldn’t wait for the clouds to clear!”

“So you are saying you have to go up into the most upriodtable mountains in this country to go look for Jin Li?!”

Yi Bo says with confusion and attitude.

“Yi! What is wrong with you. Our best friend is gone, god knows where and you are asking me if we have to go up! It's a no brainer!”

Setting Yi in his place they look at each other with certainty and rush up the slippery slope of the mountain.

“ It's been only 30 mins and my calves are already hurting!”

Yi Bo says with annoyance.

" Well suck it up Jin Li is missing and we would do anything for each other, so just shush!"

The clouds, mountains and everything around the group was getting thicker as they headed up the deadly mountain.

The wind howled and flipped around every living thing. The animals crawled back into their holes of hibernation and the grass got crushed and crunched underneath the 6 and only footsteps on the yellow mountains.

" Jin Li!, Jin Li!!"

"Ugh where could she be"

Chun Hua and Wang Lei scream at the top of their lungs as Yi Bo casually relaxes in the back.

" What are you doing?"

"Me?"

"Yes you, are you called Yi Bo?"

Wang Lei whispers to Yi.

"Okay, what? I am looking, just in my own space while you two scream and lose your little voices over it!"

"Very funny."

The first flat of the dry land mountains came. The group looked left and right scrambling to get to the prayer temple for the new year.

"She was right. Even if we don't get down tonight, we had to go up now we would have never made it. I just wish she told us what was going on."

As Chun Hua is trying to come up with a reason for Jin Li's disappearance, the explorer finds a remarkable clue to Jin Li's location.

" Uh guys, look!"

Chun and Yi abruptly stop in their tracks.

" Oh my god! Its Jins necklace.."

A moment of silence crosses over the group of the leaves brush across the mountain top.

"We have to find her"

"She must be at the temple"

"Well we have to get there before dawn"

The group scramble into the night all across every mountain face they can find but no luck. The small figure of Jin could be anywhere engulfed in the tall rocks of the yellow stones.

"The stars alone in parallel to the star of the…"

"I got it"

Wang lei looks at his work of the sky again and looks out to the tyretorous fields among him.

" I know how to find Jin"

Wang smiles with confidence and walks toward the East.

The three left of the group reach the mysterious new year temple. The gold shinned as the mood hit the plating, the red trimming of the building lit up the eyes of the group. The only thing missing in this beauty was Jin.

"She was here. I know she was, I just wish we knew where she was."

“ Um I think we might find her sooner than you think.”

In the corner of Chun and Wangs eyes a fireball lit up with a dark silhouette inside of it. “Is that.. Jin?”

The fireball was glowing yellow and targaene orange. The ball got larger and larger, consuming the life−like figure inside.

“ We..we have to help him...now!”

Chun desperately pleaded with the boys, to agree with her to help Jin.

“ No Chun, we need to let this happen.”

Yi stepped Chun away from the increasingly dangerous flames surrounding most of the temple now. They looked around to see the deep night of dusk dispaing ad dawn emerging. The outlines of the deep yellow stones and the greenery of vines sharing off of them shown in their rear views. The most important thing was Jin.

A larger map surrounded the ball of scorching fire it expanded engulfing the entire mountain and snapped back as quickly as light into the size of an atom. Jin, Chun, Wang and Yi all coupled to the ground with the fire.

The breath of the sun awakened Yi.

“ What happened? The last thing I remember was just, this huge scorching fire.”

Yi looked around at his friends who were shackled to the cold hard concrete floor of the temple. He rushed down to each and everyone of them as they took breath after breath in awakening to dawn.

“Yi ar..are you okay?”

Wang looked at his friend in disablife and worry.

“Im fine, how are the girls”

They slowly looked over in unison. They gasped slowly and tried helping them up.

“Ahh!”

“What happened, my hand was pricked”

Wincing Yi explains what type of thorn pricked him. It was carefully wrapped around Chun, a long dusty green vine was coming out of her hand and wrapping around her trembling and weak body.

“What in the world is this, why is this coming out of her hand.”

It had great thrones of protection and looked as if it was about to strangle her. The boys carefully made a knife out of a shape stone laying next to Chun. The dusty green turned venta black. The roots curled up around Chin and her already pale face turned a dark violet.

The fireball around Jin was gone and she had ash in her already dark hair. The boys looked down and saw her burn marks disappear with a yellow sparkle.

“I don’t understand, first the vine and now her burns are disappearing?

Yi looked around in disablife.

“ I know it's like they got a granted power.”

The silence drew again. The leaves rolling in the air above their heads were heard louder as the group who were meant to pray on new years have turned into the powers of the planet.

“ Woah! What did you just do.”

“What do you mean”

“You hand there was a thin milk white cloud just in it.”

Wang and Yi look at each other and temp into the temple as chun wakes up in agony.

“ I have a cloud or air in my hand, she has a vine coming out of her hand and she had a fire ball around her last night.”

“You guys have powers.”

“We are missing one!”

The boys step into the middle of the temple where there is a grand, elegant wishing fountain.

“I think you should give something a try.”

Wang looked at You with hope and slowly walked away to the groggy girls.

Yi looked at his trembling hands and raised them over the water. The water elegantly moved across the below zero air. The paused his hands as the water hardened and turned to stiff ice. He was amazed by what could do.

Jin and Chun stood up and embraced each other in a hug.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes I am, are you, fire fairy?”

“Hahaha you saw huh?”

“Yes we did but we didn’t know what to do.”

“You did fine.”

“Do the boys know?”

“I think so..”

“It was my grandfather I had to come and pay my respects to his ashes.”

“I get it.”

“When I got up here I saw four people with earth powers and I said that's us. I guess the mountains heard me.”

Jin and Chun walked to the yellow mountain edge looking down on the tiny villages below that looked like ants. They knew this is where they belonged.

The four all entered the temple together and stood around the statue of the yellow mountain. They realised it was their time to embrace this mystical place and now they were a part of the mountain family.

“Common guys lets show these mountains what we got on them”

The Light from Grandma

Discovery Bay International School, De Sampaio, Manoela – 13

I was alone, in this world of fear of what would happen in the next chapter of my life. Fearing and seeking a 'why' of my being, 'why' was I there? As I walked home my feet dragged with each step. I entered my house, as soon as I went in I saw my two sisters joyfully playing with their dolls. I asked if they had checked on grandma and gave her daily dose of medicines, oh which their surprised faces said: "oh sorry Jay we forgot". I didn't think twice, I rushed to her room with my heart skipping a beat every second, I could just imagine that if she got even worse then she was now because of me I would never forgive myself never. I intrusively opened the door to end up seeing something that my eyes just couldn't cath on. Something I wavn't prepared myself to see. She was there. But not there. She was laying on the ground with an exhausted face praying for help.

A week had finally passed around after grandmas incident, I just thanked God that nothing happened to her. I worry about her too much, I don't know what I would do without her here. Watching her face turn paler and paler everyday, watching the enchanted look in her face fade away I knew I should prepare myself for what was coming, but in the very deep inside of me it was too though, it was too much suffering. To clear my head up a bit I decided to go for a walk, as I reached the pathway that brought me the most joyfull feeling I looked around and I saw the view. That explendid view that caught me speechless. It always reminded me of mum and dad, they died when I was young and told grandma to raise me and my sisters in this so beloved place. A light breath of wind tickled my face, a small gasp came out of my mouth that got me distracted from my thoughts just to look back and encounter the blue horizon lines from that hazy day. The sun finally started to settle it seemed to be basking in its own rays. It hovered over the horizont , and bright fuschia and apricot collided with the deep blue sky. After a few minutes there or so I walk home, finally with feeling more calm from looking at that special view.

Days came and went quickly, watching grandma get sicker and sicker everyday. It was tough but I never left her side. Grandma didn't talk much she used to, but not anymore. Which came to me as a surprise when I was in the kitchen preparing dinner for my sisters and I that Lily came running into the room saying grandma wanted to have a chat with me. Excitedly but worried at the same time I went to her room and sat down in the chair next to her. As a few seconds ticked by with none of us saying anything I finally made up courage to say:
"did you need to talk to me grandma?"
" uh yes my dear yes" she said
"So is everything alright are you feeling anything different?" my hands trembled as i spoke trying to hide myself from the truth.
"You know Jay you have always been my favourite grandchild"
"Oh hum thanks grandma but what about Lily and Bella?"
"They will always have a space in my hear, but you Jay, you are special. You are the one who holds this family up together, and as you may seem to notice I'm going very soon Jay, and when I go I need you to be strong and keep taking care of the girls for me will you?"
"Grandma don't say that" I cried
"Jay darling don't hide yourself from the truth" she said slowly
"I promise I'll take care of them."
"You know why your parents wanted you to live in these mountains so much?"
"Why?" i curiously asked her
"Because that's where they grew up, and they wanted you Lily and Bella to have the same experiences that they did when they were young."
I dragged the chair closer to her bed where she was peacefully lying down.
"Jay darling that monumental and incredible view of the slim rocky mountains will always be there for you to see, everytime you miss me you look up to the sky and think of this me knowing I'll be safe in Gods arms always looking down and protecting you three."
"I'll miss you grandma" I cried

“I’ll miss you more then you can imagine, but I’ll always be here” as saying that she pointed to my heart. At last we gave eachother a long hug that seemd to last forever.

She was gone. I would never see her again. Her body was laying in the bed, the warmth of life stolen away by death’s cold embrace. Bella promptly sprinted to her body, Bella was desperate to find any flickers of life or hope left for her dear grandma, but was met with cold silence broken only by the breeze gently blowing from the window that upheld her. Grandma was gone, stolen from all of us. I just stood there watching Bella cry over her body in disbelief. I said I was prepared to face it, I was certain I was prepared to face one of my biggest fears but I wasn’t. At that moment I couldn’t do nothing but stand there in disbelief. ‘Was it my fault?’ ‘Did I get he rmedicines wrong?’ A split cold second until Lily came in the room and shocked herself to what her eyes were met with. I hugged both of my sisters as if it was the last time I would ever be able to do so.

A month later had passed and it still feeled like it was yesterday. I kept my promise to grandma up going. Taking care of Lily and Bella because they simply just meant the world to me. But there was this one thing inside me that was being bothered by my own thoughts. I still hadn’t gone to the view of the mountains where grandma told me to go whenever I missed her. I think i was ready to go. I told Lily and Bella to come with me, and so they did. We walked in silence still heartbroken thinking of everything that had happened to us. When we finally got there I told them to sit down in the grass with me. They looked over and said to me:
“It’s beautiful”
“The trees hanging off the edgy cliffs”
“Everything about this place makes me feel good”
I finally had bulletin up courage to say:
“Girls I didn’t bring you here over nothing, grandma once told me that everytime we were filling down we could come to this very place to feel her presence among us”
With that being said me and my three sisters stood there, feeling the slight breath of the wind hit us feeling like grandma was just there with us, like she forever will.

A Climb

Discovery Bay International School, Ngok, Chung Ching – 14

There it was.
My goal.
My escape.
My freedom.
It was the only place I could go.
The crest of the mountain sat ominously as I gazed at it from the bottomless valley.
I marveled at the mountain for a moment before returning to the task at hand, I sat under a rock shivering as I braced for the avalanche.

As the snow flooded the verdant landscape, I began to trudge through the snow, I looked back for the last time on the life I once had. If I had regrets it was too late, I had to look to new horizons to escape the boredom and mundane routine of life.
Reaching the peak of the mountain range would solve everything. Right?
I continued my journey to the peak of the mountain along a narrow path that spiralled around the entirety of the mountain, and the difference in terrain as I progressed through the path was enchanting.

As I ascended, more and more mist obscured the rugged base of the mountain.
The sun slowly peered through the thin leaves of the canopy as it slowly descended into the West.
I wish I had the time to fully appreciate the setting as I went from one majestic view to another, but it would all be made up at the end, the peak was the only thing that mattered, the lush bushes were only a nuisance that slowed me from reaching the peak.

Over time, the path gradually became narrower, and eventually was obfuscated by the snow of the snow−capped mountain.
As I neared the peak of the endless mountain, my body felt as if it could melt into the snow below, as the altitude increased, it felt like I had just run a marathon despite only having plod a few meters in the snow, but the thought that I could finally have everything I needed nudged me forward.

After what felt like a century, I could see it.
I was done.
I had floated away from everything, I had reached the top.
I had spent so long trying and was finally finished.
But all that was there was a thin vapid patch of grass that could only fit a picnic.
I flew to the sky but my bubble had burst.

What now?

The Journey to my Happiness

Discovery Bay International School, Nilsson, Naiya – 13

It had been nearly a year since mother died, I hadn't been out of the house since the day of the funeral. I had no one except for my aunt, and after a while she had finally gotten so fed up with me that she kicked me out. That brings me to today, a 14 year old girl being forced to go and live with her estranged grandfather in some strange faraway place. Here I am, driving to where I'm supposed to meet him, leaving everything I've ever known behind; maybe it could be my new start!

After what felt like days in a cramped car, I reached the meeting place. As I stepped out of the car, I was taken aback, the place we had arrived at seemed like a fairytale; exoctic birds singing their songs, ancient looking trees blocking out the sunlight, leaving me in what felt like a piece of paradise. Who knows how long I was standing there, but the next thing I noticed after my stint of daydreaming were four horses standing in front of me, one with a young weathered man sitting on him. The man got off his horse and started talking to me, not that I was listening, I was too busy petting all of the horses. "Um hello, excuse me, are you Zhang Wai's granddaughter?" The man asked me. The word "granddaughter" caught my attention, who was this strange man?

"Your grandfather sent me to pick you up, so grab your bags and mount the horse." This man kept telling me to do stuff, who was he? Eventually, I got around to asking him "who are you and how do you know my grandfather?" He replied "oh right, sorry, I should have introduced myself. I'm Li Wei, I work and live with your grandfather in the Yellow Mountains." Well that made things a bit clearer for me and while he was loading all my belongings on two of the horses he was describing what sounded like a magical place. Finally we were ready to start the long journey back to my grandfather's house. After he was done he asked if I needed a leg up, I then replied with " whats a leg up?", he then burst out laughing, he asked "do you not know how to ride?" I shook my head and he looked extremely shocked. After a minute he said "ok well come here, I will help you up, all you need to do is sit in the saddle and hold onto the leather straps, the horse will follow me so you won't have to do anything." "Okay, got it" I replied. Li helped me up on to the most gorgeous horse that I had ever seen, he was huge and well built with the smoothest, glossy black coat. This was going to be amazing.

Everything was ready and this time there really was no turning back, I was on a horse with a man I just met, claiming to take me on an extremely long journey to my grandfather's house, where I was supposed to live with a person that I had never met before. I guess this would be my life now, and before I even had time to finish processing everything, we were off.

It was nearly night now and the sky was a stunning array of reds, oranges, yellows, pinks, purples and more. I am certain that this was the most breathtaking sunset that I have ever seen, unfortunately I was interrupted by the sound of Li Wei calling my name. Just when I thought things couldn't get any worse, he told me that we had to sleep out here tonight and that it would take us around four days to get to my grandfather's. Yes, I said that correctly, FOUR MORE DAYS of traveling! The night was starting to fall, we had to work quickly to build a fire and set up camp. I did try to help, but it did not amount to much as I had never been camping before, slept outside or for that matter acquired any survival skills. So after some attempts, Li finally told me to just sit aside and wait till he was finished.

Around an hour later our camp looked habitable, now it was time to cook ourselves dinner which consisted of a cup of instant noodles and green tea. It wasn't much but at least it filled the hole in my stomach. I had no idea what time it was after we finished eating, but the sky was a pitch black charcoal shade and I couldn't see anything beyond the fire. I was very tired and sore in every muscle from our long day of traveling so I headed off to bed not knowing how I was going to sleep my first night out in the untamed yellow mountain ranges. As soon as my head hit the ground I could feel my eyelids start to close and just before I fell asleep I said a quiet goodnight to Li, but before he could even reply, I was fast asleep.

After a surprisingly sound sleep, I was awoken by the sound of rustling outside of my tent. I pulled myself up to go find out where the sound was coming from. When I opened the tent I was surprised to see Li by the fire cooking some fish and rice, breakfast definitely sounded good right now but still what was that noise? I turned around and saw the four horses; it must have been them. After a quick and hearty breakfast and when everything was packed up, Li and I started the next leg of our journey. We were peacefully riding along a pleasant trail when out of nowhere we heard gunshots which changed our serene paradise into a full blown tornado. Birds were flying everywhere, monkeys were tumbling through the trees trying to escape and every other animal was panic stricken. It wasn't just the animals that were alarmed, I was terrified. Why did someone have a gun out here? What were they shooting at? Why were they shooting? Who was this person? I had a million more questions running through my head but I was jolted back to reality by the sudden movement of my horse and before I knew it I was clenching on the reins so tight as I galloped deeper into the mysterious yellow mountains.

After what seemed like an eternity, both horses and I caught our breath and found some calmness. It was only then that I remembered that Li Wei was also with me. When I looked over at him, his face was a bright fiery red and looked as if he was about to erupt. He quickly shouted "come on, we have to keep moving, it is not safe for us to be here". His response shocked me, I had no time to think or respond, just trust that Li Wei and the horses would lead me out of danger and back into the peaceful, picturesque world of the Yellow Mountains.

The following two days were magical and as we travelled deeper and deeper into the yellow mountains, it almost felt as if no one had ever travelled here before. I saw new flora and fauna that seemed to be of unknown species. With every new step, we were getting closer and closer to my new home. My Home, in the mysterious Yellow Mountains, I really liked the sound of that. Maybe this was going to turn out alright. I was looking forward to meeting my grandfather and living in a place where I might finally feel like I belonged!

It was the final day of our journey, excitement was bubbling inside of me and I couldn't wait to discover what lay ahead. Nothing could stop me now, even when Li told me we were about to embark on the hardest part I didn't hesitate or worry. We had to climb the steep, rocky edge to the peak of the mountain so we could reach the other side. I was ready for it, I couldn't wait.

After a few treacherous hours, we were nearly there. I urged my horse forward and we raced ahead. What was at the top of the yellow mountain on the otherside caught me by surprise, nothing could have prepared me for what I saw. Standing there was a man that had to be my grandfather, he was looking out into the most beautiful view of all times, it was pure heaven. I ran up to him and without hesitation, I gave him the biggest hug of my life. I definitely caught him by surprise but he just hugged me back and we stood there in the sunset looking out over my new home with someone I already loved.

My Great Escape

Discovery Bay International School, Thmopson, Sophie – 13

I start walking home, knowing I'm only arriving to a scolding. My feet drag with every step. I turn the corner onto what should be called 'Trash Can Road'. I gag and hold my nose. Broken bottles of beer roll onto the road, with rodents crawling around them, ready to feast. When I enter my home, I see my younger sisters on the couch. They're giggling and playing with their dolls. But no matter how many neon colors stand in front of me, there's nothing bolder in the room than my father's face. His death stare still gives me shivers down my spine. He's still running his fingers over the same photo of my mother as he does every day. She's wearing a lace white wedding dress and is grinning wildly. He always said me and her had the same eyes. His face is pale and his eyes are red. He stands up slowly and offers to take my check. I try my best to smile at him, but it's more like I'm presenting to him my teeth before pulling out my check. He scans the check and dismisses me.

My father was always strong–willed and independent, but this only made him worse. He's the reason I used to cry myself to sleep every night until the 4rth grade. He constantly reminds me of how much easier it would be if he had no children, how he can only fake a smile for 3 people, and how he could only see a future for my sisters. He called me the runt of the family and blamed me for his problems. That's when something came over me, like all of a sudden I couldn't control my body. At the door, I give myself one last glance at the mirror. My tangled hair, my tear–stained eyes, the bags under my eyes. I open the door and start running.

I look back and I see how caged I was. How caught up I was on his words, how he made me feel worthless... I start to run faster. I remember how after a long, traumatic day of work, he would be there, a look of disgust on his face. My calves are burning now. I run faster... I remember how he would tutor me, or how he would teach me new things, but no matter how many papers, how many meals I made, it wasn't enough to please him. I feel my whole body trembling at the thought of him. I try to forget. Forget the feeling of being at my father's house, being home, but everything reminds me of him. I had been stretched so far, I had to learn everything, do everything, and it had to be perfect. I had finally torn... I halt abruptly to take in the view. I knew where I was, but I felt transported, free. I looked forward to seeing an unimaginable view before me. How could such a beautiful place like this go unrecognized? It was magical, as if gravity didn't exist, as if the laws of physics had suddenly disappeared. Nothing made sense, nevertheless, it was beautiful. It's foggy, mysterious horizon tempted me to explore onwards, but my legs could hold me and I dropped to my knees.

Its mountains were randomly perfect, towering over everything below. Slim, yet muscular, muscular, yet peaceful. It was the whole package. It was monumental and incredible. I rose to my feet, still not stable, and placed one foot in front of the other. The trees, creeping over the edge of the skyscraper, as the ground seemed to stretch further, and further away. At this point, It looked bottomless, and I took into the light that one misstep could lead to a large series of unfortunate events. I slowly came back into consciousness to realize my heart was beating a thousand beats a minute. A gust of wind tickled my skin as I let my expectations go and sunk into myself. I felt... like my own person, free. Free to make mistakes, free to have my voice, free to be myself. I felt a grin creep onto my face, followed by a giggle. And that giggle, it evolved into a laugh, and that laugh evolved into a full of laughing breakdown. I was no longer my family's caretaker, I was no longer my family's backbone. I was no longer part of a family. What 3 sisters? What father? Dead mother? What a poor girl. Thump–thump, thump–thump, thump…

Thump–thump. My heart skipped a beat. He's not always like that, every once in a while, the storms clear out and the turbulent sea calms. And in the brief tranquility, I allow myself to hope. My family. I took out my broken watch and sighed. My family didn't know where I was, or what I was doing. I think to myself about the good times. The last Christmas we had with mother, with father putting me on his big shoulders and me fumbling with the star. We all laughed as one big family, and no matter how much I hated them, they were my family. It was then reality dawned on me as if the mountain gods had spoken to me. You're stuck with your family, and mine loved me, no matter how many fights or arguments we had.

The Journey Up

Discovery Bay International School, Whittle, Chloe – 13

Story…

That's it. I was lost. I was in the woods and lost. I peered down at my dog, fufu. Thinking he would know the way. His eye peered up at me as if I was crazy. I sat next to him, wondering if we would ever find the mountains. A gush of wind suddenly came out of now where. I don't know where it was coming from. Part of me thought it was trying to tell me something. As if it was pointing me in a direction. I stood up and if followed the wind. Before I knew it, I was out of the forest. I look up to be amazed by the mountains that were right in front of me. The evergreen mountains were so lush and picturesque, I had to blink twice to make sure I wasn't dreaming. I glanced at fun with the biggest smile, we were smiling back at me. I looked up at the dove–white, hilly mountain that soared up into the sky. The tip of the mountains was covered by the foggy clouds until it became a blur. I fantasied about what would be up there. Was I ready to climb this mountain? I was about to find out. My long–awaited journey started here. It was time to start the journey. This is my journey up.

As I started to climb up the huge hill, my thoughts started to spill into my head. The grass was a vibrant green. It swayed back in forth in the wind as if it was dancing. The weather was nice. The clouds filled the soft blue sky and the sunlight beamed down onto my head, making it hot. At some moment there would be a gush of wind coming out of nowhere. I was in an amazing mood. Everything around the world seemed perfect. I kept walking up. I then decided to take a break and eat some of the food I had decided to bring. I took out my peanut butter and jelly sandwich and took a bite of it. I gave fufu a bit of some leftover bread as she munched on it next to me. I sat on a tall rock as I ate my food, the view I had was amazing. I took a deep breath in and somehow the air smelt fresher. I didn't want to take too long since I still had a long way, so I grabbed all my things and continued on. From a distance, I could see colorful flowers pouncing out of the ground. I ran over and dropped my basket. I layed down in flowers and looked up at the sky. I looked over to see fufu rolling in the flower meadow. I picked some flowers to bring home for my grandma later and continued on.
Moments later a huge gush of wind came, almost sweeping me off my feet. I was able to catch my balance. The sky had gone from a baby blue to a dark blue. The white fluffy cloudy turned grey and the sun had vanished. Fufu had this look of distress on her face and just then I knew what was about to happen. Rain. I picked up fufu and started running in the hope to find some sort of shelter to keep me from getting drenched. Finally, I had found a gave just big enough to shelter me from the pouring rain. I reached into my soaking wet basket and pulled out a blanket that my grandma had knitted for me. Fufu and I curled up in the blanket and watched the rain as it poured down. We counted the thunder and watched the lighting as it lights up the sky. After a while, the thunderstorm had calmed down a bit but it was already dark, so I decided to call it a night and get some sleep.
I woke up to the bright blue sky back again and a rainbow. It was going to be a good day. I packed up my things and I was off again. I was already halfway along the mountain so I knew I was hopefully able to make it to the top before dawn. I came across a small river. I decided to jump and wash. I heard my stomach rumble in desperate need of food. I found some fish in the river so I tried to catch them. Fufu was able to catch one and we feasted on it. I dried off and went on.

Ten? Fifteen? I didn't know anymore, I had lost count. I can't recall where I turned a wrong turn and I have lost count of the day. I was tired, the bags under my eyes were big and dark. I could no longer feel my legs anymore. They either felt like jelly on some times or hard rock on others. My hair had become dry and stiff and I lost my sense of taste. My back ached with each step I took. I look down at fufu who look just as bad as me. I could barely keep my eyes open. "Keep your eyes open….keep your eyes open…" I told myself. Suddenly everything became pit black and I felt my head hit a rock. I was out like a light.

I awoke to the breeze of air hitting my face. I..I..wasn't on the ground. I was on a dragon. I big red flames dragon, we were souring through the air as all my worries have vanished. Fufu has her tongue sticking out. It really was a magical mountain. We rode off into the sunset and lived once again.

The Ghost of the Yellow Mountain

Discovery College, Kim, Jungwoo – 12

"Looking for me?" a voice echoed behind the trees.

"Max?" I jerk my head to the direction of the voice.

Squinting between the disappearing mist, I spotted him leaning against a tree grinning from ear to ear. "That's not funny," I yelled, "I was lost!" I faced the ground half embarrassed and half angry.

"You looked so scared." Max added. He was trying so hard not to burst out laughing that he looked like he was suffocating.

"What took you so long anyways?" I said, trying to steer the conversation away.

Max didn't answer. Instead he reached out his hand and said, "it's getting late. We should head back." I looked up at his warm friendly smile and without hesitation I grab his welcoming hand. As he pulls me up, I can't help but notice how cold his hand felt, it's unusual for someone to be that cold on a hot summer night.

Max saw the puzzled expression I had on my face and chuckled, "Come on. I'm not a monster or anything, I don't bite." I stared at him sternly, *Why is he acting so strange?* I thought to myself. Whatever it was I decided to play along, I'm not in the mood for fighting.

"Yeah never mind, I, uh… was wondering, where are the others?" It's a stupid lie but it's all I could think of right now, to be honest I couldn't care any less about them. The group that we came with were all distant friends and cousins of Max. I'm pretty sure they didn't even remember my name.

Max looked at me and grinned, "Don't worry about them, they're all waiting for you below."

"Yeah right," I mumbled. Soon I found myself on my feet following Max through the dark mountain. He seemed to know his way and was walking with speed. I was surprised at how fast Max moved, it's a struggle to even keep him in my view at this point. Unexpectedly, Max suddenly stopped, I stumbled and fell to a halt.

"Why'd you stop?" I ask as I picked myself up.

Max looked at me seriously, "hey, this might sound weird but I have a question for you."

I looked at him oddly, "uh, sure."

He put his head to my ear and lowered his voice, "are you ok with me asking? Because it might sound really awkward."

I shot him a concerned look. "You can tell me, what is it?"

Max stared at me dead in the eye, "do you believe in ghosts?"

I smirked but then I saw the seriousness in Max's face. "Uh… no," I respond quietly.

It got silent for a second, and then Max burst out laughing. "Haha, you should've seen the look on your face. It was hilarious."

Trying my best not to punch him, I managed to walk past. Behind me, I could hear Max shouting, “You go first. I just remember I forgot my bag where we left.”
I turned around and looked at Max, “but I don’t know the way.”

“Don’t worry, just go straight down and soon you’ll be back at the beginning of the trail.” Max waved at me and quickly ran back up, soon disappeared from my sight.

I turned around and did as he said. After a few minutes I arrived at the beginning of the trail. Everyone was huddled together waiting below, I scanned the group and found Max, I was surprised to see he’s already here. “Max!” I shouted, “you're already here? Wow, that was fast.”

Max gave me a puzzled look, “what do you mean? I've been here all along, where were you?”

I looked at him and laughed, “your tricks are getting old, haven't you picked on me enough today?”

Everyone including Max was staring at me oddly, I started to feel uncomfortable. “Uh... guys come on, are you all a part of this prank too?” I heard murmuring between the crowds and a few people shaking their heads.

After a few seconds, Max spoke up, “we don’t know what you're talking about, we all met here a few hours ago.”

I looked at him angrily, “then why were you up there in the mountain with me a few minutes ago?” I protested.

Max paused for a second and replied, “I wasn’t with you, like I said earlier I arrived here a few hours ago with the others, we were worried about you when you didn’t show up.”

“If that's the case, who was I talking to up in the mountain?” I asked, starting to tremble.

“I… I don’t know,” Max replied looking at me like I was crazy. “Are you ok?”

I ignored him. My body was starting to feel numb.

Max was looking at me rather curiously, “are you ok?” he asked. He put his hand to my forehead, with a shriek he quickly jerked it away, “you’re cold.”

I don’t have the strength to speak. My eyes closed and I dropped to the ground. A huge crowd gathered around me, some of them were furiously calling the hospital while others were screaming and yelling for help.

Later that day, I exited the Yellow Mountain of Huangshan in an ambulance.

Life is a Mystery

Discovery College, Ng, Tiffany – 12

A long time ago in the mysterious mountains of China, Huangshan, there lived a little girl called Tsing, she lived in a village with a group of people, happy people, they have always lived a comfortable and easy life. There Tsing met her best friend May, they have spent most of their lives together, when they were together they were the happiest girls in the village, even though they fight sometimes, they get over it after a small amount of time. But one day something unfortunate happened, a huge earthquake struck and destroyed the whole village. Tsing lost her whole family, the only person left was May, they decided to take a journey to the unknown land below them, they have never been anywhere down on the land we live on today. So they packed their bags and started walking, they walked for 2 days 2 nights they drank up all their water, May was starting to get very weak so Tsing tried to take care of her even though she was also very tired but she kept on going.

One week later, Tsing and May were still walking. They walked over mountains, rivers, oceans and forests but they haven't reached a single big city or village, all the places they went to were either deserted or very dangerous. By now they have already ran out of both food and water, they were drinking from water wells as small as a plastic cups, May was getting very weak by now sometimes she can't even move her fingers, she is very weak just like a new–born dolphin needing its mom to bring her to the surface of the water to breath, skinny as a stick, Tsing knew that she needed to help her friend.

As they continued walking, May suddenly collapsed on to the ground, Tsing was sweating, panting and crying, Tsing fell to the grounds on her knees, fanning her, giving her air and poured water on her, but nothing worked, Tsing had lost all hope, she had small soft water droplets running down her eyes, her brown and ruff knees were on the soft sandy grounds, her whole body was shivering from the cold strong winds, she thought: " my life was as bright as a sunshine, lovely as beautiful spring flowers blooming day by day, but now my life is the strongest thunder storm, as dark as the night sky, will my life ever be the same as before again?" Tsing knew she had to keep going to a safe place so she continued to walk.

The next day, Tsing woke up on the floor, she looked around and saw a snake as long as school stairs, its teeth was as sharp as a knife, the snake looked like it was going to bite her any second. Suddenly, an arm quickly appeared in front of her face and strangled the snake's head, Tsing looked up and saw a tall old man, he was wearing a farmer hat and looked like he hadn't showered in days. Tsing quickly said, "Thank you for saving me just now, My name is Tsing I come from the Huangshan mountains."

The old man replied, "No need to thank me, you said you came from Huangshan" The old man sighed and said, "Those beautiful mysterious mountains, those mountains are like our lives, sometimes live will go up and down again, life is mysterious just like those beautiful mountains, no matter how you are feeling right now always look on the bright side you can always overcome any problems." The old man looked at Tsing.

Tsing said through tears, "Thank you, Thank you, you didn't only save me, but gave me inspiration to keep on going, thank you, thank you so much!"

The old man took her back to his house and gave her some food and water, Tsing thanked him and continued going to a faraway city, as you might have guessed, Hong Kong.

Tsing continued to walk to the far away city, yes, she was alone but she believed that the spirits of her family and best friend May will always be there, the old man there gave her lots of positive energy, she walked over sea, mountains, scary forests and more but she never gave up, she walked, she ran, she swam and finally she has arrived to the new city or to be exact our home Hong Kong.

After all those weeks and months, Tsing finally arrived to the big city she wanted to come to, she didn't know the language there, she didn't know what places there were, she walked to a small hut on the bottom of the mountain, there she saw a woman, about 40 years old.

She went in and said, “Um, Excuse me?” She stopped to take a breath, “Do you know where I can find a home to live in?”

The 40 year old woman stopped knitting and said politely, “May I ask who you are?”

Tsing was surprised as that women spoke the same language as her. “My name is Tsing, I come from the far away mountains of Huangshan, I don’t have a home. May I ask where I can find a house to live in?”

The Women answered, “ Oh, you came from the same place I come, I used to live in Huangshan, but I wanted to go somewhere else so now I’m here, here in Hong Kong you can’t find a place to live for free how about you come and live with me here?”

Tsing didn’t know what to say. She held her mouth open the only words that came out was “ tank yo.” Tsing was so shocked that she couldn’t even speak, she dropped all her things and hugged the woman. Afterwards she asked the women what her name was and she said, “Mandy, I changed my name to Mandy from Man Yee.”

So then Tsing lived with her new stepmom.

3 years has passed, Tsing is still living with her beloved stepmom, Mandy, Tsing is going to turn 18 next week, she is very excited because Mandy said she prepared a very special gift for her and Tsing can’t wait to see what present she will be getting. In these past 3 year they have moved houses twice, from their first house a wooden hut at the bottom of a mountain to an apartment with 3 rooms, Tsing guessed that she will finally get her own computer because she has been begging her stepmom for it in the past year.

Tsing and Mandy were supposed to go out for mother–daughter night which is the second Saturday night of each month, but Mandy needed to do something for work so she told Tsing to come with her to work and then eat dinner near her office. The moment they left their house, Tsing thought they shouldn’t go out tonight because she felt that something bad will happen, but Mandy was in a hurry and just pulled her out of the house, they took the bus and walked to Mandy’s office. Tsing cleared her mind because nothing happened just now so they don’t need to worry about anything.

As soon as Mandy finished work they walked outside and started crossing the road, but suddenly a speeding truck came from a far, rushing towards Tsing’s side. Mandy was behind her and saw she quickly pushed her away, then the truck came, Tsing fell on the floor and heard a loud scream from behind her, she turned around and saw Mandy lying on the floor with a pile of blood under her.

Tsing knelt on the floor next to Mandy and said, “Mom! Mom! Wake up please.” Tsing was crying, it was the most painful moment of her life.

Mandy quietly whispered in her ear, “Tsing, I don’t think I can make it, no matter what please continue living, life is hard but you must go on, please do me a favour, continue being the cheerful girl you have always been, I love you, I always will.” There Mandy died on that very day at that very spot.

Tsing said to her mom through tears, “Mom! I love you too, please don’t leave me ,please!” Tsing knew that her mom was already dead, there was no hope.

As she arrived back home she found her present it was a computer and there was a note and it said: To the world’s best daughter, I know I’m not your real mom but I love you like my own, enjoy your birthday!

After reading the letter Tsing burst into tear, her mom wanted her to live a happy life so she kept on going, so you should too, no matter what happens in your life remember that you will be able to overcome it live the best life you can because “life is a mystery”.

The Magical Mountains

Discovery College, Nie, Ethan – 11

CHAPTER 1 – Introduction

"Mama, I'm home!" shouted Mei Ling as she walked through the front door to her apartment.

Her mother was sitting on the sofa reading a book. Her long black hair whipped across her shoulder as she turned her head toward Mei Ling's direction.

"Hi, Darling! Welcome home. Go hang your backpack on the hanger and then wash your hands." she said to Mei Ling. Mei Ling did as she was told and went into the kitchen to wash her hands. When she finished, she came out of the kitchen and she began to tidy her backpack.

Her mother walked toward her and helped Mei Ling get all the books out. "So how was school today?" her mother asked.

"Oh, it was awesome," said Mei Ling. "We learned about a lot of very interesting stuff and in Chinese class today, we learned about the Yellow Mountain!"

"Oh, so what did you learn about the Yellow Mountain?" Mama asked, putting the books down so she can listen to Mei Ling.

"I learned that the Yellow Mountain is in Anhui Province, is famous for its beautiful landscapes and has a long history dating back to Ancient China." Mei Ling said with enthusiasm.

"Did you learn about anything else?" Mama said.

"No, we just learned the stuff that I said," said Mei Ling, "we were learning about the mountains in China."

"Ok," said Mom.

Mei Ling finished tidying her backpack and went into the kitchen to get some water.

"Don't forget to do your homework today!" her mother called from the living room.

"Of course, Mama, I won't forget," she yelled back. She gulped down her water and went quickly to her bedroom.

She sat down on her chair and looked at her Chinese homework. The instructions were on the paper. It said to copy the characters on the paper 10 times, then read the text and answer the questions. 'This is going to be easy!' she thought. Then, moved her Chinese homework to the side and looked at her math homework. The instructions were to finish the adding and subtracting fractions questions. 'That is easy!' she thought to herself. "It's only 30 questions."

She then looked at her English homework. She had to read a book for 30 mins. 'So easy,' she said. "I'm going to finish homework in a whizz!" she said to herself. She began to write.

CHAPTER 2 – The Video

And indeed, she finished it very quickly. By the time her mother called to tell her that dinner was ready, she had already finished her Chinese homework and math homework.

“Steamed fish and rice, your favourite!” Mama said as Mei Ling sat on the dining table. Her mother took the dishes from the kitchen and brought them to the dining table. She sat down and, using her chopstick, began eating.

“So what do you want to watch today for dinner?” Mama asked Mei Ling. They always watch a video at dinner when they are eating.

“Can we watch a video about the Yellow Mountain?” she asked.

“Sure can,” her mother replied. She grabbed her Ipad from the sofa and clicked on the app Youtube. She typed Yellow Mountain. “There is a video about the beautiful landscapes of the Yellow Mountain,” her mother told Mei Ling, “Do you want to watch it?”

“Ok,” said Mei Ling.

Her mother pressed the video and it began to play. Pictures of the Yellow Mountain were all over the screen. Some were very beautiful, showing pictures of trees, the mountains and a very special kind of cloud which Mei Ling later learned, was a very unique feature of the Yellow Mountain called the Sea of Clouds. Mei Ling thought it looked beautiful.

As she ate the fish, she couldn't help, but wanting to go and visit the Yellow Mountain herself. “Is it really this beautiful?” Mei Ling asked her mother.

“The Yellow Mountain? Yes, it is really beautiful,” she replied. “The Yellow Mountain is famous throughout China and the world for its beauty.”

“Mother, can we go to the Yellow Mountain someday?”

“Yes, we can go to the Yellow Mountain,” she replied. “In fact, we can go this summer.”

“Oh, can we?” Mei Ling asked.

“Sure can,” her mother replied. “Actually, it's nearly the summer holiday.”

“Oh good, that means we can go in summer!” Mei Ling said excitedly.

“Yeah,” her mother replied.

They kept on watching the video and when it ended, they had already finished their meal. Mama began to tidy up the table. Mei Ling sat up from her chair and went over to the sofa. She grabbed a book, sat down and started reading it. Her mother noticed.

“What book are you reading, Mei Ling?” Mei Ling looked up. “I’m reading a book about mountains, Mama!” she exclaimed.

Her mother stopped what she was doing and looked at Mei Ling, smiling. “You’re still thinking about the Yellow Mountain?”

“Yeah, it's just so interesting,” Mei Ling said.

Her mother paused. It looked like she was thinking about something. “Well, you can always ask your dad,” her mother said, “He’s bound to know something about the Yellow Mountain.”

Mei Ling looked excited. “Oh, can I call Daddy tonight?” Mei Ling’s dad is on a business trip in Shanghai.

“Yeah, you can call Dad tonight,” her mother told Mei Ling.

“Ok, thanks Mama!” Mei Ling happily replied.

Mei Ling went back to her book and Mama went back to cleaning.

CHAPTER 3 (The Story)

The evening went by quite quickly. Mei Ling called her dad at about 7:45pm. She told him all about what she learned about the Yellow Mountain.

“I heard from Mom that you know a lot about the Yellow Mountain,” she told her father.

“Yes, your mother’s quite right.,” he said, his loud voice blasted through the speaker of Mama’s iPad. “Would you like me to tell you the history of the Yellow Mountain?”

“Oh yes, please?” cried Mei Ling. “I really want to know!”

“Very well, I will tell you.” Mei Ling’s dad cleared his throat. “The history of the Yellow Mountain begins millions of years ago when it was first formed in what is now called Anhui Province during the Quaternary glaciation.”

“What is the Quaternary glaciation, father?” asked Mei Ling.

“The Quaternary glaciation was a series of glacial changes and it formed the Yellow Mountain,” Mei Ling’s dad replied.

“Ok,” Mei Ling said. “So that is how the Yellow Mountain was formed.”

“A few hundred to thousands years later during the Qin Dynasty, when the First Emperor of China, Qin Shihuang was the ruler, the mountain was called Yishan which means Black Mountain, but the mountains weren’t black so Yishan is not such a good name.” He continued. “So that is why in Ancient China, the name was changed to the Yellow Mountain in honour of Qin Shihuang. In the past, Huangshan was already famous throughout China but in the present, Huangshan became famous worldwide for its beauty, pine trees, caves and the most famous feature of all.”

“Tell me father, what is it?” Mei Ling curiosity asked.

“Is the Sea of Clouds!” Mei Ling’s father said.

“What is that, Father?”

“It is a phenomenon which makes the cloud look like an ocean of clouds.”

“Wow!” Mei Ling said dreamily. “Could you tell me about some of the myths of the Yellow Mountain?”

“Of course!” he said. “One myth of Huangshan was in the Tang Dynasty from the year 618 to the year 907 when the last emperor of that dynasty was visited by a man who claims that there are immortality pills on the Yellow Mountain which was called Yishan back then. He said that the way to get the pills was to come to the mountain and practice some techniques, then he can get the pills.” Mei Ling’s dad paused for a moment, stroking his beard. “But he never got the pills because he died and the Tang dynasty was over.”

Mei Ling started daydreaming at the screen.

“Hey are you still there?” Mei Ling’s father said, waving his hand at the screen.

“Yes I am!” Mei Ling said, startled. She quickly put her mind off daydreaming and gave her full attention to her dad. “Are we finished?” she asked.

“Well, it’s nearly time for you to go to bed, it’s nearly 10:30pm!”

Mei Ling looked disappointed. “Oh please, Daddy, just one more!” she begged.

“Oh, all right, I’ll tell you just one more!” “He cleared his throat and began to speak. Mei Ling changed into a more comfortable position.

But suddenly, Mei Ling’s fathers voice and the call ended. It took Mei Ling a few seconds to realise what had just happened.

“Oh, it ran out of battery! But, it’s ok, I guess I learned a lot today.” She quickly took a shower and then was tucked in her bed by her mother.

Magical Panda

Discovery College, Viiret, Inka – 11

Li Jing trekked down the grassy slope. Well, it wasn't very grassy anymore. It was just brown and brittle. The trail was rocky and dry, and there was so much gravel. The 11–year–old girl was sliding down the rocks, carrying her sturdy brown bucket, the gravel slipping under her feet. Her once long, straight, shiny black hair was now ruffled and very sandy. Ever since the drought, no one in the village was clean. Li Jing could now see the Wishing Well. It was the only source of water, and it was becoming scarce. When Li Jing arrived, the well was only knee deep. She hooked the bucket onto the rope and lowered it down. The bucket filled with water and she pulled it back up.

When Li Jing arrived back at the village, there was hardly anyone there. Then she realised that everyone was crowded around Lao Ye Zhang Wei.

"The drought has left us all thirsty," he rasped. "We will need our strongest men to go up to the Magical Mountains. They must cross many obstacles to get to Xiong Yuan, the Magical Panda. I shall now select who will go. Guo Zhi, Hui Qing, Ding Xiang, Nian Zu and –"

"Me! Me! I want to go!" Li Jing shouted. Everyone turned and looked at her. "I've been longing to go to the Magical Mountains for months!"

"You may not go, Li Jing! You are too small," the master croaked.

"But that can be a good thing! I can duck under things, and I'm nimble and quick! Please, Lao Ye, I really want to go!"

'I've already said no. That's the decision."

"Let her go! It will be a great experience for her. And I'll look after her," Guo Zhi, Li Zing's father called.

"Very well," said Lao Ye Zhang Wei. "But don't blame me if she gets hurt."

"Yay! Thank you, Lao Ye!" Li Jing squealed.

Li Jing, her father, and her mother went into their house.

"Look how much water I got! It's enough for the whole tomorrow!" Li Jing showed her bucket to her parents.

"Wow, that's a lot! I didn't even know the well had that much water in it!" Da Xia, Li Jing's mother exclaimed. "And you will need a lot of water if you're going to travel to the Magical Mountains and see Xiong Yuan." Da Xia passed Li Jing and Guo Zhi a canteen each. "Fill these up in Li Jing's bucket, and then once you've finished them, find any chance you can to fill them back up. I don't want you to die of thirst."

"Thank you, Da Xia. We hope our ancestors will bring us luck," Guo Zhi said. "We'll have to travel a long way. We can't even see the mountains from here!"

Then the bell sounded. Li Jing hurried outside. Lao Ye Zhang Wei was standing by the bell.
"Everyone who is travelling to the Magical Mountains gather round!" he yelled, but then broke into an outburst of coughing.

"Lao Ye!" Nian Zu ran up to help the master. "Water! We need water!"

Li Jing ran to get her bucket. "Got some!"
"Thanks!" Nian Zu grabbed a canteen from his house and ran back to the master. He pressed it to his lips. "Here, drink."

The master soon stopped coughing. "Thank you, Nian Zu and Li Jing. As I was saying, the people who are going to the magical mountains better get ready; you leave at dawn. Go to the training area and prepare."
Everyone headed toward the training area to watch the practice. Li Jing got on the monkey bars and did them as many times as she could, faster each time. Then she heard a loud crack. "Did you hear that? It was so loud!" she exclaimed. Everyone stared at her.

"Hear what?" Hui Qing asked.

"That crack. It sounded like a tree falling," Li Jing replied. Why hadn't anyone else heard it?

"Nope. Didn't hear anything. Did anyone else?" Hui Qing asked. Everyone said no. *Must've been my imagination.* Li Jing thought. *But I'm sure I heard something!*

"Yay! Today is the day!" Li Jing jumped up and down.

"Please be careful, guys. I don't want you to get hurt. And please," Da Xia turned to Guo Zhi. "Look after Li Jing."

"I promise I will be careful!" Li Jing squeaked.

"And I promise…"

Luna And The Infinity Of Stars

ESF Island School, Anders, Zhejun – 11

My name is Luna. I live in a small farming village hidden far away in the mountains of China. When the sun is clear, on the horizon you can see the snowy top of the Magical Mountain.

When I go to sleep, my Grandmother tells me stories of the Magical Mountain where a unicorn lives. Legend has it that the unicorn has magic to help people, but only those who seek to help another. No one has seen the unicorn, because the mountain is haunted with shrieking winds and mists of loneliness. Some people who went to the Magical Mountain never came back. Those who were lucky enough to return never spoke again.

I live alone with my Grandmother. We do not have much land to farm, so my parents left to go to the cities to find work. They send me letters, but since it takes so long to travel, the letters only come twice a year.

Grandma does the best she can to farm and homeschools me. Lately, something has been wrong. She wakes up later, sleeps earlier and eats less. The doctor has tried several times to find a cure. Grandma has tried every medicine but nothing is working. Grandma is getting worse. Without Grandma, where is my home?

My only hope to save Grandma now is to find the unicorn of the Magical Mountain. I have a map of the mountain, but I will have to do it on my own. I will be on the mountain for a few days, so I pack extra supplies, just in case. It is heavy to carry, but I have to try.

As I left, I said confidently, "Grandma, I am going to the Magical Mountain to find the unicorn. The unicorn could help cure you! Wish me luck!" Grandma coughed and tried to smile. I walked through the village and saw the children playing. I did the same with Grandma when I was younger. My memories started rushing back like a wild river flows.

At the base of the mountain, I said to myself, "You've got this, this is for Grandma." I took a deep breath and took my first step up the mountain.

While I was walking, I could hear my stomach growling. I sat down and ate a cheese sandwich for lunch, it reminded me of sandwiches Grandma made me. I was about halfway up the peak with a long way to go. Behind me, I saw the village and the people looked like snails.

As I got up, I tripped over a pile of rocks. My right knee was cut from the rocky ground and started to bleed. I hurried to get some bandages. My knee was hurt and I could only walk slowly.

I reached a clearing as the sun started to set. I set up the tent I packed and settled in to eat dinner. As the night got darker, I heard sounds outside. I thought some scary animals might want me for dinner. My heart was racing! This is the end, this is the end!

That was when I remembered what Grandma said every time I was scared of the dark at home, "There are no scary things in the dark. The scary sounds are your imagination. Don't be scared!"

I calmed down and took a step out of the tent. I realised Grandma was always right, there's nothing scary in the dark. It is just your imagination. So I went inside the tent, lay down and fell asleep…..

As the sun rose the next day, I searched for the unicorn. As I got deeper into the forest of the mountain, I got lost. I took out the map to see how to get to the next peak. It started to rain heavily. The map got soaked and so did I. I quickly setup the tent and waited until the rain stopped. An hour passed and finally the rain stopped. But the map was ruined by the rain. Without the map, I was lost in the mountains.

I started losing hope. There was no way I could find the unicorn! I didn't have a map and I didn't know where I was. I am so sorry, Grandma, I failed. I shouldn't have come up here. There is nothing up here to find, there is no cure. Maybe it's just a legend. What was I thinking!! I came all this way just to fail.

Suddenly, I heard something move in the bushes behind me. I turned around and a tall creature jumped out. I got scared and stepped backwards, but I didn't realise how close I was to the edge. I fell off the mountain! I grabbed for the edge, but it fell too.

I screamed as loud as I could and closed my eyes. I thought I was going to die. But then, I was lifted up by magic. I was in shock and my heart was pounding.

I landed by my tent and the magic healed my knee. When I looked up to see who saved me, I couldn't believe my eyes. It was the unicorn of the Magical Mountain!

I stood up and said, "Thank you for saving my life. Can you help cure my Grandma? She's at home and and she's very sick. The doctor in my village couldn't … couldn't….." I started to cry.

"Yes, come with me." the unicorn replied calmly.

The unicorn led me to a hidden garden filled with flowers. The unicorn picked up one of the flowers, enchanted it and told me, "To cure your grandma, you need to make a soup. Grind the flower and mix it with dew from a cloud. To collect the dew go to the highest peak of the mountain and use this small jar. Make sure to collect moonlight before your head down. You can use this magical pouch for the moonlight."

"How do I get to the highest peak?"

"Here is a magical map with wings to show you the way. You don't have much time left!"

The unicorn gave me the flower and I used the new map to fly up the mountain. After a couple hours, I was nearly at the top. I realised some of the clouds were close enough to touch. Now, I understood how to collect the dew. I took the jar and scooped dew from the surface of the clouds.

As I closed the jar, the sun set and the moon rose. The sky filled with an infinity of stars surrounding a bright, full moon. When I looked down, I couldn't see anything. Suddenly, the shrieking winds rushed over the mountain and it got very cold. I started to freeze and put my hands over my ears to cover the noise. I tried to scream, but no sound escaped. The shrieking winds stole my voice!

I had to get home and help Grandma. I will not be afraid! I put the jar in my bag and took out the pouch to collect the moonlight. I faced the opening of the pouch towards the moon. A line of wavy moonlight came towards me and spilled into the pouch.

I accidentally dripped a little moonlight on a cloud. The cloud went under me and lifted me up. I could see the lights in the village far below and used the rest of the moonlight to make a cloud path guiding me back to the village. The closer I got to home, the clouds descended like a mist and then I was in front of my door.

I went into the kitchen and ground the flower, as the unicorn said. I mixed the cloud dew and flower over the fire. I took a sip of the soup and my voice returned.

I went to Grandma's bedroom where she was laying down and told her, "Grandma, drink this. It will cure you. The unicorn said so." I helped Grandma sit up. She drank it slowly, laid back down and closed her eyes. I stayed with Grandma for the whole night to make sure she was doing well. Soon, I fell asleep on the floor.

The next morning, I woke up to the smell of food. I stood up, looked at Grandma's bed. She wasn't there! I ran to the kitchen where Grandma was cooking up eggs for breakfast.

"Grandma, I missed you so much!" I was so happy to see Grandma doing well, I started crying happy tears. Grandma hugged me and said softly, " Thank you, sweetie, for everything. You found the unicorn of the Magical Mountains! I am so proud of you! You must be starving. Let's have some breakfast."

As we ate breakfast, I told Grandma all about the journey to find the unicorn. We lived happily ever after!!

The Mist That Lifted

ESF Island School, Au, Perla –– 11

Alessia trekked up the Celestial Capital Peak.

Alessia kept an eye on the supposed tour guide, his footsteps swiftly stamping up the hill. Alessia stopped, panting and resting her hands on her knees. Her eyes gazed up from looking at the jagged rock ground and she looked around. No one was there. She shrugged, taking sizable strides up the rugged stone steps. The crisp, damp air brushed against Alessia's nose and it smelled faintly of rain.

HuangShan made her think back to times she didn't like to talk about. Strangely, this place was therapeutic, coaxing her to say and think whatever she wanted to. Somewhat like a hairdresser that always got the introvert to open up.

Alessia was weighed down with her insecurities and her thoughts. Things she wouldn't have wanted to say.
She hated how her father pushed her into vacations she didn't even want. She didn't like the reason behind it, it wasn't even like she had been asking for any breaks. She let a sigh escape from her lips and she gazed into the scenery before her. It was almost sunset and the sun was hiding behind a gargantuan mountain. The lighting was slightly dim so she couldn't clearly make out the mountain; it looked like a silhouette of a fairly large iceberg.
When Alessia squinted she could see small trees littered across the mountain. The trees were obviously not as small as what was in front of her. It was just so far away that it seemed like one of those miniscule models people used for building miniatures. In the distance she could see another smaller mountain. An upturned tooth of a dragon. Something jagged and slightly pointier at the summit. Neighboring brothers and sisters of the dragon tooth mountain were accompanying the dragon tooth mountain. They were positioned behind him so he was pushed to the front. The distance between them was filled in with mist, otherwise known as the fancy shrouds that were draped across and around the mountains. The shrouds of mist gave the family of mountains a mystical and shy appearance, it was almost like they were trying to hide behind these shrouds. One could say that the mist was canopies of water cascading down from the tops of waterfalls. Delicately, gracefully running away.

Alessia thought again. The mist was like her mother, recurring, mysterious and something you can never grab hold of. Sure her mother was loving...at times. But you could never know with her. She never stayed no matter what she promised. You never know when she was going to come back for sure and she had this strong scent. Alessia happened to be sensitive to smells. Her mother smelt of not truly caring. Her mother, in short, was an alleycat, a cat that comes for the fish bones and scampers off into the woods less than ten minutes later. Maybe the mist was her father. Bitter and cold. You could tell that he was trying to be strong but he was weak. You could smash through with just mentioning mother. Like how you could easily stick a hand through the mist and it would almost dissolve it. Most of all, she knew that the mist was like her own insecurities of her dysfunctional family.

Alessia knew that the tour guide wasn't there anyway. She didn't need protection or babysitting. She somehow felt like the mountain was enough company she needed. A black velvet tarp was flung over the sky.
HuangShan at night was a marvellous sight. The sky was a deep mulberry, raisin, midnight blue and navy mixed quite unevenly. The colors were distinguishable from each other but they were blended quite well. The sky was scattered with an assortment of different stars. Each brighter than the last. The mountains in Alessia's eyesight were completely black now. Nothing was to be seen on the mountain, not even the oldest rugged, flat–crowned evergreen. The mountains were scraggly, unevenly shaven beards of sleeping giants that lay down, causing their beards to stick up slightly due to how stiff the hairs were. She kept walking and walking forward until she didn't know where she was.

Alessia whipped out a heavy duty flashlight out of her North Face backpack. She let it shine at the rocks that she was close to walking on, illuminating the night sky. She climbed across some rocks and she noticed that there was an enormous rock with some chinese calligraphy characters carved on it. She could identify that the very rock before

her could be known as the “Drunk Rock”. She tried to find a spot to set down a sleeping bag. The tent was with the tour guide, but she could manage on her own.

The next morning, Alessia woke to find the area around her eyes stinging and puffy. She just rubbed at them and grabbed an energy bar to eat. Alessia sat cross legged on her sleeping bag and her teeth chomped down slowly onto her energy bar, tears were streaming down her face and her breath was trembling like there was an earthquake. She looked at the sky; the sun sat on its throne with the two clouds watching over everything with him, the mist scared away by the sun. The clouds filtered off a tiny bit of him. Alessia put on her puffer jacket. She felt chilly. She checked her phone. It was nine degrees.

“Welp,” she thought, “another treat for me.” Spitefully packing her sleeping bag up, she started her journey again.

Not too long later, she found herself staring at the Huangshan Cliffwalk. She didn’t know if the bridge was very stable, it was stuck against the cliffside and the path was quite narrow. Almost as narrow minded as mother about the separation. Alessia inched towards the other side a few steps and the bridge felt solid. She didn’t know what she was expecting. Jelly? Anyways, Alessia ignored her sardonic thoughts and she continued walking.

Hours and hours passed as she kept walking on and on and on. This was a 130 meter walk. It was bound to last long. She had only walked for 4 hours and she had just walked 12 miles. The woman on the walking app was chiming in the miles to her so she could keep track. The breeze was soft, light and fresh. Alessia felt all her worries rush away. The breeze carried her worries into the heavens. Alessia gazed into the distance, walking slowly at a consistent pace. All she could think about was her calm, deep breathing. It was the loudest thing she could hear. The wind blew at her side, and the sun shone, making her the tiniest bit warmer.

Maybe a walk was what she needed.
Maybe the vacations were nice once in a while.
All she knew for sure was that the mist had lifted.
The mist that had once covered her eyes, the mist that had once bothered her.

The Body on the Mountain

ESF Island School, Chan, Eugenia – 13

She kept running, faster than she ever did in her life, on top of the squishy grass that felt like thorns and through the cool fresh air that felt like pins and needles drawing in and out of her, trying to get rid of the horror of what she just experienced. Yet, the appalling scene just played and replayed in her head over and over nonstop.

The terrifying scene was light this: She gasped and snapped open her eyes. She was lying in a bathtub–like box with a strange smelling blue–green watery liquid. She screamed and ran away.

After running a length of some thousand meters, she looked back. The strange box with the liquid was nowhere to be seen. Instead, it is replaced with a mass of green pasture and green plants, shooting out from everywhere, and a billowing carpet of fog stretched into the far distance. She peered through the narrow gaps of the layered fog, and found out she was on a mountain. Somehow this piece of information made her relax a bit. She sat back down, grinning. The back of her head hurt a bit, but she didn't care. Somehow the grass didn't feel as thorny and the air felt softer, even though it still felt like her lungs were severely scratched.

She kept sitting, taking in the beauty of the surroundings. Suddenly, with apang, she remembered what happened before she found herself in the strange liquid and box. All he remembered was that she snuck out of her home to play. "Home!" she said aloud, "I must have been gone for a few days! My parents would be worried! "She scrambled to her feet and navigated her way home.

Along the path, she found herself near the strange box with the liquid again, but this time surrounded by people in strange clothing talking to each other. They are all wearing dark and tight cotton clothes whereas she is wearing loose white robes.

When she approached, the people looked at her. Some started to scream, some fainted, some shuffled nervously and talked. Yet, she was too bewildered to do anything except to stand rooted on the soft grass and oversee this commotion. She stared at the strange box, and suddenly realised it was a coffin and started to scream.

Right then, some armed people advanced towards her,yelling things in an unknown language and thrusting her into the coffin box. She howled and kicked, but everyone ignored her. The cover flew on the coffin, smothering her. She was then never seen to move or make any sound anymore.

Epilogue:
She, together with the coffin box is taken to a bright lab where it is captured and examined, while the people there, who had seen her move, tried to explain to the world and prove what had happened. Yet, no matter what they did, she still stayed as still as a statue.

The Hope

ESF Island School, Gupta, Arnav – 13

Green tea plants move side to side violently, as rotors move at a more concentrated pace, ropes are dropped and many of us whisper while we climb down from the Chinook about the magnificent breath–taking mountains with illusory sharp peaks, raised village houses, strange sea of floating clouds, odd–shaped pines and grotesque rock formations. I, along with tens of other paratroopers are ordered to execute enemies in their bunkers. We rushingly march to the allocated positions. As it is 5:47 pm and we have just about an hour left. I feel torn down by feelings as if each change in my mood is a bullet shot in my head. I desire raw revenge at times, though I wish I wanted a nobler justice, I feel pride and patriotism tinged with shame, complicity, betrayal and guilt.

The helicopter hovers back to the ongoing, desperate war near Shanghai. We hurriedly move towards the bases which are located near the hundreds of beautiful Anhui mountains as my mate, Robert exclaimed in the Chinook. I wish to be there one day, enjoying the view of the shrouds of mist clouded over the jagged mountains, sturdy rocks, leafy pines hanging over the cliffs and jagged crevices as many ancient poems say. At a steady pace, we move near the iconic mountains, few take out their binoculars to scan for the allocated fortifications.

I along with a dozen other soldiers are just feet away from the enemy bunker. Holding my 8–pound rifle in my hands, we realise that we are encircled.

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I regain consciousness. I feel a stiff wooden platform beneath me. I stumble between moments as the vehicle moves through asphalted roads and unpaved dirt roads. I can't see anything, my hands caught up in strands of fibre twisted up together. I can barely move.

Screeeeech! I feel the truck stop, the doors open by a couple of soldiers as they arrive and force us out of the carriers by holding our necks. We walk on the uneven, jaggy ground barefoot. The servicemen take off our blindfolds and let us take a glimpse of the outside world, far from the firing and the rage of the war. There are fantastic rocks, cloud seas, ancient rock–clinging pines, U–shaped valleys and moraine deposits. There is nothing like it, nothing like it in the whole world. They push us through a gate with rusty iron bars. Just on the right, there is a 100–meter–tall pole with a flag having a large red field with five golden stars, a large one followed by four smaller ones.

We have been brought into a patch of dusty, hard, concrete ground, and ordered to stand in tens of rows. After being aligned, a few soldiers get distracted by a waterfall which is Atlantis–blue, it is gushing over the rocks. At its widest point, it is surging and plunging down the fog–covered mountain. It has a beautiful serenity–pool at the bottom, it is veneer clear. The waterfall flows as smoothly as maple syrup. It is swishing over the rocks joyfully. It is thundering down into the pool like a gigantic water spout. But a Chinese major prevents them from looking there by speaking up in a strong and bitter Chinese accent,

"You are in the Xidi POW–Camp, and you are the enemies of China, therefore you will be treated accordingly."

Onwards, we have been ordered to work in factories in a nearby city. Secured prison buses would transport us to factories. The Chinese clarify that we have to work for wages such as food and water, those incapable of doing so would end up starving themselves. No one dares to stand up for themselves. Lots of people are fatigued due to severe working conditions and lack of rest. Some start to lose consciousness while working, in those instances, soldiers brutally punish them. Many die due to malnutrition.

Rob, Mark, Henry and I start to make plans for our escape, as we are, fortunately, good foes since the start of the call for infantrymen in Honolulu, we know each other as if we are all brothers. We had decided that it was better to attempt to escape rather than rot in the factories by labour.

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Mark, who is a head shorter than me, sneaks up to the numbing doors of the camp scanning for any troops on the lookout in the dead of winter. He proclaims to have found none in the blizzard and gestures for mission a–go,

the 3 of us unsuspectingly come out of our bunks into the bitter snowy night. No far than 35 feet away is high barb-wire fencing which reminds me of the ongoing, desperate war. In the deep and gloomy silence, we rush to the fencing while keeping our backs low. Henry pulls out his cutting pliers which he had brought from the factory, after twisting the wires and yanking them apart, we all get out of the POW-Camp and have a long way ahead of us. Robert proclaims that he knows how to get to the highway as he had his Geography degree in China before he joined the US army. Confirming that it is at least a 4-hour hike from Xidi, having no alternative, we all follow him East in the harsh and forbidding weather, for miles and miles. This is to be the longest night of my life, a nightmare of agony, terror and loneliness.

We all arrive at a frozen frosted brook. Rob tells us that this would indicate the half-way point to the highway. We decide to take a break and huddle up to stay mildly warm, enough to keep us going. I have lost track of the date and time now, but surely it is midnight. The temperature is below freezing. Mark exclaims that he has gotten frostbite. It clearly can be seen as he has got bluish skin on his hands. Having no medical equipment, with a big heart, we are forced to trail for the highway.

It is now close to impossible to keep on going, Mark lays down in the white-bleached ground after losing the whole of his hope,
"Carry on, don't wait here for me...."

With having barely anything to keep a person warm, we had to shamelessly, we leave him alone and plod ahead in the snow.

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As we reach the highway, the cold white and grey flakes disappear and the morning sunrises. Just then we see a Chinook accompanied by several American Black Hawks, knowing that waving will have no good, we search for transport to follow the helicopter.

"Ute! A Ute, pickup truck on the highway," exclaims Henry.

The pickup truck slows down. The transparent glass window inches down,

The driver questions, "Ni xiǎng qù nǎ lǐ?"
Robert replies undoubtingly, "Huang shān, Huang shān, Yellow Mountain!"
"Zuò zài chē hòu!"

We hop on behind the vehicle. The pickup zooms on the narrow, flat and endless highway up to the steep, fog-covered mountains. The Yellow Mountains of China stand tall and towering, the ancient emperor who once lived there brooded, he had transcended to immortality, of course, the years of refining had resulted in a fathomless lake of power.

Without noticing the time, we arrive at Huangshan. The pathways carved through the mountain and along its cliff sides there are gravity-defying walkways. It criss-crosses with the broken shards of the mountain like a ballerina gliding from toe to toe. We take the thousands of ancient stone steps up to the sky-piercing mountains, never knowing what could be in the next corner. In this lofty land, fantasies and dreams are materialised. There are only white-grey flying clouds hovering above us and rocky spires and twisted tree trunks surrounding us. This is heaven, this is genuinely heaven! We finally see the take-off area for the helicopters we saw earlier. We sprint to the sufficient flat area in hopes of going back to the battlefield

An Adventure Up Yellow Mountain

ESF Island School, Hagio, Ryo – 12

Once upon a time in the middle of nowhere in China, a group of 8 people were attempting to climb the yellow mountain. The yellow mountain was nicknamed the peak of death and all the people who attempted to climb it had died. Even the rescue team had once disappeared into the depth of the mountains. However, legends told that there is a secret vault at the top of the mountain which is filled to the brim with gold. Furthermore, there are 4 special potions. The first one is the elixir of decoy which would make 50 of yourself, the second one is the elixir of strength that can boost your power, the third was the elixir of health that can save you from diseases, scratches and pain. The fourth elixir, the elixir of life was the most powerful, it could bring back the dead. They were all in the vault at the top of the mountain.

There were 8 people climbing Andy, Ryan, Jeff, Bob, Justin, Tom, Steve and Tate. Andy was the strongest, but was mean. Tom was the bravest, who would stand up against anything. Jeff was the smartest, and Bob was a Geologist. Justin was the coolest, and Matthew was the fastest. Steve was the kindest and Tate was the youngest, the weakest. He always got bullied by Andy. Tate had no courage and was not good at anything however, he was kind and caring. Andy didn't want him in his group, but he had no choice as they needed 8 people to get up the peak of death.

Day 1

The 8 started climbing the lower stages of the mountain. In the first few minutes, the weather started to become cloudy, and started raining. The 8 went inside a cave and decided to wait for the rain to end. One hour passed, the rain gradually became gentle and a few minutes later, the rain stopped. The 8 came out of the cave, and started to climb the first challenging climb, the NEVERENDING slope. Legends told that it took a week to climb, and once every few days, an object would come tumbling down the hill and could kill everyone. The 8 slowly started climbing. A few hours later however, Justin slipped due to the wet surface and tumbled down the slope. He fell off a side of the cliff and went plummeting down into the depths of the mountain. They had all expected to lose someone but they hadn't thought it would be this early. Furthermore, they were surprised that it wasn't Tate. Everyone except Andy seemed shocked, and some started sobbing. " Oi, you weaklings, hurry up and follow me!" shouted Andy. "But we just lost a friend!" Tate cried back, " Why are you so cold?" "Friend?" Andy shot back, "He's not a friend. In fact none of you are. We don't need friends, and I just brought you guys because legends said that I need 8 people to start the climb!" And with that Andy marched on forward not looking back at the shocked faces of everyone else.

Day 7

When the remaining 6 finished climbing the slope, they were all exhausted. However, Andy shouted to keep moving so they kept walking up the mountain. After they lost Justin, they had also lost Tom. Tom was hit by a large tree log that came rolling down the slope and he was knocked off the mountain. The remaining 6 had to climb the rocks of death. Legends told that rocks came falling off the cliff and you would be instantly killed if any of the rocks hit you. When the 6 started climbing, Bob instantly knew that the rocks above were magma rocks, as he was a geologist. He suggested that 6 should take another path, but there were no other paths so they had no choice but to climb.

Day 10

When the group finished climbing the rocks, they were all covered with scratches and cuts, and were all really tired. They had lost Steve and Bob, and they were starting to become stressed. Tate's legs were trembling a lot and he was so tired he lost consciousness when he made it up the cliff. So the 4 decided to rest and start their journey tomorrow.

Day 11

The 4 started walking to the next challenge, the maze of caves. Legends told that the maze changes its shape and there were many gaps and walls blocking the way. When the 4 reached the mouth of the cave they saw that the entrance looked like a monster's face. It had 2 holes at the top and there were sharp rocks around the entrance that looked like teeth. The 4 heard weird sounds as well and Tate was shivering. Then, Ryan realised something. " There's weird smoke coming out of the 2 holes", he said, "It looks like the cave's angry." Then, Jeff went near the two holes, and examined the inside of the hole. Suddenly, more smoke came out and covered Jeff's face. He started screaming " Hot, Hot" and came back to Andy, Ryan and Tate. " Are you ok Jeff?" Tate asked. "Yeah, and luckily now I know what the smoke is! This place is a volcanic area, and the smoke is the steam. The steam travels through the hole and makes the scary sound. It works the same way as a flute does. So no need to be scared Tate!". " Ok, let's go in, and try to reach the end of this maze!" Ryan said. So the four went inside the cave. A few hours later, the four realised something. A hole, about 3 metres long, was in the middle of the path. Suddenly, the maze changed its shape and blocked off the path that they came from. They had no choice but to leap over the hole. When Jeff looked down, he realised that the hole was very deep, and he guessed that it was over 50 metres deep. If they fell, they would die. Even if they survived, they would be stuck down there for ever. Andy went first, and he was able to jump over the hole quite easily. However, when Ryan jumped he slipped and he went straight down the hole, and his screams soon disappeared. Jeff fell as well, leaving Tate and Andy the only ones who remained. Tate jumped but he didn't make it. He thought it was all over. Then, something grabbed his arm. To his surprise, Andy had grabbed him at the last second. Even Andy was surprised that he saved Tate. He didn't mean to do it, it just happened instinctively. This was the moment that Tate realised that Andy was actually a nice person after all.

Day 15

Andy scrambled out of the cave. So did Tate. They had made it out of the cave by some miracle and they were surprised by that. They went up the last stages of the mountain and soon they reached the peak. They had made it. They found the vault, and they realised that it was unlocked. They went inside and they instantly had to close their eyes. There was something shiny and when they opened their eyes, they realised that it was gold. Tons of gold and at the end of the vault they saw 4 potions. The 4 elixirs everybody wanted. Andy carefully took the 4 elixirs and wrapped cloth around it, and then placed it inside his bag.

When the two returned to their village, cheers welcomed them and people started shouting at them " Well done" and " You survived" and more. However, when they realised that 6 people were missing, they all became quiet. " Where's the others?" a villager asked. "They survived too, right?" But to the people's horror, Andy and Tate shook their heads. "Wait a minute?" a villager said, " The elixir of life would bring back the dead right? If you use it, it could bring them back!" Andy immediately opened his bag, and looked for the potion. Then, his hands froze. He couldn't find it. Tate realised that was well, and looked inside his bag too. It wasn't there. It had been stolen. When could it have been stolen? The two thought back at the events that happened when they came back. They only let go of their bags once. That was at the security checkpoint at the entrance to the village. The officer told them to give the bag to him for a security check. The two immediately rushed back to the security office. When they reached the security office they realised that they were too late. Now they had to go look for the officer. But this time they weren't afraid. The villagers were on their side. With their help they would be able to capture the guard. They were about to face their next mission.

Journey of the Yellow Mountain

ESF Island School, Hui, Nathan – 11

During the time of 730AD, Li Bai, a Chinese poet, was starting to get the hang of life. Whereas Du Fu, another famous poet and his best friend, was going to try an impossible task—something that would change the course of history.

Li Bai's determination slowly made him trudge to the towering heights of Yellow mountain in Anhui province. He knew that this would be one of his hardest goals in his life and that he would climb above the clouds, where nobody had ever gone to. He wanted a friend to keep him company, so he asked his friend, Du Fu, whether they could climb the yellow mountain together. As Du Fu agreed, the two of them packed their belongings. Knowing that they would be climbing for days, they took with them a stack of bamboo, some meat, paper, ink, and a compass.

The duo started walking up the mountain on a rocky path. Li Bai was using a bamboo stick as a hiking staff, and they trudged up the hill. Once the trail was gone, the roads were getting steeper, and then there was only rock.

Nonetheless, the two didn't stop. Together they conquered countless steep paths and decided to set camp on a small plateau halfway up the mountain, where it had just enough space to set up their bamboo and campfire. The two decided to get some rest, and so they did.

The next day, Li Bai woke up early to see the magnificent scenery. Li Bai wrote a poem on what he observed:

Thirty six strange peaks,
Immortals with black to knots.
Morning sun strikes the tree tops,
Here in this sky mountain world .
Chinese people, raise your faces!
For a thousand years cranes come and go.
Far off I spy a firewood gatherer,
Plucking sticks from stone crevices.

As he wrote, Li Bai remembered the legends of the Yellow Mountains, and how enchanting the towering peaks were. There were mentions of an ancient monastery on the summit, and there was also a monster that has been guarding the mountain for centuries. He sat down near the charred campfire and watched the sun continue to rise. Not long afterwards, Du Fu also woke up.

The two packed their camp and continued to rise onto the mountain's summit. They decided to eat their cooked meat from last night, which made them feel stronger than ever.

But as they walked along, a huge silhouette sprang suddenly from a grove of bamboo and blocked Li Bai's way from Du Fu. It looked like some kind of huge, powerfully–built ape, similar to a gorilla or an orangutan, standing about 2 meters tall and covered in long, thick, dark brown hair. Its massive head was tapered at the top to a sharp point, and its face was smooth and hairless. Worryingly, it had enormous, powerful jaws and a pair of small but fiercely shining eyes; it was the legendary *'Yeren'* or the wild man of Yellow Mountain area! It opened its mouth to reveal huge, curving yellowed teeth, and let out a powerful, rumbling roar that echoed through the mountains. Both men shook with shock and terror, and Li Bai told Du Fu to go without him and continue the journey to the highest point.

As Li Bai would do anything to protect his dear friend, he grabbed a bamboo stick and started to fight back using the "Yin Shu Gun" form of Shaolin stick fighting. With a long, strong piece of bamboo in his right hand, his left waved a slow, graceful flourish.

Concentrate, he told himself.

His elegant gesture ought to have given the Yeren fair warning, but the ugly, stupid creature noticed nothing.

Next, Li Bai spun the bamboo with quick, flowing gestures and hit the stick onto the Yeren's head, but it seemed useless.

He then warned the Yeren using a hand signal. Using the monkey climb, he landed a powerful punch, but the Yeren had tricks of its own.

It slashed a rock with its claws, then landed another punch which Li Bai blocked.

The poet then swirled the bamboo stick as fast as he could, but the Yeren deflected and landed a blow, knocking Li Bai behind.

But then, just when the Yeren wanted the finishing blow, it tripped on a stone and fell, stumbling onto a large rock.

The Yeren yelped in pain, like an injured dog, and with its eyes, he begged Li Bai for mercy.

The poet looked at the creature sternly and said, "In the name of the Dao, be off with you, and don't come back! And don't you ever *dare* to hurt innocent travellers, ever again!'

The cowering creature nodded and rubbed its battered head, and then bowed deeply, before skulking back off into the mountains, where it was swallowed up by bamboo and clouds.

The surprising conclusion to this amazing story came over two thousand years later, when a fearless and resourceful Chinese Indiana Jones–style archaeologist named Professor Nathaniel Hui of Hong Kong University, discovered Li Bai's long–lost epic poem in China's National Archives.

Entitled "The Battle of the Yeren" Li Bai describes this incredible event, which had been lost since the eighth century B.C.E., and that is how we know about this amazing poet's incredible true adventure.

Mysterious of the Yellow Emperor Mountain…

ESF Island School, John, Tiara – 11

It was mysterious how a mountain could look so beautiful. How it glimpsed under the sun and looked over us above the clouds. Its green leaves wrapped around the rocks preventing landslides. The rumour is If you listened closely you could hear a dragon roaring. I never believed that though until..

It was dark and gloomy, I was supposed to be sleeping but instead was listening to the sound of pattering rain hoping that suddenly it would stop.A few lightning strikes came once in a while which startled me. Suddenly several booms of thunder echoched one after another, a thundering clash came from the mountains. Alarmed I looked out the window to see the rain slowly stopping along a beast with a fierce red colour with the sharpest triangles poked on its tail. It had a pattern of golden spirals and a bold white mane. it gave a huge breath of fire as it quickly flew escaping my sight. I rubbed my eyes, pinching myself "Was it all a dream?" I questioned myself.

Practically the whole night I rolled sides on my bed, my hands were clutching a thin layer of blanket. No matter how cozy I was, I still couldn't sleep. I felt stupid staying there when there was absolutely no point doing something that it wouldnt be succesful. I got out of bed, my eyes sore, my hands cold. I took a deep breath, was I ready to do this? Should I get back in my bed? I decided not to stop, I left my house I shivered every step I took the more I trembled. The road was icy patches of snow here and there but in the middle of the road was a trail of fire spirals. I followed it nervously…

Following it nothing happened; it was a completely useless trail. About to give up I heard a roar, it wasn't just a roar it was a roar louder than thunder a roar like a dragon. That's when I realised a dragon was nearby I looked both ways and saw the same tail as when I looked out the window this time there was a flowing yellow green chain marking everywhere it went. Intrigued, I followed. I ran up the stairs. I panted running up the stairs, my hair flowing in the wind. I shivered. Almost to the top, I sighed as suddenly a huge blow of air was aimed at me. Feeling hopeless I held onto the stairs. My hands were slippery and soon enough I was going to be blown away.

Time ticked as my hands were losing their grasp. Suddenly the wind stopped, thankfully I continued the walk up the stairs. In Front of me was a beautiful village made out of the most interesting wood. The wood had chinese characters embroidered on in the silkiest gold fabric. Guarding the village was a warrior, a tall strong man, he had a long beard and a sword which was taken out. He was a muscular man that had the most dangerous weapons. The thing that surprised me most was how he rode a dragon. The same dragon I saw earlier, the one with the beautiful colours and designs. It looked better now that I could see it clearly. The dragon seemed gentle but had a fierce side. They flew up in the air patrolling the sky.

It was my chance, I ran quickly trying to dodge from being spotted from the fearsome duo. In the corner of my eye I saw the duo swiftly land. Steadily the warrior came up to me. Seeing this I swiftly hid in a bush outside a house in the village. The warrior stood in front of the bush and looked around, seeing nothing as he retreated back to the dragon. I wanted to continue exploring but I knew the warrior was suspicious so I went into the house behind the bush. The door was creaked open so I entered. Inside the house there were different books and cauldrons plus a big dinosaur fossil on the wall! "Who owns this house" I accidentally said the words a bit too loud that suddenly the warrior entered the house with a sword.He pointed the sword in my face. I felt like this was the end..

"Hello Warriori!, I am.." I said nervously I quickly looked around the room for a name. I scanned an open page in a book on the owners desk. I said "Sorry for that pause, I am Li Bai's Daughter.." The warrior grunched and dropped the sword. "Sorry for that mam. Follow me." The warrior said in a stiff voice and seemed sorry. He dragged me into a room above some more stairs. We entered a big throne room. There were many people standing around the

throne. There were candles and lanterns floating around. A marble floor with a red carpet. There was a grand poster of the dragon striking a fierce pose breathing fire. On the throne the dragon stared at me and swiftly a fireball swarmed around it to show the emperor. “Hello Li Bai’s daughter”He said as the warrior nudjed me towards the emperor. I walked slowly, my head looking down. “You are my daughter?” A man said. He had a long white robe, and had a journal and pencil in his hands. He had a long moustache and mysteriously glared at me. I declined “no I am not.” I said trying to save myself from the warrior as he ran towards me with a sword. “SILENCE” The emperor said as he threw a golden book with lots of pages. I catched it hopelessly falling into a wormhole of clouds. “HELP” I screamed as I landed in my bed just in time to see a streak of sunlight entering my house.

The Mountain Adventure

ESF Island School, Ko, Lok Yi – 11

"Liam, I think… I just saw something!" Amelia shouted with fright. Liam ran towards her but there was nothing. Liam frowned, and said, "Stop wasting my time!". He veered around and continued to do his homework. Amelia was so obscure about it, all she could think of was what she just saw. perhaps it's just an illusion?

Amelia walked into her bedroom, something shiny was there. Amelia was so curious, she mustered up her courage and tiptoed to that gleaming mysterious creature. "Hello?" she said, "why are you in my bedroom?" The mysterious creature didn't give her a reply. After a few minutes, the creature finally turned around, he looked adorable! "Can you tell me what are you doing here?" Amelia asked. The creature didn't say anything, he walked away with his tiny feet and was heading towards Liam, Amelia followed him. Liam was in the living room doing chores. Suddenly, he saw this weird glowing creature standing next to him, staring at him. Liam was so terrified and didn't know what to do. Liam did nothing but left his mouth wide open, he was speechless, he just couldn't believe he saw this weird creature. Amelia held Liam's hands, when Liam was just about to ask why, Amelia picked up the creature and… BOOM

Abruptly, a voice came out of nowhere, "Hello," The voice echoed, Liam and Amelia had no idea where that voice came from. But soon they saw who it is, it's the creature! That creature spoke, "Hello, I'm Charlie, thank you for saving me. If someone is brave enough to touch me, I can go back to my home. Now, let me bring you back hom–." Charlie didn't get to finish talking, but something strange suddenly happened, there was a big strong light coming from nowhere.

The sharp white light shot into their eyes, they couldn't see anything! Luckily, gradually their eyes started to recover. Amelia and Liam started to see sharp peaks and floating clouds, this is so beautiful, it's like they were in paradise. They stood there, feeling indulged in this wonderful, lovely place. But soon, Liam and Amelia were starting to get hungry and thirsty, so they decided to find some food. Liam and Amelia walked and walked, shortly, they saw a village, they were so happy because they felt like they might get some help from there. They climbed up the peak and they finally arrived. Liam and Amelia entered the dusty old gate in front of them, expectedly, it led them into the village. The village was very quiet, there weren't a lot of people there though.

"Huángshān sìqiān chū, sānshí'èr lián fēng. (Chinese poem written in Chinese Pinyin)" Liam and Amelia heard a man's voice. They ran to the house where they heard the voice come from. Liam bravely walked in front of the door and knocked, "Hi? Is anyone in there?" Liam asked. "Hello," A deep voice responded. The door slowly opened, the person behind the door looked a bit different… he had a long beard, he's wearing a fotou (a kind of hat from the Chinese Ancient). "This man looks like someone that I saw from my Chinese book. He looks like… Li Bai..." Amelia thought. Liam thought that too, "There is no way we traveled to ancient times," Liam thought, he wasn't 100 percent sure though…

"I'm Li Bai." The man said. "LI BAI!?" Amelia yelled, "What? There is no way you are Li Bai… unless…" Liam mumbled, he couldn't believe this… Liam looked around, "this place kind of also looks like the ancient times, but– how is this possible. Did Charlie do this?" Liam pondered. Li Bai looked at these kids, "Very unique clothing." He thought. Li Bai also felt like they were very hungry, and indeed, that's true. Li Bai believes there was not much danger since they were kids, so he invited Liam and Amelia into his house, they saw another man, Li Bai introduced that man to them after they've all sat down. "This is Du Fu."

They were both surprised. But, why were they shuttled back to ancient times? Amelia and Liam sat down with Li Bai and Du Fu, Du Fu looked at them, and asked, "Wow, umm you're clothing looks special? Where did you buy those from?" "Of course!" Amelia thought we are from the future! "We brought these clothes from a place that is very far away," Liam replied, Du Fu, smiled. Soon Li Bai told Amelia and Liam that he was going to get them some tea, he brought Du Fu with him too.

When Li Bai and Du Fu were away, Amelia and Liam walked around the house, Liam saw a very grimy old book, he saw a message saying: "Welcome, if you can read this, then that probably means that you're very special. There is a way to go back to your home, but it's your mission to find it." Liam was surprised, he immediately called Amelia to see, but after nearly 5 minutes, the text vanished. "There is a way to go home!" Amelia whispered to Liam. Liam nodded his head, but didn't seem to be that excited, "The text said we need to find the way back ourselves, what if we would never be able to go back home?"

It was night time already, both Liam and Amelia were very tired. Li Bai gave them a room and let them sleep in there. That night Amelia was very homesick and was very stressed out and worrying about not going to be able to go back home, Amelia even started crying. Liam realized and said "Don't worry! Everything's going to be alright."

The next day, they got up and packed their backpacks, Liam had also brought the old book along. They walked outside and began to explore, soon they saw a sign with unreadable characters, it was like a secret code or something. Liam suddenly took out that book he brought, he flipped the pages and Amelia came to look too. Liam started to read, "If you find the magic feather, you can go through the door. If you can't find the magic feather, you will stay here forever more..." They both looked at each other, "How are we going to be able to find it?" said Amelia. Liam opened the book again, hoping for answers, but the book didn't state anything about the feather. So not, their only hope is to find it by themselves. Amelia and Liam wandered around the forest, after a long walk, they decided to have some rest. Amelia saw a small restaurant right in front of them. "Hello there, is there a seat for two?" just when the waiter was about to say no, a familiar voice said, "They can sit here."

It was Li Bai and Du Fu. Amelia and Liam sat down and asked, "How are you? Liam and I were just wondering, have you ever heard of the magic feather?". Li Bai grinned "Of course!" Du Fu also added, "Speaking of the magic feather, do you know why we live here?" "No." "It's because I've heard that there's a cave in the forest, and if you can find it, you can shuttle through time! When Li Bai and I heard of this, both of us wanted to move here. Also, one of the trolls that lives high above the clouds told us that this place looks so magical and pretty and it is all because of the cage and the magic feather!" Woah, this conversation might be the coolest conversation Amelia and Liam had ever had! The cave, magic feathers and trolls!

Amelia and Liam finished lunch and continued the journey of finding the magic feather. Amelia hopped and ran around, and OUCH! Amelia fell down a little gap, she scraped her hand! "Ouch, it hurts!" Liam quickly carried her under a tree and let her rest While Amelia was sitting there, something glowing was next to her. She carefully turned around, "It's−" She couldn't even talk, she was so happy! "It's the magic feather! Liam, it's the magic feather! Liam was so happy too! Liam picked up the feather and suddenly, a sign appeared right in front of them, "It's the sign we saw, but we can read the words on it!" The sign showed them the way to the cage, not even 30 minutes later and they had arrived. "IT'S THE CAVE". They both shouted, they ran into the cage and a sharp white light shot into their eyes, just like before. Charlie started to appear, "Phew, I thought I'll never see you again, sorry, when I was about to go, I accidentally pressed the "shuttle to ancient times" button, hehe, luckily I got to see you again." "We don't want to see you again." They made a funny face and walked away together. They arrived home safely and lived happily ever after.

Tales from China's Magical Mountains

ESF Island School, Lam, Chamon -11

“Hahaha!” laughed the Yellow Emperor joyfully. He was spinning around the yellow mountain on Luna’s back, his dragon. The yellow mountain is steep and misty. Everyone knows the legend of the Yellow mountain: A dragon lives there and sleeps all day. At night, he would come out and kidnap people. But everyone was wrong about her, Luna. She is the pet, or should I say friend of the powerful Yellow emperor who lives in the mountain. The Yellow Emperor has the power to control things like lifting something. Luna is very considerate, she always cares about the Yellow Emperor. Very surprisingly, Luna can even talk.

One late afternoon, Luna was just hanging around the mountain. Suddenly, she heard a shriek. She rushed to see what was going on. A little girl was falling from the cliff, “Whoosh!” Luna quickly carried her to prevent her from hurting. The little girl opened her eyes and saw that she was sitting on a dragon! “What’s your name?” asked Luna calmly. “Carly,” replied the girl shyly. Carly was shocked that the dragon could talk. Luna knew Carly was shocked so she gently put her on the ground and gave her some time to think. Carly smiled, “So the legend was true.” "Mm.'" Nodded the dragon. "Hop on!" Carly cheerfully climbed on Luna. They flew across the sky. “Carly! Where are you?” cried Carly’s parents. Luna heard their crying, then she flew back to the tourist spot and gently put the girl down without anyone seeing. Carly beamed. She cheerfully ran back to her parents before softly patting the dragon. That night, Luna flew back to her cave and shared what happened to the Yellow Emperor. He was delighted that Luna made a new friend. “As I am getting older, I think I should be ready to crown my son too. Hmm, but my son is in Australia.” He sighed, “I need to find a person who I can trust soon”

The next day, Carly was swimming in the hotel's villa which is just beside the misty, yellow mountain. She just surprisingly thought of Luna. She whispered, “Luna? Are you there?” Looking at the sky, hoping that Luna would hear her. As usual, Lune would go out and hang out in the back of the yellow mountain. And, of course the dragon could hear her voice because of her big ears. She looked around to see if anybody was near. She flew down and shouted, “Hop on! Are you ready to go for a spin? It wouldn’t take you long. Hold tight!” They both laughed brightly as they flew across the sky.

This goes on for a week. Unfortunately, Carly needed to go back home the next day. On the other hand, the Yellow Emperor started to get worried because he thought that if he died early and hadn't crowned a person, Luna’s friend Carly might take over. She and his dragon are really good friends. On the last day that Carly was staying, when Luna was getting out from her cave to go fly with the girl again. The Yellow Emperor finally opened up to her, “I hope that I can find a suitable person who would take over my space before I die. But I am afraid that Carly might take over” said the emperor, embarrassed. “Carly, would of course not take over. But anyways, she would go back to her own country home tomorrow, so you have nothing to worry about,” smiled the dragon warmly. The Yellow Emperor was comforted and thought for a second, “Why don’t you take over for me?” Said the Emperor wishfully. “I am certainly in!” Then she flew out to spend the last day with Carly, pleased to hear that she could take over, also excited.

The following night, Carly woke up cheerfully. She was thrilled. She definitely couldn't wait for the ceremony. That morning, inside the hall of the Yellow Mountain, the ceremony began. The Yellow Emperor gave all his lifting powers to Luna and also his crown.

Can't Wait To See You.

ESF Island School, Lam, Hannah – 13

I took two steps feeling calm, wanting to see the world again. I want to remember, the water rushing down the river, the leaves rustling from a distance and the howling of the wind of Huangshan. Yes, I'm happy where I am now but I miss those whom I loved years ago. It seeemed like yesterday when I was going,

Down

Down

Down

The vision of mama, my mama got smaller and smaller. I could still hear her crying as I floated through the air, like I'm flying and soaring through the world, I looked down. And I found out I wasn't flying. It took me years to realise that macaques aren't flying creatures, it took me years to find out that I wasn't able to survive that fall, and thats why I'm here.

Mama told me when you die you go up in heaven and thats what I believed. I couldn't imagine going to another place in the afterlife now. However, I do miss my mama. I approached to a tall door knocked it,

Knock

Knock

Knock

The door slowly creaked open, hundreds of different creatures (mostly human) were patiently waiting inside. I looked up to see what looked like angel, she stared at me and then smiled softly.

"How may I help you?"

I handed in forms that were required to be filled.

"I would like to visit my mother, it's my birthday today and I miss her very much."

She got her glasses on as she started reading my application. She occasionally looked back at me, after she was done reading, she got her bell out and rang it once, it was one of the most soothing I've ever heard.

"Looks like you've gotten everything that was needed, hope you'll be able to see your mother. Happy birthday and enjoy your trip little one."

I smiled. The first time since four years, I visited home. The mountains still stand as tall as ever, the river was still flowing, the wind was blowing softly and all the trees of Huangshan seemed to welcome me with open arms. I went over the oldest tree in the mountains, where I used to live with my mama. Then I saw her, she was crying like when I was falling, but she wasn't alone. A little macaque that I don't know of went over to mama.

"That's your brother you know, he would have loved you."

"Where did he go?" asked the macaque whom I presume to be my sister.

“He’s probably watching as high up there, did you know when you die you go up in heaven? He’s probably waiting for us.”

Yes I am mama.

I can’t wait to see you again.

The Yunshen of Nowhere

ESF Island School, Lau, Yee Ka – 13

"Stomp….. Stomp….." everyone in the tavern turned their heads simultaneously at the person who was tramping on the staircases. He went into one of the rooms and slammed the door behind.

"Knock it off, young man!" someone said with irksome.

"I'm sorry!"

"My dear master, even though I asked every single pharmacy, I couldn't find the extraordinary medicine you have told me about. I'm very sorry about that."

Unfortunately, Master Hung was bitten by a poisonous snake in a forest with dark magic. He originally wanted to taste all the delicious dishes in the world, but he mistakenly entered the magical jungle, offended the phantom inside.

Guo Jing's tears tangled in his eye socket, ashamed and worried. Albeit his knees were in great pain of running, he did not complain once.

"Bang!" the door flew open and an old lady appears in front of him, a taste of unique medicine smell touched his senses. She lent out her scrawny hand, went straightly towards Master Hung. Jing was vigilant to protect his master, pulled the sword out of the sheath, and held the sword in both hands. Jing swept the blade through the air and strived for her arms. At first, Jing thought that defeating a weak and skinny woman was effortless. Unexpectedly, the old lady slapped Jing's sword effortlessly, it broke and fell on the floor. Jing felt that his hands were shaking violently, convulsing. Immediately, he realised that she was far better than Mast Hung.

"Prepare your luggage, you should be ready to go in an instant," the old lady said.

Fog covered the viridity of nature. Feeling that the appealing view was ruined by the heavy dampness floating on the air. The weather was as cold as ice, some parts of Jing's clothes turned into frosts, but the plants were still in full bloom. "Guo Jing, here is the Yunshen of Nowhere, be careful of your steps, I won't save you if you trip over!" Her voice echoes through the mountains of Yunshen of Nowhere. Jing had heard of this well–known name before, thought that it was just a legend story, didn't expect himself be in this magical place. They were getting higher and higher, a lot of magical animals Jing had never seen before came over their heads. Jing sighed with exclamation, "Maybe this is so–called fantasy land in the picture books?" Shortly after, they arrived at a paradise without coldness and dampness, but only sweet and fresh air.

From the outside of this house looked like a paradise but cosy. It had been built with brown bricks and has animal fear and skin decorations. The roof was low and rounded and was covered with grey ceramic tiles. Two small chimneys sat at the side of the house. The house itself was surrounded by grass, a huge pine tree in the centre and bushes on the borders of the plot. There was a huge room adjacent to the kitchen, which is the medicine room.

"Lie him on the bed and take warm water. I'll take the elixirs that will cure your master."

After nights and nights of treatments, Master Hung finally woke up from his long–drawn–out sleep. The old lady also reinforced Jing's swordplay. At last, just right before Jing stepped out of her wooden house, he asked, "My most respectful doctor, who are you? And how do you know magic?" The old lady replied with a mysterious smile, said, "Not bad. I am the queen of Snakes. My fellows accidentally bit you because your Master dashed into their home. They bite you and I saved you, from now on, we will not owe each other. Goodbye!"

Roasted Snails

ESF Island School, Law, Vynci – 13

"Crank Creek Cronk" The sounds of my screwdriver rush through my house. I am currently making a time machine, hoping to be able to go back to the olden days to learn more about poetry and my cultural history. I am aiming to go to Huangshan to meet some well–respected poets, as I heard that quite a few live there.

"What are you doing?" asked my father.

"I'm going to ancient Huangshan, I won't be back in a bit though. If you're wondering what Huangshan is, it is a mountain located in the city of Huangshan, in Anhui province. It's over 1,000 meters tall, and was formed 100 million years ago from rock formations." I replied.

After a few days, the machine is finally done and dusted. I hop into it, with a sense of excitement rushing through my body. I am excited to learn more about poetry and the history of where I'm from.

In the blink of an eye, I am in ancient Huangshan. It is so quiet that you could hear the drop of a pin. I marvelled around the area, hoping to meet someone. While wandering, I see two men, I ask myself "are these two poets too?". When their eyes catch me, they immediately start whispering to each other, as if I was some wild animal. I considered walking to them, but then I thought that it might make them a little uncomfortable. "Boldness" the quote by William Shakespeare just rushed through my mind, the quote that I have been remembering since I was a little child.

I take a deep breath and walk towards the two individuals.

"Hi, I am from the future. Nice to meet you, may I know your names and if you are a poet?" I asked, in mandarin, in a polite manner.

"Yes." They hurriedly replied., looking confused. "Who are you and why do you look like this?"

"I am from the future. I live in Hong Kong and it is 2020 in my time. Have you heard of Hong Kong before?" I say as I attempt to communicate with them.

Then I watch as they both mutter something into each other's ears and start acting as if they are considering something.

'No." The one on the right with a beard and almond brown eyes say. "I can help you with poetry, do you want to be one of my apprentices? You can only stay for a year though, as there are quite a lot of people wanting to sign up. We will allow you to cut the wait list since you're already here. "

I consider for a minute and say yes to this rare opportunity.

They then lead me into a house. A grand house. When we arrived at the entrance of the house, I met a girl, tall and skinny with wavy auburn hair. Upon our arrival, she handed each of us a cup of tea.

"Gong Fu Cha. Drink" Li Bai said in a serious voice, as another lady led us into the house.

We arrived at an open area, surrounded by marble half–walls, and in the middle of the area, was a traditional chinese table. The lady then helped me into my seat, while Du Fu was ordering his maids to cook some traditional dishes.

"Yes! The traditional Chinese dishes here must be authentic!" I said to myself. The thought of boiling hot soup and marinated duck made my heart go warm.

When the dishes arrived, I stared in shock. It was a… plate of roasted snails.

It looks horrible in my opinion, but to them, it's gold. Eating the snails, they stared at it with joyous eyes, as if they had just found a puddle of water on a deserted island.

"Why aren't you eating?" They asked in curious tones.

I immediately picked up the shiny pair of chopsticks, took a deep breath and swallowed it.

After, I picked up the miniature sized teacup and drank the delicious Kung−Fu Cha, just to wash away the horrible taste of snails.

"Done." Li Bai announced in harsh tones, as his servants immediately came to pick up our dishes.

"Come with us" Du Fu told me and he followed Li Bai, who was holding the hand of the lady that we me earlier on.

Du Fu told me that she was his "Human walking stick", because he has a bad hip.

****

"Cucucu… KOOOO!!!"

I opened my eyes, to find that I was sweating all over. Why? It was officially two weeks since I have arrived in ancient China and I have started to get used to it. I even like snails now!

Half awake, I slowly walked into the toilet and rubbed my eyes, to see scratches all over my face. At the start, I thought that it might have just been a prank, so I threw some water onto my face.

Ow.

Ow.

When the first drip of water reached my face, it immediately brought this stinging sensation, that I have never felt before. I felt like an ant on a boiling pot!

I slipped on my coat and ran to one of Li Bai's servant's shed, and pounded on the door. When she opened the door, she greeted me with a wide friendly smile, until she saw the scratches on my face.

"Oh no! You must've gotten scratched by sir Tai Bai's (Li Bai's courtesy name) kittens! It's okay, just put some tiger balm on and your face will be as good as new!"

She went into her shed and opened her drawer, full of mysterious chinese medicine. After searching high and low, left and right, she presented me with a bottle of Tiger Balm. I remember seeing this in Hong Kong, but the packaging just looks a tad different. I poked my finger into the bottle and got some tiger balm, and slowly rubbed it onto my vulnerable face.

"Thank you!" I said gratefully to the old septurnagian lady.

"Go back into your room now! Take a rest until it is breakfast time, breakfast time starts when Sir Tai Bai wakes up. I will come around and knock on the doors when it is time!" She screamed, when I was already a few meters away from her shed.

It was breakfast time, and an assortment of chinese foods were served. Today, it was Chicken Congee, Choy Sum with soy sauce made from a secret recipe, steamed fish, Chinese fried noodles ,crispy spring rolls and a pot of steaming oolong tea. I chose a spot on the marble table, and greeted Li Bai, Du Fu and his "Human Walking Stick" called Xiu Ying. bp

"EAT!" Li Bai exclaimed.

We immediately picked up our chopsticks and started eating. Mmm, the taste the fried noodles is scrumptious, nothing like the ones in modern Hong Kong. Don't get me started about the crispy spring rolls, they are legendary.

While eating, I felt guilty that I wasn't giving anything back for their kind help towards me. From the gorgeous chinese cottage to the delicious food to the precious knowledge that they have taught me. I decided that at the end of this year, I will go back to Hong Kong and buy some presents and deliver them over.

After eating, I returned to my cottage and lay in the soft bed, thinking of what to do before my poetry session at 2:00pm. According to LiBai's helpers, I am going to haven another poetry session with Li Bai and Du Fu! How exciting.

Life here has been beyond perfect, it feels like I have ran away from all my responsibilities in modern Hong Kong! I mean, being the forgotten child and being placed in a Village school while your brothers all go to a prestigious school is quite sad isn't it?

It is 1:45, and I wake up to a stinging pain in my foot! When I look down at my foot, I see one of Li Bai's assistants binding my foot together with threads and needles. I was so wrong about what I said before! Life isn't great right now!

"STOP" I screamed on the top of my voice, hoping that they would release me from all this pain.

"Sorry girl, its too late. Sir Tai Bai ordered us to do it, and its too late to let the stitches out. You're going to have to deal with the pain." She said, without any empathy at all.

Tears roll down my cheeks as I stare at the drips of blood slowly leaving my vulnerable body. I can't bear with this anymore.

Suddenly, I feel my entire body go cold and my vision gets blurry.

"Wh–wh–aa–t"

The Mountains Mist

ESF Island School, Lepine, Alfredo – 11

PART ONE: THE DARK
Yellow clouds beside the walls; crows near the tower.
Flying back, they caw, caw; calling in the boughs.
In the loom she weaves brocade, the Qin river girl.
Made of emerald yarn like mist, the window hides her words.
She stops the shuttle, sorrowful, and thinks of the distant man.
She stays alone in the lonely room, her tears just like the rain.
– Li Bai

Alone in a room, a woman crying, my mum. Father had left a week ago and it hit us hard. Obviously my mum is upset, but I say good riddance; he was a mean, old, abusive man. We are struggling, he paid the bills so now we're heating our noodles in a 7/11 microwave. I have to do my homework in the dark.

Oh! Where are my manners! I am Chun, Chun Long! I live in Huangshan City! It's not the most amazing of cities but it's my home. I know every nook and cranny. I know the best Bubble Tea spots here, and everyone knows me; mostly just to pick on me. See, I'm a short, nerdy kid with divorced parents; there isn't a living being in the universe who wouldn't get bullied with those stats.

When I'm older I want to work for the Chinese National Space Agency. I'm not that keen on flying through the cosmos, drifting in that eternity of darkness; that sounds scary and awful. I want to be a scientist so when the crew returns from Mars I can examine the rocks and alien fossils they bring back. According to my calculations, something is moving those Martian molecules, and I want to know what it is – even if it's aliens. My classmates make fun of my interests there as well – little do they know I explore the vast emptiness of space as a hobby to get away from the vast emptiness of space in their heads.

Today I'm sitting in the back of my bus, my class is going to the Mountains of the Yellow Emperor. Of course the jerks in my school found a way to corrupt the name so now everyone is calling this historic site "the mountain of the wee emperor" I think that "joke" shows you what I'm working with here (although secretly I smiled at that, not just the colour reference but also the mountain is pretty small and I wondered if the Emperor himself was short as well – the joke, unknown to them, actually works well on many levels!).

The bus stops and since the clowns at the front didn't wear their seatbelts, most of them slammed into the chair in front of them. Look, I consider myself a good kid, but they have put me through hell and I think it's fair that I can get a good laugh in when their idiocy comes back to bite. They must have heard me because under their bruised foreheads they are giving me the death glare. I think I'm safe since there's a teacher here so they can't make me dunk my head in a toilet, at least until we get back to school.

Before we started our mountain hike our teacher Ms Ting shouted
"We will have lunch first, if you forgot your lunch I have rice and tea!"

Ms Ting is the nicest. and the reason I don't have to bring weapons to school for protection. I sit down on a bench and unpack my lunch. My mum used to make my lunches but with my dad leaving she barely has the energy to stand, so I made me and my mum's lunch. I dont have the internet anymore to teach me since we can't afford it, but I have some old cook books from my mum's collection. I made me and my mum some 'gaifan'. That translates to "covered rice". It's rice with a little meat and vegetables and what we have every day – sometimes with only veggies.

I sit down and eat my lunch, quietly dreaming about being a scientist when I see some shadows and judging by the sounds of stupidity, I'm guessing it's the bullies. Remember when I said they would just hurt me when we got back? I was wrong. Ms Ting was helping other kids sort out their lunch so they were free to attack. They chased me into the mountains, didn't look back, I didn't want to get socked in the face, I ran and ran. I came to a stop and looked around, I didn't know where I was. And then I slipped and I banged my head on a rock. All I saw after that... All there was… was The Dark.

PART TWO: THE LIGHT

Before my bed, the moon is shining bright,
I think that it is frost upon the ground.
I raise my head and look at the bright moon,
I lower my head and think of home.

– Li Bai

I was the boy lowering his head. All I see is dark. My eyes are too heavy to open. Until I hear a voice, Soft and gentle but commanding enough for me to wake up.

“Young one, the sun has blossomed in the sky. Awake with it”

I get up and look around and see little specks of light floating in the air in what seems to be a limestone cave. I look to my right where I see an old man sitting by a large iron pot over a fire.

“Would you like some soup?” he asks me as he hands me a bowl.

I didn't finish my lunch so I was starving and took the bowl.

“Who are you?”

“I am Li Bai” the old man said.
I thought to myself “that's impossible! He died centuries ago!”. He must have sensed my confusion, he explained that we were in the spiritual realm. When he saw my disbelief he got up and gestured me outside. When I saw what was out there I couldn't deny it, even though I knew it had to be a dream. It was like the sun had been smeared across the sky. The mountains were more green than ever and there were men with long beards who looked like old time philosophers or poets as far as the eye could see, as well as a few strange looking animals. The water below was clear and like glass. I looked back at Li Bai and he was smiling.

“Thank you Li Bai but I would like to go home,” I said. Li Bai spoke in a more serious tone.

“You can't go home until you have beaten your demons. Young one, your head is limitless but your heart is holding you back. Family, school, money, everything. If you want to go home, you must conquer the things that chain you down.”

He handed me a sword and walked me up the highest peak. This place, he says, is where I will conquer my demons. A few seconds later I spotted something rushing towards me, flying gracefully through the air. It was crimson red and had scales like a lizard and two yellow horns. When I realised what was rushing towards me it had already knocked me off my feet. It was a dragon!
“Try again young Chun, your demons can only hurt you if you allow them to, you must beat them.”

Every time I got back up, it hit me again and again and again. While it was rushing towards me for the 100th time I thought about life, my parents, school, how I was feeling. I threw my sword to the water down below and raised my hand. The dragon stopped just centimeters from my face.

“You are ready, young Chun, like your name, You're pure” spoke Li Bai. The dragon breathed fire on me and I woke up in my bed.

No flying lights or dragons to be seen! I was home.

“Chun, you're awake!” it was my mum,

she told me that I slipped on a rock so Ms Ting took me home.

“Mum… if you need any help I'm here for you.”

She smiled and hugged me. After she left my room I felt something in my pocket, I pulled it out and all I saw was lint but something shiny caught my eye. It was a token with a dragon on it, and a note “be pure Chun, you're a bright sun –Li Bai”.

I can do this, I am Chun Long, I can do anything!

Tales from China's Magical Mountains

ESF Island School, Leung, Chloe – 11

Frost filled my lungs as I gasped for air, my feet were numb and my legs heavy. The cold was starting to bite at my fingers and toes, making every step painful. I wrapped my mother's scarf around my neck, again and again, hoping my mother's smell would overcome the cold. I fell to the snowy ground as my knees gave in on me, the snow was slowly seeping into the thin trousers that I wore and sent shivers down my spine, but all I could think about was the scarf. I needed to savour this moment, the sweet woody smell my mother had, the mesmerising pattern of the scarf she always wrapped around my neck, the fluffy ends of it brushing against my face, I had to savour it all. When I finally gathered the strength to stand, I stuffed the scarf into my pocket and plodded to our little wood cabin deep within the mountains.

I carefully creaked the door open and tiptoed inside, when my dad came out of my room, file in hand, my body froze as my tired eyes recognized that file. "WHAT DID I TELL YOU? I TOLD YOU THAT YOU WERE NOT ALLOWED TO KEEP THAT **FILTHY ANIMAL'S** THINGS! CANT YOU JUST FOLLOW BASIC INSTRUCTIONS?" His hand slashed across my face, narrowly missing my eyes. His blunt nails dug into my wrist as he dragged me to the closet. My vision became blurry as my back hit the mouldy closet. He slammed the doors and fastened lock after lock after lock. I moved closer to the crack in the closet door and saw him throw the brown paper file on the ground, he took something out of his pocket and chirk.

I dropped to the ground, my hand squeezing my mouth shut, tears started rolling down my face. I tried not to make a sound as I sobbed, the ashes started to fill my lungs as I panted for air. I heard my father walk out of the room, then the voices started coming in again.

You knew he was going to find it one day

As many nights passed, the sorrow I once held slowly turned into pure anger. I never tried to get out of the closet, but this time, I felt the emotions take charge of me. I desperately searched my pockets for anything I could use when I found a stone, a rather large one in fact. I hesitantly put the stone against the closet side, I shut my eyes to drown out the thoughts. I took a deep breath and smashed the stone into the closet side. The weak bug−ridden wood broke free, the frosty air filled my lungs again, this time, it felt relieving. I put the scarf around my neck before catching an image of my mother from the corner of my eye, I turned around to see a torn picture of my mother sitting on top of the pile of ashes. My eyes welled up with tears and my mouth formed a smile for the first time in a while. I looked up to the clock, "3:30 pm" it read, Father would normally be downtown, getting drunk with his friends or hooking up with women of various ages. With that in mind, I crept into the kitchen, stuffing a couple jars of food, a flask of water, a blanket, a fishing rod and a change of clothes into my basket. I heaved the basket onto my back and put a box of matches, a knife and a couple of copper coins into my pocket. I stepped out of the back door with a sigh and looked back at the only home I ever had, knowing I would never see it again.

I ran to the foot of the mountain and saw the lake my father and I used to fish at. *No, you don't need to think about him.* I nodded in agreement and set foot on the mountain. At first, my pace quickened but soon, my legs and lungs reminded me of how difficult the Huang Shan was to climb. Or how weak you are. I regained my breath and continued to climb up the mountain at a steady pace, I needed to get as far away as I could. I climbed up and up that mountain until nightfall, my body was screaming for rest but my mind was paranoid. I sat down beside a tree and rummaged through my pockets, I fished the scarf out of it and wrapped it around my neck. The warmth slowly made it's way to every inch of my body, relaxing my muscles that I didn't even know were tense. I felt my paranoia dissipate and soon I found myself unravelling my beige blanket and taking shelter underneath a cave. I looked up into the cracks of the cave and allowed myself to be mesmerised by the stars as I drifted off to sleep.

"Mama? " I yawned, "Where are you and Kang Kang going?"

"Shhh Xi Feng, you can't wake Papa up, right?" my mum whispered. "Me and Kang Kang are going on a little trip okay?"

"Take me with you!" I begged

"I can't"

"Why not?"

My mum hesitated. She said nothing and hoisted Kang Kang onto her back, his jet black hair rubbing on my mum's shirt.

"I'll be back soon," she said as she closed her bag.

"I'll come back and get you, okay? I promise. Hold on to my scarf while I'm gone, okay?"

She handed me her scarf and walked out of the house. She stopped and gave me a sad smile, her emerald eyes twinkled in the moonlight as she whispered,

"I love you"

My eyes shot open at the sound of my mother's voice, "Mama?!" My face relaxed as I recognised the rocky walls. My eyes teared up at the thought of her, I wiped away my tears and tried to get up but I was interrupted my tummy growling. In defeat, I started making some rice. I gobbled down the rice quicker than I ever had before and ventured out of the cave. I lugged my legs through the knee−deep snow, wincing every time the snow bit at my toes. The edges of my vision blurred and I could hear my heart desperately forcing out blood. The floor swayed beneath my feet until a blood−curdling scream shook me awake. I ran towards the scream, to see a boy's leg being ripped into shreds.

My face paled as a pair of emerald eyes locked with mine.

The Fog Guide

ESF Island School, Leung, Kelly – 13

'Fogs, the ancestors of the forest and our map, they are the spirits that shall guide you home.' As elder Yu finished off his daily tales of legends. As Leah slowly stood up and took a big stretch, she looked out from the wooden barred windows, a glimpse of light shone through the gaps of pine trees and the high pointed mountains, birds chirping away, welcoming the new day in Gu Mu village. Gu Mu village, a village only well known to a few and a small populated village hidden high up in the mountains. The bright beam emerged over the hills, waking up the villagers in Gu Mu village to prepare for the day ahead of them.

While adults and teenagers held baskets and hooks ready to farm and harvest the wheat, the children went to the elder's hut to start school. Following the lead of adults at the far back was 13 years old Leah who was clenching the metal hook given to her. This was her first day on the field and she was rather nervous. She had never worked on the fields before worrying that she wasn't physically capable of finishing the job. But then, two familiar voices echoed through her head saying 'It's not about how much you do, it's about how much passion and effort you put in!'. Remembering these sincere words, she lifted her head and took a deep breath and caught up with the others.

As she looked back, she saw the village's children running outside to play after having a class, reminding Leah herself of the times where she played hide and seek with her friends as well. Whilst cutting the wheat, she looked around her and realized that the fog was starting to slowly surround the village. Looking at the fog, it reminded Leah of her childhood since when she was young she would always hide in the fog as well. Reminding herself of the times in the past just gave her a sense of joy motivating herself to continue working.

As time passed quickly, Leah and the others working on the field were told to return to help prepare dinner. Slicing up a radish in a circle, Leah looked far out, the sun was slowly fading away into the horizon and into the woods. No one seemed to realize that the sounds of screams and laughter were missing. Fearing for the worst, Leah sliced up the final pieces of radish and went into the hut to fetch her silk string bag, putting in water for herself and some emergency snacks. Pulling on the two strings to close the bag, she tied on the eternal knot ornament with bells on her bag for good luck. She went into the storage room planning to steal a torch, but at the entrance of the storage room was elder Yu, holding a lit torch. He passed it to Leah and nodded at her, showing his confidence in her. She nodded her head to Elder Yu and promised to bring the children back. Leah slowly and carefully sneaked out of the village and into the fog.

Leah was confident that she could bring the children back since she knew the different hidden spots of the children – right at the top of Huang Shan since there were more pine trees and it takes longer for the seeker to walk up to find the hiders. It was easy at first since the path was flat, the fog was still faint and Leah still had a lot of stamina, but as she got closer and closer to the peak, the road became steep, the fog got more packed. Leah was starting to lose her sense of direction. She had drunk all the water and ate all the food she brought already and didn't have much to fuel herself up.

The flame on the torch was slowly turning dimmer and dimmer and her feet started to get heavier and heavier. She couldn't take another step anymore as she slowly collapsed. Before she could fall face flat on the ground, a mysterious force held up Leah, it was a cloud of fog, it was under Leah and preventing her from falling. Leah was in shock and was amazed by how the legends were real. She dazed in awe as the fog got bigger and bigger into a tiny couch and slowly moved up the hill as if the fog already knew where she was planning to go. The ride was slow but enjoyable. Whilst going up, Leah was able to see the sunrise up and see all of the yellow mountains, oh how tall they stood as they separated the clouds that hit against them. The mountains were like columns of rocks stuck together to make one big masterpiece. Leah was above the clouds, unable to see the foot of the mountains nor the village. It was a breathtaking view not one could see in their lives. Not long, the fog stopped at the peak at a tiny house. Leah was confused about why the fog would bring there but thinking it should have brought her there for a reason, she went into the house to investigate.

The door to the house was left ajar, thinking that it was abandoned she slowly walked it. To Leah's horror, she saw the children all stuck in a big spider web, she quickly ran to the children, and using the hook that she found beside the door, she cut through the web and freed the children. She got all the children and was about to set off to run back to the village, but something was in their way, the big spider demon. 'You aren't going anywhere, you are put there to starve and be food for me and my babies.'. The children got scared and hid behind Leah, Leah holding on to her hook and devising a plan to slice off all the spider's legs then running away, she went on a full charge and was about to attack the spider. But at the same time, the ornament on Leah's bag started to glow and bright white golden lights started to spread like soundwaves and the spider demon was trying to resist the force but it was too strong for her that she vanished into thin dust. But even after the demon was slayed, the ornament continued to glow. The waves from the ornament were so bright that Leah couldn't resist and blacked out from the bright light.

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'...6…7...9...10 Ready or not here I come!' It was a younger version Leah and she was running around in the field playing hide and seek with the other children. Leah was hiding behind a pine tree and she was trying not to get caught but when she stepped back, her foot slipped and made a loud 'THUD!'. The seeker who was named Jack found her and they both giggled.

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Hearing the different sounds of children giggling, Leah woke up to see the house vanished and the children surrounding her. She was relieved and hugged all the children. Leah looked back to the fog and bowed in respect in a show of thanks and asked, 'How did you know I was looking for them?' The fog went though Leah and the children's leg and bells started ringing. It was the ornament that I brought with me and the same bells as what one of the children had sewed to their vest. Leah sighed in relief, glad that she brought the bells with her as well.

Now all Leah had to do was to bring them back to the village, but she feared was going to lose them. She had an idea, Leah rang the bell that was on her ornament, and a gush of fog swept towards Leah and the children. Leah hesitantly asked the fog 'Do you mind...bringing us back to our village?' For a moment, the fog didn't move, but then suddenly both Leah and children were quickly scooped up by the fog and took the slow journey back.

When we arrived at the forest, the pine trees stood tall blocking the sunlight from entering. The fog separated and Leah and all children landed safely. Leah and the children bowed down to the fog in thanks and the fog swiftly flowed back into the woods. Looking at each other, they ran back to the village. All the villagers were glad that they could see the children and hugged them in their embrace. Leah ran to her parents and hugged them as well apologizing for sneaking out without telling them. After hugging her parents she hurriedly ran to elder Yu and said 'IT'S ALL TRUE, the fog spirits are real!' Elder Yu said 'Calm down my child. Come to my hut and let me hear your story'. Leah was slowly led into the hut for a cup of tea and her bewildering tale.

The Most Important Thing in the World

ESF Island School, Liu, Ho Yan – 12

"Don't you just ever feel curious? Are there any secrets lurking in these mountains? What IS our destiny?"
"Oh, Mei, why do you worry so much? These mountains are just very old and ancient, people don't know much about it. I think it's just pure luck we live here, it's nothing really."
Mei and Jade lived on the cliff tops in a mysterious village in the HuangShan mountains above the rolling clouds, the ones filled with magic were a brush from the grass could send magic scattering all over the floor, and each stone step was more than a thousand years old. This place was magical, this place was home.

"It is time, Jade, the truth and destiny of our family will not wait. Your great great great grandfather, the great poet came here to seek more than refuge," Mother gripped Jade tight, her expression begging for acknowledgement, "he seeked the most important thing in the world, and now it is passed down to you. It is your destiny to find the answer, as the generations before have failed." Jade's heart filled with flickering hope and trouvaille,
"I won't fail you mother, this is my destiny."

The morning wind blew through the windows, welcoming the day for adventure. Mother had packed the things required, the pack strapped to Jade's back was unproportionate to her body, like the boulder on a tortoise. Jade sets off down the rocky path of the mountain, the murky road lay ahead of her, so she set off the obvious path, she didn't even look back.

Walking down the clear path of the mountains, the fresh air awakening her to her senses, Jade hearing the soft chatter and the jingle of bells.
"We're down here!" A voice calls, angelic like and pure, like no voice Jade had heard before. Peering down at an awkward angle, Jade realized that the sounds were produced by the grass at the ground, sprouting out from the rock and filling the gaps and creases of the mountains. Filled once again with the hope spreading from her chest she speaks, bewildered to what the grass would say,
"I am on a mission to find the most important thing in the world, do you know what it is?" The girl still half determined this was just a daydream. The jingle proved her wrong, harmonious in an answer, as if they knew she would ask this in the first place,
"We believe the most important thing in the world is strength in numbers. Just like us, we look, sound and think the same, and like this we are stronger!" The grass patch erupted in giggles, like music to Jade's ear, almost hypnotizing, but she shook her head,
"You all strive to be the same, decreasing your own value," Jade took a step, the soft crunch from her foot wilting the green pasture, " It is important to be yourself, be unique, be yourself."

The earth rumbled beneath Jade, slow vibrations could be felt each step she took on the rocky path. The road ahead became less of trees and soil, the weather parched and dry, as if she was now in the Sahara Desert. A flat rocky surface lay behind the terrain, a dark cave looming by the mountainside. Rumbles and snores echoed from the mouth of the cave, and Jade knew she was close to something big.
Peering from the opening of the cave, the girl spoke to the darkness,
"Hello? Is anyone there?" The only answer coming from the cave seemed to be the constant dripping of water, but before she could say anything else, a rumble shook, deep and powerful, the image of a monster flickered across Jade's mind, but the beast that emerged seemed a hundred times more vivid and momentous than anything she's seen before, feeling as if she was a grain of dust compared to the dragon that now stood next to her, letting out a great yawn that shook down the leaves like droplets of rain.
"Who has summoned me from my million year slumber?" It's voice was lazy and low like a grumble, it's eyelids barely open as the moss covering it's scales and talons seem to look green as ever. Trying her best to accustom to the dragon's colossal size, it seemed impossible as every shift or movement it had, the dragon seemed to grow larger.
"Hello, dragon, I apologize for waking you. I just have to ask, what is the most important thing in the world?" Her question was simple and quick, not wanting to bother, knowing she would be gone in a million years, and to the dragon, it would all be just a quick nap. The dragon's voice was scaly and dry, opposite to it's unbothered mood a few seconds ago.

“I believe the most important thing in the world is secrecy, when you keep to yourself, the treasure you possess belongs to you and only you.” It’s thick tree−like talons waddled over to it’s cave, it scooped a handful of rubies and pearls, cascading down on Jade. The young girl laughed, shaking her head,
“You know the value of your possessions, but how much is it actually worth if you do not show it to the world?”
The beast shrugged it’s heavy shoulders, as Jade tried to hide her disappointment from the enormous creature.
The beast crawled into the cave, consuming the dark hole with its mass. Patting its snout painstakingly as she stepped closer to its ears,
“See you in a million years…”

After days of walking in circles, Jade’s hope began draining slowly, the days began to accommodate her, slowly beginning to get colder and more dreadful.
A green moore stretched at the front of her sight, trees waving in the wind. She decided she would stay under a big willow for refuge, where the long leaves cascading down would block the tantruming cold. Laying underneath the great big willow, her eyes grew heavy,as she let the sleep consume her, not knowing the reason why.
As her eyes fluttered open, the moores lay in front of her, and she knew something was different. Looking behind her, the great big willow vanished into thin air,
“Hello, Jade.” A voice slipped into her ear, as she turned around to face it. A woman wearing a blood red dress stood, her dress adorned with roses. Her presence seemed welcoming, she was the spirit of the great willow tree.
“What is the most important thing in the world?” Jade asked, her voice coming out in a whisper, as if her voice itself seemed intimidated by this holy being. The spirit seemed satisfied with her question, and in a blink of an eye, a few more spirits appeared, their features having the same calm expression, but each one different.
The spirit walked up to the girl, her high pitched voice surreal like a melody by a nightingale.
“The answer is simple, one you already know.” The spirit pointed to her heart,,
“I do?” The spirit nodded, anticipation surging through the girl's small body.
“Although we do not possess the common treasures others want we do have one thing…”
“What is it?” eagerness and desire overwhelmed Jade, this was the moment she found out.
“It’s love and family.” The spirits concluded together in harmony, “Our love as sisters dig deep into our roots, our family may not be big or strong, but we help each other up, and that’s what helped us exist through these millions of years.” Jade’s expression sunk, the answer wasn’t what she expected nor wanted, and the spirits could see this.
“Jade, why did you go on this mission in the first place? Who was it for?” The red spirit questioned, her eyes sparkled, like she knew the answer already, and she did.
“My family,”

Her eyes flickered open, the field lay in front of her, the willow tree on her back, the wind whistling in and out of her ear. It was all a dream? A single red rose, the blood red reflecting off the drab trunk of the tree, the petals delicate, yet the thorns present and piercing, one that wasn’t there mere moments ago, she was sure of it.
“Love and family…” Jade mumbled.

The small hut above the clouds stood at the peak of the mountain, one that seemed distant, yet familiar, she finished her task.
Mother and Mei bound forward and smothering Jade in a tight embrace.
“So, did you find out the answer?” obvious excitement hinting in her voice as Jade stepped into the all too familiar room. Looking out her window, a flicker of red barely escaped her sight, as soft giggles and lazy snores seemed to play in her ear. Instantly knowing who, she answered, her adventure playing in her mind all over again, her mind telling her it was all fake, but her heart knew otherwise,
“I did.”

Diary of a Poet

ESF Island School, Narayanan, Vijay Sathappan – 12

January 4th, 1947

The sun shines its golden rays on the mountains ahead. Around me, air is so fragile, like a baby, yet it is heavy with my dreams and aspirations. Huge waterfalls dribble down, the crashing sounds on the stone echoes across the huge land, breaking the silence of the morning. As the sun looms from the mountains, so the people of the land. They embark from their village houses, their views looking like tiny ants from my humble abode. With their small vessels, they wade through the seas, their ever–sharp eyes looking out for salmon and trout.

After my daily dose of herbal tea, I jump down, the wind whistling in my ears. I dive down in the crystal water, it is time to take my routine daily bath. After swimming for a few meters, I spot my friend, Loi–Wei.

He calls me up into his tiny fishing boat and I readily jump on, seeking some warmth. He passes me one of fishing rods, asking me to fish. I take it wearily. The Government has started cutting down land, and the rivers are getting smaller. All the fishermen in the village rely on one another to fish and feed the village. That is what I like about Huangshan. It is a community, not divided, not survival of the fittest. I bade goodbye to Loi–Wei and race across the branches and vines, back to my humble abode.

I strolled through the market today, my daily poem completed. Li–Jien, the butcher pulled me aside and told me that he saw a few white men.

"*I think that they will soon invade our land, Li–Bai!"* he says, with an air of frenzy, "*You must be careful!"* But then smiling he says "*But, maybe they do not want to harm us."* Stopping to take a breath, he further continues in his preamble. *"I have seen one of them is a poet" "Who knows, perhaps you may like them."*

This reminded me of my quest in finding an apprentice. With a spring in my step, I climb up the mountains. As I climb, I see a fire burning nearby. The Burnings of the New Year has started. A festival to burn the old things and start a new year. We have to burn the old things in our house, to create space for new things. The festival is largely celebrated here, especially on top of the DuZhu Mountain, a mountain known for its religious symbolism. Legend has it that the God of Light, Ma Zhi, defeated the God of Death, Tu Ren, from destroying the world on the same mountain. Till date, DuZhu is used for the Burnings of the New year, to mark the coming of light over darkness, or new over old. I must hurry up to my hut and change for the festival. I hope I notice the white men there as well.

January 31st, 1947

I have waited a long time for my fabled 'white poet'. I must find him. I need one person to pass down my knowledge. In a changing world, where poetry is a dying art, somebody needs my knowledge. It is fine for Du Fu, he has his son. But me? The villagers, although they respect my art, do not want to learn it. They think that their day–to–day jobs are much more profitable. Poetry takes a lot of time to learn, like any other art, practice makes perfect. They enjoy reading the poem, but do not want to learn it. I asked around, but people either shut their doors when they see me, or make an excuse. It is hard, being a poet.

My father used to say that soldiers in the army had to learn poetry. It was important that a soldier knew how to stay calm during times of war. For that, poetry was needed. I used to be fascinated by my father's teaching. By day, he taught the soldiers, and by night, he taught me. He was an excellent poet, that is, until he was killed by the Japanese.

I have heard that the white man is a poet. He will be the perfect apprentice for me.

Each day passes in the same, dull manner, a repetitive routine. I draw men in the wet mud, my inspiration for poetry having completely gone. Li–Jien says he has not seen the monsters for days. I even tried asking my rival, Du Fu for help. But the vile idiot refused, shutting his door on me.

I hope that he will come soon. Only if he comes, can I pass my vast knowledge on to someone. Poetry is a dying art, a treasure that only few possess. I have heard that the Government is planning to cut down villages in China and transform them into pesticide factories.

Imagine that! The beautiful village of Huangshan into a pesticide factory! It breaks my heart to imagine that the beautiful rivers of Huangshan will soon be a black death, floating with the corpses of innocent animals.

I look out the horizon, seeing the beautiful rays of the sun, keeping the tiny flicker of hope safely inside my heart.

March 4th, 1947

I have lost all hope in the comings of the white poet. It has been two months since I last heard of him. I have restarted my poetry. Du Fu has taken advantage of my lethargy, and started writing more and more, making more money, yes, but more importantly, winning the trust of the villagers.

I, once considered the god of poetry, am now reduced to a poor man. I begin writing, but I am devoid of inspiration and each poem ends up being worse than the last. My friends have ignored me and the village has disregarded me. I try to earn back their trust, but in vain. I know it is wrong to be like this. But my brain is failing me, and I need an heir to my knowledge.

That is all for today. My failures today have made me lethargic to even write a proper diary entry.

March 5th, 1947

The white poet has arrived today. My dreams have come true. I regretted not learning English years back, my laziness now showing its consequences. I could only barely keep up with the white's speed of language. But my writing proficiency is exemplary, and I showed him my poems. He then started speaking in Chinese, a huge relief for me. As we chatted, I realized I did not know my guest's name.

He introduced himself as Jack Keroauc. His poems mainly consisted of surreal events, full of crazy dreams and sightings. His poems are amazing, heavily contrasting with my poems, which tell of the usual happenings in life.

We continued chatting for a long time, until he shared one of his poems, which he translated into Chinese. It was breathtakingly beautiful, so amazing, that I cannot find the proper words to describe it. I begged him to remain here for a few days. He readily accepted, leaving me for a short time to get his supplies. When he came back, I cooked a meal of boiled rice and chicken meat. Under the moonlight, we shared stories and ideas. I hope, diary, that we, together, can help each other out. Me with my inspiration and him with his consistency. His poems are good, but it does not have the same style throughout. His collection is a mess, with everything all over the place. I look forward to teaching him.

March 5th, 2000

It has been a long, long time since Jack left. The once peaceful village of Huangshan has now turned into a war zone, the screeching sound of cars and motorbikes becoming common on streets. Nobody here has respect for poetry anymore. Children tease me on streets, even dogs turn away when I have come. I have turned old, the effects of living for over a hundred years can do something to a man. My end is near, I can feel it in my bones. I cannot even write properly, even the smallest sentences can wear me out.

I can only write one more sentence, I feel as if I will soon meet Death….

March 7th, 2013 (Jack Kerouac's Diary)

I have come back to visit my dear friend in China. I cross streets and climb steep branches to reach my friend's humble hut.

I come in, a scene of grotesque horror meets me. My friend is sprawled on the bamboo mat, a piece of scrap paper, eaten by dust lying near him.

I cross my friend's body, holding back tears. Has nobody bothered to take his body out. But strangely, there is no scent from him. No flies are present above him, the hut smelling of the usual violet flowers. A serene look is over his face, his forgotten body lying in a changed world. I pick up the paper near him. On the paper is written one word

'*Bloom'*

The Mysteries of Yellow Mountain

ESF Island School, Ngan, James – 11

Yellow Mountain is a mysterious place. It is a ginormous mountain with a lot of fog covering it. Many fossils of dinosaurs have been discovered there and scientists find many new species on Yellow Mountain. Yellow Mountain is also very steep and dangerous.

Oliver is a skilled and experienced mountain climber. He wants to climb Yellow Mountain and discover its secrets. Rumors are that a pack of fierce wolves live up the mountain. Oliver is a young mountain climber who climbs mountains all around the world. His mother and father also loved to mountain climb and brought Oliver around the world with them on their travels.

Oliver loves adventures and will attempt the challenge of climbing Yellow Mountain. Yellow Mountain is a dangerous place. Oliver heads off to China. During the 14 hour flight, Oliver checked his equipment such as the clothing, first aid kit, food..... Oliver is prepared. He will climb with his friend, Tom, who also loves hiking. Tom was already in China waiting for him. His friend has climbed countless mountains with him. After arriving in China, Oliver and Tom drove a car to Yellow Mountain where their journey will begin.

Oliver and Tom slowly walked up the mountain, it was very steep and took a long time to walk a short distance. An hour passes by and Oliver and Tom have only walked a bit. They had their lunch break and continued walking up the steep mountain. Oliver and Tom are exhausted and using a lot of energy. Oliver and Tom are very tired. They continue going up the mountain seeing fewer and fewer people the higher they went. Finally, after 5 hours, they reached the top of the mountain and were presented with a spectacular view. Not many people are up on the top of the mountain, because it is 4 pm and most people have returned home. After staying up at the top of Yellow Mountain for 30 minutes, Oliver and Tom decided to leave and rest in their hotel. They walked down the mountain while it was turning dark.

They slowly went down the mountain, it was getting darker and darker. Oliver and Tom walked quickly because it was getting dark and they wanted to go to the hotel. Suddenly, a wolf burst out of nowhere. They were shocked and scared. The wolf was very fierce and growled angrily. Oliver used his hiking stick to defend himself. The wolf used its teeth to grab hold of the stick. Oliver was forced to let go of the hiking stick. Tom opened his backpack and found a map of Yellow Mountain. He started to try and find other routes to get back down the mountain. After finding another way down, Oliver and Tom ran for their lives taking the new route down. After running down the new route, they met more fierce wolves, this time so many more than just one. Oliver was terrified and Tom started to panic. Tom used his hiking stick to distract them, he threw it and all the wolves started looking at the hiking stick. Oliver and Tom slowly backed off. They were trapped on the mountain. They still had some food to last a while, so they went back up to the top of the mountain. Tom took out some things that might help them to fight off the wolves. He had rope, they found some tree branches and some stones. Oliver and Tom quickly found some long branches and used them as swords. They each picked up a lot of small stones which they could throw at the wolves. They rested for a small while to get themselves ready. They slowly walked down the mountain, keeping their guard up. A wolf jumped out and growled in front of them. Tom threw some stone pebbles at the wolf, which made it angry. The wolf charged towards Oliver, he dodged the attack and used his tree branch to stop the wolf from fighting him. Tom escaped and Oliver followed him. The wolf was chasing them but couldn't catch up since wolves can't run very long distances for a long time. They lost the wolf in a short time. They had to climb across a cliff to reach the other side of the mountain. While they were climbing, wolves appeared on the other side of Yellow Mountain. They decided to go back but there were wolves on both sides of them now. Oliver used his stone pebbles to throw at the wolves. Oliver had excellent aim and hit some wolves in the eyes so they could no longer see. Oliver and Tom seized this opportunity and ran down the mountain. The wolves chased them and suddenly, they found themselves at a dead end. The wolves were slowly reaching them. Oliver, thinking quickly, decided to attack the biggest wolf, so the other wolves would be scared of them. Oliver attacked by using his stick to hit the wolf. Tom distracted the wolves by throwing more stones. Oliver then tied up the largest wolf. The other wolves ran towards the wolf that was tied up and bit on the rope to try to save it. Oliver and Tom ran, following the map towards another route down the mountain.

It was 2am in the morning and Oliver and Tom were still on the mountain. The wolves chased them a few times and they escaped them. They were now inside a cave and had covered up the entrance with some larger rocks so the wolves wouldn't be able to get in. They decided to wait until morning to begin fighting off the wolves again.

The wolves were biting and smashing the large rocks at the entrance in vain. Oliver and Tom were preparing for the fight. They planned out the whole fight. They found an exit to the cave, but it was very deep and Oliver and Tom couldn't fit through the back exit. At 6am, Oliver threw three rocks out of the cave. The rocks did not hit any of the wolves but the wolves turned their heads to see what happened. The second the wolves turned away, Oliver ran out of the cave. The wolves thought he was still in the cave. Oliver ran to the other side of the mountain which the wolves can see. The wolves saw him and ran towards Oliver. Tom seized this chance to run out. Since the wolves didn't rest that night, they ran slowly because they were tired. Oliver ran down the mountain, to the nearest route that lead down the mountain. Tom followed Oliver, The wolves chased them. They couldn't catch up. As soon as Oliver and Tom reached the bottom of the mountain, They called the police to catch the wolves. The police arrived shortly and all the wolves were captured. Yellow Mountain is finally a safe place to hike thanks to Oliver and Tom.

Oliver and Tom go back to America where they live and continue their normal lives. They decided to hike Yellow Mountain again two months after their first dangerous adventure. They arrived in China after another 14 hours of travel. This time, Oliver brought a real metal stick, just in case the police hadn't caught all of the wolves. When they arrived, There were a lot of people. Much more than the last time they visited Yellow Mountain. The tourists have heard what happened on Yellow Mountain and believe that Yellow Mountain is safe to hike without wolves. A lot of people recognized Oliver and Tom because they were interviewed on a TV Show talking about their experience. Some thanked them, some asked for their autographs. Oliver and Tom had a fun day at Yellow Mountain and went back to the hotel when it was 2pm. The mountain is finally a safe place. Many scientists still visit Yellow Mountain to dig for fossils and study the mountain.

The Torn Paper's Prophecy

ESF Island School, Palshetkar, Vaibhavi – 13

As I sat there, I contemplated the actual reason for everything. The wind whistled an intriguing tune in my ear, and the same tune went out the other. I didn't notice until the last second.

From the low benches that bordered the perimeter of the park, I looked up to see the buildings that made up the grand skyline of our city. I felt so small, so insignificant compared to the impact that so many had as they built the (overall) utopia that we today called home. Many people say I have a very negative attitude towards life. I say they're wrong. I'm not pessimistic; I'm realistic. I'm not lying about the ever increasing climate change, or the large spikes in life, or even death. What's the point of being fakely hopeful even though you know how everything's going to turn out?

My attention wavered from the buildings to the clock. Tick tock, tick tock, tick tock. Every second that passed felt like another eternity. But I wasn't in the mood for thinking. This was just a break from the busy reality that was our world.

While I walked, I still thought about that clock… I walked into the mediocre–looking building—the one with the slightly tattered sign that said Gorsan Inc.

Just for a little context, today, I was to give a presentation there for the interns. I left the job a long time ago, but I wanted to relive that feeling of the musty smell of my desk, and the ancient feel of my office.

As I walked up the stairs, I went over the main points I wanted to make today. Quite a long presentation, if I do say so myself.

As the end of the staircase started to appear, my stomach started to turn. Was it supposed to? Well, it doesn't matter. Every presentation starts with some kind of nervous reaction.

As I opened the door, I walked upon the most calm room I'd ever been in. Actually, I hadn't walked into too many rooms, at least not as the authority figure.

"Hello everyone! You may know me as the presenter for today.", I said, as I tried to put on my best enthusiastic face.

And with that, I was done introducing myself. I'd hoped for at least one "Hello" or "Hi", but all I heard was the sound of someone's cough.

"Let's start for today, shall we?"

"Go ahead, mister.", said a voice from the back of the room.

"... So, as you all know, ever since the company was established, Gorsan Inc.'s been highly successful in producing successful business campai—"

"Really, mister? My mom said this place didn't have many expectations from it's employees. So automatically, that isn't great, right?" said the same voice from the back of the room. This time, I looked up from my notes, and stared at the kid. She had black and purple hair, and wore a blue cap backwards. I don't know what drove me to do it, but I looked straight back and said:

… Nothing. I didn't have the energy to deal with it.

"Campaigns. Not to mention, the improvements that we had done last year really helped work speed. The company is honestly quite a pleasure to work with. Following o—"

"Didn't you leave a few years ago, mister? Didn't you say they're 'a pleasure to work with'? What happened? The pressure got to you? The routine got tiring? What was it?"

“Listen, okay? I’m just here to tell you about my experiences at this company. Okay?” I was close to breaking my usually calm demeanor because I didn’t like people asking me about things I didn’t like to talk about.

“But mister, I did ask a question about your workplace experience. Aren’t you going to answer it?”

“OKAY, THAT’S IT. I’M SORRY I CAN’T ANSWER YOUR QUESTION, YOUNG LADY! I DON’T WANT TO ANSWER IT, AND I WON’T!”

I didn’t know what made me do it, and I can’t say I’ve done it before. But I slammed my hand on the table. I wish I hadn’t… because it was the most painful, and the most grotesque occurrence I’ve seen. The tip of a pencil, but much bigger, and much more malicious

A steel spire. At least that’s what it reminded me of. A spire as wide as the area of my palm had impaled it. A pin drop silence was heard.

Blood gushed out, gasps and screams were heard, and something… happened to my hand. I—it started to disappear, crumble. Like a demolished building whose bricks started to fall like rain.

An arch… An arch, I could see, far ahead of me. A stone arch, tall and proud, stood in front of me. It was like it was calling me… Begging me to come to it. Something about it stood out quite a lot, and I understood what it was. I could see a golden medallion. Looking down upon the Earth, but only as high as the arch itself. Its glory could be felt miles away, and it shimmered as the real Sun shone upon it.

I did. And I wasn’t disappointed. As I passed through the arch, I was greeted by numerous peaks that loomed over me. The bliss blue sky was full of birds that I didn’t even know existed, and the fog made it look like a wintery paradise instead of a cold, dark place.

But something else caught my attention. A peculiar silhouette. It sat at the top of an ordinary peak. It didn’t move, didn’t blink, didn’t do anything. It just stood there aloof, while I stared at it. No monkey business whatsoever. It looked oddly familiar, with that long tail that curled at the end in the shape of a coil. It was just… stone.

I decided to move on, and as I walked, underneath my feet, I heard a heavy rumble. It was odd because it wasn’t heard again, at least not by me. I ignored it, and turning to my right, I could see a village. And I snapped back into my situation.

What was I here? Where am I? How did I disappear? Where is everyone that was with me during my presentation?

I was in a tight spot as I thought about what I could do, my knee banged against a rock. It was a wide rock, a sort of a mixture between a square−like and circle shape. But that’s not the point. There was a paper, with writing on it. It just laid there. Doing nothing; nothing at all. It didn’t fit in with the extraordinary scenery everywhere else. It was a yellowish coarse paper, with a few dirt stains and tears on its corners, and one large one that ran right through the center, like it was stabbed.

It said:
“**Early End in Huangshan**

Year’s end, these leaves now rest,
The season of crimson now comes to an end.
On the pier, the shallow water becomes thin ice,
And winter’s snowy clouds cross over Xin An.
Broken dreams circle these walls,
As the light, which is their Sun, crashes upon us all,
These negative thoughts, they vanish from my corpse
I look up, and away they wash, those negative thoughts”

What could this mean? Is it a poem about destruction… or something worse?

Could it be? It must be.

I sprinted as fast as my legs could to the arch I saw earlier. I never thought it would carry so much symbolism. I get it.

Look up, not down, as you can't see the Sun, and the opportunities it holds for you. At least that's what I thought it wanted to say.

But, I never noticed that under the Sun, the arch turned into some sort of portal. Without thinking at all, and as if the Sun was emanating an intense aura that compelled me to do it, I stepped inside of the ocean blue coloured hole through one side, and came out the other.

As I walked up the stairs, I went over the main points I wanted to make today. Quite a long presentation, if I do say so myself.

This felt a little nostalgic… or is it the phrase, "deja vu"? If anything, that makes me feel better, because it is a second opportunity to rectify mistakes.

As I reached the top of the stairs, and my hand mindlessly gripped the rectangular doorknob. I opened it.

I walked upon the most calm room I'd ever been in. Actually, I hadn't walked into too many rooms, at least not as the authority figure. There's a first time for everything, they say. No way it doesn't apply to this!

"Hello! I'm a former employee of the company. Today I'll be giving some key points to enlighten you about the company, from a sort of "alumni's perspective". Feel free to ask any questions."

Thanks, mystical mountains. You've changed me. By a great deal, actually.

The Dragon Princess

ESF Island School, Raje, Nishita – 13

People say dinosaurs and animals lived on this planet before humans. What they don't know is – so did Dragons. My name is Kaylin Prince and this is the story of how one of the greatest dragon empires burned to the ground. This is also known as my story.

I lived my entire life in a village near the yellow mountains. It was a quiet village, where it was said: people live quiet lives. What they didn't know was that the whole village could turn into Dragons at will. My family had ruled over all the dragons for decades and finally it was my turn to ascend the throne. I remember it as though it was yesterday.

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"Kaylin," says Caden, snapping me out of my thoughts. I am in the throne room with my mom, the dragon queen, and my older brother. The castle is hidden in the yellow mountains by the mist. Dragons used to roam freely until humans came along. Now we live in the yellow mountains, hidden by the mist. Living peacefully, guarding our secret. I realize my mom has just asked me a question.

"Are you ready for tonight?" she asks again. I guess my confusion can be seen on my face. "Yes" I answer.

All around us people are planning and getting ready for tonight. Red and gold is being hung all over the place. Caden and I give shallow courtesies before leaving the throne room. She might be our mom, but she is also the Queen of Dragons.

Tonight is the ceremony. I transformed into a full fledged dragon last month and as the tradition goes, I will now be crowned the dragon princess. Caden was crowned when he was 16 as well and so was my mom and her mom before her. Everybody in my family has been crowned when they were 16 and I was scared that I wouldn't. Becoming a dragon is harder than it looks. But now I don't have to be worried about that.

The main party is going to be held in the throne room but the whole castle is getting decorated. Red and golden, I never got why those are the colors. I mean when we turn into dragons usually our colors are black and violet or black and dark green. Basically black and a dark color, never golden and red.

I am near my room when Caden catches at my hand.

"What's up?" I ask. We might be royals but that does not mean that we don't use normal language. Or at least Caden and I do when speaking to each other

"Are you ok? You seemed distracted in the throne room," he asks

"I was wondering what would happen if someone was seen in their dragon form by a human." I say honestly. I am always thinking about that. Well not always, since the first time I turned into a dragon.

"Sometimes there have been quick glimpses. The humans think they imagined it." Caden says

"I already know that. That's how dragons came into their stories in the first place. I mean what would happen if we tell them we are real. We can live without hiding."

"They will hunt us down. Humans are afraid of what they don't understand and when they don't understand something, they have to take it down," he says. "Look, I know how you feel. But it is not worth thinking about. You should get ready." Caden checks his watch before continuing, "The party will start in an hour. And you can't be late." He starts walking backwards, "It is in your honor, after all."

I turn around rolling my eyes and walk back to my room.

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I look at myself in the mirror. I am wearing a black dress which turns into a gown at the back, black leather boots

and a violet ruby necklace. My hair is falling on my shoulders with violet streaks. The thing I love most about these events is that dark colors and leather are part of our regular and formal clothes. I smile at myself in the mirror before turning and picking up my phone from the table near my bed.

I walk towards the throne room. When I get there, most people of my mom's small kingdom are already here. I take a deep breath

"Nervous?" I look to my side to see who said that. A smile comes to my face when I see who it is. "Mira" I say and hug my best friend. My nerves seem to disappear when I see her.

Mira and I have been best friends since we were five. We have done literally everything together since then and I guess it is fitting we do this together as well. Mira links her hand with mine and we make our way into the throne room. My mom is sitting on her throne at the end of the room, Caden is standing beside her talking. I catch her eye and she smiles at me before turning her attention back to my brother. Everyone in the room is talking to each other while sipping their drinks. I look around before following Mira to get a drink. We both pick up glasses and stand there for a while. I look around and take a sip of my drink. I can't believe this party is for…. I spit the sip I took back into the glass. "This is horrible" I splutter. "What is it in this thing?!" Mira shrugs at me then puts her glass away as well, deciding it is best to not try the drink.

At that moment the ground shakes and everyone looks around. What was that, earthquakes don't affect this mountain. A voice comes from outside the castle "They are here". Humans.

My mom stands up from her throne as the castle moves again. The minute it stops Mira and I run through the crowd making our way to where my mom and brother are. I run up the podium steps and hug my brother before asking "Mom, what's going on?" "The humans are here." The door to the throne room flies open and a crowd of humans with pitchforks and torches come in. One man steps forwards and demands what is going on here and asks what we are.

Before my mom can answer some of the humans from the group step ahead and wave their torches at the crowd. Honestly, humans don't know the difference between vampires and dragons. We breathe fire. We are not afraid of it. Nevertheless the whole room breaks into chaos.

My mom turns towards us. "Kaylen Prince I crown you the princess of all dragons." She puts her first tiara on my head. The tiara has a silver frame with black and violet gems. "Now go. I will send someone to find you both when this is all over." she commands. "But mom−−−". "Go" she says again before descending into the crowd.

I look at Caden for a moment, then back to the crowd. After a deep breath, Caden and I hold hands and run into the crowd as well making our way to one of the balconies around the room.

On the balcony we can still hear people screaming and people turning into dragons. We stand on the railing of the balcony. I look back one last time before we jump. I turn into a dragon right when I am about to hit the mountain rocks. We fly away from the mountain staying close to the water surface.

A minute later the castle bursts into flames.

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And that was the last time I ever became a dragon. After that Caden and I went into the human world and I started living my life as a human. I still have the tiara my mom gave me and that is the last thing that remains of the dragons.

I finish typing my story and look up from my laptop. The short story writing competition I am taking part in doesn't know that this is the story of my life. They think this is a fictional story, which is one of the reasons I signed up. Fictional stories are great but my story is real and that makes it interesting, but of course the judges don't know that.

A knock sounds from the door. Finally, Caden took his sweet time to visit me. I open the door and to my surprise no one is there. At my feet, there is a brown paper envelope. I pick it up and walk back into my dorm room shutting the door behind me. The envelope only contains a scrunched up piece of paper. I open the paper to find two words written on it: “Found you”. I look back in the envelope to find a ring.

My family crest is on the ring. I fear my past is catching up with me.

The Saviour's Quest in the Land of Red Dragons

ESF Island School, Soni, Aarav – 11

Once upon a time, lived three lively and loyal friends named Max, Jess and Frank in China. It was a normal day for them, playing soccer, painting and watching TV. Their summer vacation had just begun and now they just wanted to relax.

Max was an intelligent boy, achieving straight As, Jess was very good at sport and ran like a cheetah and Frank loved working with nuts and bolts making robots and washing machines.

One day, a man with a hermit cap came up to them while they were talking, frowned at them unreasonably and with a loud and robotic voice said;

"3 close ones and a beast must answer the call,
to save China from a great fall,
Three–headed monsters they will face,
To help someone not their race.
They will search high and deep,
and make the monsters finally sleep".

His eyes then glowed green for a moment, then he pointed behind them and disappeared. They looked behind themselves and saw a dagger made of imperial gold, a sword made of celestial bronze and a suitcase full of mechanical equipment. And then they saw a golden lion, with a mane shining as bright as the sun, and he stared at them with its piercing eyes.

The burden of saving China was on their shoulders.

Jess picked up the imperial gold dagger, Max picked up the celestial bronze sword and Frank made a wind–up toy using the tools. With the lion, they went to the mountains. Many tourists were surprised that 3 kids and a lion were galloping together with weapons. Frank noticed buttons under Max and Jess's weapons and told them to press it, then Max's sword turned into a pen. Jess's dagger turned into a hair clip.

They needed to think of how they would get up the Yellow Mountain, if they hiked up, it would be too slow, they would have to find a vehicle. Max and Jess looked at Frank and said in unison, "You can put together something that can make us fly". Frank started working and as his hands elegantly worked, in no time they had four jetpacks powered by fire. They helped the lion put on the jetpack and put on theirs too. And then they flew up.

It was the best thing ever!

They saw mist wrapped around the breathtaking mountain and there was a magical rainbow–coloured aura that it was releasing.

Then they saw a cave and trotted into it and there it was : **Their first challenge**

They saw a horrifyingly mighty creature. It was hairy, with a lion's head, two elephant legs and a gorilla's chest. The monster roared and charged at them with lightning speed and all of them dodged. Then two more of the creatures appeared. Jess was a natural since she did kendo. She had great reflexes and she kept slicing at the monster's legs. Their lion; who they named Shiny, began biting its enemy and then something really cool happened; it dug its silver claws in the creature's chest and the monster instantly exploded. Frank was playing with the creature; he took out a

laser light and had a theory that since lions are cats and the monster is part lion, he might be able to distract it with it. And it worked!
He then took out a hammer and chucked it at the abomination's head. It disintegrated.

Max looked like he needed an assist so he and Shiny smashed the monster into pieces. Jess was now a bit wounded on the legs since the one she was fighting was the biggest one of them all; precisely 8 feet tall. Even with Frank helping, the monster was a bit too much. The monster kept healing when Jess stabbed it at the chest or the legs, maybe she just had to get the head. She then used the jetpack to fly up and then slashed and achieved victory.

Then hordes of monsters came in. They were surrounded. They all tried to run but only Jess and Max got through. "Frank!" cried Jess. "Shiny!" shouted Max.

Frank thought of flying away but the creatures were too tall and fast. Frank pulled Shiny back, took his own jetpack and threw it in the air and the lion slashed, bit and made a way for both of them to escape. While they were leaving, the jetpack exploded with a big blast and ended every monster over there.

Max's instinct told him that they should go at the top of the mountain; so they were headed there. They killed many odd–looking monsters on the way and used up most of their jetpacks' energy.

Now they faced the three headed monsters

Max kept swinging his sword without looking. Frank was throwing all sorts of tools at the monster but it did not budge. Even Shiny was having trouble fighting them. It kept slashing its claws at the head but the head came back. Jess had hurt her shoulder and they were really falling apart.

Was this it?

All of them thought about their lives; their family.

Then all of them felt a sudden power surge.
Electricity sparked from Max's fingers and he gave the monster a big shock. Frank threw massive fireballs at the monster. Jess now turned into a Bengal tiger and bit the monster; and it disintegrated. Shiny's mane sent a bright light that blinded the monster and the rest became easy.

With their new powers, they fought any creature that came to them easily.

THE FINAL BATTLE

They were now at the top of the Yellow Mountain. The clouds sent a pleasant scent that made them want to lie down and relax but they had no time to rest. There was a whole structure built all around it. The trio opened the door and saw that there were at least 2000 monsters in it; every kind they had faced. As soon as they looked in, they closed the door and thought about their situation. Then they made a grand entrance.

Jess turned into a dragon (which couldn't breathe fire) with Franks throwing fireballs in the sky; Max electrifying them and Jess the dragon smashing them at the ground. Shiny was helping by blinding a lot of them; since they had long range weapons. They were like a giant wave of destruction– until Jess passed out and the shape–shifter fell to the ground with them. Max assumed that being a dragon took a lot of strength. Jess transformed into human form while she fainted. Max took out some first–aid and tried to get her back. Frank started throwing fire everywhere. Shiny blinded anything that got close to Max and Jess. Frank now threw bombs around which bought him two

minutes to build something. His hands worked furiously and he made an onager. He kept lighting it with fire and the weapon was unstoppable. It was so strong! He had killed at least 500 monsters– and then his superpower slowed down leaving a hammer to attack which was not helpful.

Then Jess woke up, turned into a rhino and charged. Max now used all his power and a big lightning strike came from the clouds and hit the onager which blew up and it was the biggest explosion which radiated so much power; luckily they were all in a safe distance. Now came the big one. It was at least 15 feet tall, it was hairy, held a club in its hands and remained unnoticed so far. Next to it were trapped in a cage Li Bai and Du Fu. And next to the poets was a monster spawner with new monsters coming out of it. Frank easily smashed the monster spawner and whispered something to Li Bai and Du Fu, they replied and Frank started making something. Max tried to break the cage and Jess went to fight with the big one. She turned into a maximum sized African elephant but the monster kept hitting its club at it which almost killed Jess but she kept the fight on.

The giant now took a sword and swung it mightily and Jess fell to the ground and now her life ended. Li Bai and Du Fu, who were now freed, used their instruments and got into artistic poetry.

Jess and Frank ran over to Jess with tears in their eyes and sat there crying, but as soon as tears fell on to Jess, she woke up. Max and Frank were relieved and hugged her. Behind them they saw the monster who was very drowsy but was still standing. Jess climbed up the monster and said “Bye” as she sliced off its head. The monster found it hard to say bye, since it didn’t have a head anymore.

Now the three climbed down the gigantic mountain and went home, keeping their superpowers a secret for the rest of their lives.

The Heart of Huangshan

ESF Island School, Suen, Ching Laam – 12

"Have mercy! Have mercy…" There was a terrible war in Huangshan between the Thalassians and Ignisians. The two tribes were fighting over the rich land between them, they sent spies and used destructive weapons to attack each other, no one can be trusted in this situation. This war not only destroyed many lives, but also the mountains. Trees were damaged by bombs and animals were burnt alive, it was a horrific sight. The once peaceful mountains were destroyed bit by bit. Both tribes had equal strengths so the war lasted for a long time, until one day, the Ignisians released their ultimate weapon, an unknown virus. The virus spread quickly among the Thalassians, the people and soldiers suffered and some died in agony because of this fatal disease. The Ignisians invented special masks to keep them safe from the virus, they dominated the Thalassians and ruled over them. When all hope seems lost for the Thalassians, the prophet of Thalassius told Prince Artem, the Prince of Thalassius, according to the myths, the heart of Huangshan can cure any disease. The heart of Huangshan is a crystal that gives off blue light, it's located in Lotus Peak, the tallest peak of Huangshan. Prince Artem set off to find the heart while the people invent masks to block the disease. On the night the prince was leaving the village, the prophet made a new prophecy. "When people beg nature for forgiveness, a saviour covered with blood will walk between the clouds and the blue moon, at that time peace will come." Marking the prophecy, the prince started his journey to find the heart.

Prince Artem brought along some weapons, food and a first aid kit and walked through the breathtaking mountains. The mountains are so beautiful, the unique landscapes, peculiarly–shaped granite peaks, the colourful flowers, the vast sky, the pine trees, the golden monkeys, the sea of clouds…. Everything is so perfect and lively in Huangshan. The prince was enjoying himself in the mountains, nature provided him with food, shelter, water and company. The animals in Huangshan walked with the prince making sure the prince didn't feel lonely. Prince Artem thought "There is no other place in the world that is as magnificent as Huangshan, I must protect this place at all costs." After a few days of climbing, Prince Artem finally reached Lotus Peak. He walked through the trees and plants and found vines twisted into the shape of a staff, crowning the heart of Huangshan in the middle. The heart is translucent and gives off a soft blue radiant, the beauty of it is hypnotising. Prince Artem circled around the heart, gasping at its beauty, he touched it, it is cool but tender in a way. "How mysterious this is," he thought. Prince Artem yanked the heart out of its container and walked away with it. Without the heart, Huangshan was losing its liveliness, the branches of the trees fell out, the flowers withered. The prince noticed the change and placed back the heart, once the heart was in its container, the plants regrew and everything became vivid. Prince Artem tried chipping a small piece off the heart using his sword but the heart is too tough. "What should I do?" thought Prince Artem, "I need the heart to cure my people but without the heart, Huangshan will die."

Prince Artem made an important decision, he decided to leave the heart to where it belongs. He thought "There must be another way to combat the virus, I can't bear to see Huangshan die. The war is only between humans, we shouldn't drag nature into this, alas, humans have already done enough harm to nature." When he was about to leave, a loud strong voice ordered "Stop right here! Lower your weapons and raise your hands!" The prince turned around and found himself surrounded by Ignis soldiers. He lowered his sword calmly and raised his hands. The female general looked at the prince and smirked, "Looks like someone failed his mission, we forced your silly old prophet to tell us where you are, how pathetic," she said with a laugh, "Tie him up!" she then ordered. When the soldiers tied Prince Artem up, he took out his dagger and stabbed the soldiers, the soldiers lost hold of him and he ran away. "Stop the prince you fools! Fire!" yelled General Zelda. The soldiers threw grenades, shot with their guns and ran after the prince. The trees around the area were burnt and animals were shot, Prince Artem couldn't bear to see this and walked out from his hiding place. "Stop firing please, you are destroying the mountains! Here I am, take me instead," said the prince. "With pleasure," said Zelda, "Fire!" she ordered. Prince Artem dodged down but the bullet hit the heart of Huangshan. The blue mysterious crystal shattered and dropped to the floor.

All the plants died immediately, the sky darkened, there were animal cries in the distance. Huangshan is no longer lively and beautiful when the colours and lives fade away. "Look what you've done! You ruined the mountains! It's over!" yelled the prince in a rage. Prince Artem stormed away into the forest. He found wounded animals and took care of them using his first aid kit. He tried everything to bring the forest back to live but nothing worked. Prince Artem then said to the Ignisians "Don't stand here and do nothing! Try and fix the mess that you created!" The Ignisians recovered from shock and tried to help. There are spots of blood everywhere, the prince followed a blood

trail, leading him to a wounded leopard. “Don’t move, it will only worsen the wound,” whispered the prince, “I am here to help.” The leopard calmed down and let the prince touch it. “That’s a terrible bullet wound, this will hurt a bit,” said the prince. He then pulled the bullet out of the leopard, the animal let out a terrible scream. Blood rushed out from the wound, drenching the prince with leopard blood. Prince Artem wrapped the wound and gave the leopard some food. There was a scream in the distance, the prince ran towards the direction and found Zelda lying on the ground, she was bitten by a snake. “Calm down, stay still,” said the prince. He then sucked out the venom and covered the bite with a bandage. Zelda felt better. “How dare you hurt our general!” shouted an Ignis soldier. Before the prince could react, an arrow hitted the prince square in the chest. Prince Artem fainted and fell on the ground. Zelda ordered “The prince didn’t hurt me, he saved me. Take him to the military doctor right now!”

The Ignis military doctor took care of Prince Artem and he soon woke up. Zelda gathered the soldiers near the broken pieces of Huangshan’s heart. She said “Look at the damage we’ve done! How can we fix the heart? Let’s hope nature can forgive us,” Zelda regretfully sobbed and her tears fell on the shattered pieces of Huangshan’s heart. The pieces reformed magically and the heart slowly pieced together. “Hand out the prince I order you,” said Callan, general of Thalassius. The prophet of Thalassius sensed the prince was in danger so he and the soldiers went to save him, that is why the Thalassius soldiers were here. Prince Artem walked towards his people and said “Calm down, I am fine. Put away your weapons" Callan saw him and yelled at the Ignisians, “You wounded our Prince! How dare you! Fire, Thalassians!” “Stop right now!” ordered Prince Artem. He walked up on a stone and said “Let’s end this war! We humans have done enough harm to each other and to nature. Let’s not claim the land between our nations, let's make it nature’s. Our two countries can come together and build a new eco−system on those lands. I offer peace.” At that moment, the heart of Huangshan fully recovered and let out a bright blue light, the light was so bright that it turned the moon blue. Standing on the rock, the prince looks like he is walking between the clouds and the blue moon. “Why can’t humans coexist with nature?” said Prince Artem. “The prophecy! It’s fulfilled!” screamed the prophet. Prince Artem walked down the stone and placed the heart back to its rightful place. The plants slowly regrew, covering Huangshan with their green leaves again, with the heart in place, the colours and liveliness came back. Prince Artem stepped in front of Zelda and asked “Do you accept my offer?” Zelda replied “Yes, our countries should collaborate.” Some blue, heart shaped leaves grew around the heart of Huangshan. Ignis’s military doctor told the Thalassians according to their study, this kind of plant can cure the unknown disease. Prince Artem said “I guess nature did forgive us afterall, it is giving us a second chance. We should use it wisely.”

The Mountain

ESF Island School, Tse, May – 12

I started to run, and the branches sliced through my flesh with every step I took. “Don’t be scared, help me.” The voices were increasing in volume incrementally.

I stepped on the camp bus as I let out a shaky breath I didn’t realise I was holding. Apparently, my mom registered me for Camp HuangShan. I glanced around and noticed kids around my age. I tried my best to avoid all their stares by sitting at the back. “Hi, I’m Isabel and this is Jess, nice to meet you.” I just nodded and looked down, as I wasn’t used to others chatting with me. That was one of the reasons why my mom sent me to camp, to socialize with others. The bus halted and I glimpsed outside. We had reached Camp HuangShan.

After I signed up, the camp instructors took me to a shared cabin. There were three more girls in my cabin and we quickly got along. But there was this one girl who had dark raven hair. She was very different and refused to talk to any of us. I let it slide and walked out for lunch. I quickly learned that this mysterious girl’s name was Jade. Everyone told me to stay away from her. I was curious about why but I ignored all the questions I held in my head.

After a few days, everything was fabulous. But I still knew zilch about Jade. She never participated in any of our activities. So, I decided to do the unthinkable. I snuck back to the cabin and crawled over to Jade’s bed. She had books stored below her bed and documents of each camp member, even me! I freaked out and left the cabin immediately. But something distracting caught my eye. I looked over immediately and saw Jade sitting on the edge of a cliff, holding a knife. She spun around and smirked wickedly at me. She muttered something but I couldn’t hear it clearly since she was barely making any sound. I wonder what she’s saying. “Well, well. You.” She pointed the blade at me and started to get up gradually and walked towards me, getting faster and faster with her every step. I screamed as she chased me. I managed to escape her. “You can’t run from me.” I turned and saw Jade. She wasn’t doing anything at all. But I could have sworn I saw her chasing me. I ran past her, to my cabin.

I jumped up to my bed and covered myself with the thin blankets. It wasn’t cold but I was soaked. I was rocking back and forth, trembling and thinking about what I just saw. My insane scattered thoughts were cut short when I heard the door open. A sinking feeling crept its way into my stomach. ‘Who was in here?’ “Amelia, are you in here?” A familiar voice asked. Isabel. I immediately untangled myself from the blankets as I peered up and tried to fix my face. “Amelia, were you crying?” Isabel came over and asked me. Concern laced in her tone. “I’m fine, just tripped.” I cracked a smile. “I hope you are fine, I came over to inform you that our camp instructor planned a campfire for us tonight,” Isabel told me with a smile plastered on her face. “Sure, I will be there,” I responded and gave her a reassuring smile.

Isabel nodded and left the cabin. I decided to go out for a walk to clear my mind. ‘I probably just dreamed about everything’, I thought to myself. I put on a clean T−shirt and walked out the cabin. I observed my surroundings, there was no one. I wandered into the forest, making sure I didn’t get too far. I sat down on the soft grass and looked around with my dull eyes. I couldn’t see anyone and hoped everything I saw was just my pure imagination.

I no sooner laid down than I started hearing whispers, which got louder and stronger as if they were trying to deliver a message. I covered my ears to try to get them to stop but they were too loud. I started to run, and the branches cut through my flesh with every step I took. “Don’t be scared, help me.” Some of the voices whispered. I cried out as bolts of searing hot pain jolted through every inch of my body. Tears filled my eyes instantly and spilled over as the pain took over. I groaned and lay there in the darkness. The voices were still in my head, whispering non−stop. There was a horrible throbbing pain in the back of my head and I felt like someone was trying to rip me apart. Suddenly, everything stopped. All the whispers, murmurs stopped. I froze, and the pain was gone. I glanced around, and I could feel myself shaking. This was definitely not my imagination.

I limped back to the campsite and saw everyone getting ready for the campfire, except for a certain person. Jade. She stared at me with certain hatred with her cold dark eyes that sent chills down my spine. I ran back to my cabin and shut the door behind me. I felt a cough rising up in my chest but when I tried to release it, a painful sting came as I covered my mouth with my hand. I coughed painfully and dark red liquid came out. Blood. My breathing that was once slow got rapidly fast, only causing it to hurt even more. I slumped down on the chair and gulped, and a leftover taste of blood still laced in my mouth.

I ran to the bathroom and brushed my teeth, making sure there was no more blood. I took a clean bath and slipped on a long dress that reached down to my knees. I opened my door and stepped out of my cabin.

My breath was still unsteady as I approached the campfire where everyone was gathered at. I knew there was something twisted and wrong about this camp, although I just couldn't seem to point it out. Jade, however, could be the answer to all my questions. My eyes roamed around as I caught Jade creeping into the forest. 'Why would she go to the woods while a campfire was going on?' I followed her, creeping behind her silently. I needed answers to all of my questions. My eyes widened as I saw her approach the cliff. The same cliff where everything weird began occurring. I touched my forehead, where the sheen of sweat covering it caused a few strands of my hair sticking together. I was nervous and curious and needed to figure out what was going on.

After a few minutes, Jade turned around, and for some reason, she seemed to be able to sense me as she looked right at my direction. She looked at me and tilted her head with a twisted smile crept across her face. "Look, we have a guest. Amelia Delgado." She said as she stepped towards me. "How did you know my last name?" I questioned her in a voice that I did not recognize was mine. It was hoarse and raspy. Like someone was sucking the life out of me. "Do you feel that?" Jade chuckled darkly. "W−what are you doing to me?" I asked, engulfing a great amount of air. "I'm taking your life away from you, you Delgados. Have you ever heard that curiosity kills the cat?" Jade taunted coldly. "W−what have I ever d−done to you?" I stuttered as I felt myself get weak. "No darling, you haven't done anything to me. Your descendants have. I was just an innocent little girl here, at this camp, 70 years ago. I wanted to live life. I wanted to live, grow and die as any human being would. But your descendants were pure evil. They fed me a type of herb that made me immortal. I never got a life. I will make sure your entire family line doesn't get a life as well. I have attempted to kill your family members for years now. Only you are stupid enough to fall in my trap!" Jade shouted furiously. I almost felt bad for her.

All of a sudden, I felt air enter my lungs again. I got up and started running for my life. My legs were aching, my lungs were burning, and my head was spinning. It wasn't long before I felt myself getting woozy, and my vision started to get blurry. I knew at that moment, that it was the end of me. I let myself in as the darkness consumed me and I sank into oblivion.

Eyes of Ember

ESF Island School, Wong, Sophie – 13

"I'm cold," Elias complains, dragging his feet on the narrow stone staircase.

"What did you expect? We are walking up a mountain, in winter, at 2 am." I snort, hitching my bag higher up my shoulders. The wind cuts against my face, wildly flying my hair and making my cheeks flush. The moonlight illuminates the jagged edges of the side of the mountain, turning the dull grey stone silver under its light.

He ignores me. "We shouldn't be doing this. I was joking when I said that I would go. I didn't know you would actually take me seriously and drag me ten thousand miles away from home!"

"I needed to see something and besides, it's good for you; you've become lazy and stopped going camping with me, Kia and Liam."

"Kia, Liam and I," He corrected.

"Shut up."

"No."

"You wouldn't want to wake the dragons with your shouting and you stomping around like a giant."

"Hey! I only weigh 70 kg!" He defends.

"Whatever you say."

"I can feel the sisterly love," Elias huffs. "I wish I brought my phone."

"Knowing you, you would drop it." My steps slow as a large opening of a cave comes into view, inside pitch black.

"Tell me again why couldn't we have gone when our eyesight still worked?"

"I had to come at night." I chew on my lip and sling my bag over my shoulder, taking my phone out.

Elias' jaw dropped. "You brought *your* phone?!"

"Because I'm the more responsible twin."

"Hypocrisy at its finest."

I turn on the flashlight and point my phone to the cave, waving it around. "In my defence, the last time you brought your phone camping you lost it twice."

"Your memory is clearly not functioning properly. I lost it three times." Elias replies, his voice deadpan, as we slowly walk through the cave, the darkness swallowing us quickly. As my eyes adjust to the darkness, I almost scream as I see the number of ashes and bones littering the floor, burnt leaves and stripped branches strewn messily and dead tree branches hanging from the ceiling.

"I don't remember it looking like this," I mumble, grabbing Elias' arm tightly and running as fast as I could out through the maze of stone I knew like the back of my hand.

"Oh my gosh woman, did you just get a sugar rush and how in the hell did you know—" His voice cuts off as I reach the end of the cave, stopping suddenly, yanking him back in the process. I can hear my heartbeat as I squint, the moonlight shining directly into my eyes, and I start to make out my surroundings.

Light mist covers the large plot of land, tall pine trees with burnt tips stand near another cave entrance on the far side and cherry blossom trees fill most of the space, giving off a fragrant smell. There is some sort of a campsite built in the middle of the cherry blossoms; a tent with a sleeping bag is tucked under one of the trees and the benches around a fire pit have clumsily placed small potted plants and vegetables.

I suck in a breath as flashbacks from my dreams flicker in front of my eyes. Elias is silent as well and I turn my head towards him, his mouth open and eyebrows furrowed.

"Are you okay?" I start to get worried as he continues to gape at the landscape.

"How—" He struggles to find words. "Ash, how do you know this place?"

"*That*, right. Well, uh, I've been having the same dream about Huangshan every day for about a month and—"

"Hold on a minute. *This* is Huangshan?!"

"—Yes?" I say timidly.

He glares at me and I brace myself for the impact. "This mountain is dangerous for a reason! Do you know how many people have been here and never came back? Hell, even our brother disappeared here and we haven't seen him for two years—"

I cut him off. "Which is exactly why I need to explain everything to you before we might die."

Elias looks up and starts mumbling incoherent words under his breath. I stare at him weirdly, "What are you doing?"

"I'm praying to God."

I roll my eyes, slapping him across the head as he yelps in pain, rubbing the sore spot. "I've been having dreams that—" I pause, uncertain. "That Exton is still alive."

Elias is staring at me, a dumbfounded on his face. I rush to continue before he runs away. "I—I know it sounds stupid, I mean it's impossible our brother is alive but every night I dreamt about this mountain and— and I sound stupid."

"A bit," Elias admits. "Although it sounds too coincidental that all of this is happening around the day he went missing. And an entire campsite is on a secluded mountain. And out of everything, the plants are still alive—"

Elias suddenly stops and I look at him questioningly. I see realisation wash over his eyes. "The plants are still alive, the fire is suddenly lit—"

I jerk my head to look at the fire pit.

"Ash—"

"Shush!" My heart starts pounding rapidly as I drag Elias by the arm behind a cherry blossom tree, and we stay quiet for a few seconds.

A low growl comes from behind me, and I slowly turn around to lock eyes with a large reddish—brown dragon. I let out a large scream as Elias grabs my hand and we run into the cave next to the pine trees, just as something explodes behind us. I'm still in a state of shock as we find a small space to squeeze into the cave, our breathing the only thing audible besides the loud growls of the dragon from outside the cave.

Elias says, “I should explain something to you.” at the same time as I say, “I think I insulted the dragon with the comment from earlier.”

Silence settles between us. “Eli, I think I’ve gone crazy.”

He begins to say something but I cut him off. “I’ve gone crazy!” I burst into laughter. “Or I’m hallucinating—”

Something flickers in his eyes. “You’re not dreaming or hallucinating, Ash.”

I snicker. “And you want to tell me that dragons exist?”

The ceiling above us suddenly crumbles down and I scream. Elias grabs my hand once again and drags me out, pulling me behind one of the pine trees.

“Oh my gosh! This is real, oh my gosh. It can’t be real, can it Eli? Why are dragons real? How are—” Elias slaps his hand over my mouth as I continue to panic.

Overwhelmed, I yank Elias’ hand off of my mouth and start to run towards the cave to go back, but I am met with two glowing orange eyes.

The dragon’s eyes bore into mine and everything happens in a blur. A large purple forcefield–looking shield is around me as a fireball made out of lava crashes down against it. I shriek as the lava melts through the forcefield and drips onto my skin.

Unimaginable heat and pain shoot through my arm and it feels as if I’ve dipped my arm into hot coal. I let out an ear–shattering scream as I see Elias run towards me in my peripheral vision, waving his hand in a circular motion, muttering something under his breath. Another shield is placed around us as the dragon continues to pelt it with lava.

Tears rapidly fall onto my cheeks as my entire arm suddenly goes numb and now feels like I’ve dipped my arm into dry ice. I can see Elias saying something to me but I can’t hear anything as I continue to scream even louder than I thought was possible, my arm throbbing, scalding and freezing all at once.

“Eli! Make it stop!” I plead, covering my ears with my hands. “Please!”

Panic and fear are evident on his face as his eyes turn a deep purple, his eyes fixed onto my arm.

“Eli?” I cry, scared to death as the colour of his eyes stay purple. “What are you doing? Come back!” Tears gather in my eyes again. “Eli!”

His eyes continue to glow and the pain in my arm starts to slowly fade away. After a few seconds, his eyes slowly return to their normal brown, the forcefield disappearing with it. I screech as he starts to reach for me.

“Ash, ASH! Calm down, everything is alright! I’m here, it’s me!”

“No!” I run away from him back towards the cave when the dragon suddenly appears out of nowhere and lands right in front of me. I scream, my heart dropping to my stomach as the dragon narrows his eyes at me.

In a blink of the eye, the dragon shifts and shrinks into a tall, tanned boy with the same black hair as mine, the same smile I used to remember, everything I used to know but with eyes of ember.

The Village Lost to the Mist

ESF Island School, Woo, Isabelle – 13

Kasumi was an orphan. Like all orphans, she had no mom or dad. She had her orphan friends and her strict master. That was the world she knew. She has never left the orphanage. Being a disciplined child, she was smart and spent the majority of her time studying. Yet she always had a sad, nostalgic feeling. Something she couldn't remember. Something she wanted to remember. She didn't know where she was from. Her master told her that her parents left her at the end of the river and never came back. She learned to accept that over the years. She wasn't wanted or needed. That was her life.

Her bedroom overlooked these ominous looking mountains. They were alluring, always covered by a hazy and delicate fog, she always wanted to go see them, but she knew she can't just leave the orphanage. Actually, come to think of it, she never sees anything beyond the mountains. The fog always covered everything. She never questioned it though. Well, until now.

On her 16th birthday, her mischievous, reckless friend Kiriko ran up to her and said "Hey Kasumi, you wanna come camping with me?! You better come! It would be fun, and before you object to all the stuff we do like normal, please note, it's your 16th birthday and I don't want you to die an old lady with regrets of how you spent your life filing useless pieces of paperwork."

Kasumi was somewhat, taken aback you could say. Usually, Kiriko gave up arguing after a minute or two, she was short–tempered like that, she doesn't put up a fight or give the reasoning for her ridiculous requests. So clearly there was a catch.

Kasumi questioned, "Did you get permission from master?"

"No."

"Course you didn't, your going to sneak out again, aren't you. I really don't understand why I never tell on you, honestly."

"Because I'm one of the few people you talk to at this orphanage obviously. I'm like your one piece of emotional support you have, come on your 16, you never go anywhere and you have like minimal friends."

"I have Akana and I don't go anywhere because there's nowhere to go!"

"Akana is a freaking cat! You're such a killjoy. Guess you won't be coming to the mountains with me then." said Kiriko with a smug look on her face.

Well, this isn't fair, she didn't tell me we were going to see the mountains. If there was one thing Kasumi wanted to see in her life, that was mountains outside her window. She only ever seen them from a distance, the fog and the towering looking cliffs patched with green. It sounded like they came from dreams, so close in your head yet so far. As Kasumi was deep in thought, Kiriko was rambling something about how she was going to keep it a surprise but got too excited. By the time her rant was over, Kasumi made up her mind.

"Fine, I'll come."

"HAH, YES I KNEW IT!"

Kasumi gave her friend a large eye–roll packed with a small smile.

And so now it's midnight, two days later and Kasumi is about to go on her first adventure for the first time in her life. She and Kiriko dainty tiptoed out, with huge backpacks slung over their shoulders, in the dead of the night, being sure not to wake the master.

They journeyed up the misty mountains, slowly making their way up. Passing by marigold glowing fireflies under a blanket of twinkling stars. They didn't even need flashlights, the enchanting atmosphere lit everything up for them, It was quite magical like a pretty painting came to life. The mist freely parted and let them through, like it was welcoming them into the mountain. By morning, they made it up to the peak. It was sunrise, and it was breathtaking, Kasumi had never really seen anything like it. Red, orange, yellow, washed over the sky like a spilled paint bucket.

They stopped at an abandoned village to rest. It felt so good, the fresh, minty–frost, morning wind blowing through her messy raven black hair. It was so peaceful, as morning songbirds sang mellifluous melodies…

Wooshhh….

A sudden chilling whistling cold washed over her, and it made Kasumi shiver right down to her bones. The hair at the back of her neck raised up, indicating that something wasn't right. Kiriko looked at her in blatant confusion, clearly unaware and unaffected by the sudden change of feeling. The songbirds started singing a melancholy melody. And Kasumi's eyes widened with realization. She knew this song. She knows it right from the deep core of her heart. But why doesn't she remember? Why? The song, this song, she doesn't remember hearing it yet she knows it.

Hmmmm…hmmm..hmmm..

Kasumi whipped her head around. Kiriko too.

"Did you hear that?" Kasumi whispered in a quivering voice.

"Uh–huh yeah, there humming to the melody of the birds."

"I didn't know people lived here."

"They don't."

A petrifying silence followed after that. The wind fell to a standstill and the thick fog started to cloud in surrounding them like they overstayed their welcome.

"We should get out of here." Kiriko whimpered

"Agreed."

They got up as fast as possible and started to exit the village, and started walking at a fast pace. The fog was picking up on the mountain, and it was getting more difficult to see. Clouding their view they could barely see 5 feet in front of them. They walked for a long while through the village and Kasumi began to wonder why it was taking so long for them to leave.

"Hey didn't we pass by this archway before? I could have sworn I– Kiriko, were going in circles."

"What?! We're walking in a straight line."

"It doesn't matter we're going in circles…"

It was at this point Kasumi started to get scared, *this isn't good.* She thought. She began to scan the area for another exit other than the one they came through. It was ever so hard to look through the fog but she soon saw an old–looking temple in the distance with an exit on the other side.

"Kiriko let's go there. It looks like an exit, come on."

They started running out of panic, and desperation to leave the abandoned village. When they reached the temple, an odd, ominous, strong wind blew against them, howling through the empty temple, pushing them in. Inside the temple, it was dark and cold. Overgrown vines were everywhere and there was rubble and dust littered here and there.

"There look, it's an exit!"

A solid milky fog blocked the exit, not thinking Kasumi ran through and tripped on the stairs…

Owwwww She thought.

She took in her surroundings.

There was a crowd, full of bustling people.

She was in the market.

Wait wait wait, a market?! WAIT. WHERES KIRIKO?!

She frantically turned her head left and right, the worried expression ever slowly growing on her face.

Where am I?

The Secrets of Huang Shan

ESF King George V School, Kim, Yerim – 12

The mysterious mountains had finally appeared. It was known to be one of the most beautiful and magical places in the world. The peaks of the sharply shaped mountains were able to be seen through what looked like lightly floating white cotton candy and were still striking up into the sky. Alysha wished that she had six more eyes to take in the breathtaking view at once. She couldn't believe what she was staring at. A spot of yellow was glowing above her dancing, shining on the villages which had scratches on the gates of every entrance. It was so beautiful. Right at the start, stood an oak–wood sign that was partially peeling off, barely visibly written: 'Huang Shan', in bright yellow strokes. Her name was Alysha. She had to figure out for herself.

Rumors of 'Rahn the Eternity' had spread. Legend has it, if you were able to make it to the top of the mountain, you will be able to live for eternity. But no one has ever made it through the hard challenges… ever.

Alysha quickly took a step. Except from the fact that as she tried to take another step, her foot wouldn't budge as if her feet had grown root. In fact, she was sinking down.

It was quicksand. More movement would only cause her to sink more, but she couldn't let that happen, it was only her first move.

"So this is how it works." At first, she felt confident. She had prepared as much as she could carry, and she expected it to be empty when she reached the top; she hurriedly got a pole from inside and extended it. She placed it under her hips and leaned backwards calmly waiting until her legs flung to the surface. She grabbed the dirt beside and pulled herself to it. Then Alysha quickly extended her elbows and got up before anything worse happened.

She had passed the first level. Although not in the cleanest way; but she didn't mind, even if she did, there wasn't any time to consider.

As she went on, the path was leading to a vent through the middle of nowhere. The vent didn't look dangerous at all, but Alysha was assuming it was (to call it as a challenge at least).

Alysha jumped straight into the vent, and as she did so and crawled cautiously forward, the opening of the vent slammed closed and she began to feel fear. As she went, there were two paths to her left and right, and still one continuing forwards. *Which path do I take?* She was physically well–trained for months before she came here but she didn't know there would be mind games, too – because no one actually came back from HuangShan. But one more thing… something she was forgetting about. There was the smell of smoke.

As soon as she realised, two big blasts of fire came from her left and right and quickly she slid through the metal vent. One arm blocking her nose, opening her eyes as much as she could, she used all her strength to open the opening of the vent. Quickly, she escaped and slammed the vent closed like it did to her in the beginning. When she did, it was a completely different place. The path was no different. However, the ground was much softer. It was a desert.

Flustered, she continued to walk, whilst covering her eyes making sure for the sand not to go into her eyes.

"Wait.." she paused.

"Why *is* it windy, there mustn't be," she looked in all directions making sure nothing was wrong. Unsurprisingly, there *was* something wrong. Something *very* wrong.

From behind her was a wide, tall bush of fog coming closer and closer towards her. Why wouldn't there be a sandstorm among these challenges? Alysha tightened her backpack and got ready to run. Sprinting, she rapidly went as far as she could go until she reached two large boulders that looked as if they were placed there for her to use. She went to the end of one rock and pushed it with all she could until the two rocks hit. Anxious behind these big rocks, not being able to see what was happening behind her, she waited.

Soon, all was silent. She had only finished the third adventure, but it felt like almost a day had past. From her bag she pulled out her bottle that was filled before she had come. She gulped the soothing liquid inside and soon she had drank roughly half of what she had brought. And food… She desired to eat it so much, but she left it as it was and stood up.

But something caught her eye. Bones of people! And as she dug up, revealed dinosaur fossils! Could it really be? In case, she ran towards it and put all she could find in her bag. Now, it had really been time to move before night. As she went on now, she only looked at what was ahead of her, and how much left she had to go. A lesson she had learnt on this journey.

A door that seemed to be old was in front. To the right of the opening, had a keypad that seemed like a passcode to open the door; on top, it had a green sign reading, 'EXIT'. *'How do I open it?'* she thought.

Until she observed a few black lines. Just a few… 'Is that a 1?" she mumbled, there was a straight black line on the left of the 'E'.

"Another one!" There was the exact identical line on the side of the 'I'. And...

"A 7!" she exclaimed. A '7' was illuminated under the left sector of the 'T'. Next to the rusty keypad was a spray painted star. She breathed out. With her delicate hands Alysha tapped the numeric pad in order:

"1.. 1.. 7.. star." as she muttered, the door opened to either side and it seemed to be an elevator! When she entered, the lift shaked and like before the door slammed right after her. As it did, scared to move at all, she stood motionless. The lift slowly went up, the light flickering.

After a few seconds in the dim light, the lift had stopped. When Alysha cautiously stepped out, she was shocked by what stood in front of her.

By now, she had forgotten why she had come here in the first place: to meet eternity.

A large throne was waiting for her, painted golden and covered with velvet. On the throne, a tall woman with a white dress was sitting with her legs crossed on the colossal chair. As she speaked, her voice echoed around the horizons of HuangShan.

"Would you like to live eternity?" The woman that was most likely 'Rahn the Eternity' asked her.

"Emm.. Yes."

"Welcome, I am Rahn. I may teach you 'eternity' as I cannot show you. Until now, you have climbed HuangShan with courage, I have seen; sometimes you sank down, sometimes you felt empty and scared. But you have overcome it which is what leads you here. Another word that is known for what some call 'eternity' is, 'happiness'. Since you are the first one to arrive here, I expect you to share this information with those you love and not be selfish with this. Now, are you ready?"

"Yes," Alysha replied, excited to hear a secret no one else has before.

"Be happy and grateful. You will then live eternity!" Rahn said this as if it was a joke.

"Actually, I came all the way here to– I already am grateful–"

"Bup." she raised a finger to her lips.

"You came here to find eternity, I know. Now trust me. You may now exit with the elevator there. You know the passcode." she then returned to the position she was before Alysha had come. *'Will she be here forever?'*

This time, the door was much bigger and it seemed more rusty, besides that it looked the same. Alysha took the long ride back. Thinking: *'Is this really the way to happiness... eternity?'* She had never expected this sort of answer. Through the lift, she heard the faint voice of Rahn.

"This path will take you to your beginning. And don't worry you will not forget anything. Use the secret. I wish I knew this when I was young." This wasn't just an elevator this time. It was a time machine.

When the door opened, she stepped out. In front, nothing was visible but a bright light that almost blinded her eyes. She squinted and before her last step, she stopped and thought. Tomorrow she will have a complete new start. Achieving new goals.

Still not sure if this was the truth, Alysha couldn't help but smile. So wide that it looked as if her lips would tear apart. And as she did so, she stepped into the bright light...

Mountains Calling

ESF King George V School, Mishra, Athy – 12

My life was pretty average until I got the dream. I was standing on the edge of a narrow cliff gazing at the misty clouds that stretched as far as the eye can see, as they wrapped themselves around the emerald peaks that dotted the landscape, that's when a deep voice came from behind me and said 2 words: "Bodhi Dharma". I woke up with a start. Ivory rays fell upon my white bedsheet as the birds chirped their songs. I glanced at my MUJI MX50 alarm clock, 5:00 AM Monday. I wandered out the door and got ready for school thinking about only one thing, what was that dream about? I strolled out the door and onto the grassy lawn where the bus stopped. Soon enough the dented and rusty amber school bus came to stop.As I sat down on my blue leather seat, I could only think of one thing, The Dream. Where was it? Who is Bodhi Dharma? What did he do? Why me?

As we reached school, we ran out of the putrid rectangle on wheels and breathed in a gulp of fresh air. Our school was a small building that was made of glass, bricks and concrete. It was surrounded by a forest full of oak trees that occasionally grew acorns for us to pick and feed to the squirrels. In the class, I sat down on my black chair and waited for Ms. Hammond, our teacher to arrive. After a while of anticipation, Ms.Hammond, our maths teacher walked into the classroom. She had black hair, was wearing glasses and had a black sweater with a pink scarf that Clarrise gifted her on her birthday. "In our first lesson we will learn about the wonders of Algebra" She started the lesson but I just couldn't focus. The letters and words on the blackboard started to dance and jiggle until they formed pictures of mountains, the world was coming to a blur, I was feeling dizzy yet my mind just focused on one thing: "Bodhi Dharma" . Before I knew it, I heard the loud shriek of the school bell. Class dismissed.

I boarded the rust bucket and sat quietly on the way home.I flung myself onto my soft mattress hoping to sleep like a baby but guess what? I had the same dream that night. I could not take it anymore so after school that next day, I told everything to my mum. Strangely she told me that I could use her library card and research as much as I wanted about it. My mom was a scientist so her telling me to research was normal, but something as absurd as this? I strolled down to the glass and wood building with bold letters on it saying: Irvine Public Library. I strolled down to aisle 12 section BD22 and pulled out a book named "Bodhi Dharman – The Mystic Sage" From that day onwards I would go to the library everyday and research more and more.

On Thursday 11 February, one day before Chinese New Year, I was going through my favourite travel vloggers post when my eye got caught on one image. It was an image of misty clouds wrapping themselves around the emerald paks and abalone cliffs that dotted the landscape. It looked exactly like my dream. Suddenly I heard the whooshing, the light drumming and the deep voice from behind me: "Bodhi Dharma". I knew that I had to get there immediately , to answer all my questions.

After taking permission from my mother, who surprisingly was happy on my decision, I hopped onto a grey Toyota Camry headed towards LA Airport. I rushed to check in at Terminal 3 aisle D6 for my China Air flight. The flight was going to be 19 hours long. I sat down on my seat in Economy class aisle 42 seat B. I was tired and slept, eagerly waiting for the flight to land at ZhengZhou Airport ,China.

I quickly received my luggage, passed the glass and concrete immigration stalls and exited the airport where there was a chinese driver holding a placard that read Peter Dharman, my name. We boarded the white Toyota Innova Crysta and headed on our way to the Shaolin temple in DengFeng HeNan. Soon we arrived and I was standing in a black and red pagoda with intricate patterns of gold dragons, monks and warriors on the roof. I had arrived at the most famous temple on Planet Earth: The Shaolin Temple. I walked over to a ledge and as I gazed at the scene that lay before me, I saw those very same misty clouds wrapping themselves around the emerald peaks and abalone cliffs. It was exactly like the dream. I felt so good. I felt happy and satisfied and felt like I had actually achieved something. Suddenly I heard that very same deep voice. "Bodhi Dharma" This time, rather than annoyed, I felt happy. I looked behind me and saw a huge ivory statue of some sage. I walked over to it and read a golden plaque on it that said in big letters: **Bodhi Dharma.**

As I stood mesmerized, the saint from the Shaolin temple came and greeted me " Nai Hao Dharman ". I know you have many unanswered questions and we were waiting for you for a long time. We knew you would come to the land of your great grandfather, Bodhi Dharma. I was shocked and had no clue what he was talking about. He kept on telling the story of Bodhi Dharma.

1504 Years ago in 517 AD, a plague had struck China. Thousands of people were dying per day. The skies filled with murky grey sadness and red clouds of death. Life had come to a halt. This virus neither had a cure nor was preventable for it had been spread by black flies hence its name: Black Fly Virus. Inside the jade halls on a gold throne embedded with dragons, The chinese emperor issued an order to send messengers to all the stretches of the world to find a cure. One such messenger was Huang Shu Di. He travelled and travelled for ages and ages and asked many people in order to find a cure but he came to no prevail He was about to give up and return to China when one day he emerged from a forest of mystical Banyan Trees and entered the kingdom of Kanchipuram in Tamil Nadu, India.

He wandered into the palace ornate with carrera marble, black onyx, Ivory and gold. He passed the diamond encrusted halls and entered the outdoor gathering area. There was the queen who was a beautiful woman covered in majestic white silk robes, The prince, Bodhi Dharma who was a bearded man sitting on a red and gold throne and opposite of him sat a sage with a weird hairstyle and a long white beard. As Huang Shu stood amazed, the Queen said "What is the reason for your arrival". Huang Shu Di said "I bring a message from the emperor of China, a great plague has taken China, thousands of people are dying everyday. Please save our country from the Black Fly Virus" . The Queen replied,,"We too had this virus years ago but we have cured it, and as a gesture of friendship and support to China we will send our Prince Bodhi Dharma to China". He will teach everyone how to fight this virus and make your body so strong that in future you don't have to face such situations anymore.

Bodhidharma showed Huang around the kingdom and explained that they fought the virus by eating the right foods and by practicing martial arts. While visiting the school, Huang saw some people were fighting each other. He asked why people in India fight each other ? Bodhidharma explained that they were not fighting but they were practicing martial arts. It would make their bodies strong and immune. It's the best way to make our body strong not only from outside but also from inside.

The next day, Bodhidharma and Huang Shu Di boarded a Huge wooden sailboat and set sail to china. They travelled on vast seas and oceans and eventually reached the mountains surrounding the great Shaolin Temple. Bodhi Dharman understood the lifestyle of Chinese people and taught them to eat more vegetables and fruits, do Karupatti which was martial arts from India and later became Kung Fu. Bodhi Dharman also brought art and science of Ayurveda which helped to develop into Chinese medicine based on plants and herbs. Together they fought the deadly virus and made China free of this disease. The king declared Bodhi Dharman as one of the great Masters of China and people still follow his teachings.

Today when a new deadly virus COVID spread again in China, Master Bodhi Dharman, sent his messenger – his great grandson Peter Dharman to save this world once again. Welcome home Mr Dharman!

Tales from China's Magical Mountains

ESF King George V School, Sun, Rosie – 12

There's a reason Huangshan is barren, a reason that goes back way before anyone can remember, a reason that has nearly been lost with time's erosion.

The legends say that it used to be green. It used to be absolutely bursting with life and color from each nook and cranny. It used to be a beautiful place, full of trees and colorful birds dashing by, their song echoing through the woods.

That's how it used to be.

Now it's a misty, lonely place, where trees grow through solid rock at the edges of mountains, with nothing to help them but the instinct to live.

And yes, there is a reason why it's like this.

It all began back when villages flourished there. The records say that they were so in touch with nature that they could communicate with the birds and squirrels. Whether that was true is uncertain, but it is for sure that they were content and happy with their lives.

The clouds listened to them and provided them rain when they needed it, and hid away when they needed sunshine. The trees grew tall and provided the sweetest fruit in all the land. And above in the skies resided the dragon that controlled them all.

The dragon was huge– so huge that he could easily block the sun if he wished. But he trusted and cared for the villagers, and in return, the villagers cared for the forest– kept it alive, cherished it, protected it.

For everyone knew that the forest was exactly what the dragon's heart was like. If the dragon was happy, the forest flourished. If the dragon for any reason was discontent, then the trees would begin to shrivel, the birds would begin to lose their voices, and the villagers would soon find themselves without a home.

So the villagers sang praises of the great dragon, which helped them in times of need and made sure they lived happily.

But the dragon had a weakness.

The dragon kept his greatest secret in a wooden box down in the well. He ordered the villagers never to go looking for the box, or if they were to find it, never to open it. The villagers agreed to this. For thousands of years, people kept asking their friends and family the same question: "What is in that box?" But they did not wish to anger the dragon, for their lives depended on it, so generations died without getting closer to finding the truth.

Until a young boy was born.

The boy had always been a troublesome child, always doing the opposite of what he was told. The villagers quietly whispered amongst themselves that he would never do anything good. But secretly he had a plan.

He was going to find the box.

The boy had never been told of the box with the secret inside. His parents had never told him about it, since they knew that he would almost certainly go looking for it. But he'd heard about it, nevertheless, from his friends.

So he set out into the woods one day.

As he kept walking, the trees began to get thinner and thinner, until they looked like dead, gnarled fingers sticking out of the ground. The birdsong went from a symphony to a dull muted whisper to silence. Soon, he could hear nothing except his footsteps crunching on mud.

He smiled. This was good. He was getting close.

"Don't go there," a small voice whispered.

He turned around and noticed a small squirrel perched in the trees.

"Don't go there," the squirrel whispered again. "It's dangerous. You don't know what the dragon will do."

The boy laughed. It echoed through the empty wood. "Don't be ridiculous. Everyone knows the dragon will love us no matter what."

The squirrel sighed. "I'm telling you, don't! It's lucky you're going the opposite direction any–" The squirrel quickly clapped its hand to its mouth. "I shouldn't have said that!"

The boy laughed. "Thanks for your help." He smirked and set off in the opposite direction.

It wasn't long before he came across a clearing. In the middle was a stone well with a wooden frame that was falling apart and creaking due to old age. It hadn't been used in a while. The boy immediately knew that the secret was hidden here.

He turned the rust–coated handle. It creaked and croaked, but he could see the rusted bucket was coming up.

A small wooden box was nested inside.

The boy smiled and drew it out, before flipping the lid open.

A small piece of paper was curled up in the middle.

He pulled it out. Something was written on it.

A single word.

This was the word that would send their lives into danger.

He could turn back now.

Would he?

The boy opened the paper.

Two characters were written.

"不满," he read out loud. "Discontentment."

The words were foreign on his lips. He'd never said them before. He'd never experienced them before. He didn't know what it meant.

He looked up towards the sky.

"You see this, dragon?" he shouted, waving the paper at the sky. "I've discovered your little secret with this nonsensical word. I win!"

The boy ran back home.

The village had gone looking for him. They were all running through the forest with lanterns, calling his name. The boy scrunched up the paper in his fist and thrust it in his pocket.

"Thank goodness you're here!" the man shouted. "We were so scared that you were gone!"

The rest of the village clustered around him and let him sleep.

"We were worried about you," his mother called. "Don't run away again. Are you feeling hungry?"

He ate his food reluctantly. However, he could see his mother had changed. Her forehead showed worry lines now.

"It's a pity we don't have much food today," his mother said. "I wonder how we lived like this before! Look at our shabby little house. We need to improve it. And look at your shirt– slightly torn– oh, how poor our fortune is!"

The boy looked outside the window.

All the villagers outside were discontent. Unhappy with this. Unhappy with that.

"I don't think the weather is good enough today. It's just two degrees too hot for my liking."

"Look at this dreadful jacket? Can you imagine how poorly it's made? Purple, too! Who ever heard of a purple jacket?"

"The trees are too tall. Whoever made the trees so tall? Too hard to get fruit."

"What do you mean? The trees are too short! No good for climbing."

The boy realized, for the first time, that this was discontentment– the greatest curse of all.

The dragon woke up to check on his village friends.

What he saw appalled him.

Weather not good? Jackets not perfect? Trees too tall or short?

His greatest secret had been uncovered!

The people the dragon trusted had betrayed him. They were grumbling about everything now, unhappy about this, unhappy about that, in a world that was otherwise perfect!

"Mankind is never content," he thought to himself.

So his heart turned grey and malicious.

The forest did, as well. The trees perished. The grass that once grew on the side of the mountains perished. A heavy mist grew over the land.

The villagers, one by one, left the wretched mountains. The dragon was all alone now, looking over what had once been a beautiful place.

Discontentment had ruined it all.

The Tale of Nine Dragons Waterfall

ESF King George V School, Wong, Adelaide – 12

"Dad, don't you think that waterfall kinda looks like a dragon?" exclaimed a small boy, clutching the hand of his father in the crowd of tourists.

"I suppose it does, because this is called Nine Dragon Waterfall after all…there's a story about it though," replied the father.

"Tell me! Tell me! Please?"

"Alright then. Let me tell you……"

———

Once upon a time,

There was a mountain that soared higher than the steeples. Clouds clothed the peaks with a blanket of thick mist, ancient stone steps twisted and turned like snakes across the nooks and crannies of the mountain. During the winter, the snow embraced the cliffs in a sweater of white, and during the spring, between the ancient pine trees were signs of life everywhere: pawprints of a Mongolian wolf, the hoofprints of an ox, the feathers of a pheasant, the occasional shrieking of a macaque, and the budding blossoms of sprouts ready to reach their green hands towards the warm sunlight.

The great mountain was known as the Yellow Emperor's mountains, or more simply, Huangshan.

In the great mountains, there was a small trickling waterfall.

Behind the waterfall was a paradise of nature where cranes flocked in vast numbers to drink in the glistening waters and where silver–furred wolves, graceful tawny deer and swinging, hooting monkeys roamed the land.

The King of Heavens wanted the secret paradise to be a sanctuary for animals only. So, he appointed one of the most truthful creatures, the dragons, to be the secret passage between the lands.

Behind this waterfall, was the secret home of these magnificent creatures.

——

Amongst the nine dragons who lived in this secret wonderland was a young dragon named Xue. Xue had pearly white scales that reflected shades of lavender, peach, and mint, flowing whiskers and luscious horns, and soft, forest green eyes.

Xue enjoyed slipping through the passageways to the mountains and ventured on adventures, despite her companions relentlessly warning her not to leave Huangshan, as them, the mysterious creatures could only survive in this secret land.

———

One day, when Xue meandered through the snowy riverbanks in the tall reeds, she heard a loud wailing sound, unlike anything she had heard before, and followed the sound to a frosted rock as the first snows began to fall.

Swaddled in a thin cotton blanket, was a small baby boy.

Xue had never seen a human before and had no reason to help any human being, but Xue had reason to help a small, abandoned, defenseless child in the middle of a freezing winter.

She took the child back to the world behind the falls and named the child Huang. When wrapping the child in warm furs, she discovered a golden charm of an intricate dragon buried inside.

Xue raised the child as if he were her own. She taught Huang how to climb trees and swim across lakes, how to find food and how to find his way through the mountains. She even taught how to communicate with the inhabitants of Huangshan, but most importantly, lessons of kindness, patience, and bravery.

The two of them splashed in the frothing brooks in spring, ran through the meadows in summer amongst the herds of deer, leaped in the scarlet piles of leaves in autumn as flocks of cranes migrated, and brushed through the snows with the wolves.

Later, when Huang reached a more mature age, he even learnt to start fires with stones and was taught to speak Human.

Despite his recent maturities, Huang never shunned Xue and enjoyed his life thoroughly in the mountains. He raced the wolves in the meadows, climbed the giant ginkgo trees with the monkeys, and fished with the cranes at the twisting rivers.

Their life was peaceful, and happy. Or it was, for a while.

One day, Xue and Huang decided to go on an adventure. They slipped through the waterfall gateway into the mountains. The two of them scurried through the grass, but were stopped in their tracks by a large, thumping noise.

"What's that?"

Xue flicked her tail and ducked lower into the grass. Not long after, dozens of shadows approached, blocking out the light of the sun. Xue's heart pounded rapidly. Humans? What were humans doing in the mountains? She yanked Huang under a bush quickly.

"We should stop and rest soon," growled a deep voice.

"Shouldn't we keep going?" replied another anxious, low voice.

"No, this is pointless," groaned the first.

"Look, the emperor is sick! And we need to find his heir fast, otherwise the kingdom might fall to pieces. So, what do you think is more important, carrying out the mission or resting your feet?" snapped a reedy voice.

"But the army's been searching for over fifteen years. How are we supposed to find him? There are so many places in China the heir could be," moaned the first voice.

"Remember, the heir should have an intricate, golden charm of a dragon! Now hurry up, we'll be moving out of the mountains before sunset," barked the reedy voice.

Xue yanked Huang away and dragged him all the way back to the secret entrance at the falls. Not looking back, she hauled him through the water and all the way back into the cave.

"What was that, Xue?" asked Huang.

With her jaw clenched, Xue snorted in exasperation and tromped away to a shadowed part of the cave. A heavy silence filled the hollow.

"Hey Xue, please don't tell me I was that missing child…" mumbled Huang.

Xue stared in shock at him.

He shrugged sheepishly. "I found the charm in the blanket a couple years ago. I didn't know what it meant until now…You don't want me to go, right? Please don't make me go…I know you would be sad if I go…"

Xue rolled over and glared at him. "I will miss you terribly…but your people need you…your country needs you. I would be selfish if I try to keep you here".

Huang's eyes filled with tears. His mouth went dry as he attempted to answer her.

Xue's eyes softened. Sadness and dread rushed through her head like a river. "Come, let me take you back home." She swallowed down an ember of sorrow down her throat.

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Xue and Huang soared over the clouds, cutting through the sky as they tracked the movements of the marching men. Just as they were about to cross over the final stretch and ridges of the mountains, down towards the camp in which the army had made, Xue hesitated and hovered in the air before taking a nervous gulp. Xue knew, if she left the mountains and touched the ground, she would be vanished in the air.

She soared down towards the men, the air rushing past her face, and as soon as her feet gently touched upon the grass, her legs began to crust over in a layer of gray stone. Slowly by slowly, the gray stone stretched across her body and cracked across her face. Huang gaped in horror.

"Goodbye, dear…" rasped Xue as the gray crept across her chin and began its ascent to Xue's horns. As reached out towards the dragon, the stone finished its job and all was left was a statue of a dragon, frozen in mid–flight, with an expression of fear and sadness.

"Xue…" he whispered.

The statue crumbled into dust and disappeared.

"I'll never forget you."

–––

Years later, in the great palaces, there lived an emperor who was patient, compassionate and brave. He treated all his subjects with kindness and was beloved by all his people.

However, every day at dawn, he stands by his windows and watches the sun rise over an enormous range of mountains that he once called home, where he lived with a wonderful, kind white dragon who had taught him through life's greatest lessons and had made him the person he was that day.

One day, he returned by himself to his former home and stood in silence in front of the waterfall which was the entrance to where he had once called home. He could never return to it, ever again.

However, when he turned to leave, he spotted something strange. The waterfall was now made up of several rock ridges, that glistened peach, mint and lavender in the warm sunlight. One rock looked as if it was an eye, filled with kindness and sadness at the same time.

He smiled to himself. At least Xue was at peace now.

Many years later, after the emperor was long gone, people told stories of his generosity and patience, and the way he had ruled his people. Like Xue, he was never truly gone, for people remembered him, day after day.

Not only that, but the mountains where he once lived are named after him, and the unlikely guardian who had come to love him and help him no matter what.

Do you know that place?

We call it Huangshan.

The Fountain of Huangshan

ESF Sha Tin College, Fung, Marcus – 13

It was a dark night. The primeval trees stood against the howling wind. A faint light reflected the rough rocks. A thick blanket of snow covered the stairs. From afar, you could see a faint curtain of slithering smoke crawling away to the sky. A tattered tent sat on a loose cliff. A fire burnt outside the tent, twirling in a fiery dance. A man climbed out of the canvas. He sighed and put out the fire with his feet.

Suddenly, cracks formed on the tall cliff. The man, shocked, leaped for the mountainside. He barely held on before the cliffside, along with his tent, fell down to the unknown abyss. The man was limping heavily as he moved. He held a torch. His face was half–lit by its feeble fire. His body was full of wounds, bloodstains on his ragged clothes. A haze of smoke blinded the man's eyes. He carried a bag, heavy as a boulder. Dazed from his injuries, he had no idea where to go, he was just faltering, on and on.

There was a snow storm, turning the sky into a swirling white storm of screaming darkness. The biting cold numbed the man's face and fingers. The cold seeped into his toes and stalked him through the mountain steps. A twist of fate for the man, a large cave was around the corner. It was a gaping hole in the mountainside. Although the man found shelter, a cold chill ran down his spine. Inky black water covered the floor. Light didn't reach the ceiling, walls nor the floor, there was only a pitch dark void. The man took an unlit torch out of his bag and lit it with his flint and steel. The bright light shone like the sun in an uncanny darkness and blinded the man's eyes for a brief moment. There were countless tunnel openings on the cave wall. The tunnels were like the arteries of the earth. They went on and on without an end of sight or possibility of sunlight.

This man who was resting in the mountain cave was in the Huangshan Mountains. Searching for a sacred power. He was looking for a sanctuary. A temple hand built by the ancient civilizations. Rumors were that inside the temple was a thing so unimaginable that it wiped out the very same people within months. Almost no trace as to where they went. The man needed to know. He had searched for it for almost thirteen years. Tracking the message from Italy to Mexico, from Russia to Egypt. After these twelve years of dead–ends and collecting hints or clues, all sources pointed to the Huangshan Mountains in China.

Still suffering from the cold, which was slowly invading his internal heat. The man was clinging on to his life. The man was tired. Unable to walk. He tried to sleep, to escape this frozen hell. He closed his eyes for a brief second only to open them and find himself in a hallway. A perfect arch made of sandstone and brick walls hemmed the man.
A soft welcoming voice echoed "Look for the fire..."
The man closed his eyes again. He woke up back in the freezing cave extremely confused. The man grunted in pain as he stood up. "I. Need. To. Find it.".
The man picked up his bag and continued his journey.

The man took out a piece of yellowed paper. It was from his search in Norway. It read "ᚹᛁᛏᚺᛁᚾ ᛏᚺᛖ ᛗᛏᛖᚱᚾᚨᛚ ᛞᛁᚱᛖ, ᛏᚺᛖ ᛗᛖᛋᚾᚠᚷᛖ ᛋᚺᛁᚾᛖᛋ ᚨᚾᛖᚹ. ᛒᚢᚱᛏ ᛏᛟ ᛒᛖ ᚱᛖᛒᛁᚱᛏᚺᛖᛞ ᛁᚲᛖ ᚨ ᛈᚺᛖᛟᚾᛁᚲᛋ.". An ancient runic writing that no one understood. The man considered it a dead end but he brought it along just to be safe.

He took out a faded map from his bag, seconds from tearing. "Almost there" said the man with a rough voice. He pointed at the side of one of the sky–high mountains with a dim orange light coming off of it. He went around the uneven corner to find a temple. Crafted out of limestone, there were tall rocky chimneys that looked like jagged stalagmites. Small windows looked out to the fogged darkness. A pebbled path made basalt and marble paved the way to the archaic temple. Lingering vines entwined with the mouldy walls.

Shivering from the winter cold, the man trudged on the winding path towards the great wooden door which towered over the man. Small cracks could be seen on the door. A rusted gold door knob guarded the door.
"Finally." The man said.
"In these ancient walls, a secret that took twelve years to find."
He opened the huge door. An instant warmth filled the air. The air smelt like no one has been here for years. A weak fire burnt eternally in a stone fireplace. The only movement being the dust shuffled by the man's boots and the whispering of fire. Multiple flickering torches were held by grey metal sconces on the rock walls. A worn down bed

sat at the corner. A thick sheet of dust covered the old oak shelves. The shelves held centuries of knowledge yet it wasn't what the man was looking for. At first it seemed like the temple was a living quarter for someone, but no one has touched anything inside for a long time.
"Where is it?" the man questioned himself. He scrambled around the dimly lit room for the message.

The man kneeled down to examine the fireplace, the warm wave of radiation melted a thin layer of snow on his hands. The fire crackled as the yellowed piece of paper fell out of the man's pocket. Suddenly, the fire exploded and grew ten times as strong. The man was shocked and stumbled backwards. The fire jumped to life as it rearranged itself, leaving a hole in the middle with the scorched piece of paper.
"What type of wizardry is this?" The astounded man questioned. The fire calmed and the man reached for the paper. Still numb from the cold, the man couldn't feel the burning paper.

When the man looked at the charred paper, the ancient runes were nowhere to be seen. All these years, mounting up to a blank piece of paper. The man sat on the bed, storms of dust were pushed out of the way. He readied to go back to a mountain village miles away.
"Another dead end." The man frustratedly said.
The tall wooden door once again opened to the pitch black night. The ongoing blizzard blew against the man's face.

Suddenly, the floor began to shake. The man fell on his knees from the rumbling. The echoes from the quake ricocheted off of the monstrous mountainsides. The man looked back at the sanctuary. Many books fell out of their places and were cushioned by dust. The fire trembled in an effort to avoid being put out. There was a hole in the walls of the temple, leading to a room with echoes of an unknown origin.
The man thought "Perhaps the shaking caused it?"
He got on his feet and walked towards the new room. Around the corner, there was a fountain. The room was silent and still, water endlessly poured out of the top, the whole structure was coated with gold.
"Finally! I am here! The Wishing Fountain!" The man was overwhelmed with excitement.
The fountain was filled with warm water, beneath it there were many coins from a long time ago.
The man knew what the future had held for him as a rejoicing smile appeared on his face.

50 Years Into The Future

The sky was silent. Dark clouds reigned over the burning city that was once the pinnacle of the world. A city where glass towers were spread across the metropolis, giving shelter to thousands of people. A city of wide avenues stretching around like the web of a spider. A city where the air was fresh as day, unlike the poisonous gas that was here. There was no indication whether it was day or night, only a grey foggy sky that curtained the world. The Wishing Fountain, once a beautiful thing full of opportunities, Now a permanent scar on the face of Earth.

The Fountain stood in the center of the burning chaos. The golden coating had worn out, revealing an extraterrestrial stone structure on the inside. Vines entangled with broken cracks in the fountain. Still, dirtied water dripped from the fountain top. The curse that was the fountain still stood while everything around it fell. Many golden coins were left unattended in the fountain.
The man appeared. Scars all over his body. Faint frantic screaming could be heard all around the block. Standing before the fountain. Looking over the madness that the fountain brought on everyone. The man realized he shouldn't have went on his journey. Never should he have went to Huangshan. He never should've went in that room. He never should've used the fountain. The doom that was brought by the Fountain of Huangshan.

For Every Tragedy, there is Always a Happy Ending

ESF Sha Tin College, Lo, Kaiden – 13

My grandfather died. The note in his chest pocket, it read only a place: Mountains of the Yellow Emperor (Huangshan).

Confused, I searched on the internet and only found the location: East China. It must've been important since his expression as he came through the door, was cautious and anxious. He was 79 at the time and only did frequent visits to our house. With that note sticking out in his chest pocket, he used our spare key that we gave him, slammed open the door, and barged right in. A few seconds after he stepped in, he covered his heart with both hands and collapsed on the spot. We rushed to the hospital as fast as we could but still, he couldn't make it.

Ever since then, I have been investigating what the 'Mountains of the Yellow Emperor' is or meant. It took around more than half a year to snap back into reality and give up on this pointless exploration, realizing only my (dead) grandfather has the answers to this unsolvable investigation. It finally popped into my head, 'I could go to China for my summer vacation!' I begged my parents to go. Reluctantly, they went along with the idea.

Right before we got onto the plane to China, my dad received a call from work. Due to an emergency, he couldn't come. When we arrived at Tunxi airport (which was conveniently the closest airport to Huangshan), we went straight to a motel since both my legs started to drag behind. By the time we had already settled down, it was finally time to sleep. All I could think about was what awaits me tomorrow at Huangshan and all the secrets I was going to unlock.

Tomorrow finally came! Luckily, I read the pamphlet whilst we were checking in, I bet my mom would gladly take a 2–hour spa, followed by another 2 hours of yoga. While she suspects I'm enjoying crafts… That would give me just about enough time to explore around Huangshan. I brought my watch and water, not much, but good enough. Using the money my mom gave me to buy food and drinks, I was able to get onto a taxi and drive straight to Huangshan, I looked at my watch, 10:13 am. No roads were leading straight to the actual mountain itself, so I had to jog. There I was, standing right in front of a tall, majestic mountain, with peaks piercing through clouds. it was the most fascinating view I have ever seen! I could barely contain my anticipation to see what awaits me up there, when suddenly, I remembered, there wasn't much time left, I looked at my watch: 10:56 am. I shot past the beautiful scenery that I so eagerly wanted to stop and explore, cherry blossoms, ponds, small creatures, pine trees, and fresh grass. I looked past them right and left, then skidded to a stop as a glimpse of a moving shadow caught the corner of my eye. My eyes were squinting into narrow slits so I could take a closer look, my mouth was already open without me realizing. Who is that?...

I saw a rather large man with a beard in yellow robes wearing dangly hat ornaments, by the looks of it, he was old. He was about 20 meters in front of the road up the hill, I think he was crossing it. He appeared out of nowhere from multiple monstrous wide trees and tall bushes, completely covering where he came from. He was midway crossing the streets when I rubbed my eyes, the fog was too thick. I needed a closer look, but once my hands were off my eyes, the old man had disappeared. I'm pretty sure it was just some sort of hallucination; Time flies.

After a while, as I continued my journey, I looked up at the sky and saw the sun was at the centre of the sky, I couldn't stay any longer, mom would be worried. Although I did not discover much today, I'm certain tomorrow will be better.

The very next day my mom received a call from the hospital saying dad got into a minor car accident. But all the aeroplanes that are going back home are full, so we had to wait for one more day. I cut through the wall of silence and said, "I met friends yesterday, can I go hang out with them today?" She approved. Same way as before, I arrived at Huangshan, 3:48, sprinted up the mountain. It felt stranger today, I felt the presence of a shadow, I was being watched. Ignoring the situation, I dismissed the thoughts and ran up the road, further than I ever went before. Finally, I arrived at the top, 4:05. In front of me was a beautifully architected temple. Curious, I went towards the temple and as soon I stepped up the small set of stairs, I heard someone clearing their throat with a cough. My eyes took a while to adjust to the brightness of the overwhelming colour of gold surrounding the room. In the centre,

there was a throne and on that throne was an old man, I could tell he was an emperor with the crown, fancy clothes and the penetrating demeanour, he was sitting up straight and had a long and grey beard. With a jolt, I realised he was the man that I saw, the man that I thought was a hallucination. I stepped back whilst staring at him, realizing he might be a dangerous man, casting a worried and frightening glance towards the man, I thought to myself 'will this be it? I wasn't able to say goodbye to my grandpa, and no one I love will be able to say goodbye to me…'

At first, he had one of his eyebrows up and then he laughed, laughed, and laughed. He was laughing at me! He finally spoke, "You think that I'm some kind of threat?" He literally read my mind. I recognised you, you're David's grandson, we kept in contact for a long time, but these few months he hasn't returned my mail."

After a moment of silence, I replied: "He died."

"Oh."

After a long pause, I switched topics by saying "Why were you following me?"

"To protect you from the demons."

"Demons?" I exclaimed in disbelief

"Yes, demons. Millennials ago demons and monsters existed, that was a forgotten timeline. I and your grandfather were the best demon hunters. Eventually, we found this mountain, then we created jail cells in the centre of the mountain, and we stored demons in it. Once, when we were fighting a demon, it nearly brought us to the verge of death. With the realisation that every minute we go into the field, we put our lives at risk, so we decided to retire and live in the mountains. Because of the countless numbers of demons in the mountain, the magic from the demons was able to keep them, us and the mountain alive. We were too unwilling to kill the demons because of what it granted us, we built and explored the mountain for years until decades ago things became boring for your grandfather, he wanted to go out into the world and live a life, but I wanted to stay with the mountain because I have grown attached to it, I didn't want to leave everything that I created. A few weeks ago, I found out the demons have found a way to escape the cells but still don't know the way out of the mountain, many are wandering around. I broke the news to David but he probably overreacted knowing that they will hunt him down and also knowing he is too weak to defend you. Now that your grandfather is gone, I should be too, bringing the demons along with it."

"Do you need help?"

"I can take care of it, I might look old, but I'm still very young."

I looked at my watch, 4:34, I needed to return. As I turned towards the exit, I connected some thoughts myself. On my way back, I was fulfilled and satisfied that I have found the answers. It wasn't going to be battles and war in this adventure. It was going to be returning to my normal life. I arrived back at the motel, but as soon as I opened the door, my mom was on the phone with a worried look. When she turned around and saw me, she immediately ran to me and quite literally crushed me.

"Solving a mystery."

Eventually, we arrived back in Los Angeles by plane and found our way to the hospital. As soon as he was in front of us, my mom instantly dropped our belongings and rushed right past me to envelop him with a fierce hug.

A Dragon's Legacy

ESF Sha Tin College, Szeto, Millie – 11

I knew I shouldn't have wandered off from Dad to walk up another hiking trail, no matter how dull the hike up Huangshan felt or how crowded it was. I tugged at my mask, furious at myself.

To add to my frustrations, it was now raining.

That's right. Dad and I went to Huangshan for a little hike during the pandemic. There weren't many people around and the scenery was stunning, but it was a tiring experience.

I looked out across the canyon. Thick swirls of mist surrounded the mountains and billowed up from below, concealing and protecting Huangshan. Leafy trees grew all over every single mountain, as if to soften the spiky peaks. I stretched out my hand to touch the ghost–white curls of fog and rain. The eerie beauty of Huangshan was accentuated by the calm whooshes of the breeze.

Enough soaking in the scenery. Dad is probably at the top of the mountain and freaking out because you're lost. Keep going. I kept walking.

The rain poured down on me as I threw my coat over my head for protection. A gust of wind roared in my ears. "I can't keep walking like this, I'll catch a cold," I pressed my back to the rocks and shifted around the mountain, trying my best to avoid the rain.

I touched a cluster of dry rocks and turned around to see a pitch–black opening in the boulders. *A tunnel?*

"I'm definitely not going in there, it isn't safe," I muttered, forging on through the curtains of rain.

A bolt of blinding white slammed into the ground below, shaking the entire mountain. The lightning was followed by a series of rumbles, a drumroll sent from Heaven. I sank to the ground and covered my ears with my hands. "On second thought–," I scrambled for the safety of the tunnel.

Backing into the safety of the cave, I bumped into something rough and somewhat furry, tumbling over on the floor.

"Did I reach the end of the tunnel already?" I turned around and gasped.

A bloodred Chinese dragon, with scales embellished with the brightest golden and silver patterns was curled up on the cold stone floor, softly snoring. Its scales radiated a lustrous glow that put shame to even the sun and its skin was laced with tongues of ruby fire, the only light in the cave. Grey tendrils of smoke rose out of its nostrils. Spiky, curled antlers adorned its massive head. Its eyebrows were furrowed, as if it were dreaming about something truly disturbing. Its lips were curled, razor sharp teeth showing menacingly. I fell to the ground in shock with a thump.

The dragon stirred as I held my breath, carefully edging away from its lair, eyes widened in terror.

An ominous rumbling began in its throat.

Very slowly, its eyelids rose, unveiling a pair of ancient, deadly, jade eyes.

"Who dares approach the Mighty Tianlong?" It hissed, voice raspy from years of slumber. It raised its massive head from the floor and opened his mighty maw, revealing lethal fangs as sharp as stalactites.

"My name is ChunYing," I shivered, terrified.

"You are a human child, aren't you?" It leaned closer, sniffing carefully.

"Y–yes."

“I do not harm innocent humans. I am a Protector of humans, sent from the Sky Emperor himself to protect the world. It is thanks to my guidance and advice that this country has become so advanced. I possess infinite wisdom and centuries of experience,” the Dragon informed me proudly, scratching his chin with a single claw.

“What? If you’re so powerful, why aren’t you teaching us how to solve our problems? Why are you dozing away lazily in this little cave?” I was curious.

“You see, O disrespectful little human, during the Tang dynasty, my guidance was no longer needed. Humans are clever and they managed to keep the country running without my assistance. I hid away from the people I was supposed to protect and fell into an eternal slumber…” He looked down to me. “Well, almost.”

“You have to be kidding me. Have you not heard of the pandemic, the Californian forest fires or the floods in China?”

“Pandemic? Fires? I must have missed out on a lot of things,” the Dragon leaned down to me again. “Get on my back, silly child. I need to see what has happened to my people.”

Hesitating a little, I climbed onto the reptile’s scaly back. He rose into the wind, rippling like a giant ribbon, higher and higher into the sky, until we were above the clouds.

“There’s a city ahead,” I announced, pointing to a skyscraper below. “We should keep hovering over the city in case the people see us.”

“What’s that?” The Dragon pointed to a small building.

“It’s a building. People live in those,” I explained.

“What’s that?” He leaned down and carelessly picked up a nearby truck, tossing it up into the air and catching it. Thankfully, it was empty.

“That’s a car. They’re like chariots, but we use mechanics to run them. Please put the car down before you break it.”

“Child, what is wrong with the air here? I can hardly breathe!” He let out a series of deafening coughs and hacks, smoke curling out of his mouth. His jade, glowing eyes narrowed, trying to see through the thick smog.

I squinted at the surroundings. “You took us to Beijing. The air here is polluted.”

“What is wrong with all this smoke? The water running through the streets is grey and look at those heaps of trash everywhere! Besides that, what are those humans doing? The streets are empty and they’re all inside their homes! The ones that are outside are wearing a strange strip of cloth over their nose and mouth. Child, what is happening?”

“It’s because of the pandemic, Dragon. It’s killed over a million of people and everyone’s staying in their homes so that we don’t get sick. The world has turned upside down by all the misfortunes that have happened this year. See what I meant when I said that you were needed?” I patted the Dragon’s antlers. “I don’t know how we can help with or stop the pandemic or the problems around the world, but we have to try.”

The Dragon grimaced, baring knife–sharp rows of teeth. “I don’t have any healing powers, naïve little human. You creatures are on your own. I have not seen the world in many years. I am inexperienced.” He hissed. “I can only watch my people suffer.”

“That’s not all you can do!” I tried to persuade him. “You can help with the natural disasters around the world!”

He shook his massive head. “You humans. Always so hopeful. I loved that about you little creatures. No matter what darkness you were trapped in, you would always remain hopeful and fight your way out of your problems. That is a quality that must be cherished. Alas, I cannot help.”

“We need your help!” I pleaded, clenching my fists.

“I told you, I cannot assist you with these disasters.”

“Why? You’re a mighty dragon and you are a friend to all humans!”

“Solving these problems happening around the world is the responsibility of you humans. You creatures caused a lot of these disasters as well. You abuse the environment, pollute the water and air, and cause global warming. These are your problems, and thus they are yours to solve.” The Dragon tipped me off his head and held me in his claw.

“That does not mean I will not do something about your suffering. Here, you and I must part ways.” He set me down on a rooftop. “I will command my winds to escort you back to Huangshan, my child. I have work to do and peace to maintain. Thank you for waking me and making me see sense after so many years.”

With a strong gust of wind, the Dragon was stripped from my vision, along with the city of Beijing, and I was sitting in the Dragon’s lair in Huangshan. The rain had halted.

I stood up, stumbling towards the mouth of the cave.

And there he was, in the sky.

My Dragon.

He was burning with all his strength, a look of furious love yet gentle kindness for humanity in his jade eyes, spiralling through the sky, a rainbow that shone with glory trailing in his wake. He broke the grey clouds open with his tail and moved through the wind like the swiftest thunderbolt. At one point, he crashed into a layer of clouds and vanished, scattered to the winds…

Whenever I see a rainbow, I think of the Dragon I met in the middle of Huangshan. I think of his sacrifice and his message of hope to us humans.

The Mystical Mountains of China

ESF Sha Tin College, Tang, Jason – 11

In the year of 1611, Emperor Chongzhen ruled the lands of the Ming Dynasty. The Monarchy at that time was struggling to hold up as its people were suffering from war and natural disasters. But in the east of China at that time, it was a different story.

Locked deep in the lands of China was a small village in HuangShan located in the province of Huizhou, the modern–day Anhui. Colossal mountains shaped like fingers staggered above the clouds. Caverns and secret caves scattered around the landscape. Hidden in the mist and fog was a tiny village on top of the highest mountain in HuangShan. No one from the south ever discovered HuangShan or the secret village hidden in the mist. They never knew the secrets that lay between the Mountains.

Long stone stairs circulating the mountains in HuangShan led up to the Village. Two pine trees, thousands of years old, formed the large gate into the village. There were dozens of homes sized differently with a sense of their own diversity. A long road separated the two districts, each district was home to about 6 different families.

In the village lived a young boy named Chen. Him and his family of three lived together in a small limestone house. The walls were covered with light turquoise and the roofs were painted with tomato red. Vibrant lanterns tangled around the doors and roofs.

Chen's father, Han worked in a pet shop in the village breeding and selling Dragons, flying Turtles, mystical Lions and other magical creatures that were only found in Huangshan. Chen's mother Crystal made medicine with herbs and insects found from around the mountains. The village was scattered all around the humongous mountains with hundreds of unique homes all with their touch of diversity. Chen would always play around the colossal mountains that ranged across the fields.

While Chen's mother Crystal was cooking dinner, Chen read books that his grandfather gave him before he died.
"Interesting, the gem of Huangshan. Li bai and Daufu mentioned this in their poems as well." Chen whispered to himself quietly.
The thick book smelt earthy and had an extremely hard cover like concrete. Just as Chen was about to turn another page the fossilized book the door sprung right open.
"Everyone guess what I brought back from the pet store!" Han, Chen's father excitedly cheered.
"Is it a necklace for me? I wanted a pearl one!" Crystal shouted with her eyes wide open.
"Well.uhh," Han nervously laughed.

Something suddenly screeched an ear breaking tone out of Han's bag. The delightful smile in Crystal's face suddenly dropped.
"No way! Is it a dragon?" Chen screamed.

The little creature jumped out of the bag enthusiastically. It had magnificent scales sprinkled with magenta and gorgeous blue eyes that looked like the ocean. Its wings were a mix of light red and a darker tone of purple that dazzled everyone's eyes. Its two parallel horns stuck out of its small head.
"What is this disgusting creature doing in my house!" Crystal exclaimed loudly.
"What do you mean this lovely dragon is so cute, I had to adopt him. He's a Purple Sapphire Horned Dragon, a very rare species and one of the last of its kind."
"Just don't let it cause any trouble, and don't let it destroy all my vases!" said Crystal.

Chen spent hours and hours playing and taking care of the young dragon. They formed an unbreakable bond in a matter of hours. The Dragon slept by Chen's side, ate by his side and even went out together side by side. In a matter of weeks, the Dragon grew to the size of a bicycle.
"Let's call him Lucky, it's good fortune and brings luck!" Chen said.
"Why not. Take good care of Lucky son." Han told Chen.

Without his parents knowing Chen took the magnificent Dragon beyond the village, into the jungles in the mist.
Lucky flapped his wings around with a little grin.
“Do you think it's time for you to fly buddy?” Chen asked.
With a little nod from Lucky, Chen jumped on its scaly back and held onto its mane and with a final breath of air the elegant creature took off into the winds.
“Ahhh, slower buddy.” Chen laughed.
They lifted slowly reaching the sea of fluffy clouds.

“Wow, the views are just spectacular.” Shouted Chen as he glided around in the clouds.
In the far distance near the low rivers there were miniscule figures. Chen and Lucky could not tell what they were. Flying closer they found out it was Emperor Chongzhen’s Army. Their bright red flags staggered around the air as thousands of soldiers slowly stormed up the mountains.
“We have to go back and warn the village,”Chen exclaimed.

They swiftly flew back to the village gates and into their limestone house.
Chen and the Lucky broke open the doors quickly and towered in their home.
“Dear son! Where have you been? Emperor Chongzhen Army is coming to our village!” Crystal shouted.
“I saw them mother, why are they here?” Chen sighed.
“They are here the Gem of Huangshan. It has been told the Gem has powers of the extraordinary and can control life. If someone ate it, they would be immortal. “Crystal replied.
“The gem also brings life to these magical mountains in Huangshan. Without its life would slowly fade, and the earth would crumble.” Han said.
“How come I didn’t know any of this until now?” Chen asked loudly.

Crystal and Han held a green box. They opened the hard cover, and in it was a shining Gem. The magnificent gem glowed like a beating heart. It was the Gem of Huangshan.
“The great poet Li Bai pasted it down in generations and here it is today. We mustn't let the Emperor lay hands on the Gem.” Crystal cried.
“Everyone, hide under the bed and I’ll keep the gem in one of the vases.” Han shouted.
“No, I can help. Me and Lucky can deal with this.”Chen said bravely.
“No Chen!” both parents screamed.

But it was too late Chen and Lucky leaped out of the doors and flew above the sky.
“Is that our son up in the sky, this is too dangerous! “Crystal sobbed.
The army of Chongzhen was storming up the mountains and was only a couple hundred of metres from the village gates. The soldiers shot spears at Lucky as they saw him hover above. They both dashed to the mountain creak. Suddenly Lucky screamed so loudly the echo of ear breaking volume went for kilometres around the mountains of Huangshan.
“What are you doing Lucky?” Chen shouted.

After a couple minutes distant sounds vibrated, it was the ancient dragons. Dozens of enormous Dragons all with different colours and scales raced to the village. In the trees below Tigers, Jaguars, all kinds of birds and animals came together as one. They all flew and leaped around so ferociously the soldiers were starting to panic.
“Oh my lord, Lucky how did you do it?”Chen gasped.
The Army headed backwards very quickly, and the village was saved by a young kid and his pet dragon. This news spread everywhere from province to province. Chen and Lucky saved Huangshan and the village and were deemed legends. When they returned home all the villagers came out to praise them.
“How did you both fight ten thousand soldiers?” one asked.
“With Luck and Lucky, my best friend,”Chen said.

Crystal and Han raced to give a smoothing hug to Chen.
An enormous magenta and red covered dragon hovered over Chen’s house. When it landed the whole village was shaking.
“Could that be Lucky's mother?” Han spoke.

Lucky flew to the massive dragon and they both licked each other with their slimy saliva. The transparent liquid was everywhere on the streets.
"It's time to let Lucky go home with his real family Chen,"Crystal sighed.
"Well, thanks for saving the village and I will miss you a lot buddy," Chen cried.

Chen teared and cried as both dragons flew away into the distant mist. With one last look, Lucky gave a grin and flew away.

Huangshan was saved by two best friends and now 400 years later Huangshan is a protected paradise for dazzling species of all kinds. And who knows, maybe the dragons are still here.

Tales of China's Magical Mountains

ESF South Island School, Grunberger, Mathias

It all started in 1820, there was a group of friends traveling when all of a sudden they come across China's Magical Mountains. They decided that since so many people wondered what was in the end why not find out for themselves.

Matt said, "why not sounds fun and it's beautiful today, how hard could it be?"

John, Rose, and Olivia later agreed. They hiked for nearly 2 hours now, everybody regretting their decision. Rose said, "can we please just head back?" Matt said "no, how could we? We don't even know how far we are" So they continued.

They were all exhausted and decided as a group to take a break, so they all sat down and rested for the next 20 minutes.

20 minutes later, they start to hike again. They hike for another period of 1 hour until they come across a tour guide who was left here by his group of previous travelers who had all died. He explained to John and the group how they died, and how it was all from one dragon which he saw for his own eyes and ran away as fast as he could, and once he found a good spot he could stay there. He also explained how hard it was to survive claiming he was living off of plants and bugs that he found throughout the Magical Mountains. They asked him if he knew the way to the end of the Mountains and he said "well nobody has seen the end, to be honest, nobody has ever managed to come this far without giving up or dying along the way" All of a sudden the group's mindset changes and all of their faces turn into a surprised look. Olivia then said "guys, look we are the farthest almost anybody has ever come, we cannot give up and make sure to save up supplies because we don't know how long there is left" So they kept going but had to deal with several setbacks along the way.

Setback 1 came along pretty fast. It was the fact the now came the first main uphill to get to the top of the first. They had successfully pulled through.

Then they came along with setback 2. Setback 2 was to decide if they wanted to eat or hike more. They voted, Olivia and John voted that they should stop and eat a little, however, Matt and Rose said they should keep going until they are truly exhausted. It was a tie, then then the tour guide said he didn't want to be on any side so he didn't vote. Matt and Olivia looked at the bright side and said "why not I guess it wouldn't hurt that bad if we took a short break to eat a little snack" Matt later agreed and they took a 30−minute break.

30−minutes later, they have begun again Hiking again they Hiked through any different obstacles, they had to cross a small river creek but they were quite a big drop so they looked for some wood. It was a very risky decision but they decided to put some wood planks that they found and made a bridge. They all went one at a time so that they didn't put too much weight on the bridge and all successfully made it across. There was a little first area that they came across on one of the mountains but the only problem was that they had to think about all the different animals that could potentially harm them. They all pitched ideas. Matt mentioned "there might be a few bush vipers or spiders that we have to be careful of"

Olivia mentioned "there could be other snakes or venomous animals that we dont know about" Rose agreed with Olivia and john said "if we all stay aware we will all be just fine" The tour guide then mentioned, "what about so many other animals that are way bigger than us like the ox or the forest tigers and bears, what if the dragon is here!" The group thought about it and knew he had made a good point.

So they were extremely careful and quite not to attract any attention. They ended up making it through successfully. It had started to turn dark and they didn't know the area very well so they didn't know if they should sleep or not. The tour guide then said "I think you guys should sleep you have had a rough day" This had creeped the group out a

bit and they didn't know if it was a good decision to trust him, mainly because they only met him a few hours ago. But they decided as a group to sleep in the end, they found a cave, and almost instantly all of them were out. Then as they are sleeping the tour guide takes action, he gets into his natural body, as the dragon which he originally was himself. He killed his last tour group for food. He picked them up and curled them together with his tail they woke afraid screaming not knowing what's happening.

He brought them to the end where there were only magical creatures like dragons, minotaurs, griffins you name it. They were later eaten by the animals there along with other humans that were saved up and that was all. Since that day nobody has ever heard of it, nobody ever knew it was all gone, done

Tales from China's Magical Mountains

ESF South Island School, Chung, Ottillie

15 years ago today, accompanied by my older brother, I journeyed to the mountains of the yellow emperor in Eastern China, a place now established as Huangshan. The mountains were an item of mystery – only the bravest poets dared to journey there. Many of them never returned. Whilst villagers fabricated gruesome stories of how they'd been assassinated on the way, my brother and I found this fact to be quite intriguing – we thought "what could possibly be so enchanting that they didn't bother returning?".

One night, my brother said to me "Legend has it that if you reach the very top of the first mountain, your greatest dream will come true,". It was an old folks tale – I'd heard it before. Yet whether it was the dark of the night, or the serious tone in which my brother recited this line, I was captivated.

"I want to go there," I pronounced.

"I'll get everything ready. Just be awake early tomorrow," my brother told me, and then he turned around and left my room. I never understood how he managed to convince our mother to let us go on our spontaneous trip.

The very next morning, we set off on our journey. We were required to travel for two days, catching only a few hours of sleep when the sun made the ground too blistering to walk on with only our thin bamboo boots. On the third day, we finally reached the bottom of the mountain path. We knew this because the soil became softer, and the path would switch from wide to narrow quickly.

"Only half a day to go," my brother claimed, his voice less confident than it had previously been. We kept up a steady rhythm, trekking up the slope of the mountain for approximately 3 hours before I finally called a break.

"Sit down on these rocks," my brother instructed, pointing to an uneven arch of boulders, arranged in a mass to the left side of the mountain path.

The ground was covered with moss and algae, so I took off my boots to prevent them from becoming slippery, as I sat on one of the studier boulders. There was a continuous crunch of grains behind me – the kind you get from rolling a car along rubble. My ears were drawn to the noise – it was impossible to ignore, almost as if I was destined to hear and have to do something about it.

As the sound grew closer, I realised there was a wet squelch amongst the louder sound of material against rock – someone was coming up the path. I turned around to say something to my brother, but almost jumped out of my skin upon hearing a high–pitched voice speak "What are you doing here?". I angled myself back towards the young lady – one moment the path had been completely empty, and the next, she was right behind me. I blamed the supernatural speed of her arrival on my own lack of observation, as I replied "We are journeying to the top of the mountain. What about you?".

I couldn't help noticing that the girl was beautiful – her brown hair was thick and rain smoothly past her shoulders, and down to her waist. What stood out to me the most were her eyes though – she had these deep hazel eyes – I had never known brown eyes to be so full of life, sheltered with long eyelashes, that seemed to gleam when the light caught them.

"I was just returning to my village," she answered, smiling. There was a deep indentation on her right cheek, and I was delighted to notice that she had dimples.

"How far away is your village?" I inquired politely. I was pleased to realise that my brother had wandered off somewhere by now, allowing me privacy to speak to the girl.

"Only an hour's walk away. Would you like to join me for lunch?" She laughed. Her laugh was like sunshine.

Just as I was about to accept her gracious invitation, my brother reappeared from behind a large oak tree, his voice stern as he warned me of the importance of getting on with our journey.

“Mother expects us home in five days. We must keep moving – don’t forget what we’re heading for,” he advises.

“Well?” The sunshine girl pushes. I think of my brother’s words. Ultimately, it was still my decision to make. I was keen on spending more time with this girl, however, the thought of the magic waiting for me at the top of the mountain twisted my line of thought.

“I’m afraid we have to continue on our journey. Maybe on the way back we might cross paths again?” I decide.

She nods at me, smiles a half–crooked smile, and then disappears just as quickly as she had arrived.

“Come on. Let’s move on,” my brother said.

For the rest of the journey, the sunshine girl was all I could think about.

After two more hours of trudging up the steep path, we finally reached the top of the mountain. Clouds swirled overhead, and when we looked down, our eyes could wander along the thin lines and creeks of the mountain.

Almost expectedly, my brother and I both looked at the small puddle of water that was collected on the ground, waiting for our greatest wishes to be granted.

“Perchance we have to take a sip,” my brother guesses – so, both of us collected some of the murky water in our hands, and gulped it down. It was cold, and dirty tasting. No doubt the remnants of rain from earlier on in the week. Nothing happened.

“Perhaps we should say something,” my brother tried again. I watched as he bowed down, and spoke some words of gibberish – I figured he must be speaking quietly on purpose, so that I couldn’t make fun of what he was saying.

However, nothing happened.

My brother and I stayed on the top of that mountain for two days, before finally returning home to our village.

“What wish had you been hoping to get granted?” I questioned my brother.

He mumbled something under his breath – the only words I had heard were “knowledge” and “poets”.

“What about you?” He asked me.

“To find a girl to fall in love with,” I replied.

My brother was quiet for a long time after that, until he eventually said “We’ve tested mother’s patience enough as it is. Let’s head back home.”

I did not see the sunshine girl again on our hike down. In fact, I never saw her again. I saw people that resembled her – but the resemblance was all I was able to take notice of – never again did I find someone as beautiful as her.

Up until today, I still consider what would have happened if I had indeed accepted her offer for lunch – did journeying to the tip of the first Huangshan mountain truly make your greatest wish come true, or had it all just been a myth?

To be sure, you’ll have to go there and decide for yourself.

Tales from the Misty Mountains

ESF South Island School, Fu, Aidan

Everybody is sitting in the room staring at the board, not me though. I'm concentrating on my pencil. Did you know that it is hard to actually twirl the pencil without it looking like that was your first time you are doing it. I'm the oddball, the weird one, the one who feels all alone after all that. I raise an after−school−celebration drink as I wait for the sun to set. I feel as if I am being sucked into a black hole. This is a weird feeling even if I am drunk. As I wipe the nice cold feeling of the condensation of the beer cup onto my freezing trousers, I see someone I used to see a whole lot standing there, giving me those constant looks.
I don't drink.

I am aware of this figure as I would be if somebody farted loudly. She comes and sits there as if she doesn't know me and as if she has gotten over "it", but she needs to polish her acting skills, and so do I. As I took a sip of the beer I have been drinking, she said under her breath, "Your the only one……." I smirk and chuckle, I might have spit a bit of the beer out. I don't drink.

To be honest, I know what she was talking about but I can't give up, after all she had done. I have seen her as much as I have seen my pillow, I could draw her with a blindfold, and especially the lips which I used to kiss so often. I take a sip of beer as I look away from her desperate ocean−blue eyes screaming for my return. I don't drink.

I say to her, "Is that so?" in a cocky and dumb voice.
She says, "I'm not joking." in the thickest accent I have ever heard from her mouth.
I know what she wants but I wasn't going to give her it. She is now looking at me with the same gaze that I have happily recieved until now. I'm cracking my knuckles as I down my beer and ask the bartender for yet another. I don't drink.

Honestly, I thought of her as one of many mistakes, I usually get things right but this time I didn't. She just doesn't stop. I used to have a fan club− one that had one member in it. I would still rather kick her out and end the fan club. She was like poison in my beer to me. I just knew it. I think with all my brain cells as I sip my beer. I don't drink.

Then It hit me one day, as I truly understand the meaning of betrayal and being used. I thought it was all over but here we are again. Why do I feel like I still owe her an answer? My brain is again trying to have a decent conversation to convince my heart to stay strong and luckily my heart gives in.
"No." I say in my weakest possible voice.
"What did you say?" she snaps in an annoyed voice.
"I said no." I say again, in a louder and firm voice.
She responds by saying, 'But why? I did nothing wrong I−"
I cut her off.

"I said no! Don't you think you've done enough damage!" I roar in a voice that would remind you of a lion. She is shocked. She has always thought of me as a quiet guy but I am definitely not being very quiet now. Attention is now being drawn to us. I take another foamy sip of a beer as I watch everyone gather around for the "show." I don't drink.

She then starts rebelling and screaming 'You're meant to love me!" "I need you!"
I murmur back, "The only thing you need is money and a real heart. You know what? take this."
I give her $100 and she asks, "What's this for?"
"For you to buy a shovel to get all the gold .You gold digger."
I take a sip of beer as all the people watching are getting hyped for what seems like the ex−girlfriend and ex−boyfriend battle of the century. I don't drink.

She just screams as I try to calm down. It doesn't work so instead of roasting her I am burning her. I just can't get over the fact that innocent eyes could actually be evil. I take my last sip of beer. and I walk out of the club with nothing except for sweet happy revenge and probably a new re-opened packed fan club full of drunks. I don't drink.

The Lonely Mountain

ESF South Island School, Kattikatt, George

I was here finally. After a long plane ride from the Beijing airport to Tunxi airport located in the Huangshan province of china. I was here for a bigger reason than the attraction of the huangshan mountains. The city was like a normal one, cars and people going to their jobs. But a few kilometres away was one of the most scenic places in the world. But more importantly to me, my father's old village which he lived in when he was a child was up in these mountains. My father used to tell me about the golden monkeys and the copperhead.

We lived in the bustling city of Hong Kong but after my father's death I always wanted to come here. I immediately found the taxi driver. I only had my shoulder bag so I wouldn't have to drag my luggage everywhere. It was an hour drive and it felt really long so I dozed almost the second after we got on. We drove and drove through the city and slowly the atmosphere started to change and then we finally reached there. It felt a lot more different, it was misty and colder. It felt magical and almost like if I was on one giant rock.

I got up and I searched around for my dad's friend Kai wang. He was one of dad's best friends. He was a tall and thin man wearing a straw hat. He looked and asked me who I was. 我叫张菲(my name is Zhang Fei). No need to say in chinese, I know english said Kai. Well let's move on, he said. The trees were filled with a strange fruit he had never seen but the trees seemed so much more beautiful than a normal tree. The mountain was kind of steep but we went at a slow pace. I started to get tired when we reached around the halfway mark. But then I looked around. We were above the clouds. In a green environment I saw a small house on the way. Although it was man−made it looked so much like it was a natural thing.

Then, we saw a small yellow thing in a cluster of bamboo. It was a golden monkey and they were babies. The small creatures were so cute swinging from the bamboo softly with ease. Then we finally reached the village. It was really small with just 10−12 houses. The people came outside and sighed thinking that we were tourists. They didn't exactly like tourists because of their noise and the way they almost ruined the place. But the people felt a little like the animals we watch in the zoo. And they take pictures and all which just makes a really bad impression. The people were kinder when he told them who I was. The people greeted me and I came inside. The floors were wooden and there was a small fire burning inside. After some refreshment, I went outside to continue exploring as we were near the peak. But when I looked down there was fear and also shock from the beauty of the place. I visited my dad's old home which was now owned by my uncle.

I was happy because the place really reminded me of dad. The places he described were just as good as I thought. Me and Kai trekked higher and after 3 hours we reached the peak. It was an amazing view and there weren't many tourists up this high so we had a great view of the stairs and old statues. We went into an old temple which was on the peak. It was surrounded by ancient trees that could have been 100's of years old. The temple had smoke in it. I breathed it in. The place was truly magnificent. It was sad that I had to leave but I did spend one more day at the village. We went down but then we saw the copperhead snake cross the steps. My uncle wasn't worried at all. He waited for it to pass. The people had a great respect for animals and worshipped them. I reached the airport and I was ready to go back to HK. It was a great experience especially since I could meet my dad once again.

Tales from China's Magical Mountains

ESF South Island School, Leung, Aidan

As you stare into the distance of the beautiful peaks, you see the magical and mysterious mountains of China, you sense the warm feeling in the air and you smell the fresh, green grass of Mother Earth. The beautiful, azure sky, along with the sound of droplets of rain, as they fall from the clouds, splash on the ground. The proud history and culture that you and others here celebrate is special to each and every one of you and always has a place in your heart.

Imagine, however, that this could cease to exist. You could live in a dystopian future. You'd grow up seeing trees crawling back into the soil, whilst houses turn into giants, covering the night sky.

The smell of gasoline permeates the air. Ashes fill the sky, and there is not a spot of sunlight. The sound of industrial machines and metal scrapes against each other. The constant aggravating noise of vehicles soars around the blocks of gigantic metal superstructures. What was once a land of fantasies and magical hope has turned into a dark and gloomy dystopia.

This is what your children will have to tell their children about their domicile of origin, how dazzling it once was and how it has altered. This is what would happen, unless you help.

A dystopian future is physically damaging to society. Currently, (other than Covid), we can go out to play football, basketball or take a walk in the park. However, in a dystopian future, none of that is possible. From a utopia to a dystopia, paradise to desolation, is a horrible outcome. That is what the mountains of Huangshan will become if we don't act.

"Get back to work, you lazy slugs," the Section Chief exclaimed. "And y'all better hurry up or I'm gonna start sackin' heads."

Jake sighed, worrying he wouldn't make enough yoyos today. But looking at his friends working hard, with determined faces, forced his doubts away. The smell of molten plastic filled the air, as Jake continued to press down on the molder. The sound of machines clanking against each other permeated his ears whilst reflecting on how he got here. Jake still couldn't believe how he was working at the age of thirteen. But after all, many kids these days start working around this age, especially if they were working class.

"JAKE, JAKE!", the Section Chief yelled. "You gonna' take your rations or are ya gonna' sit there daydreamin'". Jake shook his head suddenly, widened his eyes and stood straight. "Y−Yes, I will, sir."

Jake walked over to the line that was waiting for the rations. It was long and full of sweaty men.

"Looks like they're serving gum again."

Jake sighed in disappointment. Last week the rations were candy and the week before was canned ham which was slightly better. As he walked to the front of the line, another worker, who looked like he was in a rush, budded in. Jake didn't know him but knew he was called Hao. Annoyed and mad, Jake looked around to see if anyone was going to call the person out. But nobody cared enough to notice, so he decided to speak up.

"Hey mister, you know there's a line, right?" Jake tapped the man's shoulder.

"Yuh I do, got a problem with that, fella?" Hao shook the hand off of his shoulder. Jake shriveled, afraid to speak up again. But then he remembered how his father had told him to always stand up for himself and how if you don't, nobody will. Jake felt the pain, anger, rage and all the emotions flow through him. He curled his fist up and tapped on the man's shoulder again. Hao turned around slowly chuckling, but Jake, with his other hand, struck the bloke right in the face. The workers started to crowd around and stare. Hao wiped the blood off his nose. His expression changed into a menacing one. He pulled out a hammer from his belt and rushed towards Jake, lifting it in a striking position. Just then, a shot fired out and both of them paused in shock. The Station Chief approached with a squadron of armed guardsmen.

"Take these fools and chuck em' in the basement," exclaimed The Station Chief with a disgusted face. Jake and Hao were cuffed and taken to the holding facility at the Administration Department of the building.

A few hours later, Jake was released with a strict warning, and told that his rations would be cut for five days if this happened again. Just as Jake was about to leave the building, he saw a bunch of Station Chiefs enter. One of them was carrying a folder which read "HUANGSHAN NEW FACILITY".

Jake thought about that all night. He couldn't stop thinking about what was going on in Huangshan. He'd often heard tales about how beautiful and majestic it was. But Jake couldn't get over the fact that the factory had something to do with the Huangshan Mountains. So he decided to look up the Huangshan Factory on the internet, but found nothing. He went to bed and tried to forget about it, but he just couldn't get it out of his mind.

So the next morning, Jake decided to ask around about the facility, but nobody knew anything. When he asked his Station Chief about it, he was ignored. Jake decided to investigate. One night at midnight, he searched the Records Room. It was risky and dangerous but it was worth it as he found some folders about plans on Huangshan.

As Jake skimmed through the folders, he found blueprints, numbers and analytics, but what intrigued and shocked him the most were pictures of the mountain and what looked like simulations of what it would look like if a factory was built.

The next morning, Jake and the other workers were gathered together for a meeting. All of the Station Chiefs and the Director were there, which was quite unusual as only the Section Chief would typically attend. The Director stepped up, explaining how he needed a workforce to construct new buildings. Of course, he mentioned the risk and dangers, but also how they would receive high pay. The Director detailed that the work would be on steep mountains, and that they would also be given housing. Jake thought about it for a while. He considered the fact that, if this was indeed on Huangshan, there would be more of a possibility of how he could investigate, as he couldn't just sit there and do nothing, whilst a piece of history would be turned into another industrial location.

Life for Jake continued on as a worker in the yoyo factory. He laboured hard, fast and produced quality material. His Station Chief took notice and gave him a promotion to Station Leader, where he was responsible for the yoyos in a small department in the production station. As time moved on, Jake received more and more promotions. Eventually, he made Section Chief himself and was invited to his first meeting. The main topic the Director brought up was Huangshan. He mentioned how he needed someone to survey the area and to evaluate if it was suitable to build a factory there. Jake had a jolting feeling and his worst fears came to him when he thought about a factory in Huangshan. But then his worries were cast aside after remembering that someone was needed to evaluate the land to see if it was suitable for building the facility. Jake raised his hand and held it up high. The Director took notice and exclaimed, "Ah wonderful Jake, pack your bags, you leave tonight

"T−Tonight?!!", Jake asked in a questionable manner.

"Aye, tonight." The Director spoke in a calm tone. "Unless you have something more important than the company, Mr. Jefferson?", the Director asked in a sarcastic tone.

"None at all, I'll be back with results in a day."

"Excellent," the Director responded with a pleased face. "With that you all are dismissed."

As the plane descended into the misty atmosphere of Huangshan, the majestic rocky mountains and beautiful green trees grew on top of them. Jake gazed in awe at the beautiful surroundings, and was impressed. He observed the area as he got off the plane. Not only was it not suitable for a factory, it was also a priceless piece of history.

With that, he created a summary and report of the mountains, pointing out that it was dangerous and not appropriate for a factory. The Director acknowledged this, telling Jake that Huangshan would no longer be an option for the factory. Jake sighed, relieved and happy.

Although Jake had only saved one mountain, salvaging one peak would be a worthwhile contribution, in the long run. We may not be able to save mountains or achieve extraordinary feats in our life, but if we do good deeds, even if they are small, it will always benefit those around us.

Legendary Story of China's Magical Mountain

ESF South Island School, Li, Kristie

Down in the misty, foggy, ominous−looking mountain, where only immortals can belong, was the Heaven Realm Emperor practicing his powers. At the apex of the mountain, there was a pond, it looked very normal, so normal that the ducks would splash in it. The pond was cleaner than the sea, bluer than the ocean, it was aqua blue and inside was an old, gold, rusty cauldron full of everyone's fate. If someone were to put the cauldron upside down and sink into the pond, the six realms, Heaven, Demon, Flower, Mortal, lower immortals and lower demon realms would all disappear.

Thousands of years ago, an extremely powerful demon was stabbed and turned into a war general by the prince, he was called 'Luodu' and sooner his name turned into *her* name which is Xuanji. She helped the heaven realm kill one of the demon tribes, everytime she killed them she would feel her heart hurting. One day, she realised that she was a demon, and had killed her own tribe. She had been used by the prince, who was the emperor's son Yixuan to kill people who weren't supposed to be killed.

The emperor found out and said " What about this, you can go down to the mortal world for ten lives forgetting about everything, by that time I can make you an immortal again. Since the heaven realm was wrong at first."..... He looked at his son, "You can also go down for ten lives."

The nine lives had all failed, but the last one she finally passed. All thanks to Yixuan and her friends, Linglong, Ruoyu, and Minyan. Their memories were back, although it didn't turn out so well. Yixuan was hurt and only the extremely powerful demon's soul could save him. The soul was sealed inside a bottle, she didn't have a single bit of ambivalence in her decision. Soon the very powerful demon returned and overtook her. The demon was awake!

He was very determined to go up the mountain where the cauldron belonged. When he arrived at the mountain, the demon rose the cauldron, but then, Yixuan the prince and his friends were begging him not to destroy it. The demon said "I once believed and trusted the prince, and I never cared if I was an immortal, demon, or mortal. I thought everyone was the same, but what I got in return was betrayal, and getting tortured in the bottle. Should I hate him, should this kind of hate disappear like it never happened? Should I not get vengeance?" He also showed how he was cut. Around his neck, arms, and legs there were scars. It was like he had been attached together.

The emperor soon arrived, he saw the prince and told him that if he had waited for one more day then the immortal and demon war wouldn't have happened because the demon already told his king to not have war, but he had been too anxious. The prince was shocked and murmured" Everything happened because of me? I ruined everything?" He felt like fainting. The emperor removed his powers and wished that the demon could stop.

The emperor said:"I can't stop you if you want to destroy the cauldron, but you only have one chance, if you destroy it then everything will be gone. Make your decision wisely". His friends told him he had them, a family, and people who love him. Although, his response was that "everyone lives for only one life, after that life no one remembers anything. These friends, families and beloved people will die sooner or later, so why don't we just disappear together?"

He looked at the emperor and shouted,"I am so sure that I will destroy the cauldron. No one can stop me!" Surprisingly, the emperor replied "then please yourself". Just then, all of a sudden Yixuan shouted "think about it, our tenth life! Think about what we've been through together! You have friends and families and I love you. I will always be with you no matter what! Don't…….please."

The demon's head started to ache. His whole entire head was full of memories. In fact, very valuable memories, also very important ones. Not only that but the future. If he destroys the cauldron, all his friends and families and also his loved ones will disappear. In a flash, a tear came down his cheek. He touched it and couldn't believe he was crying. Yixuan chuckled " You said you didn't have a heart, but how can a person with no heart cry?"

The demon's, rather *'loyal'* servant said sinisterly "My lord, don't be blinded by these people's nice words. Remember Yixuan betrayed you! Don't let them ruin our great plan!" "Hmph, I'm not sure you are doing this for me," he glared. The demon removed the protection spell from the servant. "You removed the protection spell my lord? You want to kill me?! I did everything for you, even though my life was lost three times, just for you," he gasped. "You're only doing this for yourself, I am not entirely stupid, those ten lives I can remember every minute, every second, you say he betrayed me, I think you're talking to yourself," The demon replied.

His servant cackled, "The powerful demon is actually the powerful demon. I SHOULD BE THE LORD OF 6 REALMS. Muahahaha." The cauldron fell, just then Yixuan lept and held the cauldron. It was very heavy. The servant flew and stabbed Yixuan. Some kind of power hit the servant and he dropped back to the floor. Suddenly, the demon turned back into Xuanji and held Yixuan whispering "Yixuan, Xuanji is back, look at me. Look it's Xuanji, she's finally back." "Yixuan!"everyone yelled except the demon servant.

"I AM THE LORD OF 6 REALMS!!" the servant yelled again unexpectedly. He again flew towards the cauldron, but this time Ruoyu stabbed him with two knives and shouted at him "IT ALL HAPPENED BECAUSE OF YOU, YOU CAPTURED MY LITTLE SISTER, KILLED THE PERSON I LOVE, FORCED ME TO KILL MY GOOD FRIEND!!" He pushed the servant down into the pond and they both disappeared.

"AHHHHHHHHHHHH" the demon yelled and he let Xuanji out, they were two different people once more. "I wish I could live all over again,"he sighed, and put his heart in Yixuan's heart. The demon drank some wine, and then 'poof' he vanished!

The emperor walked towards Xuanji and warned, "the demon has given Yixuan his heart, but I am not sure if the heart will pump again. It will depend on your fortune." Xuanji asked tearfully "Don't you want to save him?" "Yixuan is my son. I obviously want to save him, but I can't do anything either. I am powerless. You are made unexpectedly and every step you choose is not destined by Heaven, no matter what you become, immortal, demon or mortal it is your choice," he answered.

Xuanji brought Yixuan and her friends back to the mortal world. It had been two years but although there was still no sign of him waking up, she didn't give up. She waited ---- waited---- waited. One day, she went into Yixuan's room and found that he was missing. She ran all around the house, but she couldn't find him! All of the sudden, Yixuan stood behind Xuanji. They hugged each other and then, as fast as lightning, they went to Xuanji's dad to talk about their marriage. At last, her dad agreed and they got married. Yixuan and Xuanji had their children, and they were the happiest family. They both didn't want to become immortal or demon, so became mortal and happily finished their lives.

Fiction

Group 3

Huangshan Tales

ESF West Island School, Beed, Lara – 11

It was a cold and gloomy night. I sat on my hard mattress, shivering as the thin blanket did very little to help me feel warm. The only chance I could feel like a normal villager was when I snuggled with my fluffy siamese cat, called Blossom.

Unfortunately, Blossom was too busy trying to keep warm herself, unwilling to feel my cold hands in her paws. My dad wasn't making enough money to afford a heater. Ever since my mother died, we went from a wealthy family to a family that got excited over spare mints in trash cans. I tried to sleep, but failed miserably. It was just no use.
"Come on, JUST FALL ASLEEP! You survived the worst part of winter. It's almost spring!" I said to myself. Soon, I fell asleep, but only after I wore all my ragged clothes on top of each other, wore my torn socks, and took my cat away from my dad, bearing with the wails of Blossom as she shivered violently in my arms.

After that horrible night, I ran to the village well to get water for me, my dad, and Blossom. I ran off, grabbing my bucket.

And so I continued, running to the well, ignoring all the rude remarks and comments that were thrown at me by the richest chinese kids in the village. I quickly reached the well in record time: 1 hour. I started to lower the bucket to get some water, but then I saw it. The rich kids, playing in the village park. One kid saw me, and said: "Oh! Look! It's the poor girl!"
I was so mad, that I completely forgot what I came to do in the first place.
"I am not poor! I have enough money, and i'm not spoiled like you!" I shouted in anger.
"What are you gonna do, baby?" he replied.
"This." I said.
"What? You aren't doing any– Ouch!" I cut him off. As he was talking, I kicked the bucket. He cried out in pain and agony and ran off with the other kids.

I collected my bucket and started to gather water.

A while later, I arrived at my home, well, home isn't the word to describe it. It's more like a roof with sticks and a tiny door! Anyway, I wished I hadn't. I wished it was a nightmare, but sadly, it was true. I opened the door only to see that my house was being invaded by ALIENS!!

Well, not the flying around type in UFO's with antennas, but the 2 most spoiled, posh people I have ever met: The new kid and his annoying father. My life isn't and wasn't THAT interesting.

"Hi! What's your name? I'm Jack. Nice to meet you!"
"Don't really care." I replied, rolling my eyes sarcastically. I didn't think he would take it too personally, but he ran out of the house and started bawling his eyes out so loudly that I could hear it from my room! I yelled at him telling him to keep it down, but I think I made things worse. Soon, he came back in, to my disappointment. I was forced to talk to him while my Dad and his were talking. Apparently, they were long friends back when my Dad lived in America. Since I was 3 years older than Jack, I was told by his Dad that I should babysit him while they went for a walk. I was about to say no, but then I saw the pleading look in my Dad's dull grey eyes.
"Sure!" I replied, trying to look and sound happy.
"Great! Let's go then!" my Dad exclaimed, obviously happy with my choice.
"Bye daddy," yelled Jack excitedly, "Hope, we're gonna have so much fun!"
As soon as they left the house, Jack suddenly became calmer. He acted differently, less exciting and more self absorbed.
"Why don't we go for a walk?" I suggested, hoping he would say no. To my surprise, he said no.
"How about YOU go for a walk and I'll just chill here." He said.
Suddenly, I got mad. How dare he act like that in someone else's home! My home! Such a spoiled brat. I yanked him and his thick jacket, and pulled him to the door.
"What are you doing? Let go of me!" he screamed. I held on and started to make my way out of the doorway.
"Ugh, would you stop being a baby for once?" I said as he whined and complained.

We were about halfway there to the village well, when Jack got a call from his Dad.

"Hi Dad!"
"Hi Jack, I have some bad news…"
"What?"
"We have to move."
"Again? We just got here! Please, no!"
" I'm sorry, Jack. We aren't welcome here. The emperor wants us to go. We can't refuse."
"Is there any way we can stay?"
"Unless the emperor changes his mind, I'm afraid not."
"Well, then I'll make him change his mind."
"Jack, don't get in−"

Jack hung up the phone, with a mixed expression on his face.
"What is it?"
"I have to move, AGAIN! I don't want to, but I can only stay if I do something amazing to make the emperor change his mind!"
"You could throw an epic party?"
"Nah, my Dad would get mad."
"You could, um, make the best chinese dress?"
"Ew! Gross!"
"Well, you could climb Huangshan. But no one ever has come back down!"
"Huang what?"
"Huangshan, you dummy!"
"Huangshem?"
"UGH!! Just call it… um… China's Magical Mountains!"
"So, let's go!"
"What? We can't leave now! It's freezing cold during the day, and burning at night! There are dangerous plants that could kill us if we get too close! We need to pack!"
"So I'll go home and pack, and you do the same!"
"Ok, why not?" I said sarcastically. I hoped he didn't think I actually wanted to come. Sadly, he did.

As soon as me and Jack were done packing, we snuck out at midnight. I was really nervous, so I brought Blossom. I was scared, but I knew I had to be the braver and more responsible one because, after all, he was younger than me. As we reached the base of the mountain, the sun started to rise, blooming a mix of orange, yellow, pink, and blue. Suddenly, I felt lighter. I felt as if the sunrise had given me enough hope, that I could finally believe we were going to make it down.

As we climbed, we faced lots of obstacles, such as wild animals trying to eat either us or our food, poisonous plants (which Jack kept collecting), and the seemingly endless hike up to the top. Unfortunately, Blossom didn't make it up. Halfway through the climb, she started to act really sick, and she could not continue. She died the next day. I was so sad, I cried the rest of the way up. It was devastating. Jack acted normal, but in our camp one night, I heard him crying and saying the name 'Blossom' over and over in between sobs. I didn't think he would get too attached to her. I didn't bother to comfort him, because, well, I have a history of making him miserable. However, we made it. I don't know how, but we did. And when we reached the top, we saw it. The village.
"Wow, a village? Where are all the people?" Jack asked.
"I don't know. Let's find them!" I replied.
We walked all around, only to come across a mother and her son, a cat, and an old cable car leading back down to our village.
"This is how we used to get down the mountain to get water. Our village cable car was destroyed, leaving us no way to collect water. Most of us died off, and some of us moved, but me and my son stayed. We made our own source of water. It's not a lot, but it's enough." The mother said."

We managed to fix the well, and came down after saying goodbye to the mother and her son. We were so excited! Jack could stay! I was not going to be poor! We got out of the cable car at the base of our mountain, and ran to my home. Turns out, our parents were looking for us! We were only gone for a day, but we could understand why they were worried.

4 MONTHS LATER

Jack and I finally got noticed by the emperor. He got to stay in the village, and I was granted 1 wish of my choice. I chose for my family to be wealthy and healthy, throughout the rest of their lives. Me and Jack became good friends. A couple of days later, it was my birthday! I got one of my most favourite presents. A siamese, fluffy cat, just like Blossom! I decided to call it Flower, after blossom.

It was a happy ending, thankfully.

Max and the Magical Crystal

ESF West Island School, Beed, Neil – 13

My mother hid me in my bedroom. I was only six when The Sacred attacked my little Chinese village in the middle of a blizzard. She ran out onto the plaza, her sword clattering by her side. I sat there and looked out the small window, praying that this was all a dream.

It was from that window I watched, helplessly, as a soldier rammed a sword through my mother's chest. She turned around to look at me and fell to the floor. I ran outside and knelt over my dead mother, my wet tears falling onto the white snow.

The soldiers ran to our pious crystal and pulled it off the stand. They got onto their horses and ran off, leaving the entire village in the dust.

Angry and scared, I ran to the woods. I leaned against a dark oak tree, tears flooding the soil around me.

Then I saw him. A bright green lizard crawled down from the highest branch of the tree. He quickly scuttled over to my shoulder.
"Hello there, Max," he exclaimed with a smile.
"Ahhhhh! A talking lizard!" I screamed wide−eyed in shock.
"No, it's ok, I'm Spock," the lizard said in a gentle voice, "you don't have to be afraid."
"You see," he explained, "the crystal powered the entire mountain, not just your village. The forest is in great danger, all the water in the Enchanted Fountain has disappeared completely, and the animals have nothing to drink. I had a vision, Max, only you can bring the crystal back."
"Me? That's impossible! I can't do anything right! I couldn't even save my mother." I said dejectedly with tears in my eyes.
"Yes, you can," asserted Spock, "you just need to believe in yourself"
I took a deep breath in as Spock explained all the precautions I needed to take when getting to The Sacred's base. The plan was simple, climb to the top of the mountain and retrieve the crystal.
"Be careful," the lizard warned, "dozens of beasts lurk around the path."
He handed me my mother's engraved sword.
"Truth, Honor, Justice," I read aloud, and off I went to retrieve the crystal.

The great mountain towered over me. Branches cracked below as I hiked up the old, ruptured steps. It was getting dark. I began to set up my tent. Suddenly, a low growling noise filled the twilight breeze. I looked around in shock.
"Hello?" I asked as I quivered in fear.
"Hello," it responded in a deep, raspy voice.
Behind a bush, a huge creature rose. Black scales crawled around his entire body, his sharp teeth gnawed, and his glowing yellow eyes squinted at the sight of me. I tried to draw out my sword, but when I reached down, nothing was there. I must have dropped it on the way up.
"Oh no." I whispered.
It charged into me as fast as an eagle that just found its prey. It knocked me back into the soil. I tried to get up, but my legs burned. I couldn't move a single muscle. The creature trudged closer, his sharp horn shining against the midnight sky. I breathed in slowly, eyeing the beast as it came closer.
"I can't go now," I told myself.
Slowly but surely, I picked myself up. I could feel the electricity run through my spine. The animal started to sprint. This was it. I closed my eyes, my heart beating faster than bolts of lightning crashing as it strikes land. I clenched my fists and tensed up all of the muscles in my body. It was getting closer. With a sudden burst of adrenaline, I used all the energy I had and punched the creature right in the nose.

Bright blue lightning ran through the beast's bones and dark smoke came out of his large nostrils as he collapsed on the floor in front of me. I looked around, then at my shaking, blue hands.
"Did I just do that?" I asked myself in confusion.
The colours suddenly faded out and my skin returned to normal. Shaking, I retired for the night in utter shock.

I woke up startled the next morning to the sound of a tall tree collapsing against the leaves below my torn tent. I got out slowly and gazed ahead in horror. All the colour had drained from the trees across the mountain.

Without the crystal, the entire mountain was destroyed. In disbelief, I started to climb up the rigid hard rocks. I was so close to the peak. Slowly walking up the spiral staircase, I circled the mountain as I ascended to the summit. Swiftly, something ruffled the bushes behind me. I turned around, but I couldn't see anything there.
"Must have been the wind." I told myself.
I turned around slowly, but only to come face to face with a gigantic white tiger. It's red eyes burned with anger, as he growled and walked toward me. I quickly turned around and started to run. The tiger sprinted, the distance between us closing rapidly. I tried to go faster, but I had reached my limit.
"Come on!" I screamed to myself, and that instant, I zoomed across the stairs, leaving behind streaks of bright blue lightning.
I could feel the wind in my face, my feet pushing me forward faster than a heartbeat. The lighting clapped and thundered behind me, it's electricity travelling to every nerve in my body, crackling and running through my veins.
"Woah!" I shouted as I came to a stop.
I glanced at my burning blue shoes in awe then took a look around. The tiger had faded completely out of sight. I breathed a huge sigh of relief. I leant against a jagged rocky wall, but suddenly heard the sound of moving machinery and mechanisms. I jumped away just as the wall parted to reveal a long, icy passageway.
“Incredible!” I exclaimed in surprise.
I shivered as I walked down the dark tunnel, I had forgotten to pack warm clothes the night I left. I continued down the frozen alley, but only to come to a stop. In front of me, I saw two paths, each leading to two different places.

I took a step closer. I could hear my mother’s voice. I looked over at the first path, where the voice was coming from. But then I heard the Sacred on the other side, rejoicing with the crystal they had stolen. The ice slowly cracked below me as I took a step toward the sound of my mother. Without the crystal, China's Magical Mountains will fall. I needed to do the right thing. I needed to save my village.

The sweet sound of my mother’s beautiful voice faded away as I walked along the second path, ready to face whatever was at the end. I stepped into the blinding lights at the end of the tunnel. I had made it to the top of the mountain.

"Intruder!" I heard a gang member shout.
Hundreds of soldiers surrounded me, their sharp swords banging on their impregnable shields.
"Give me the crystal!" I screamed.
The leader sneered at me.
"And what's a kid going to do about that?" he jeered.
The top of the mountain erupted in loud laughter.
"He's just a kid!" everyone snickered.
I ran toward the leader, but he just knocked me down onto the floor. The laughter grew even louder. I closed my eyes. I could hear my mother.
"Get up, Max" she whispered.
"Come on, Max" said Spock assertively.
"You can do this" I heard the villagers say in unison.
All my friends back home were counting on me. The whole of China was counting on me. I slowly rose into the frosty air. Every part of me ached. I had to do this. I took a deep breath. My eyes crackled with powerful electricity. This was it. I reached my hand into the air, and straight out of the sky, my mother's sword flew into my hand.
"Truth, Honor, Justice!" I shouted and drove the sharp sword into the snowy ground.

The electricity from my hands reached the tip of the sword, and all the clouds in the sky circled the summit. The bright lighting thundered and roared as it struck the top of the mountain leaving streaks of bright blue electricity around the clear white snow, and as if by magic, the colour of the mountain was restored, and the sky turned a bright blue. Weak and tired, I knelt on the floor, next to all the disintegrated bodies around me. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. Just a little while longer. Suddenly, the sun rose from behind the village, and everyone woke up that morning to find clear water running down the long streams, and the crystal back on its stand.

I felt one last shock of electricity run through me, as I smiled and faded into the clear, morning air.

A Tale Of Phoenixes And Demons

ESF West Island School, Chan, Aniece – 11

Wake me up from this nightmare, someone, please.
"Miss, wake up. A proper princess must not be late. That would bring dishonour to the Emperor." She yanked me aggressively out of my bed. This is Liori, the maid that has been serving me ever since I was born. She is a pain, I won't lie.
"Look at me. I thought I taught you proper manners ever since you were young!"
My everyday life is like this.
I feel the magic in the wind coming to me, I felt a presence that made me feel warm and cosy but also gave me strength. A mysterious red bird was travelling towards me! It soon became clear to me that it was a phoenix. As it came closer to me, I felt even stronger. It startled me and explained,
"Janet, I am here to inform you that you are the next phoenix bloodline who can hold the feather and use its magical power. You must go and conquer the 'Feather Of Faith And Wisdom', which is located in Feng Huang Shan. Child, run free, to where your heart desires." She was about to leave, then turned around.
"Oh right! You need to hunt down the four dragon protectors, they can assist you to the mountain safely. They live together in a small village, near Feng Huang Shan. I'm off, good luck."
Then, it disappeared without a trace left behind. You can do this. I must do it for the sake of China. I leaped out from the window. I looked down, then noticed I was about to fall onto a guard! I crashed onto him, and it was not a safe landing.
"P–princess? Please be careful! Are you alright?" He was shaking whilst weirdly, begging me for mercy for some chaotic reason.
"Don't worry, I am fine."
"D–do tell me i–if there's something I can d–do for you."
"I know, come on this trip with me. I can explain it to you. I want you to accompany me there."
"Yes, I will help you with all my abilities."
I jerked him to a hidden place that only I know about, then whispered to him,
"You better obey me, guard. Assist me to Feng Huang Shan, and help me track down the four protectors."
"What? Princess, escaping to find something will bring dishonour to the family!"
"But I want, no need to save China from the demon race. They're going after the 'Feather Of Faith And Wisdom'."
We used the little energy left in our bodies to make a little hole through the magical barrier surrounding the palace. Then, we crawled through it and entered the forest. This forest is named, 'The Forbidden Forest'. Well, it is not just called the Forbidden Forest without a reason, rumours state that many have gone missing after entering the forest, and there are hundreds and thousands of dangerous species lurking about and call the forest their home. Who knows what kind of trouble I will be in. But I don't care right now, as long as I can do whatever I want.
"I didn't catch your name yet though, just realized now."
"My name is Arthur, and I am quite the loner in the palace."
As we chatted, we became more close and understood each other more. Talking to him was relaxing and it makes me feel like all the weight on me has been lifted off my shoulders, unlike back at home.
"Alright now, I need to collect some food, it is getting rather darker and deeper now." Arthur explained.
Scurrying to find some safe animals to hunt, he disappeared. I was trying to catch up to him but he soon faded and I couldn't see him with my bare, weak eyesight. As I was trying to track him down, I encountered an unusual animal skulking in a nearby cave. I was curious to see it, so I snuck past the trees like a ninja and reached it. It had blue shimmery eyes, a pair of mini ears and was the size of a newborn cat. I instantly fell in love with it, and felt a bond between us. It beamed at me and blushed, then dashed from left to right, then finally onto my arms. I believe it was a Kitaron, which is an endangered animal and are an extremely rare creature that lives in caves alone, and likes to keep a low profile. With my genius and creative mind, well of course I named it Bubbly, how could I not name a fat and round Kitaron Bubbly?
"P–princess? Are you here? Hello?" Arthur yelped from a distance.
"I'm right here!"
I introduced him to Bubbly, in hopes that they would be friends and get along well. They both despite each other, which is undoubtedly not a great start.
We arrived at the village mentioned by the phoenix. Suddenly, I felt a strange presence. There were four different presences I can sense, all of them felt connected in a sort of way. The power was strange and it felt so powerful that my mind was going to explode. The four 'unnatural four', which are the four protectors of Earth. They knew I was the next phoenix bloodline. They were the strongest of them all, at least in my head. Skylar the protector of the land

and sky, Asher, the protector of nature, Kiaria, the protector of life and death, finally, Sulien, the protector of the moon and sun. They are all shining with pride while I'm in the darkness, craving for some praise.
"I am in fact the next phoenix bloodline, name's Janet. I have a request, please assist me and my friends to Feng Huang Shan before the demons come to take the ancient artifact, the Phoenix Feather Of Faith And Wisdom." I asked them.
"Well, since you are the next phoenix bloodline, we can assist you there." They replied with faith in their eyes.
They packed their bags and followed us to Feng Huang Shan. Arriving there was not a piece of cake, with all the insects around, it was horrendous. The spawn of demons rapidly increased, it was even quicker than Einstein's quick mind calculations.
Rage filled the territory.
"Go away." King Almaro uttered in arrogance.
"You and Arthur go find the feather together."Sulien suggested with confidence.
We darted there as fast as we could, giving it all we've got. A demon with death in his eyes, looked down at us like we are ants, and laughed,
"Hey y'all, stop acting like barbarians!"
"Boring, random demon." I joked with sass.
I rolled in the air above him and landed at the entrance.
"Girl, I'm not done with you!"
I'm about to die. Death was chasing me like a runaway goose in a farm, it was so unsurprising. Though, I wonder why. Well, it is the end of my line for my life, so why wonder about such futile worries? Wait, got to make myself from thoughts right now, though.
I ignored him, then grabbed the glorious feather off the display board and hastened back out. I was tempted to look around for any unrevealed treasures, but I had to stop the demons and their vicious acts.
The feather was shaking and magic came out of it. In a flash of time, this sensational aura circled the demons, and a ray of blinding light targeted the mob of demons, there was no escape for them. Right before the ray hit them directly, something unexpected happened. It all happened so quick, I couldn't process it at all. I was struck by this bewildering force that I couldn't utter a word. My heart was pounding so quickly, gasping for breath. My injuries were too severe, I'm going to die.
"I won't forgive you if you don't come back alive!" Arthur cried with all the strength left in him.
Bubbly rubbed herself against me, it was fuzzy and comfy.
The pain in me was unbearable.
"Promise me you'll stay alive."
That was my last wish for them.
The four protectors tried to save me with their magic, but the dark spell that had hit me was so powerful that they couldn't do anything but stand and wait. I felt a drop of water dripping down on me, a glittery, glistening droplet of water. Then, all I knew was I blacked out for good.
I wanted to stay with them longer, but destiny was acting like a strict mum and wouldn't let me see them more. Their warm smiles were the last thing I wish for. I knew it. My predictions were never wrong, about anything. Death was really playing tag with me, and caught me off guard. Like my mother used to say, all I was good for was foresee the future ahead of me, well, at last, I let it destroy my life and destroy it. I feel relieved now. My time came to an end, so be it then.

Aster

ESF West Island School, Doss, Ariyaana – 13

My breath short and sharp, winter was always the harshest month. It was getting dark, without hesitation, I knew where to go. I paced myself, trekking through these beautiful, exquisite mountains, the mountains I call home. The beauty and tranquillity packed in these natural formations are truly one of a kind. It is a place you will never forget. Sorry I haven't introduced myself! I go by Aster and this is my life story.

I have lived up in these mountains for most of my life, it was pretty hard getting used to living up here. From when I was born to my fifth birthday, I lived in Huangshan, a small city located close to the yellow mountains, the place I have learnt to call my home.

How had I landed here? A great story to tell. In the city of Huangshan, a war broke out. Soldiers storming in left and right, taking away innocent townsmen. My parents and I fled, only with a backpack each with essentials such as water, food and blankets, it was like our life depended on it, which in fact it did. We made it to the outskirts of Huangshan, with the soldiers on our feet. We thought we were safe until we came across a bad thing, an extremely bad thing. There was a diversion in the road, causing my family to split up. My parents were in panic, without any agreement, they forced me to go the other way, parting from them. The army of soldiers had followed them, leaving me in the middle of nowhere, stranded and alone.

I never knew what happened to them because they never came back.

I don't really remember what happened afterwards, all I remember is waking up in the middle of the mountains, shivering, fearing what's to come. At that moment, I had one objective: to get to safety. I needed to get to a shelter but... I did not know how to get one or even find one until I stumbled on the flower path. A flower trail, filled with dead lotus', my mom's favourite flowers. Without consulting the consequences, I followed the trail, leading me to a cave, which in present time, I call my home.

I had stayed in the cave for God knows how long, I was starving, frightened and most definitely unprepared. My hunger got the best of me and I knew I had to hunt, but how? A five–year–old, hunting. Quite a literal death sentence, but I did it anyway. I left my cave, the sun still up, memorising the exact location and set off. I had collected mushrooms and found a stream, I used some leaves to make a somewhat container for the food, refilled my water and left.

Trekking back, I took a wrong turn. I was in a dark area, a very intimidating area. There was not any warmth to it. A perfect place to die, I thought. I was making my way through, trying to go back to where I came from until I heard a growl. As expected, there had to be other life on these mountains. I scoured my brain for answers until I came to a realisation, *mountain lions*. Mountain lions also known as Puma Concolor, are the biggest of the cat family, mostly found in the western hemisphere and mountain areas, they are quite dangerous creatures. I knew I was in trouble from the moment I spotted them. One of them started circling me, followed by several others. I knew I could not run; it would be impossible to outrun these agile, fierce, big creatures. My body, hyperventilating, didn't help me think of ways to escape. As of now, I never knew these animals would become my friends. First impressions aren't everything, right?

Well, you are probably wondering how I escaped. Weirdly enough, I did not. I turned around and slowly approached them. They did not fight back but instead came closer. I laid my hand on what seemed like the leader of the pack. I steadied my breathing, crouched down and bowed, hoping to show my co–operation. It seemed as if my message got through, and they slowly started to back away. I gave one last bob and turned around in the way of the area I came through. My dad always said I had a magic touch when it came to animals, I guess I did.

After that wild encounter, I did find my way back to my cave. The howl of the wind, guiding me. The pathing had involved lots of twists and turns. It took me a considerable amount of time to get back to the cave. The sun had gone down quite a long time ago, making the moon and stars distinctive. Fortunately, I did make it back, bringing back several cuts and bruises with me. I was parched and famished; the hunt came in handy. I had eaten well, not believing how the day unfolded. It had completely changed and drained me. I had to rest.

I woke up the next morning, the sun shining on my eyes. I got up, drank some of my water and started thinking. How long will I be here? How long will I have to live like this? How will I survive? I went outside, looking for a sign – any sign at all – of my parents. Having that little hope that they may come back. I spent, what seemed like an eternity, to find footprints, a trail. I went back to try and find the lotus trail but in its place was an empty dirt road.

I could not find anything and headed down to the stream. I collected water and stayed there for a while. The eerie silence of the mountains was too loud. I was left with nothing but my thoughts, painful thoughts. I was alone– no one to count on, no one to speak to– all alone. I had to face the obvious. I had to lead this lifestyle; I did not have a choice. Huangshan had been falling apart the last time I had seen it. There would be no point trying to go back. Finding civilization would be too strenuous. Exploring would be dangerous. Then it had hit me. *I was stranded.* I had to live here, be here, with just myself. **I had to.**

I devised a plan. If I had to live here, I would have to know here. I spent the next 3 days walking around the mountains, getting used to them. Finding food points, water sources and shelter. I had spotted several mountain lions but kept them undisturbed.

The cave became my home. I had set up a bed, using foliage to mimic a mattress and pillow while using my blanket as a source of warmth and comfort. There was a food station where I had mushrooms, water, greens, vegetables and fish. I had a fire going on using twigs I found on the paths and rocks to ignite the flames. I would hunt every 3 days, making sure I go at the right time was key to having a successful hunt. I would explore practically every day. I had made clothes from leaves, vines, twigs and anything I could get my eyes on.

Life had changed, quite drastically, but I had adapted quite well, Making the mountains my home.

So here I am, several years later, in my cave, on a cold day, the wind still howling. The mountains now bring safety to me, the inhabitants such as lions and birds have gotten used to my presence, they help me in many ways. I had grown mentally. There were challenges every day, of course but that is the fun in it. There were days where I did not think that I could do it anymore, living here, making my own life, being my own person. Against all odds, I made it past those days, and now I am stronger than ever.

Every now and then, the thoughts of my parents would come rushing in. I really do miss them, but I don't think they ever left. They are somewhere, looking over me. The lotus path, the lions, the wind, they were here, spirituality. They were with me.

It is winter again; I am in my cave. A fire burning, bringing me comfort and warmth, I never thought that this would be the way I lived. I do not think it will be forever. For a long time, yes but forever, maybe not.

The Final Peak

ESF West Island School, Gibb, Bori – 13

A thick layer of fog lies motionless on the mire. Jester clasps his hands around his neck. Blood seeps through his fingers. He collapses into the mud.

My knees buckle, and I drop to his side. His life will not be forgotten, and his death will not have been for nothing. I put pressure into my ears, and block out the gun fire. The thumping of my heart is distinct in my head. Through the blood and broken skin, I see a vein. The final pulses of life coursing through. I see and hear our heartbeats synch for a moment. Then his body grows limp. I breathe out. A wail escapes and racks my body. Long dignified weeps.

The simulation ends.

I'm sitting in a metal chair in The Pit. I punch and kick, smacking my arms and legs against the side. I moan, in pain, and in relief. I feel like the weight of a mountain has been lifted off my shoulders. The experience in the simulation was stressful, I feel like a mountain has been lifted off my shoulders.

That was my seventh of the week. Ever since the Shadow Commander took over, and now that I am 16, daily simulations are a must. They are used to collect our terrors and turn them into data. Why? No one knows. And we have no choice.

I leave for home. I open my eyes and see my mother. The sun is reflecting off her dark green eyes, turning them a shade of gold. They are beautiful. Her long eyelashes mesmerise me as she blinks. She stares at me. I wonder if she sees what I see.

“I watched your simulation,” she starts. “I know it was difficult.” She pauses. “I’m sure you don’t have too many more simulations to face.” Her words are tender. It's almost impossible not to believe her.

“Don’t worry, Prim, I'm sure you will face your final fear soon,” she says.

“So, no more simulations?” I ask.

“After you face your final fear, no more.”

I sit on the wooden stool in front of a mirror in my house. My mother twirls my hair with her deft fingers, and idles with the tips. She lifts it up into a bun, and tucks a curl of hair behind my ear. She pins it down, and steps away. She nods once at me in the mirror, and begins to walk away.

“Mum?” I murmer. She walks back, and kisses me on the forehead. I know this is my cue to leave.

I head for The Pit, as I do every day. Steam rises from the concrete slabs. I let the smell of the wet pavement fill me. Jester is there waiting, along with other participants Judie, and Judwin, Lace, Rue, and Pod. I can't tell whether Jester’s surrounded, or excluded. I feel his eyes consuming the side of my face. I know that by acting like I don’t notice, I will irritate him, so I do so. I feel arms embracing my shoulders. I turn around, meeting Judie. She looks so happy to see me. She's about to say something when we hear the clump of boots coming up from The Pit. Her arms drop to her sides, and her smile fades.

It's Deke, who has worked for the Shadow Commander since the Fall. It's always shocking to see him, but not because we aren't expecting him.

“Today we will be verifying your bravery in The Pit. Here's what will happen. You will be jumping off the end of a pier into a tank. You will have three large horseshoes strapped to your back, making you sink to the bottom of the bay. There will be a series of keys on the top layer of sand. You must find the right keys that fit in the right locks, and set yourself free. Then swim your way up. There will be an air pocket, if you even make it that far.” He chuckles, and leads us into The Pit.

Deke injects me, and the simulation begins. I fall out of this reality, and into another.

It feels too dark for day, and too light for night. There is no sunset, nor sunrise. We stumble on the uneven gravel paving the pier. Waves swell and lap around our ankles. When we reach the end of the pier, Deke signals for one of us to jump in. No one volunteers at first.

“I will,” Jester finally says. I see his hands begin to shake. He grabs the hem of his shirt to steady them. He glances at me. “I'm taking my Swiss army knife. It's my lucky charm.”

I can tell he wants to be brave. Before he jumps, he whispers, “Dad would be so proud.”

My throat tightens. I cough to relieve the pressure. I squeeze out “Bye.”

This could be the end. I need to say something more. “I lo−.” I pause. He waits. I can't say it. His mouth forms something too sad to be a smile, and whispers “I love you”. He falls back, and sinks unnaturally fast. I yelp something like his name, but he's gone. I watch him, until he disappears. Every second hurts more than the last. Bubbles rise to the surface, and I pray I’ll see him again.

Eventually, Deke signals for another person to jump. I don’t hesitate. “Me.” No one objects.

I lean back, and pludge in. I spin and roll around helplessly. I hear water rush past. My back drags me under at speed. My arms flail around, and my hair covers my face. It's not getting any easier to hold my breath. My back thuds into the sand, the force of metal crunching my spine. Pain prickles down my thighs, into my feet. My head clouds as dark spots appear in front of me, obscuring my view. I blink rapidly, trying to see past them.

I need to find Jester. I lie on my back, and pat the sand around me for the keys, still blined. Suddenly, I feel something cut into my palm. I try to focus my eyes. Jester’s Swiss army knife.

Blood is a strange colour. It's darker than you expect, like mountains and twilight. I watch it seep out and disperse into the water, giving it a tint of pink. I use the knife and cut myself free of the horseshoes. Ican’’t feel my legs. Without them, I can't move. I twist and turn, looking for air. My fear peaks.

I prop myself onto my elbows, and shuffle around on the seabed until I find the pocket of air. I breathe deeply. As my mind clears, I begin to understand: the knife sticking out of the sand, what Jester said before he fell, that this air bubble untouched. He left the knife for me. Sacraficing his life along the way.

I lie in the sand and sob my last breaths. But then I sense something moving nearby. Jester! I grab for him, but I can't reach. I realise, he's sinking. He drifts quietly onto the sand beside me. His skin is yellow, and his eyes open.

I ignore the burning in my lungs. I lift him onto my lap, not to try and wake him, but so I can say, “I lo−.”

The simulation ends.

I don’t know how to feel. All I know is I’m not angry.

We all went through the same simulation, but our minds adapted in differently. I jog out of The Pit. I start sprinting, getting as far away as I can, and only when I feel my legs trembling, do I stop. I press my forehead against the nearest tree trunk, though it scrapes my skin. I let the tears come.

I need to think. I go through the same numberof simulations, but with more terror. Does this mean I have been through more fears than most people already? I arrive home to my mother, watching Jester’s simulation. We adapted to the simulation similarly. We are both afraid of death. The only difference is, he’s afraid of his *own* death, I am not.

Neither dinner or breakfast make it into my memories, nor does my mother doing my hair, or the kiss goodbye. I arrive at the pit the next morning. I notice I don't feel Judie's embrace. I wonder if her view of me has changed somehow after the simulation yesterday, just as mine changed on Jester's.

I hear Deke approaching again, and brace myself.

The first thing I sense is grass. It's prickly. It's pleasant. I am surrounded by jagged rock, yet I don't feel trapped. I begin to feel moisture under my feet. Mist swirls around my toes, and grows up my legs. I feel lighter, and surge upwards.
I rise above the cliffs, to see radiant peaks. The mist thins, and I glide to the highest point of the tallest mountain.

Now I realise, here among the magical mountains. This will be my final simulation. My brother appears. I have faced all of my fears. Except for one.

"Jester, I love you too."

The Story of the Orange Lily

ESF West Island School, Iyer, Sahana – 13

Tang Xiao Hui is a bright and intelligent young girl. She loved history, which is why her project was on the poets of the Magic Mountains. The mountains were a source of wonder for many in her community. Almost no–one knew the true height of the place, and it just seemed to radiate with an aura, unlike anything anyone had ever seen before. This community was one that had existed, at the foot of the mountain, for centuries. Soon, however, quite a few things would change.

We start our story at Huang Hua Elementary School. It was the last five minutes of class, and of Xiao Hui's presentation. She talked about the Poets Li Bai and Du Fu, who are well known for having spent time in the mountains. Everyone in the village knew of their famous works, but one that was lost to the pages of history interested Xiao Hui immensely. This poem is described as being so mysterious yet melodious, that it sparked curiosity in anyone who reads it in its entirety. The entire passage is quite long, but a recurring theme is the *Orange Lily*. The lily is said to belong to the Pearl Dragon, who was is very proud of them, as only a few grow. Centuries ago, many were found all over the valley, but now, not one can be found anywhere.

After an hour–long meeting of the Huang Hua Elementary School's book club, Xiao Hui was going home from school. Just then, her younger sister, Xiao Mei, and their parents were walking towards the school. A village meeting was being announced in the courtyard. In a true coincidence, an Orange Flower was found at the foot of the mountain. However, its petals were scattered all around that section of the base of the mountain. This mystified all the Village Elder was telling the residents about the same story Xiao Hui had told her class just an hour earlier. Li Wang Lei, the village elder, told them that this flower has not been seen for since the 8th century, and that if the Lily exists, then so must the dragon. He told everyone to keep a look out for anything related to the dragon.

Early the next morning, there was a deafening noise. It was the Pearl Dragon. He had come down the mountain upon finding out that one of his prized lilies had gone missing. When the Dragon found his lily in the possession of the village elder, he became furious, and demanded to know who had stolen it. The climbers, which go up every summer to collect berries that grow on the mountain, had just come back. As such, it was impossible to tell who had stolen the flower. The dragon was not pleased with this answer and warned of big consequences.

The consequences soon became apparent. Massive Hailstorms combined with severe floods had caused the entire villages supply of food to go to waste. The harvest season had just finished, so none of the crops were stores properly yet. As such, the water carried all the barley and grains outside of the barns. By the second day, crops were floating around the village streets, all ruined. The hailstorm also caused the small road towards the village to get hidden, meaning that the village was isolated from the rest of the world. The villagers were soon starving and were unable to get any food. Many of them were getting sick from the hailstorms, which were not common in their village.

Before the situation got any worse, the villagers all met in the village circle. Many of them had sick family members, so everyone was desperate to come to a solution. In the middle of their meeting, the Pearl Dragon came back. He came with the same demand as last time and wanted the name of the person who had stolen his Lily. However, he was not alone, in his hands was a box full of plums. This got the Wang Lei thinking. He told the dragon that none of the climbers had stolen the flower, as it had been found at the base of the mountain, not at someone's house, and that it may have accidentally 'travelled' its way to the base of the mountain. The village elder then asked the Dragon to stop the atmospheric disturbances, and sudden temperature fluctuations for 24 hours, and that the villagers would to everything in their power to help him. The Dragon agreed but warned that if he did not get his lily back, in pristine condition, at the end of those 24 hours, he would come back, and the consequences would get worse.

The next morning, the entire town was on edge, and school was cancelled for the day. The streets were all pristine again, and the sun shone down upon the village. There was enough food to last everyone in the village three meals. Xiao Hui had finished her lunch and was going to return the books she had borrowed for her presentation, back to the library. Once there, she noticed that all the books on shelves about the ancient properties of the flora and fauna of the mountain were out of bounds. This intrigued Xiao Hui, who rushed home to tell her parents. She suspected that something big was going to be announced soon, and she was right.

About 13 hours after the Dragons Announcement, the villagers all meet with the dragon in the village circle. Wang Lei tells the dragon that they will make a special potion, and leads him to a back room, where they converse for 5 minutes. Upon their return, Xiao Hui noticed the dragon looked surprised. The Dragon stopped and said that he was not willing to trust the townsfolk. Wang Lei explained that the townsfolk are suffering through this sudden change in weather, and that they have nothing to win by harming the dragon but have a lot to win by helping. The village elder says the lily was brought down by accident, and that is why the villagers were all surprised by the Lily's existence and were quite confused when first asked about it. In addition, Wang Lei told the dragon that he would not tell anyone about the effect of the potion will not be told to anyone, unless it is a success. The Dragon seemed to be getting more and more content with the proposal, and finally agreed, giving them another 48 hours to get the potion ready.

Wang Lei tells all the townsfolk to pick plums from the trees, and that everyone must collect at least two. He, and a few other volunteers, collected firewood in order to make a fire that would cook the large quantity of plums needed for the concoction. Around 7 hours later, everything was prepared, and the Village Elder set the potion to brew. The next morning, the second batch of plums were picked and added to the concoction. It was then allowed to simmer for another 7 hours. By the time the dragon was given the potion, it was late at night. The potion was given to the Dragon, who drank it just outside the village gates, and went to sleep. A very tense night later, the villagers get up to find that the Pearl Dragon has turned into a man! Li Zhang Wei was his name, and he had gone missing centuries earlier. He told the villagers about how he had gotten lost, but he could not remember how exactly he had become a Dragon.

He also apologised for his earlier actions. Zhang Wei said that he had come to the village asking for help years earlier. He said that he had given the villagers a flower as a thank you gift, but that they had tricked him, and shooed him away. That is why the flower was a part of the libraries books but was never seen again. He desperately wanted to become a human again, so he snatched the opportunity when he saw the lily near the village. The villagers all forgave his after he explained his actions, and Zhang Wei promised to help in the village whenever possible.

"That is the story of the *Huang Hua Festival*!" said Xiao Hui. She was named after her great grandmother, the Xiao Hui in this story. "This is why, every year, a week after the harvest season, we all eat *bao zi* (dumplings) and drink plum juice. Thank you for coming to visit our village and we hope to see you soon." She was talking to the tourists who came to visit the mountain. After the events of this story, the abandoned road became a popular rest stop for people travelling along the mountainside. The village became famous, and this story is now told all over the world! The Orange Lily is now displayed in the village circle and is a source of wonder for many that see it.

Unexpected Visit

ESF West Island School, Lane, Eva – 11

Chapter 1
Intro

"Eek!" Natalie screamed, dropping the box. "Well that was rude." the dragon said, placing his tiny wings on his hips. Natalie looked at the creature in horror as his yellowy light blinded her eyes. "I am a dragon thank you very much my name is Glow, and I came out of that box you have." he started. She slowly picked up her water bottle to defend herself with and raised an eyebrow on her panicked face. "I think I know what your question is..." he boasted, "My name is Glow the Great and powerful dragon, and I come from the beautiful yellow mountains. There is a yellowstone in the middle of the mountains that gives the mountain it's beauty and my power. But obviously there are people who envied me, even my own little brother, and one day a jealous villager, who was a powerful sorcerer trapped me in that magical box, who knows how long I've been in there, hundreds of years, thousands? And now you have rescued me, er thank you." Natalie didn't know what to say, *usually you wouldn't trust a strange creature that comes out of a box.* She thought. "Since you have done me good I could give you something in return". "What?" Natalie gullibly replied. "I could take you to the yellow mountain, the beautiful, beautiful mountain with trees thousands of years old and the occasional misty clouds allowing you to see the lovely mountain tops oh and you must see the sunsets because they are the nicest you will ever see." She quickly but sleepily agreed without understanding what was happening first.

Chapter 2 To The Mountains

"You are completely sure this won't take me to some alternate universe or –", "Stop being such a baby and do it already!" he interrupted. So she followed the instructions he gave her. He flew in the box and shut it, she tapped three times and said the mandarin character *"shan".* All of a sudden everything in her room was twisting round and round in one big swirly picture, faster and faster, until it all disappeared. There was nothing around her. And once again she was shocked as she found herself in the yellow mountains. *It's prettier than I imagined,* It looked sunny and fresh but felt calming and free. The sun felt warm but every now and then she was greeted by a crispy summer breeze. Her eyes darted all over the mountains realizing how high she was. "Amazing isn't it?" boomed a loud and scary sounding voice. "Agh" she cried when she saw the dragon had increased in size by at least 20 times and he was 8 foot tall and very fat. "Honestly all I've heard from you as agh or eek" the large thing bellowed. "I grow when I return to my original home. Now come on I want to show you around. The sleep deprived (from walking all over the mountains) but excited girl followed, picking up the magical box on her way.

Natalie's legs grew tired from walking to one rickety unstable bridge to another, and she finally got sick and tired from hearing the dragon's loud annoying voice. "And this is the north west mountain in the middle of this is the magic sto–", "Please be quiet!" he looked at her confused. "Sorry I just want to go home. I've been walking around for hours and I am fed up with you showing me around." she explained. "No." the dragon said with his face expressing nothing. "What do you mean no?! Don't you know how many unstable bridges I've crossed and how much of your annoying voice I've listened–", and right in the middle of her sentence the dragon flew away without a single word.

Chapter 3 Dim The dragon

"Hey! Come back here" she shouted, jumping in an attempt to grab his tail, but he was too high up. After the dragon flew out of her vision she sat down her back against a huge prickly boulder the size of her, and started sobbing. And before she knew it she teared herself to sleep.

"Excuse me" spoke a quiet scared sounding voice. Natalie opened her eyes to what looked like glow but smaller around her height and skinnier. Without thinking she grabbed the animal and screamed "Take me home right now Glow!". "Agh! I'm not glow I'm Dim!" with those words Natalie let go immediately and started crying again. "There there" the scrawny dragon said in a kind voice "You must be the one Glow tricked into bringing him back, he is boasting to all the other dragons about it. But don't worry we'll get you back home."

Dim ushered her into the boulder she was lying against and from the back there was a hole just about big enough to let them into a beautiful but small place. It was decorated fantastically. There were 4 lanterns hung from the top and all over the walls were lovely glowing stones which shone of a fire in the middle. There was a huge leaf to the right of the fire and a big pot to the left. He sat her down on the leaf making what looked like tea as she explained the whole story. When she finished the dragon shook his head and said "That naughty dragon.", "You see, Glow is my older brother and has much more power. He was the first born son so my family expected greatness from him and after they saw how powerful he was they decided to name him Glow". "But I don't understand, why didn't they name him that when he was born?" she asked puzzled. "Dragons only get names that suit them, and the only way you know that the name will suit them is if you see what they are like beforehand". "Oh, ok carry on then" Natalie replied but she still found this whole dragon thing hard to understand. "After my outstanding but horrible brother I was a disappointment to my family when I couldn't fly or lift heavy boulders, so they decided to call me Dim." As he lowered his head into disappointment Natalie thought better of asking all those touchy questions. "Well that's um−" she tried to say something sympathetic but she wasn't the best person for that. "Well Dim it was great that I bumped into you because I need some help getting home…" she said unsure. "We can try but it will be very difficult". Natalie bit her lip as she thought, "I've got an idea!" and they discussed the plan for the next half hour.

Chapter 4 The Plan

"This is the second time I have walked around this whole mountain today, I mean tonight, I mean.. Whatever" she was tired again from walking around trying to find the dragon, didn' reply to any of her complaints. Just as they almost gave up they spotted him.

In a grassy patch he was boasting to a group of other dragons and you could tell by their scaly faces that they were bored and probably heard the story a million times. "Duck" whispered Dim as the pair dropped behind a small boulder. "Okay, now go up there and do the plan" Dim said pointing over to the group. Natalie hugged Dim tightly, and now her arms were wrapped around him she didn't want to let go, "Thankyou Dim, thankyou" she let go and walked over to the Glow as he eyed her suspiciously, "Oh and that's the one stupid enough to fall for my amazing plan" he said looking proud flying above all of the other gigantic dragons. "I come in peace and have brought a gift because I appreciate your godly powers" she said slyly while the other dragons looked confused. "Ooo let's see then, where is it?" he snapped. "Right here in this box", she opened the same box but it had wrapping paper all over as a disguise. He flew closer and eyed the box. "I can't see the present". "shrink down and go inside if you want it", so the dragon shrunk down and flew in. SNAP! Natalie shut the lid, she tapped three times and said *"shan"* once again everything was twisting round and round until there was nothing again. She closed her eyes and hoped it would all go back to her bedroom. And it did, to her surprise it was still the same time as she left. *Wow!* she thought, *did that really happen?* After locking the box inside her drawer. Hopped into bed and fell asleep, only to awake herself the next day thinking it was a dream.

A Tale Infused in Scarlet Mountains

ESF West Island School, Leung, Chung Hei Chester – 13

"No!" Yu–Long rasped.

"But—" a hoarse voice began to dispute.

"I said no. There is no time for rest. Not when we are this close."

The hunting pack led by North Owl Tribe leader Yu–Long had spent the past three moons traversing Huangshan's great canyons, chiselled mountains, and waterfalls of clouds that rolled over moss embedded hills. To stop now would be madness. When the overhead sun began to sink, they finally set foot in the forest clearing where they were to meet the person who hired them for the bounty. As the sun sank lower into the horizon, Yu–Long couldn't help, but wonder if this request had been a bluff. His of thought was interrupted by a sudden rustle from the hanging branches above.

Yu–Long casted his gaze to the eerie shadow that had slipped into view. "Step into the light," he called. The shadow moved and morphed into a tall, lean figure.

The figure chuckled back. "Here I am. I am Xing–Zhi, a member of the North Owl Tribe first legion." She rolled up a sleeve to reveal an engraved mark of the first legion against her porcelain white skin. As soon as he saw the mark, Yu–Long bowed.

"We too are from the North Owl Tribe. I am their chieftain, Yu–Long."

"Well, Yu–Long," Xing–Zhi drawled. "Head towards the summit, and walk for three moon sets until you reach the cloud harvest mountains. There, find the pines that have been drenched in the lies of the wind. Then, hike up the Lotus Peak—the highest peak of Huangshan, and crawl into its mouth in which you will retrieve an artifact. *My* artifact."

"And what does this artifact look like exactly?" Yu–Long asked, pondering the credibility of this mysterious shadow in his mind.

Xing–Zhi took a deep breath and began. "It is an orb covered in a thin plate of stone, and bathed in the pure essence of a Giving Tree.

"A rabid group of Nomads serve as guardians of the artifact. They wear the armour of our warriors slain from eons past. Make no mistake: they are your enemies!"

Her bony fingers stretched to Yu–Long's faceplate, tracing the grooves. "Now go! Make me proud!"

The North Owl Tribe trekked on the path that the mysterious Xing–Zhi had set them on. As they escaped the wooded atmosphere below, the mountains afar seemed to shine like polished marble. The clouds weaved through the arms of the trees. The passing of three moon sets came when the group finally laid eyes on the Lotus Peak. Beneath the clear wisp of clouds, they spotted a forest like no other. The branches were withered away, and the soil was soaked in a plum hue.

"The forest of lies!" Yu–Long murmured. Suddenly, a warm flicker of fire came from the forest, then another… another... and another. "The Nomads!" he hissed. He turned to his pack. "We rest here upon this mountain, then ambush them at night from the high ground. Once all the Nomads are dead, we shall have free passage," Yu–Long mused.

It was time. Slipping into the opaque black shadows of the surrounding shrubs, the pack crept to the very rear of the camp. His right–hand man Yu–Hua began the attack by setting the Nomads' huts ablaze; stirring up a panic. With an ear–piercing whistle, the North Owl Tribe warriors on the cliffs fired their arrows downwards into the valley below like rain from a thunderstorm. The arrows ripped apart the clouds, and shrieks of fear echoed across the fruitless pines. Shrieks of fear that oddly emanated from…behind them? The Nomads had flanked them! Arrows flew across Yu–Long's head as he and his fellow warriors were mercilessly shot down by the Nomads.

"Retreat!" Yu–Long yelled to his pack. As the North Owl Tribe scrambled for cover, he noticed something rather peculiar about a dead Nomad warrior—something familiar. *Impossible!* He thought. *There's no way!*

"Cover me!" he barked to Yu–Hua.

Yu–Hua simply nodded. Yu–Long made a mad dash to the warrior, and flung off the slain warrior's faceplate. What Yu–Long saw chilled him to the bone. For the warrior's marking featured an owl clasping lightning bolts in its feet: the marking of the South Owl Tribe. They were butchering their own. Armed with the shocking truth, Yu–Long willed his feet to move; dashed out from cover.

"They are one of us! Take off your faceplates; show them your markings!" he screamed to his fellow warriors.

With a great leap, Yu–Long tackled one of the Nomads, and tore off his faceplate. He showed his face in a headlock to both tribes. The meaningless fighting slowly came to a stop. Yu–Long fell to his knees, and let out an agonising wail of despair.

The milky evening dew had been washed away, and in its place hung the sickly, acrid smell of blood. Yu–Long made his way to the injured Mu–Bai, chieftain of the South Owl Tribe. Mu–Bai was pinned to a stump by an arrow that had pierced through his stomach. Yu–Long dropped to one knee.

"Mu–Bai, brother! Who gave you the order to attack?" Yu–Long nervously asked.

"Xing–Zhi did. She told us that there were deranged Nomads that had killed the North Owl Tribe, stripping them of their armour; wearing them as trophies." Mu–Bai stopped and punctured lungs heaving for air.

"So, we retaliated. We agreed that it would only be right if we were to strike back as an act of revenge..." The words stopped flowing from his lips.

Yu–Long sighed in grief. He put Mu–Bai's faceplate back on his limp head, and began to rally what warriors remained.

Both Owl Tribes climbed the Lotus Peak united; fuelled by their rage. The horizon of the Huangshan valleys was blocked by the mouth of the head. A beam of light, which slithered through a fracture in the ceiling, lighted up a worn–out abandoned podium that had long since been reclaimed by nature.

"There!" a warrior exclaimed, pointing to the podium.

The orb was nested on the podium. Yu–Long cautiously made his way toward the artifact; gently lifted it from its nest. *How ironic!* Yu–Long thought. That such a simple object could cause so much death. The tribes headed back to Xing–Zhi with fury in their hearts that would only be quenched once they had their revenge.

They made their journey once more through the blood–soaked mountain. Xing–Zhi sat in the middle of the clearing. The tribes soundlessly paced around her. A flock of Laughing Birds thrusted out of a patch nearby, and Xing–Zhi opened her eyes in a startle. Her heart skipped a beat. In the blink of an eye, warriors surrounded her from all angles. Xing–Zhi could do nothing but hold her hands above her head.

Yu–Long took three paces towards Xing–Zhi. "Before you die, witch, answer me this. Why would you do this? Turning your own tribe against each other?" he snarled.

"The Owl and Wolf Tribes—" Xing–Zhi croaked, "disregarded all life around them. Not a single life other than humans was spared."

Yu–Long spat on the burnished ground. "So, you betrayed your ichor tribe for some trees?"

"The tribes were damning us to certain death! Nature gave us a renewed life: a life that the tribes did not cherish, did not value!" Xing–Zhi hissed.

A loud scoff came from Yu–Long.

"Hand me the orb, and I will show you its purpose!" Xing–Zhi shrieked.

Yu–Long hesitated, but temptation got the better of him, and he threw her the orb. Xing–Zhi began to peel flakes of stone from the orb like paper.

Xing–Zhi pointed a frail finger at Yu–Long. “Long before any feet brushed the grounds of Huangshan; mountains were the only inhabitants. These mountains were gifted with the essence of life. They would shine internally, emitting a strong light that would brighten up the forests around it.

“You see my child— the roots of the pines are connected to that very living essence within the mountains. But a war broke out amongst the Humans. It divided them into two tribes: Owl and Wolf. Their conflict ripped apart natural life all throughout Huangshan. They used such essences to further incite the havoc. The digging into the mountains to extract the living essence within became normalised, and not too soon after the number of essences fell.

“Your ancestors came to a pathetic truce. All seemed to have harmony, but the damage was already done. The forests that surrounded the mountains withered away; their essence taken. Only their carcasses remained.”

A small grin began to form on Xing–Zhi’s face. “A few of these essence orbs survived, and you happened to bring one to me,” laughing, she smashed open the orb.

An opaque mist engulfed the dazed and confused warriors who promptly blacked out. When the haze settled, it revealed a new mountain that had arisen dressed in a scarlet hue. Where the warriors had once stood remained nothing but pine trees, their armour the only remnant of the once–feared Owl Tribes.

The Spirit of the Mountains

ESF West Island School, Li, Andrea – 11

Long ago, in the country of China, there lived a beautiful goddess who protected the legendary magical mountain. She was known by many names, the graceful one, The beautiful one, some even called her the protector of the magical mountain. The goddess' real name was Huang nu, or yellow lady. There was a whole group of people devoted to her during a period they liked to call, the Yellow age. During that time, temples were dedicated in her honour, and the mountains were lush and beautiful, blossoming like a beautiful flower. But slowly, people stopped taking care of nature, and instead became more interested in cars and other electronics that polluted the earth, and the mountain. Slowly, mist started to cover the mountain. Nowadays, you can barely see the mountain through the mist. Some people have even forgotten that it existed. And the poor Yellow Lady could only sit and watch, as people forgot about her and the mountain, too busy with their VRs and TVs to come and see the real thing.

The Yellow Lady has been protecting the mountains since the magical mountains appeared. The magical mountain is linked to her, as if they were good friends. When one dies, the other immediately kills themself. That was exactly what was going to happen if people did not start remembering her. One day, a naturalist was in china for a vacation. His name was Tam. He liked to look for mountains in legends. Tam was excited. He could not wait to discover the mountains and prove to others that the legend was true. He could make the Yellow lady great again! Tam had been walking for many hours. When he arrived at the site for the mountains, Tam was confused. In the place of a supposed beautiful and blossoming mountain, was a ghostlike mountain covered in thick grey haze. Tam was taken aback. Had he found a new mountain? Or was this *the* Magical Mountain?

Tam looked at the mountain. There was almost no way that *that* was the Magical Mountain. He ran back to the urban city to report his discovery to everyone! Now a big group of people were heading towards the mountain to see Tam's discovery. Everyone was astonished that the ghostlike mountains were translucent, yet solid! From afar, it almost looked like they were walking in the air! That day, the spirit woke from her painful slumber, only to find people where she usually saw nothing! People were setting up camp there, families hiking through the mountain and gaping at the view below. The Yellow Lady threw her head in her hands. Did they really think this was scientifically possible? Hadn't they read the legends? In every legend, if something was like the state of her once beautiful mountains, they were fading. And so was she. She had to get those innocent people off this mountain before she and the mountains crumbled from existence.

As Tam looked at his discovery, he could not help but think that this all was a bit strange. Invisible mountains. Misty cliffs. How in the place of one mountain was another one that almost looked identical except for its colour and state? Tam gasped to himself as it hit him. As in a transparent rock literally hit him. He saw people everywhere facing the same problems. He had to help them! This was his fault that they were stuck here! Rocks were chasing people all over the place! Tam raced towards a family stuck between two rocks about to come down. He pushed them away as the rocks clashed with a thunderous BOOM. Most of the people were already rushing towards the exit of the mountains. Tam scanned the horizon and saw a little girl at the edge of a cliff trying to pick a flower as a rock rolled towards her. The girl, completely unaware, teetered towards the cliff to try to get the purple blossom. In a flash, Tam caught her and told her to run. Then Tam realised he had to run too! But the rocks were too close! All he could do was pray to the spirit, the goddess he always believed in, the saviour of him right now. The only person that could save him. He took a deep breath and jumped off the cliff. The spirit, high up in the mountain unleashed a sob. The only person who truly believed in her, had overestimated her power. There was only one way to save him. To make him, the spirit. The Yellow Lady smiled sadly. Her time was up. It was time for a new reign, a new spirit.

Tam opened his eyes. Instead of his normal clothes, he was wearing an old China robe, pared with his now pale skin. Also, he was now floating. People gaped at him. Tam's eyes widened as he realised, he had become the spirit. Everything came crashing back at him. The spirit. The mountains. Saving the girl. Believing in the spirit. The legends. Tam heaved a sigh. This was going to be a hard job to do. But from that day forward, Tam vowed to make the Yellow Lady proud.

Immortality

ESF West Island School, Ng, Megan – 13

All the myths pointed me here, to these craggy mountains. Alchemists making pills and emperors ascending. After all these years of waiting, I'm finally going to do it.

This is where I'm going to become immortal.

Everything I've wanted is here. The stone staircase I stand on will bring me there. All of it's just how I imagined, too– crooked pines rooted in the rock, the foggy peaks up in the distance.

My left leg begins to ache, and I ignore it. This is where I'm meant to be, and I'm not going to let some old injury stop me from gaining eternal life.

The atmosphere here is strange. Not quite silent. Twice I hear whispers behind me, and when I turn there's nothing there except the steps I've left behind. The trees and bushes on either side of me grow thicker, and I'm uncomfortably aware of the fact that, besides a vague grasp of some Huangshan myths, I've got no idea how to set about accomplishing my goal.

All that's left is to keep moving, because I've got this strange sense that whatever I want to find will be at the top. A herb, to make magical pills– it's been done before in myths. A spring that a legendary emperor bathed in before gaining eternal life. My plan hinges on me recognising whatever it is the moment I find it.

Mist curls between the pines. The pain in my leg has swelled, and my pace is slowed– I have to stop every few minutes to rest.

There's the sound of quiet laughter next to me and I swing around to empty mist.

I force myself to climb a few more stairs. There's a rough wooden railing here, and I cling to it like a lifeline. Climbing is better than thinking– if I stop too long, the past will catch up with me. Already I can feel the old panic, hot under my skin.

I've got to keep moving. The stairs have gotten wider, not steeper, and the trees are flimsy and stick–thin.

A voice to my right, and I look quickly. This one seems to have come from the rocks itself. I run up the next few steps and tell myself it's because I'm so eager to get to the top. Not because I'm scared.

I dash up the first few steps without incident and am just regaining my confidence when my left leg buckles under me and I fall.

The panic feels like it's about to burst through me. The last time I was trapped on the ground like this was when–

Don't stop to think. I've got to keep moving forward. I've got to keep searching for immortality, because I am not going to die here, alone on this mountain. I am not going to die at all. Stand up and swing your left leg in front of you, come on.

I lean back on my hands and try to move my left leg. Nothing happens.

The sky above me is covered in the reaching arms of the trees, and it's white as paper. I stare at this and try not to scream, because the terror is shooting through me and the mountain is still so high, and I'm not even halfway done. I'm not even halfway done.

I hold my backpack to my chest and sob. How could I be so stupid as to believe in immortality? This was always going to happen sooner or later. If not now, then when I got to the top and found nothing. Nobody can stop death.

Someone is speaking very faintly behind me. The voices, they're back again.

Are they real, or am I just going crazy? I wouldn't be surprised if I were— this entire trip was crazy. The one non-mythological emperor who tried to find immortality died *because* of his search, and I'm exactly the same. I'll die here, surrounded by fevered hallucinations. I'll die here, and it'll be because of my own reckless decisions.

Reckless decisions, I think, and suddenly we're walking to the car together under an umbrella, our footsteps splashing, and I'm asking her if we should maybe make the trip another day—

Something very close to me is whispering in a language I don't know, and I whirl around and tell the voices to go away.

I scream at them, at the moss-covered stone beneath me, at the mountains themselves, but they don't leave— I can feel them hovering around. Almost like they're waiting for me to start talking. So I do.

"I didn't want everything to turn out like this," I say, looking around at the rockface. "I never used to be scared of death."

Nobody answers, but I can feel something listening.

Something listening. Voices in the rock. I've heard about this before. Where?

The voices feel like they're leaving, so I keep talking. Anything to get them to come back.

"It began when she died, I guess."

All my memories of her are stained by that last one. Where I am crawling out of the wreckage on that terrible rain-slicked road and screaming at her to wake up, wake up.

The voices lean closer. Did something just move?

There was a legend about the rocks on Huangshan being living. They're in strange positions, upright pillars and sitting monkeys. Is this what's happening? Some of them were even said to have been real people who became stone.

I've always hated that myth. To be trapped on a mountain forever, unable to move or call for help, locked into place as you were slowly forgotten by everyone else— it sounded worse than dying.

"After that, I was constantly scared of death, of making some mistake that would end up getting me killed. I did my research and came here to prevent it."

I can feel the panic rushing back.

"And it's not going to work, is it? They're just myths. Nobody can actually become immortal."

She wouldn't have done this if she were the one who had lived. She wouldn't have gone crazy on this mountain worlds away from home.

The voices are more solid now, and I feel hands on my shoulders. Slowly, with their help, I stand.

We walk up together.

As they guide me up the mountain— flights of stairs that are almost vertical, paths beaten through thin forests, terrifying ridges that cling to the rock— I tell them about her. How she was never scared of anything. How she'd wake me up early and drag me to hiking trails. How a simple drive through the rain could change everything so suddenly.

She would have loved Huangshan, I realise. She would be happy if she knew I was here. And the hands squeeze my shoulders in agreement.

We continue the walk, higher and higher. The pain is gone– all that's there is the almost–white sky and the sound of my voice, telling our story.

I understand why Huangshan was loved by so many poets. It's beautiful, really. Immortality might not be up here, but peace certainly is.

The hands have stopped moving me. I'm sitting on a ledge, legs dangling down into a steep drop. How did I get here? The stairs are nowhere to be found. I hear the voices again, and they're almost singing.

It's as if I'm in a painting. Perfect clouds across the sky, the crooked trees streaking the mountains with green. She would have wanted this for me, I realise. Immortality wouldn't have brought her back, wouldn't have helped me. It's here, on this mountain, where I can feel her closest.

Here, the memory of the accident is so far away. Here, she's alive in every plant, every rock. I miss you, I say to her.

And I'm about to tell her I'm sorry, that I should have stepped in and stopped us the second it began to rain. But I know deep down that it wasn't my fault. She's driven in worse weather before. How could I have predicted it?

Instead, I tell her that I love her. I tell her about my travels, and my research, and how it all worked up to this moment. I've never felt so purposeful.

Huangshan's hands tighten around me, and I realise that I've found immortality after all, right at the moment when I had stopped looking. It's here where the people in the myths became part of the mountain. It's here where the emperor ascended and found peace.

As I sink into the ledge and join the spirits of Huangshan, I realise that turning to stone wasn't death, as I thought it would be. Instead, it's eternal life.

It's immortality.

The Mountain of Far Beyond

ESF West Island School, Tang, Xi Chor – 11

"Far, far away, deep in the lands of China, there was a mountain as high as the heavens. People called it the mountain of Far Beyond. The people who climbed the mountain said there was a magical haven far beyond their wildest dreams. Every one of them who returned all bore the same thing. For–"

Taoqi coughed. All the other children giggled and laughed at the coughing fit except for one.
"Go on! you haven't finished the story!" Danda said, her eyes wide as dinner plates.
"You still haven't said what they came back with!"
Taoqi glared at the laughing kids for a second and returned to his story.
"As I said, they all came back carrying one extra possession. Fortune"
All the other kids stopped laughing and stared at Taoqi in awe.
And like a dam bursting they all began to assault him with questions. Shouts were heard as the children tried to ask him more.
"Is it true?"
"He must be lying!"

"You all see that?"
Taoqi pointed to a mountain towering over the land.
"That's the mountain of Far Beyond. It's said that to reach the destination you must go out of the village and follow the path until you see an intersection. Take the path on the right and you will reach a village called the City of Markets. It's the only place you can climb the mountain of Far Beyond. From then on, all you have to do is follow the path up the mountain."
The children laughed again, but Danda simply stared towards the mountain.

The village that the children lived in was called the DaoTian. The land around DaoTian was very poor. To feed themselves, every adult in the village was a farmer and had to work in the muddy rice paddies day after day bending, stooping, and trampling. Working in the fields so much had turned the village into a dull brown. What once was a colorful village turned into a depressing state.

That night, when her family was having their meagre dinner of rice, she asked her mom a question.
"Ma?"
"Yes?" Ma turned to look at Danda
"Is the story of the mountain of Far Beyond true?"
Ma pursed her lips and asked:
"Taoqi told you that?"
Danda nodded.
"You know those stories are fake, right?"
Danda's eyes widened.
"They are!?" She exclaimed.
"Now now, we don't know if those stories are true or not," Ba said, looking at them.
"For all we know, it might be another planet. And besides, stories cost us nothing."
"And gain us nothing!" Ma shot back "We cannot buy fortune with stories!"
"How can we gain fortune?" Danda asked.
"That, is a question no one truly knows" Ba Said

Every morning, Danda's father and mother went out to the fields to work, leaving Danda all alone with nothing to do. Sometimes she would daydream or play with the other children. But today, she didn't feel like it. Danda felt sad after she had upset Ma last night, so naturally, she did something that she would always do when she was feeling sad. Exploring.

Exploring made her feel free. She loved to look at the butterflies flutter around, and the ants crawling across the earth. She would look at every ant and make up a story for each of them, pretending they were a king to a merchant to a farmer.

As she was squatting down looking at the ants, a traveller passed by. Danda looked up to him and said: “Sir, have you been to the mountain of Far Beyond?”

“Oh yes,” he said with a proud look “It is a place where you could get wealth and– ”

Danda didn’t hear the rest of the sentence as she was running madly to prepare for her journey.

She quickly grabbed some supplies and wrote

Dear Ma and Ba

I am going to the mountain of Far Beyond to change our fortune. I may be gone for a few days but don’t worry. I will be back soon carrying fortune.

Love, Danda

Danda looked back at her rackety house and thought: that would do.

She set off to the unknown.

★ ★ ★

After several hours of walking, Danda was exhausted. She found a tree lean on and decided to take a rest. She closed her eyes and went to sleep.

Danda was woken up by the sound of rustling from her pack. She gently opened her eyes and the sight that greeted her was a surprise. There was a small cat, looking for food. As soon as Danda moved a muscle the cat instantly registered that she was awake and ran behind the tree. Not wanting to scare the cat, Danda quickly got some rice and dropped it on the floor. Wary of the gift, the cat refused to eat it. But soon, hunger quickly washed over him, and he pounced on the rice and gobbled it all up. Gaining Danda’s trust, the cat now followed her.

“I’m sorry, But I can’t take you to the mountain of Far Beyond.” She said sadly.

“I know a shortcut there!”

Danda stared at the cat who seemed to have spoken.

“Can you talk?” She asked the cat

“If most people listen”

Danda was stunned. And because most animals cannot talk, she decided to listen.

★ ★ ★

Danda walked forward with her new companion. The cat told her that he was a Maneki–Neko.
A symbol of fortune.

“What's your name?”

“A name?” The cat responded, “I don’t think I have a name.”

“Well, everyone needs a name,” Danda said “How about, Fortune?”

“Fortune…” The cat opened his mouth as if tasting his title “I like it!”

When they got to Fortune’s shortcut Danda was surprised that it led straight up the mountain. But dusk was quickly approaching so they decided to stop their journey. They found a tree to rest beside and made a small bed using leaves. With her new fluffy companion, Danda’s mind was mixed. But exhaustion washed over her, and she went to sleep

The next morning, they wasted no time trekking up. The journey was cold and hard, and she almost froze to death. Sleeping in this wintery wonderland was not an option so they planned to trek up the mountain in a whole day. Otherwise, it’ll be suicide.

Just when they thought that it couldn't be done, they saw a structure in front of them. It seemed to be… a monastery?

“I'll wait outside for you,” Fortune said, “A talking cat would attract a lot of attention!”

“Ok” Agreed Danda

Danda went right in and sure enough. It was a monastery

“What is this place?” She wondered out loud.
“The Golden Monastery,” A monk beside her said
“Do you need anything?” He said with his kindly eyes
Danda hesitated
“I’m here to look for fortune” Danda answered
The monk laughed.
“What you seek, is what you have”
Danda tried to decipher the words.
“I– already have fortune?”
The monk nodded
“But that is impossible!”
“And also, tell your friend out there, that the Jade Emperor has permitted his return”
“What!?”
In addition to being confused, Danda was now shocked as ever, but as she looked back the monk had disappeared. Walking out she heard Fortune say:

“Well?” Fortune asked eagerly “Did you find what you need?”
Danda shook her head in disbelief. “A monk said I already have fortune, and he said to you that the Emperor has permitted your return?”
Fortune looked confused for a second then his eyes flashed with understanding.
“I–, I remember now”

In a flash, a golden cloud suddenly dropped out of nowhere. He stepped onto the cloud and the cloud began to go up.
“Wait! But what happened? You haven’t explained!”
“Another time, friend” Fortune promised
“In the meantime, take my claw as a reminder. I was the fortune you were carrying all along!”

★ ★ ★

When Danda finally got home, her father and mother were in the fields. She quietly sat her belongings down and went to her bed. She was exhausted, after all. Danda let herself be lulled to sleep at the prospect of imagining a house filled with gold. Smiling a secret smile, she slept peacefully that night.

When she woke up, the shouts of Danda filled the room. They only stopped hugging her when they heard the rumble of Danda’s stomach. Ba quickly went to make his special tea and Ma went to cook up a special breakfast. A choking sound erupted from the living room. Danda and Ma went running through when they heard the noise.

“What is that!?” Ba said pointing at a claw on the table.
“It's just a gift from a friend” Danda said.
“That’s no gift! That’s a claw of a beckoning cat!” Ba exclaimed as he picked it up.
“This is worth the Emperor's entire fortune!” Ba looked at Ma who smiled and whispered:

“Our fortune has been changed”

The Tiger That Saved My Life

ESF West Island School, Thakar, Maya – 12

Chapter 1: Akita:

The sun was slowly sinking into the clouds that circled the misty grey peaks. The bitter wind blew around, causing leaves to fall from the old pine trees. I shivered and winced from the cold, clearly my thick coat was unable to protect me from the howling gale. I did not struggle to keep my balance on the slippery, jagged limestone only because my claws provided me a firm grip. As I edged ever closer towards the moss covered steps, I looked back one last time at my village that now appeared the size of an ant.

I continued down the steps fighting back the tears that were threatening to overcome me at any second. The sun was slowly rising above the clouds announcing dawn to the surrounding villages. I tried to block the thoughts of home from my mind, the worried looks that were probably frozen on my parents faces. Suddenly my stomach released a low growl of complaint, only then did I realise.

Somewhere in the foggy distance I could make out a large patch of green. Surely there would be food there, so I expeditiously started my descent. As I came closer to my destination, I could make out the tall green trees with thick patterned barks and the scent of damp moss filling my nostrils. I continued on my path. Only a couple meters away from the forest I spotted a tiny figure. It had peachy, white skin with dark curly fur only on the top of its head. It appeared to be walking on two legs like a circus animal.

The growls from my belly had suddenly disappeared. All that filled my body now was pure curiosity. I followed the creatures crunching sounds until I saw it settle down on a hollow log. I searched for a way to introduce myself. "Hi my name is Akita" I murmured as I built up the courage to reveal myself.

I leaped in front of the ginormous tree that was concealing me and stuttered "Am I Akita, I mean I am Akita." I was mixing up all the words that was how nervous I was. When I glanced back at the creature all I saw was it staring at me in utter astonishment.

Chapter 2: Ebony:
Was I dreaming, it couldn't have been what I thought it was, was I staring at a talking Chinese Tiger? As her soft voice slowly woke me from my stupor, I realised I was not delusional this was really happening! I groaned and rubbed my aching head. Standing in front of me was a ginormous tiger with black claws, beautifully striped fur going in a mesmerising pattern of orange, black, orange, black and murky green eyes like a polluted river.

After moments in silence I finally spoke up "Hi I am Ebony," I stammered.
The soft voice belonging to Akita (The tiger) replied "What animal are you?"

Clearly, she had no knowledge about us humans so I decided it would be easiest to tell her my story and the reason why I was on the mountain.

Every day was exactly the same, no fun and certainly no adventure! You see I come from a tiny village. My life was simple, but I was not content. Every day we would wake up to the smell of fish which was revolting. Then I would head off to work which was in a little area we liked to call shi chang meaning market. I had the monotonous job of selling the fish. Every ten minutes or so a customer would walk up to the tiny hut and trade some bread or flour for some fish. Then I would return home and go to bed that was it! I needed to get away from humans and their repulsive behaviour so I left.

Akita listened to my story without a single interruption when I took a glance at her face, all I could see was her willingness to listen and learn. She was so fascinated by the world below the mountains the only thing I could do was take her down there myself. So we continued the descent.

"Eh, slow down!" I wheezed and coughed. Akita had no trouble on the slimy, mossy rock and was now miles ahead of me. She turned around at the sound of my voice and suddenly with urgency started bolting straight towards me. In a split second she was by my side offering to carry me for the rest of the journey. I tried to reject the offer, but my tongue was dry as a sandpaper and my legs were slowly collapsing underneath me. Unhappy with the weakness I had displayed I reluctantly sat down on the long, soft coat on the tigers back.

The rhythmic tapping of Akita's claws lulled me to sleep. I slept like a baby peacefully and sound, but only to be woken by the whipping pain of snow hitting me with full force. I struggled to fight the wind while clutching on the Akita's fur. I opened my eyes hoping to see some shelter but all I could see was the swirling white of the endless storm.

Chapter 3: Akita:

The wind attempted to tackle me and succeeded. I flew through the air and landed with a thump on a soft patch of glistening snow. Laid beside me was Ebony, covered head to toe in snow which was slightly tinted red, wait then I thought 'red that's not right'. I swiped off the snow which was enclosing a dark red wound nestled in between two ribs. What could I do, my paws were too heavy and clunky, not in a million years could I heal a wound that deep. I had no choice but to gently lift Ebony up onto my back and head down to his village.

Sharp colours of red, black and grey flooded my mind, I could not escape. What had I done? I just wanted to run back home safe and sound but even there I would not be safe from the tide of guilt that was violently crashing onto the shore, swallowing me up.

I scurried down the mountain, never stopping to satisfy my parched mouth or growling belly. Soon I could see and smell the little fishing village. It was kind of cute. Unlike our village it did not contain thousands of rows of huts but just a couple and was located beside a large river dotted with multicoloured fish.

I walked with caution watching the dancing shadows in each window and taking note of where the sweet scent of bread was coming from. I continued on the winding path until an old frail lady gasped "Ebony!".

Chapter 4: Xue:

That filthy creature was holding my boy like a trophy. The tiger was flaunting its success, it had killed my son. I could not speak, instead I quietly sobbed as I ran to call for help. I ran a couple of meters before my legs became jelly and I collapsed besides a wooden barrel outside a hut. I landed with a large thud waking up all the surrounding huts. They circled around me offering help and asking questions. Before anyone could say anymore I shrieked "Tiger, holding, son, dead." My sentence made no sense but somehow the villagers understood and disappeared into their huts.

One by one the villagers marched out their huts and down the cobblestone streets. They held flaming torches and their sharpest fish knives. I followed them silently and stood at the back hoping I wouldn't be noticed.

Chapter 4: Akita:

First gleaming torches of red, next a large crowd of tired faces, last the blades. I froze like a deer in headlights. Something was wrong. Within seconds I was surrounded. The blade belonging to a man with a thick bushy moustache pierced my skin. Pain flooding my body, blood flooding out of my skin. I was fighting for air until I finally took my last breath and my last thought 'I should have never left home, my family was right, humans are nothing but disasters'.

Chapter 5: Xue:

The creature and Ebony lied on the cold cobblestone floor. The blood that was now dry looked like a blanket protecting them from us and the outside world. Only now did I notice the beautiful fur of the creature. Both my son and the creature's stomachs curled inwards exposing their ribs, by the looks of them they hadn't eaten in days. The tiger had its paw protectively, over Ebony like a mother.

I set up a fire and cremated them both. I kept the ashes in tiny pots. I could not help but feel that both their blood is on my hand, the only thing I could do was keep the pots in their memory.

No one knows where the other tigers have gone but all I know is that they are gone, gone for good.

My Grandma told me a story when I was 4, about the healing mountain, a form of Guanyin; the God of mercy and compassion. She had healed her sidekick, a crippled boy. Being a reincarnation of her, it has the same powers. I wish to teleport there and get medicine for the butterflies in my stomach. Tomorrow's my first day of school and I'm too nervous to sleep.

"Emma!" shouted mom, "you're late!"
At the school assembly, the principal announced, "Today, we are welcoming a new student – Emma Wu. How about we hear a little bit about her?" I was ushered onto the stage to introduce myself. I cleared my throat, and began. "Hi my name is Emma, I'm from China but I was born in the US. A fun fact is that I get stage fright." Everyone started laughing. I escaped to the comfort of the restroom and sat there, crying. After a few minutes, there was a gentle knock on the door. "Hello?" a voice called out. "I just wanted to check if you're okay," the girl said. I opened the door and there was a short girl, waiting for me. "Hi! I'm Olive!" she said in a shrill voice. "Hi," I said back. We walked back to class together. That was the day I met my best friend.

At the dinner table, mom said that she met a nice lady at the supermarket, whose daughter went to the same school as me. They set up a playdate for us on friday. Eager to know who the girl was, I asked mom. "I think her name is Holly!" she said. My stomach dropped to my feet and I ran to my room.

Friday came as quick as Usain Bolt. "Be nice, okay?" Dad said. We stopped outside a mansion. "Okay Dad," I said. I walked to the door and rang the doorbell. I presumed the lady at the door was Holly's mom. "Hi there! You must be Emma. Holly will be down in a minute."Take a seat." Holly's mom said in a friendly voice. At least her mom seemed nice. Holly came trudging down the stairs and sat down opposite me. "Don't be rude! Offer her a drink or a snack!" Holly's mom whispered to Holly loud enough for me to hear. "Would you like a drink or a snack?" she asked in a bored tone. "No thanks!" I replied. The playdate pretty much went by without a word.

A week later, the doorbell rang. It was – The mean teens. (A.K.A. Michaela, Holly and Amelia) "What do you want?" I said cowardly. "We just thought we'd come to visit'' Amelia said in a mocking tone. They started looking around, and saw the painting of Chang'e; The Moon Goddess. " She is so ugly!" Michaela remarks "In fact, I think the ugliness of your house has rubbed off on you!" They all laughed. "I am a bit busy," I whispered with tears in my eyes, I pushed them out the door. I turned back to the painting. " You are so ugly!" I screamed. "If you say so" said a dreamy voice. I looked around, confused. "Who's that?" I asked. "The ugly lady behind you" she said. "Chang'e?" I whispered. "You have been disrespectful. You deserve a punishment." She said in a strict tone. "Your family will be frozen forever unless you travel to the healing mountain and retrieve the Glowpea flower. To get there, answer three riddles. One; What belongs to you but is used by others?" Is it my name?" "Correct. Two; What goes up and down but never moves?" I recalled my science class, where the thermometer kept going up and down... "Is it temperature?" "Yes, well done. Three ; If you have me, you want to share me. If you share me, you don't have me. What am I?" After thinking about that one, I remembered when Michaela shared all her snacks with her friends in secret, since sharing food isn't allowed at our school due to allergies. I know what it is! "Is it a... secret?" "Good job Emma. Suddenly, a ray of light beamed from Chang'e's hand, sucking me in. Soon, my feet were on hard ground again and I could hear an echo saying "Just shout the answers to get back home."

I was in a valley filled with pine trees surrounded by forest sounds. After walking for 30 minutes towards the village, I decided to rest under a tree. I dozed off, but little did I know that a wolf was on the prowl. A growl woke me up. There he was, creeping towards me. Instinctively, I clambered up a pine tree. After an hour I peeked down the tree to see that the wolf was gone! I started scaling down the tree when I heard a twig snap. I looked down to see the wolf with a pack of friends. I quickly ascended again. The wolves started making a pyramid to reach me.

Suddenly, I heard a low growl. A weird looking creature emerged from the bushes staring me in the eyes, he pounced on the bottom two wolves until they all tumbled down. He executed a deafening roar scaring the wolves away. I cautiously climbed down. The strange creature looked like a Chinese stone guardian lion! "Xie xie nin!" I said with a deep bow, which meant thank you. "No problem!" he replied. "You speak english?!" "Yes, I am a linguist " But, how do you talk and move?" "A wise wizard cursed me to turn into a walking, talking statue for eating his goats. Why are you here?" The lion asked. "I need to get to the healing mountain to retrieve something, my name is Emma" " I'm Guang! I always wanted to go to the healing mountain to find the magical herb that can undo my curse. May I join you?' I was happy to have a companion.

"Hey Emma, should we settle down for the night?" Guang asked me after walking the whole afternoon. I was exhausted after the wolves and climbed into the nearest tree. Guang got into a comfy position below me. I woke up to Guang shaking the tree with all his might. "Emma, we have to get going!". By lunchtime, we reached the quaint village. "This is Liao village," Guang said like a tour guide". "It's nice, but where's the mountain? Is there anywhere we can have lunch? I'm starving." I asked. "The mountain only appears at 4 o'clock, until then we can go to a friend's house for lunch" he told me. Guang led me to a small hut. He knocked on the door. A petite girl answered the door. "This is Emma, we are travelling together to the Healing Mountain!"Guang said introducing me " Emma, this is Tian Tian. We were wondering if we could stop by for lunch." Guang said. "Of course you can, if only I can go with you to the mountain to get a cure for my Nai Nai (Grandma) who is terribly sick." Tian Tian told us "Sure!" I told her.
Walking towards the North, slowly the mountain was coming into view, rocky and steep, covered with colourful plants. Tian Tian asked "To go up, we just have to pay our respects" Tian Tian assured me. She walked up to the mountain and started praying. A golden carriage appeared, taking us to the top of the mountain.

Tian Tian and Guang immediately started looking around, but I was still taking in everything. "Hey Emma! I'm pretty sure Glowpea is up there!" Guang was pointing at the highest point. I cautiously climbed up, trying not to look down. But… nothing was there. Tian and Guang had already found their cure. I called down to them, "Hey guys! I can't find it". They helped me search in vain. Dejected, I just wanted to return home when it suddenly hit me. "The Healing mountain; THM. THM is a pharmacy on our street back in San Francisco! Maybe there is a medicine called Glowpea there!" I exclaimed. "Bye Guang, bye Tian Tian, I promise I will come back to visit!"

Back home, I ran to THM, browsing through the shop, I finally found Glowpea tablets in aisle 3. I opened the door, mom and dad were waiting for me. Chang'e seemed to wink at me.

One week later…

After school I met Olive in the hallway when the mean teens blocked our way. Michaela sneered, "Hi Emma! Are you and your friend going to your weird house?". Amelia chuckled, yet Holly stepped forward, "Michaela, that was quite mean." " Well then Holly, never talk to me again!" Michaela snapped. This time I blocked Michaela's way "I don't think she would want to talk to someone in trouble" "I'm not in trouble!" "Now you are" it was Ms. Garcia, the principal.

That night I dreamt of Liao village, Tian Tian and Guang, wondering whether I would ever go back.

The Healing Mountain

ESF West Island School, Thakur, Deeva – 11

My Grandma told me a story when I was 4, about the healing mountain, a form of Guanyin; the God of mercy and compassion. She had healed her sidekick, a crippled boy. Being a reincarnation of her, it has the same powers. I wish to teleport there and get medicine for the butterflies in my stomach. Tomorrow's my first day of school and I'm too nervous to sleep.

"Emma!" shouted mom, "you're late!"
At the school assembly, the principal announced, "Today, we are welcoming a new student – Emma Wu. How about we hear a little bit about her?" I was ushered onto the stage to introduce myself. I cleared my throat, and began. "Hi my name is Emma, I'm from China but I was born in the US. A fun fact is that I get stage fright." Everyone started laughing. I escaped to the comfort of the restroom and sat there, crying. After a few minutes, there was a gentle knock on the door. "Hello?" a voice called out. "I just wanted to check if you're okay," the girl said. I opened the door and there was a short girl, waiting for me. "Hi! I'm Olive!" she said in a shrill voice. "Hi," I said back. We walked back to class together. That was the day I met my best friend.

At the dinner table, mom said that she met a nice lady at the supermarket, whose daughter went to the same school as me. They set up a playdate for us on friday. Eager to know who the girl was, I asked mom. "I think her name is Holly!" she said. My stomach dropped to my feet and I ran to my room.

Friday came as quick as Usain Bolt. "Be nice, okay?" Dad said. We stopped outside a mansion. "Okay Dad," I said. I walked to the door and rang the doorbell. I presumed the lady at the door was Holly's mom. "Hi there! You must be Emma. Holly will be down in a minute."Take a seat." Holly's mom said in a friendly voice. At least her mom seemed nice. Holly came trudging down the stairs and sat down opposite me. "Don't be rude! Offer her a drink or a snack!" Holly's mom whispered to Holly loud enough for me to hear. "Would you like a drink or a snack?" she asked in a bored tone. "No thanks!" I replied. The playdate pretty much went by without a word.

A week later, the doorbell rang. It was – The mean teens. (A.K.A. Michaela, Holly and Amelia) "What do you want?" I said cowardly. "We just thought we'd come to visit'' Amelia said in a mocking tone. They started looking around, and saw the painting of Chang'e; The Moon Goddess. " She is so ugly!" Michaela remarks "In fact, I think the ugliness of your house has rubbed off on you!" They all laughed. "I am a bit busy," I whispered with tears in my eyes, I pushed them out the door. I turned back to the painting. " You are so ugly!" I screamed. "If you say so" said a dreamy voice. I looked around, confused. "Who's that?" I asked. "The ugly lady behind you" she said. "Chang'e?" I whispered. "You have been disrespectful. You deserve a punishment." She said in a strict tone. "Your family will be frozen forever unless you travel to the healing mountain and retrieve the Glowpea flower. To get there, answer three riddles. One; What belongs to you but is used by others?" Is it my name?" "Correct. Two; What goes up and down but never moves?" I recalled my science class, where the thermometer kept going up and down... "Is it temperature?" "Yes, well done. Three ; If you have me, you want to share me. If you share me, you don't have me. What am I?" After thinking about that one, I remembered when Michaela shared all her snacks with her friends in secret, since sharing food isn't allowed at our school due to allergies. I know what it is! "Is it a... secret?" "Good job Emma. Suddenly, a ray of light beamed from Chang'e's hand, sucking me in. Soon, my feet were on hard ground again and I could hear an echo saying "Just shout the answers to get back home."

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Worlds Collide

ESF West Island School, Tse, Chloe – 12

"I, a citizen of China's Magical Mountains, pledge to treat my fellow citizens with respect and obey my guardians. I will stay on the premises and will never go beyond boundaries without permission or approach a Beloworlder of any kind. I will contribute to making the Mountains a safe environment."

———

I lived in a tower, which meant I got better views than anyone. The Mountains were, in a way, a fairy tale. We could do magic, if magic meant levitating things and talking to animals. From my window, you could see everything: a songbird serenading; tops of trees that held our apples and towered over everyone and everything; golden foxes running around, chasing fluffy rabbits. I also got a clear view of the clouds and fantasized of jumping onto one of them and seeing if I could float up and away to someplace new – which, after living in a tower for all eternity, was exactly what I planned to do.

I had lodged a knife in the side of each boot and my sack consisted of an assortment of essentials from fruit to matchsticks. I tied the top of my makeshift suitcase in a double knot, so it looked more like a sack, levitated it onto the windowsill, and looked down. All clear.

With a final nudge, the sack flew gracefully down the side of the tower and landed on the soft grass below. I came after, tumbling onto the ground clumsily. Without hesitating, I grabbed it and hurried around the tower, going into the opposite direction of the fence, losing myself in the trees.

———

I didn't really know where anything was, as we didn't have maps this high up in the Mountains – but I didn't mind taking a stroll around. That was what made it so fascinating – everything was so *bright* compared to the inside of my tower. I wandered around for a while, stopping when I heard a *snap*. It could've been anything, from a person stepping on a branch to an animal chewing. I yanked the knife out of my boot. Slowly, I tiptoed in the direction the sound came from. Animals? No, animals knew better than to make noise unless they wanted to become dinner. *Snap.* But no one ever came here – I specifically chose this trail because I knew it was practically deserted. The stories my Uncle had told me resurfaced. But they were just stories, right? Tigers with snakes for tails didn't exist, did they? So, it had to be a person. *Snap–Snap.* I was getting closer. Just one more step and– I felt the knife slip out of my hand.

"Where am I?"

It wasn't an animal. But it wasn't someone I knew, not someone from the Mountains. It– *he* was a boy. A Beloworlder.

———

Minutes, hours, months could've passed while the boy and I stared at each other. The silence was broken with the sound of a tire running out of air, followed by an unpleasant odour. The boy's cheeks went red. I felt a little sorry for him, so I spoke up.

"How'd you get here?"

His eyes widened. "I'm not so sure."

Now it was my turn to be confused. "I didn't think this trail was open to the public."

"It's not– *wait, then how come you're here*?"

I crossed my arms. "You first."

His eyes casted skywards, and he stuffed his hands in his pockets. "I was hiking with my family, but we dropped the map somewhere, so we stopped to figure out where we were, but then I got bored and wandered off."

"Far off," I concluded. "You're practically in a different world." I shut my mouth. Why couldn't I keep quiet? A line from the pledge I had taken came back to me: *I will stay on the premises and will never go beyond boundaries without permission or approach a Beloworlder of any kind*. Maybe it was because this child was the first Beloworlder I had ever seen. I could tell from the look on his face: a mix of confusion and awe.

To my surprise, he took some sort of glowing, glistening slab out of his pocket and started tapping it furiously, probably looking for a map. I'd never seen a phone either, but I knew what it was.

"Phones don't work," I said. "We're too high up." Sighing, he pocketed the device and looked up, a scowl plain on his face.

"I figured," he snapped. "So, care to tell me where I am, who you are, and *why this place doesn't seem to have Wi-Fi*?"

"China's Magical Mountains," I told him. "I'm Yuigui – what?"

"Magical Mountains? Yuigui? That's a name? And – you don't know what Wi-Fi is?" he demanded. I watched as he sat himself down on a rock, pulling his hair. When I didn't react, he waved his arms out in exasperation. "What is going *on*? This place is crazy!" At that, I snapped.

"For your information, Yuigui is Chinese, meaning Laurel." When you lived in the Mountains, being named after a plant was common. We never socialized with Beloworlders, so we didn't know any ordinary names. "And yes, China's Magical Mountains! I'll have you know that even though I've lived here since I was born, I spent a lot of my time indoors, also, I'm in an equally bothersome situation as you being out here for the first time, so pull yourself together and stop being a baby!"

Silence.

He slowly looked up. "Indoors? Why didn't you come out?"

I snorted. "Well, it's against the law to go against the fences, and to *talk to Beloworlders*. But since I was too curious, I got stuck in a tower."

"Beloworlders?" he asked.

I pointed at him. "People like you."

"Ah. Are we really that bad that it's against the law?" he raised an eyebrow.

I pondered for an answer. "No, it's just that most think that we have a higher status than your type since we have famous ancestors."

"Who?"

I tugged at some grass, considering whether to answer this. "Li Bai. Du Fu"

"Wow," he said, impressed. "We learn about them at school! That still doesn't answer why it's against the law to talk to, uh, *Beloworlders*."

"That's the thing – no one's ever done it before. Mountaineers are just. . . scared. But you're actually not that bad." A smile appeared on his face.

"I'm Benji." He said. "You're not so bad either."

I was about to say something else, when I heard another sound. The sound of wood scraping against wood – or something heavier.

I reached for the knife in my boot but stopped at Benji's sharp intake of breath. I looked up, and sure enough, a knife wasn't going to get me out of this one.

Dragon.

I had never seen one, only heard about them in the tales, but there it was. Standing in front of me. Sixty feet tall with eyes of the devil.

"Dragon….dragon...dragon!," Benji peeped.

I waved my hand, and a tall branch flew into it. I held it defensively in front of me.

"How'd you do that?"

"I really don't think now's the time to discuss magic." It was amazing how calm I sounded. No wonder this trail was empty – who would've wanted to cross a dragon?

"Magic? Could magic send this dragon flying into nowhere?" Benji whispered.

The dragon turned, facing Benji instead. "A Beloworlder?" it boomed. I jumped, and Benji did too.

"And I thought you Mountaineers were gung–ho about the law!" the dragon cackled. His tail flew towards us, and Benji and I ducked in unison.

"We don't want any trouble," I said.

"Of course," he said mockingly, "Lucky for you, I'm in a good mood today – and *hungry*. I'll let you go for the boy."

"What's he saying?" Benji asked. Right – he couldn't understand animals.

"No," I said sternly

"Why? He's a Beloworlder – no Mountaineer knows he exists. I doubt he'll be missed anyways. Look at the scrawny thing–" I'd had enough. I brought my hand up, and the dragon slammed to the ground. Then, I thrusted my branch straight into his tail. He howled, and I grabbed Benji's wrist and sprinted through the trees. When we put enough distance between us and the dragon, I dropped his wrist and slid onto the floor.

"Whoo! Do you do that every weekend or something? You were like Black Widow! Awesome!" he said, panting.

"Guess you can't wait to go home after that, huh?" I grinned.

"I wouldn't mind learning a bit more about this place." He admitted. "Also, how do animals talk? And how you make things float?" he added.

I'd heard Mountaineers blather about how Beloworlders were, but they really weren't that much worse – or different – to us. We just needed our worlds to collide to realise.

We walked in the direction of the place where I found him when I realised, I had a question of my own.

"Who's this Black Widow?"

Discover

ESF West Island School, Wang, Sophia – 11

I held the only two things my mother left me – an extravagant painting of the Chinese mountains, and a beautifully written poem contained in a wooden scroll.
'Why did you leave me?' was the only question I wanted answered from the parent who had left me when I was one year old in the middle of nowhere – that is, until Mr Linem, the orphanage keeper of a small village found me and brought me back with him.

I was old enough, so it was definitely time for me to find out the truth.

"Mae!" Lilian, my childhood friend from the orphanage ran towards me. She was dressed up in a light grey outfit matching her white hair, and carrying an enormous stuffed up blue bag.

"You really look prepared." I stared at the colossal bag.

"That's a must, since we're leaving this place for the first time in our lives." She gestured, "But I guess I did bring quite a large amount of items..."

Well, she and I had been living in this village and never stepped out of it for ten whole years, and had no clue what it was like beyond our village's boundaries. Lilian was definitely ranked number one as the person that wondered the most about the world that we had never seen with our own eyes, but only read about from books.
Lilian decided to go with me when I told her I was leaving to find my mother.

"Please always put your safety first." Mr Linem was just like a worried parent. "Mae, don't forget to hide your hair once you're out." He always mentioned how I had to hide my long red hair – it was probably for my own benefit and safety.
I nodded and put my hat onto my head to cover my hair. "Please take care."

The orphanage which was covered in vines – the one place we called home. We were finally leaving it.
Lilian and I both crossed the village boundaries. And for a moment, I wondered if it was going to be worthwhile.

We were hiking straight to the Chinese mountains, which we always gazed at from the broken window in the orphanage. The main reason we were proceeding this way was because my mother left a painting and poem of the Chinese mountains with me – those objects might've been a clue leading to her whereabouts.
I gazed at our destination and stood speechless. To put it simply, it was beautiful. Both the painting of the Chinese mountains which my mother gave me and the real thing gave off an elegant vibe of life.

We started hiking up, I guessed we finally reached around the base of the mountains.
Lilian took a deep breath, "I'm exhausted. How far are we planning on climbing up?"

"Till the top." I looked up at the neverending slope. Well since we never really exercised back home, I expected our stamina to give out eventually – and Lilian was also carrying a colossal bag with… unknown items.

"The top?" Lilian muttered, putting her bag down. "What are the chances of finding your mother here?"

"About a… five percent chance, maybe?" I hesitated, "I'm not even sure if she's still alive..."

She changed the subject. "Mae~ It's starting to get dark. Let's set up camp!"
We found a perfect area for camping and managed to do a pretty good job setting everything up.
I sat down next to the campfire – it was impressively comfortable. "I wish I could live like this forever."

Lilian sat down next to me, "The Chinese mountains." She took a sip of water, "What a wonderful place. I wonder if the rest of the world is like this as well."
For a moment, we both sat down and gazed at the stars and breathtaking scenery.

It was early in the morning, Lilian was determined to hike longer distances than before.

"Aren't you pushing yourself too much?" I watched under my hat as she dashed up.

Before Lilian could say anything, we reached a rather flat pathway, and we both heard a loud noise – it sounded like an absolutely destructive machine. "What was that?"

The ground shook. It almost felt like an earthquake, which was written in books, said to be a natural disaster, and also the Earth's natural means of releasing stress.

We started looking around at our surroundings. I noticed a group of men in the distance, but the biggest problem was that they seemed to have some kind of ultimate weapon against nature.
The machine started moving, it progressed towards the bulky trees. Then its arm suddenly appeared and sliced a tree in half. It carried on chopping one tree after another.

The men laughed, it was as if they were mocking mother nature.
Lilian watched in misbelief, "THAT'S ILLEGAL!"

I stood up. "They have no right to chop those trees which aren't their own property." I ran towards the men.
"STOP!" I screamed. Both the machine and the group of men froze. "What do you think you're doing? You have no right to chop down these trees!"
Unfortunately, my hat fell off and my red hair was visible.

"A little girl?" A man said.

"Look at her red hair!" Another one screeched. "That hair could sell for a hefty price!"

"HEY! It's illegal to chop down trees however you want!" Lilian sprinted through.

A man moaned. "We're bandits. We don't care if it's against the laws or not."

"Let's capture them. Deal with them later, we have to finish what we started." A different man said. The bandits agreed, and tied us both with ropes. They walked away and carried on chopping down trees.

Lilian nudged me, "The grass behind us, it's called a Finiv. I've studied about it before. If you keep rubbing an object at it, the Finiv will cut through the object."

I reacted quickly, and started rubbing the ropes tied around my hands at the grass. The ropes tore apart – my hands were free. I glanced at the tree logs placed about three meters away from me – I finally cleared my head and devised a plan. "Thank you so much."

She beamed, "Break a leg."

I crawled towards the stack of logs without being noticed, and hid behind the logs. I managed to overhear the group of men conversing.

"Hey, now that I think about it, doesn't that red hair ring a bell?" The bandit questioned.

"You're right! Didn't we kill a pesky woman with red hair about ten years ago?"

'What? Another woman with red hair like mine?' I froze and tried to process what was going on. *'My mother?'*

"They might be somewhat related, but what does it matter?"

I was dazed and confused, unsure of what to do next.
I suddenly noticed a cliff at the opposite end of the tree logs. Was God guiding me? I started focusing, waiting until the bandits walked to the area where the logs would roll to.
They were nearly there.

Three… two.. one…! I pushed the tree logs with all my might, and they went tumbling down towards the bandits.

One noticed the tree logs, he alarmed the others.
"AHHHHHH!" All the bandits ran for their lives, however the logs hit them all and pushed them off the cliff. The large machine was the only trace of the bandits left.

"Mae, we did it! We survived." Lilian ran to me.

"Yeah." The conversation between the bandits – about how my mother was killed, it really hit me hard. "I overheard their conversation. They said they also killed a woman with red hair ten years ago."

Lilian held my hand tightly. "Your mother…"

I nodded, "Most likely. I think my mother tried stopping them like we did, and made sure I was out of the situation when I was a child. That's probably why she left me. But I still wanted to meet her though…"

"They say God sometimes leaves us to suffer, but God might have his own reasons for how it is the way it is. And Mae, you know there's no way your mother went down without a fight."

I laughed. "Lilian, you want to explore the world, right?" Lilian nodded. "Take this chance to do that then."

"What about you?" She knew from my tone and speech that I wasn't going with her.

"I'll stay here." I concluded. "This place was definitely something my mother treasured deeply. I want to spend some time here, and protect what she tried to protect."

Lilian's eyes were watery, "Then promise me the moment you decide to leave this place, contact me. Let's carry on exploring parts of the world together."
"Of course." I hugged her. Separating with Lilian felt extremely painful, but I set myself my own goal which I was determined to achieve.
As we waved farewell to each other, I sat down and gazed at the sunset sky.

From this day forward, I'll follow the path you did, mother.
Please watch over me.

Between Two Worlds

German Swiss International School, Kwon Wong, Madeleine – 13

Huang was a lost cause. It wasn't something that had to be observed carefully –– one glare from him would make you want to hide and one word from him would put Horrid Henry to shame. On top of showing his temper, all he ever did outside of school was shut himself up to play computer games and there was nothing anyone could do about it.

One morning, after realising that she hadn't seen him for a whole day, his mother had an epiphany. If her son couldn't be fixed with human power, maybe Nature could.

Huang, a thin boy with menacing eyes, appeared at the breakfast table, dragging blue trousers that draped his thin legs like curtains. His mother coaxed. "Huang, I want you to go spend some time in the mountains. How does that sound?"

"Yeah right," he retorted.

At this, his mother's face changed immediately and so did her tone. "It wasn't a question. You will go to the mountains and don't come back until you've learned something," she said, briskly packing some dumplings, dozens of beef jerky and a bottle of water into a red backpack. Seeing this, Huang stood up and started howling like a hunted lion at last caught in a trap. She pushed him to the door and handed him the backpack. "Remember, if you are lost, always choose the better path, it'd be obvious," she sang mysteriously and disappeared inside. He heard the door lock click. Panic sank in.

"Of course I'll choose the better path, what else?" he spat back. His mouth never betrayed his fear.

He knew exactly where the mountains were. Everything in his village –– from the traditional food stands to the modern hotels with glass windows –– seemed to be encircled by the great mountain range, lush with green and decked with gleaming stone cliffs. Fine, he thought. He was going to get the whole thing over with quickly.

At the foot of the mountain, Huang stared up at the endless series of stone steps that seemed to soar up. He loathed feeling so helpless; it felt like losing a series of games against the computer. He glowered at some jovial passers–by, who immediately drew away their eyes and pursed their lips. He felt a little better.

He muttered, "How am I supposed to learn from things that don't even talk?" He blinked furiously, adjusting his eyes to the dizzying lines of steps ahead of him. He stomped up the first twenty steps, the way he liked to attack fast when he started a battle.

"Why did you build these steps? So that you become famous just sitting here while boys like me suffer?" He kicked the stones hard. "Yeah, I sit in my room all day too, but at least I do something. I save the world in Epic Battles!"

The stone steps were very narrow and very quiet.

"I heard about your 'amazing' sunsets and clouds," he started, wildly waving away the hazy mist, "but turns out it's just a lot of fog," he finished. To his horror, he nearly fell backwards and decided to climb quietly. His legs felt weak. Every few minutes, he paused and clung to the stone steps. "Got... anything else... to show me? Like some... magic tree... or treasures hidden away or something?" Huang rasped, between gasps of breath.

Met only with cool breezes, he smirked and shrugged.

As he clambered the last bit to the top, he observed the sharp boulders and fading silhouettes of different peaks in the distance. Even in his heart −− normally only roused by digital images −− something stirred. However, quickly finding himself bored, he said, "I mean, we share the same name, right? There are legends about how you got your name −− an emperor came here to find the ingredients for immortality, and his name was Huang." Then, rather embarrassed at sounding so nerdy, he added,

"That was from one of my computer games; not that you'd know how amazing the computer world is."

He stretched his legs at the top and felt the heaviness of muscles all over. Then he blurted out."You know I lost my whole world two nights ago? I spent all day yesterday trying to get it back. But they're all gone −− my army, my weapons, my generals, my mountain fortress... all of them. What am I going to do now?" He wailed. He collapsed onto the ground and threw stones down the steps. Pitiful echoes reverberated through the air.

It was sunset when Huang came to a fork in front of a forest of pines. The path to the left was narrow and seemed almost untouched, as all the leaves on the ground had not been swept up by the versatile winds. The path to the right was quite different; it was flat, wide and smooth and he could tell it was the "better one" that his mother would approve of. Huang dashed to it, sure that it would lead him back home.

He sprinted past what seemed like a thousand trees. "There's a quote by a famous Chinese writer that says, *it is not worth seeing the Five Great Mountains if you have been to Huangshan.* Pft, I totally see what he means. One mountain, two mountains, they're all the same!"

Something started bothering him. It was the pines. None of them stood straight; each one stood in its unique posture like monsters that he used to spend hours quelling in his games. One lurked behind a towering boulder; another stood like a fierce guard on top of a cliff; another one literally stood sideways, like a witch trying to swoop one up. The more he looked, the more they came alive. He had to get out of here soon. But in fact, he had an eerie feeling that he'd been circling the mountain endlessly, only arriving at the same crosspoint every time.

"Something's wrong," he panicked but hunger struck harder. Finding his bag was empty, he banged his head on the ground for not rationing more carefully. He walked on until he heard the sound of water. It turned out to be a tiny brook and there, he happily lapped up the crystal clear water and felt refreshed. Then he spotted a huge bush studded with berries as big as marbles. He gobbled them up and saved some in his pockets.

"In Epic Battles, I never run out of food… I'd never thought of having to find food myself… And in the Epic world the mountains seemed so easy to conquer...." he murmured sleepily. A tremendous fatigue overcame him and before he knew it, he fell asleep on the soft grass.

When he woke up next, it was to the sound of monkeys. "Since when did we have monkeys here?" he grumbled but was actually happy to have some company. He remained prostrate watching them up in the trees. Monkeys were interesting creatures −− they went around in threes or fives and scratched each other's back. One monkey shared his berries with a younger one.

A funny thought came to him −− if he was conquering this mountain in Epic Battles, he would surely have killed those monkeys. He would have had to, to become the Hero. He stopped breathing for a moment, thinking how horrible it was. "That computer world sure is different from the real world. I can't kill anything in real life, no way," he stuttered. A wave of emotions −− fear, regret, anger, sadness, hysteria −− overwhelmed him and he screamed. Why was he here? Where was everyone? He missed home and his mother.

A thick fog started shrouding him. Almost dreamily, he found himself walking again among the strangely shaped pine trees. Whenever he felt tired, he just let himself fall into a deep sleep.

Awaking, he saw the same trees. Right −− he remembered that he had again ended up at the fork. Then he saw it −− a human like figure, pointing its long arms to his left. Straining his eyes, he recognised it as the famous Welcoming Pine Tree. He slowly got up to get a better look. The end of the branch looked as if it was pointing at the path that he had never taken!

So he entered the narrow path. The trail wasn't as arduous as he had imagined. "Why did I not even consider coming this way? How come I kept taking the other path, knowing I was wrong?" he shook his head.

He came to the edge of a cliff and crossed the Bridge of Immortals, the famed crossing that linked one impossibly steep cliff to another. He felt almost immortal as whiffs of cloud wafted around him. On the other side, he easily found those steps that he first came across at the beginning of his journey. It seemed like a long time ago, though he remembered it clearly as if it was just earlier that day. He sauntered down the steps, into more clouds. He wasn't afraid anymore; he wasn't thinking about his aching legs, for there were none. Most surprisingly, he wasn't thinking of his Epic Battles anymore. Though they could not see him properly, he had a pleasant smile on his face when he greeted a group of passers−by.

Out of the clouds emerged a boy with a faded red backpack and blue trousers that fell above his ankles. He strode back home, thinking what excuse he'd have to tell his mother for being away a whole year.

Draco Dormiens Nunquam Titillandus

(Never Tickle the Sleeping Dragon)

German Swiss International School, Lee, Ruby – 11

It had slept for a thousand years or more trapped here, the steady thrum of its heartbeat pulsing through the rock, ringing through the mountains in a phantom drumbeat. Coil upon coil of its serpentine body shifted with each breath it took, shaking the land above as it snorted in its sleep, the smoke that escaped from its nostrils drifting around the soaring mountain peaks; around the towering pines that adorned the mountain; around the raised villages that overlooked seas of cloud against vast skies streaked with brilliant red and orange. The creature's eyes were closed tightly, disguising the gleam of death and destruction within as it slumbered deeply, scaled chest rising and falling with each breath.

For the first time in centuries, the beast stirred lightly, one fiery, gold–flecked crimson eye cracking open. Its maw gaped open in a great yawn, revealing every single one of its wickedly sharp, jagged, yellowed teeth before it snapped shut with a sickening crunch, shaking the very earth, which trembled as if it was scared of the mighty being. As it stretched languidly, the curves of its sinuous body shifted, scraping against the narrow walls of its earth–bound prison, fragments of caked dirt and debris scraping away to reveal jewel–toned scales that glimmered in the pale shafts of sunlight, shining valiantly in the near darkness of the cave.

It — for the mighty being had no name nor gender; long lost in the mists of time — lifted its great head from the icy stone it had lain on, eyes lidded as it surveyed its surroundings. Barren, grey underground tunnels that stretched as far as the eye could see greeted its eye, rugged and strewn with debris as sunlight shone through minute cracks in the rock. Serrated, yellowed talons tapped against the ground as the creature let a frustrated whine escape, pacing like a lion before it curled into a tight circle, scales shifting against each other and resounding in the still, dank air.

The creature lay its bejewelled form down once more onto the cold, hard floor as pebbles crunched underfoot, skidding off the side of the magnificent being. It seemed for a second as if the regal beast would return once more to its peaceful slumber before it threw its magnificent head back and let loose a roar that felled the towering pines as if they were toothpicks and rattled the very foundations of the earth.

The wind bowed down in submission of death incarnate as the galloping *longma* of seafoam reared back and neighed, nostrils flaring as they heard the earth–shattering roar. The sun, frightened, peeked out from behind a thick barrier of storm clouds as the creature rose, its imposing frame blotting out what was left of the light as its serpentine form towered over the villages of the Mountains of the Yellow Emperor.

Slitted pupils stared at the village below – so ethereal and tranquil, with its patchwork paddy–fields and rows of little houses amongst drifting white clouds – and narrowed.

"How dare they build their houses, their villages on this mountain, this place of worship that had stood here since the start of time?" it growled as its eyes grew stormy, gold–speckled crimson darkening into blood–red. "How dare they?" it screeched as it climbed the height of the mountain, swooping down as it dove for the village with a scream of pure malice that shattered the still mountain air once more.

Cuttingly sharp talons dug into paddy–fields and wrenched soil from the rock in great clumps as the beast growled out a challenge. The people of the village watched with wide eyes as chaos ensued, running to hide whatever they could from the dragon's all–encompassing wrath. Flames licked hungrily at the harvest crops and at the proud, tall pines which stood guard over the once–tranquil village, demolishing great swaths of crops and anything in its way, engulfing what it could find as the people ran from the beast, lashing its tail as it snarled, letting loose streams of fire as it became one with the firestorm, cocooned in red–gold streams of wildfire.

A young boy stepped forward, lunging out at the beast in a valiant attempt to distract the creature, which merely impaled him on a single talon and watched the life drain out of his eyes, its frame shuddering as it let out a rough bark that could once have been a laugh, rough and unused, reverberating through the chasms of the mountains.

The boy had stared straight into the eyes of the beast – a slitted black pupil that narrowed in malice as dancing flames speckled with burnished gold and a myriad of colours that stared back into a pair of determined hazel eyes, steady even as the boy shuddered, his knees buckled and he crumpled, only mortal; only human in the end. The beast

gave not a passing glance to the boy as it rent human flesh from bones with razor–sharp teeth and thick, crimson liquid flowed sluggishly out of a broken corpse; lent not a passing thought to the howls and piercing cries of the villagers that filled the air.

Lashing its whip–like tail, it snorted once more before taking to the sky with a dreadful howl that rang through the mountains in a never–ending echo, a flickering wall as red as the blood that stained the creature's claws roaring in its wake as it raced through the mountains, devouring everything in its path.

And the villagers watched, faces pale and drawn as the fear sept into their very beings and the terror held their hearts in an unrelenting grip. They watched as their home, their lives burned merrily in front of them, the sparks leaping up from the fire triumphantly. They watched as the beast from the legends told by their ancestors before them came to life before their very eyes, a thing of destruction, a dreaded omen, with the all deadly beauty of a gleaming steel blade…all of those things and more...a **dragon**.

The Tales Of Huangshan

German Swiss International School, Leung, Natalis – 12

"Isn't this exciting?" My mom exclaimed as we headed to the airport. "A free trip to China, all because of you, Ben!"

"That's right." My dad agreed, looking at my reflection of the rear–view mirror. "All because of that essay you wrote about how China impacts the world." I groaned. While I must admit that going to China to visit all the mountains would be exciting, I really didn't like getting this much attention.

It was the year 2018, and just before the summer holidays, our school hosted a competition to write about how a country impacts the world. The prize for first place was a trip to the place you chose. I chose China because I used to live there before moving to London in 2017. Now, I didn't expect to win it as I was only in 7th grade, and this competition was for the *whole* secondary school of Dignity London School. But, I must have gotten lucky, and I won the prize of going to China!

We were to go to the southern Anhui Province in eastern China. The flight there was mostly boring, except for the fact that my dad had to go to the toilet *seven* times, and he had to climb over me to get there. But twelve hours later, we arrived.

As soon as we got off the plane, we gasped. The scenery was beautiful! The sun shone brightly, and huge, green giants towered over us. Now I understand why people were so amazed by the Anhui Province. The mountains were stunning.

"Those mountains must be the famous Huangshan," My mom said, eyes wide in wonder. "It looks so magical!"

"It's rumoured that many famous authors such as J.R.R. Tolkien were inspired by these places to create their bestselling books." My dad added.

"They were inspired by these mountains?" I asked. "But why? I know it looks very magical, but there has to be something else, right?"

"Oh yes, there are gnomes and all the other mythical creatures there." My dad said seriously. Then he laughed. I rolled my eyes. Of course he had to joke. My dad chuckled, "Of course there's no mystical things there. It's just a mountain. Somehow the authors just managed to find inspiration." I wasn't convinced, but that was ages ago, so that was the only thing that was 'true'.

As we took the taxi to our hotel, I noticed something out of the corner of my eye. It looked like a tiny human, walking across the street. I turned around to look at it more closely, but it was no longer there. *What could it be?* I thought, "*Or was it just my mind?"* I turned back, and saw my parents looking at me. "Everything all right?" My dad asked.

"Yeah, just thought I saw someone I knew." I lied. But inside, my head bombarded me with millions of questions. *Who was that? Why was he so short? Was he even human?* I couldn't figure these things out.

We arrived at the hotel a few minutes later. It was the 'Huamao International Hotel'. Just like the scenery, the interior was stunning. The walls were filled with paintings and the entire room was bright and gold. We checked in at the front desk, where a man kindly escorted us to our room.

It was massive.

The decorations were fancy and the room was clean and up to date.

"Let's sleep now," My dad suggested. It was already 9PM, and we had dinner on the airplane. "Tomorrow we are visiting Huangshan!" So I slept, still wondering what the strange human was.

"Ben," I heard my mom whisper. "Wake up. It's time to go."

I immediately sat up from my queen–sized bed. Even though it was comfy, I didn't sleep a wink last night. I kept on thinking about the tiny man. Now, I would have just thought to myself, *Oh, that's just my imagination.* But, My dad said that authors took inspiration from the mountains here. What if… there were magical creatures in Huangshan?

Before I knew it though, we were on the bus to Huangshan, and we soon made it there.

When we got off, the guide greeted us warmly. "Ni Hao! I'm Advik Poon, and I am your tour guide for Huangshan!" We introduced ourselves and we started hiking up the mountain.

Advik was *very* talkative. He talked pretty much every second we were walking. And he didn't just talk about Huangshan; He also talked about his personal life! That's why I started zoning out. I thought about the tiny man and realized that there was a story about them: The Lord of The Rings by J.R.R Tolkien.

I snapped back from my thoughts to reality. I was in an unfamiliar place in the mountain that Advik hadn't shown my family yet. As I looked around, I realized that there was a problem: *I was alone.* Without a tour guide, I was lost as well.

I called out for my family desperately. "Mom? Dad? Anyone?" No response. I realized I had to get out of here myself. I had no phone, so I started walking up, to the peak of the mountain. That way I could get back down.

But there was another problem: there was a fork in the path. One went higher into the mountain while the other went back down. I trusted my gut and walked up.

I got back to my thoughts again. Was it possible that the tiny man was… a Hobbit? Did J.R.R Tolkien take inspiration from it? I snapped back to reality, and this time I was surrounded by fog. But there was hope. Just above me was a tiny village with tiny houses. They were made of wood, but it must be safe there. I could go there, take a break and continue my journey. Maybe they would even have phones there, and I could call my family. So I hiked to the mysterious tiny village.

When I got there, I couldn't hear anything. Was this village abandoned? Nope. Because a second later, I was tackled to the ground. I looked up and gasped. It was a tiny man! He was an old one, but I had a sense that he was very powerful. He stared at me with anger in his eyes.

"你是谁?" He hissed. I looked at him with confusion. He groaned. "Oh my god, what language do humans speak these days? Do you understand me, *boy?*" I nodded, frightened.

"Great, so you understand english. Then, why are you here?"

I tried to speak, but no words came out. Finally, I managed to squeak out, "I got lost."

"Well, how sad. But, you're not allowed here!"

"Why?"

"Ages ago, we let humans in once. We were a stupid and curious species back then, but we aren't now. The humans betrayed us. They sent an entire army to take this place! We had to use our secret weapon: dragons. Most humans died, but some of them managed to survive, which is how you have books about us."

I tried to pay attention, but the only thing I asked was, "dragons are real?"

He laughed, "Of course! Where do you think all the mythical creatures come from in your books?" And as if on cue, a powerful roar rang in my ears, and a *dragon* flew in the blue sky.

He smiled at my surprised face, but he grew serious again. "You must not tell anyone about this place. We cannot risk another attempted invasion. Otherwise, we will have to kill you and everyone you told. Understand?" I nodded, speechless. Luckily, he gave me a map to the end of the mountain, so I could find my family again.

I started to go back to the trail, but I had one more question. "May I have your name?" I asked the little man.

He responded with a smile. "My name is Gandalf." And a powerful wind suddenly pushed me to the trail, leaving me with lots of questions.

However, I had sworn to not tell anyone about the tiny village, and getting back to my family was very important as well. So, I sensibly hiked down the mountain with a lot of help from Gandalf's map.

Advik had told me and my parents that if we got seperated, we just had to wait at the main entrance. So I arrived there, and sure enough, my parents were there, waiting. As soon as they saw me, they gasped, and rushed to me.

They pulled me into a huge hug, knocking the air out of me, and said, "I'm so glad you're safe!" I was about to show my parents the map, but it had *disappeared*.

Then, as we were heading home, I saw a tiny, old man on top of Huangshan. And even though he was far away, I could have sworn that he smiled and winked.

Beyond The Clear Skies

Harrow Beijing International School, Alderson, Natalia – 13

Dawn slowly draws itself to the crust of the oceans of green, lapping over each other, on a series of mountains. A series as if carved by a witch's spell, a shade of yellow, sublime, pours itself on the dim shadows of the forests. In the distance spirals of clouds dabbed with a band of color, surround the tips of these mystical mountains. Maybe if you could reach the waves of condensed powder, they would lift you to the beyond; beyond the willowing trees in the north; Beyond the low valley;

Beyond the covered ditch, the rusting shovel he held in his trembling hands,

Beyond the flattened essence of despair that lay covered over her, the essence was almost as thick as her already dried blood–filled tears. Her scream still echoes through the hollow depths of the mountains.

The faint whispers of dry wind will forever haunt him.

"It becomes overwhelming, we were so close, I could feel it."
"I don't belong here, I loved her, how dare you!"
"I can still feel her hanging on to my arm"
"the crying never stops"

It's hard to see through the blank canvases of sky, the fog that plays as paint, but I know she's out there, I can hear her. Almost touch her.

Why can't I? Why did she leave me?

Days passing like the flashes of zooming car lights. Days were spent in one of those cars, the small, rental ones. A red one. F202IE.

It was so warm.

She wasn't planning on returning it. Days awaiting to arrive here. Rumors of this place always amused Martha. The playful thought that nobody hearing your scream. The thought that your essence would forever echo through the mountain walls.

The thought escape.

"HE TOLD ME TO GO, I HAD TO LEAVE, I HAD TO GO AWAY. I HAD TO LEAVE HIM."

As if falling in an endless void, she didn't know when she started falling, or when she should call for help. Or when she'd hit.

Break.

Shatter.

But staying in a deep hole awaiting the day the bang would come, how loud it would be! She couldn't bare it.

He wasn't home that night. She left food; it would spare her time.

She arrived in the midst of a night breeze. The silhouettes of the mountains looked like big–nosed people shouting at the moon. She named them to calm down.
Ted…

Michael…

Johnny…

Dad.

She could hear the graceful flapping of an owl's wings, the shimmers and sparks as the after−thought of a fish's jump. She was still filled with adrenalin.

She couldn't,

wouldn't

should've

stayed still.

She decided the mountains covered in sheets of green would harm her, although the sheets crisp. For she's heard several tales of mystical animals living there as a child. Those stories tormented her dreams. There's no way she's hiding in the mists of green.

Her eyes twinkled as a reflection of the array of ruptured stars beyond her.

She saw a valley. A valley with a small river. It would do.

Only as she sat down did she realize how cold she had been. She felt a streak of paralysis. Numbness filled her finger tips.

Numbness she had become immune to. A painful clod of agony clutched her stomach. She didn't know if it was hunger or the sense of being detached.

She was always detached. Perhaps she just hadn't come to terms with it until it presented itself to her as a cold river she had to face.

The surface as pale as her lips. As still as her heart beat.

Her shirt stuck to her ribs as if clinging on to save itself from *him*. The blood still seeped out of her, though the wound not new, but it never healed once.

As if she's a broken, empty vase. The flowers already willowed, but the water still pouring through the cracks.

*"she didn't come home that night, or the night after, or for the next week. So, I went looking for her. I knew the way there, I went there often with my mother when I was just a child, Martha's age, but I didn't know it well enough. I was going around in circles. I found myself in a valley."

"what if he finds me here. He knows these mountains."

Deep down, it amused her, that she thinks she has a choice; as if she has enough strength to stand; to walk away; to leave him completely

She knew he would find her; he went to that valley as a child.

She wanted to be found.

She never denied that.

Her father harsh and unsensitive.

Although gave her the mark on her face. From the iron.
"you deserved it, you were ironing my trousers as if a piece of cloth" tears twisting and combining with the steam of the iron.

The mark that dares not turn pale under the hushed tones of the forests.

However, the amount of steam escapes from her screams,

she pleads to feel the burning hot warmth it forever gives her.
The warmth that is the surface of a flare of emotions and hurt.

But only as the rusting shovel hit her stomach.
Her skin absorbing it's falling flakes.

Did she realize, she wants warmth.

The warmth of the little red car.
The warmth as the first beams of sunlight make way to her fragile face. Those few seconds it felt like away from *him.*
The warmth on her face as the tears came streaking down, lines of camouflaged hurt, seeming as if love.

The skies are clear.

But beyond the valley that lay beneath his feet.
Beyond the patterned greens that plastered smiles on her face as dawn pulled its way above.
Beyond the spirals of gold and pink that hung in the air as ornaments.

Beyond, Martha could never reach.

A Touch of Legend

Harrow Beijing International School, Chai, Martina

The people of China loved to speak of the mythical Feather Island, a village located high on the clouds above Mount Fanjing, the home of the Faes. They spoke of the two connecting temples atop the mountain, crafted by the ancient Faes as a magical border to hide their homeland from the human's eye. They spoke of the Legend of the Dragon Tamers, the Dark Ages, and of the King of the Dark Dragons, Pitch.

The legend went like this: Once upon a time, a long, long time ago, there were a tribe of Dark Dragons. They were once the high and mighty, ruling over Feather Island in a time known as the Dark Ages. The fearsome King of the Dark Dragons, known as Pitch, was a dragon with dark purple–and–black scales, glowing purple eyes and a green sclera. He had a sharp black spike on the center of his forehead, webbed ears, sharp fang–like teeth and horns that ran down his back.

No Fae had ever been able to try and battle the Dark Dragons and get back alive, but they would not yield. The villagers of Feather Island gathered together some of their strongest warriors to form the Dragon Tamers. Together, the Tamers managed to defeat the Dark Dragons. The most famous of them all was their legendary leader, a fae called Cree. He had sacrificed his own life battling Pitch on the cliff. The battle ended with both of them tumbling off the ridge, ending their lives and, subsequently, the battle.

The Dark Ages had ended then and there, returning to the normal life villagers residing Feather Island were used to. Well, as normal as anything involving Faes could ever be, at least...

"Stop it, Everest." A girl moaned from her soft white bed as her pushed away thin air. She had dark blue hair, azure blue eyes and a blue tint to her skin that made her look more like a smurf than the Fae that she was. This girl's name was Delphi. She opened her eyes groggily and realized that it wasn't Everest, her pet dragon, who was breathing down her cheek. It was a feather.

Yes, you heard right. Delphi had a pet dragon. Every Fae had a pet of their own, ranging from phoenixes to nine–tailed foxes to winged horses. Delphi had a dragon called Everest.

"Everest?" She asked, her irritation quickly turning into worry as she glanced around the room. There was no sign of the purple dragon that always waited beside her bed for her to wake up in the mornings. "Everest? Stop playing hide and seek with me! Come out before I send you to obedience class!"

She waited. There was no reply. That line always worked, *always.* And if Everest wasn't coming out…

Feeling a surge of energy, Delphi jumped out of bed and changed into her daily silk dress, running out and across the bridge that separated her house from the rest of the village. She saw smoke in the distance and headed towards that, to find her very own purple dragon in the middle of destroying the perfectly innocent local library.

"What in the name of Cree are you doing?" She exclaimed at Everest.

The dragon looked at her and blew a burst of flames in her direction. Delphi barely had time to stumble out of the way, and the bit of brick she'd been standing on a second ago was now a steaming pile of black rubble.

She stared in disbelief at Everest. "Are you feeling okay?"

The dragon didn't reply, instead choosing to go back to destroying the library. Delphi went forward and tried to stroke him, causing Everest to thrash his tail and take off into the air.

Choosing the safe path, Delphi stayed on the ground and watched as her beloved pet dragon soared off, leaving a smoking black ruin that was what was left of her village's public library.

Later, Delphi found herself flipping through the pages of *Book of Ancient Forces*, trying to find what happened to Everest. She came across the page of the biology of Dark Dragons, and…

Dark scales. Purple eyes. Black flames. And a black spike at the top of their foreheads. That sounded awfully familiar.

Was Everest a Dark Dragon?

Delphi thought back to when she first adopted him. She'd found his egg on the mountaintop of Mount Fanjing, all alone and deserted. She didn't know *where* he'd came from, and she was starting to suspect something that…wasn't pretty.

Suddenly, she heard a roar from outside her cottage. Running out the front door, she saw Everest flying around and blowing fire everywhere as if he'd been fed some hallucination medicine.

Delphi deeply regretted what she did next. Sprinting over to her dragon, she jumped up and latched herself onto his back as he swooped down to the human mountains below.

Everest thrashed around, hoping to throw her off as she held on for dear life. The wind whipped her face and she soon felt like throwing up, but Delphi had a feeling they were still in the air and was not about to let go of her dragon's tail.

Faes, no matter what the legends say, *couldn't fly*.

Everest jerked his tail again, with such force that Delphi felt her grip on his tail loosen.

I am so *not dying like this*, she thought to herself as she fell.

Thankfully, wherever Everest had decided to drop her, it wasn't too far from the ground because she only felt a strong bump when she hit the forest floor—hard enough to give her a small concussion, but definitely not hard enough to kill her.

Standing up shakily, Delphi saw Everest land in front of her and start to advance towards her with a crazed look in his eyes. Taking a few steps back, she bumped into something soft. Giving a small yelp, Delphi whirled around, to find…

She rubbed her eyes, making sure she wasn't seeing things.

Standing in front of her was a fat old man in a battered shirt, Hawaiian shorts, with a mane of white hair on his head and a rat's–nest styled mustache. Okay, first off—that mustache really needed trimming.

"Uh…Who are you?" Delphi asked, hoping she didn't sound too impolite.

"My name is Cree."

It took Delphi a moment to process this, and when she did, she stared. "Wait, your name is what now? I—how are you still alive? And how did you end up looking like some homeless guy?"

"It's a long story." Was her reply.

"Well," She said slowly. "Can you, maybe, tame Everest? My dragon?"

"Um…" Cree started. He suddenly pointed at the sky. "Oh, look, a bird! How beautiful!"

Delphi raised her eyebrow. "Okay, it's cute, but can we get back to the point? Why do I feel like you're avoiding the question?"

Cree hesitated. "Fine."

He went forward slowly, holding his hands in front of him in a not–so–heroic way.

Everest swished his tail once and knocked Cree right into a bush. He raised one finger and said weakly, "I…have a confession."

Delphi glared at him. "Yes?"

"It's a fraud. All of it. About me being some legendary Dragon Tamer. None of it is true. It's just a big huge scam designed to make mortals worship me."

"Wait, what now?" She stared at the old man in disbelief.

"All the Dark Dragons, Pitch, the Golden Bridle—they did exist a few millennia ago. Those were true. But the part about me defeating them and whatnot? Yeah, that's just a made–up lie. The Dark Dragons and the Dragon Tamers went extinct ages ago, there was no point for them." Cree explained. "I was never a Dragon Tamer."

Alright. That had just proved Delphi's entire life was a lie. Perfectly normal.

"I still have the Golden Bridle with me. It's just an ordinary leather bridle, and believe me, I've tested it before." Cree told her, taking out a long brown bridle and holding it out. "You can have it if you want to, but it's useless."

She took the bridle—it felt light and cheap, not at all like the magical one she'd pictured in her dreams.

"I'll just go now!" Cree declared, and sprinted away at a speed not fit for an old man.

Delphi raised an eyebrow and, holding the bridle carefully in her hands, tackled Everest.

The process was very tiring and included quite a lot of thrashing, yelling, roaring, fire–blowing, kicking, and grabbing. Just as she thought her dragon was calming down and wrapped the bridle around his head, Everest gave a strong jerk and Delphi tumbled right into the sharp black horn at the center of his forehead.

The force of Everest's thrashing had resulted in him falling off the cliff of the mountain, and Delphi was only able to watch as the Golden Bridle snapped, slicing off Everest's head. She could only lay there silently on the ground while watching her dear dragon's head seep blood and the rest of his body toppled down the cliff face.

She looked at her abdomen. It had a hole. And the hole was incredibly bloody.

Oh, dear.

As Delphi felt her eyelids starting to droop, she saw the bloody bridle in her hand slowly turn a blinding shade of gold…

Fated

Harrow Beijing International School, Chen, Caitlyn – 13

Inside a cottage on the edge of the world, a boy's eyes opened to the morning light. His sea green eyes shimmering under the warm morning sunlight, only at one glance his eyes show the hue of the new spring growth embellished by flecks of ambition. The kind of charming, passionate green that the ocean turns during a storm.

"Good morning Emery!" an older male call at the top of his voice, "You better get down, breakfast is ready."

Emery leaped out of his snug bed, quickly brushed his frizzly brown hair aside and descend down the stairs. His world is well–hidden, it's beyond any mortal's reach. The Skyborn village is a dome shielding all of the Skyborns from the chaotic and dangerous outside world. No one knows the exact location of the mythological Skyborn civilisation, legend said that it's in Huangshan, where mountain peaks can pierce the realms of the stars and eerie mists encircle the mountain year–round. The only entrance in Skyborn is through the Portal of Secret which is guarded by two ancient sculptures, if you are a worthy Skyborn you can find the entrance easily as for the ordinary its beyond impossible.

Individual houses are chiselled out from the stone cliff, streets are inundated with festivals and small outlets. The village thrived, citizens are joyous and satisfied with their current lifestyle, especially Emery's family. His father, Alvar the Wise, is the most important and senior priest of Skyborn; however, Alvar's early life was a lot different compared to Emery's.

Alvar lived in the era of Dragons…

A long time ago, dragons and Skyborns were bonded together. Skyborns relied on dragons for Skydust, which was a magical sprinkle produced when dragons flied in the skies. Skydust powers the Skyborn village from water pumping to electricity. Dragons, unsurprisingly, relied on the Skyborns for essential food and the protection of their dragonets. Special or rather chosen Skyborns have the ability to connect and speak with their chosen dragons and essentially become a Dragon Whisperer. There were laughers up in the skies every time the dragons and Skyborns went for a ride or hunt. Alvar would often stare blankly at the skies, he's births defects hampered him from soaring the skies, thus Alvar was preparing to be the next Senior Priest of Skyborn ––the highest rank official in Skyborns government. With an undecipherable smile on his face, he entered the sacred temple on the Holy Festival. No one know when the tradition of the annual Holy Festival first started, but the Festival ensured the very survival of Skyborns. The festival was consecrated, Skyborns celebrated the King of Dragons; Skyborns put on their most lavish cloths, the Temple was adorned with ornaments, flags, and shimmering gold specks. All for a single festival. Except that this year's festival went horribly wrong…A deathly blanket covered Skyborn, Alvar could sense it. It's the smell of withering flora, the fragrance of rotten flesh, the ominous signs of the constellation.

At the beginning of the festival stand the burly black figure of a Vulcan dragon, Draco, gusting blazes out of his nostrils. His ebony eyes reflecting the flames on his talons as he paced around the temple searching for the Elder Priest. Oh, there he is, the Elder! Attired in gold and silver yearn, he strolled out of the temple and glared at Draco for disrupting his lunch. Draco glared back…The next thing the Skyborns knew, Elder dropped dead with smouldering flesh flaming on his body. It was Draco who did this, and from this very turning point, history was altered forever, as did the Age of Dragons.

Alvar has told this story to his son countless of times; Emery understood and knows every detail of his history. The past, as Emery sees it, is a tragic event and a misunderstanding. And as every boy dream, Emery wants to save Skyborn from the Evil Dragon. But, Emery is different.

Maybe he's destined to be the hero...

A black silhouette strolled aimlessly under the beautiful twilight, the dark violet sky and the rose–red clouds are vividly painted on the sky, Emery had just finished his duty on the Watch Tower. Tracing back to his steps, he made several swift turns before entering the forbidden alley. The alley is feared by the Skyborns, the Skyborns avoid walking adjacent to the alley for a reason: Darkest secrets lives in it.

Emery walked straight into a shabby, dilapidated mansion, the pipeline was gushing out pollute water and the acrid smell inundated his nostril, but he chose to ignore it. Immediately, an ear–piercing roar reverberated the mansion, it was as loud as thousands of thunders strikes together. A broad figure appeared under the doorway, his eyes matched Emery, except that he is in a totally different species.

He is a dragon.

Emery greeted the blue–white scales dragon with a nodded followed with a question, "Good evening Echo. I stopped by to confirm the day of Mission Fortress, it's tomorrow isn't it?"

"The attack will be tomorrow as planned." Echo thundered.

"What about your companions?"

"I assure you they will be here. And in the meantime, say goodbye to your dear father, we may not return once we're there."

Emery stared at Echo with disbelief but also understands why he had said that. The mission is dangerous, breaking into the most well-guarded place and guarded by large fire-breathing dragons is quite an impossible task, Alvar would have thought his son going bonkers if Emery told him about his 'great' plan. Emery carefully traced back his steps out of the forbidden alley, he returned back in his warm, comfy home mustering how to tell his father about this situation.

The truth is, he didn't. He left without a goodbye…

The sky was painted with rose pink with a shade of royal blue, Emery tiptoed out of his house and rushed towards the courtyard beside the forbidden alley. As he came closely, three tall figures including Echo emerged. Among the dragons, Echo stands out as a wind element dragon with soft sea-green eyes, there are also a dragon with red scales which are blazing with fire and a dragon with pure-white scales, icicles dangling on his scales.

"Morning Emery, meet Cinder (fire dragon) and Polar (ice dragon), and my confidants meet Emery a Skyborn" After Echo finished the introduction, the other two dragons hissed under their breath, can't blame them dragons and Skyborns aren't supposed to love each other. Without any delay, Emery climbed on Echo's streamlined body as Echo, Cinder and Polar ascend into the azure sky.

"Will they be able to save Skyborns?" Emery pondered, the fate isn't definite yet... or is it?

The squad soared under the pale-white clouds, their skins craving for more of the gentle breezes. Everything is where it should be, except…Cinder suddenly halted, his eyes fuming with unanticipated hatred, Echo watched in horror as Cinder lashed out flames towards she-dragon, Polar, who's unprepared of this attack. The ice dragon's fragile body burst into flames, Polar screeched as Cinder launched himself towards her and with a swift stroke, Cinder slit Polar's throat. Blood like a coagulated wine began to gush out as she falls to her death. Watching his best friend fell into the bottomless pit, Echo's sea-green eyes turned stormy, tempestuous, pain filled his heart as he lunges himself carrying Emery to Cinder.

"Revenge it shall be" Hissed Echo, a bloodshed began.

A Split second pasted, Emery finds himself plummeting to the abyss below with the unconscious body of his dear friend, Echo; a stream of tears tickled down Emery's cheeks.

He murmured, "I'm so sorry Dad." Then he shut his eyes tight waiting for the end.

The ground is getting closer by each second.

100 meters.

50 meters.

30 meters.

15 meters.

5.

4.

3.

2.

1…

Several days later, Alvar confronted the senior council, he yelled straight into their faces, "We, no, you. You Lazy cake-eaters must end all connections with the Dragon tribe and punish them severely for what they did. My son is six feet under because of them!" His voice tremored when he squeezed out the words-my son; afterwards he stormed out of the building watching the Skyborns preparing for the war between them and the Dragon, it would be destructive and a bloody carnage.

He smiled.

The Abyss of Wishes

Harrow Beijing International School, Chen, Nemo – 12

She was running from something, horses, men, their shouts of fury shattering the sky at dawn, but the mountain was unfamiliar, the footholds that her feet found so easily being entirely new. Something in her mind rang, a memory.

"The abyss of wishes, if you believe and you dive into the mist…" Her grandmama, the storyteller's voice.

She knew where she was heading now, and a sense of deep foreboding filled her. A cliff. She imagined it, a gaping mouth in the mountains. No, she had to go back to her home, to the Village above the Clouds, but she was like someone possessed, and she couldn't turn back, not now.

The shouts behind her grew louder.

It was all suddenly so misty, but she could make out the edge of a cliff – the abyss of wishes! She walked towards it, knowing that her pursuers couldn't catch up to her now. She squatted down, hand reaching into the mist, letting it curl around her, inviting her.

What was she doing?

Another line of the story came back to her: "Whatever you want first on your list of wishes will come to you…"

"Whatever I want, grandmama? Truly?"

"Yes, child, but only if you believe…"

She tipped her weight forwards and tumbled off the edge into the mist. It was a strange sensation, it didn't seem at all as though she was falling fast. In fact, it rather felt like she was falling through water, or some other sort of soft cushion.

"And on your birthday in the year of your zodiac[1], a shooting star will appear…"

She was accelerating now, falling faster and faster, and she saw the ground beneath –

Mei awoke with cold sweat all over her, clutching the embroidered quilt that once belonged to her late mother. It was barely dawn, but the sunrise could not be seen for the mist that plagued the sky of the Village Above the Clouds, as her grandmama often still told her, as though she was still a small child. As with all dreams, the memory of this one was altered and she suddenly remembered holding the hand of someone while running, and assumed it was Peng, her lover.

At dawn, Peng[2] woke to somewhat clear skies – compared with the usual skies in the Village Above the Clouds, almost anything could be considered clear. He looked out of his cottage's window and saw the farmers already out and working in the fields, and the rest of the town just waking up. He was a worker himself, but not a farmer or a normal labourer – he was an inventor. Just last winter, when the Village above the clouds was suffering a food shortage due to a lack of irrigation in the previous summer, he had designed a complex aqueduct system which could be easily controlled, bringing the water from a mountain stream to the fields.

The villagers often said that he and Mei were both geniuses, him as an inventor, Mei as a doctor. Everyone approved of the pair, so similar in being almost perfect, except that it wasn't sure if Mei would be chosen to be the emperor's concubine.

He looked upwards again. When he was young, the villager boys teased him for this habit and his name: "Peng", they would say, "Looking up into the skies but unable to fly." His parents seemed to share this belief, bemoaning the fact that he was too practical: If he put his genius into activities that "showier", he would have gone much further, but both he and Mei were satisfied with where he was now.

Thinking of Mei, he realised: today was the day that the emperor's guards would announce which girls had been chosen. There was a commotion in the village centre, accompanied by the snorting of horses. The announcer cleared his throat, then announced the name in his thin voice. Only one person had been chosen, and the girl was… Mei.

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[1] In Chinese tradition, every person's zodiac sign refers to the year that they are born in. There are twelve zodiacs, and one's zodiac year happens every twelve years.

[2] Peng means large bird
or roc

He had to tell her, but in his churning mind there was a glimpse of hope, perhaps they could elope as they did in the stories, but he would have to find her fast, the emperor's men were on horseback, and they would only have a chance if they had a head start. Their best chance was to escape by mountains. He needn't think more.

A delicate hand grasped his, and already, he knew it was Mei. She ran, letting her feet lead her in the most familiar path as she pondered what they should do after they eloped, to somewhere they could become an inventor and a doctor, but there was no time to think now, the guards had just blocked their way up the mountain.

She changed course, faintly aware of her hand grasping Peng's, and his panting behind her. It was only when she arrived that she knew her destination – the abyss of wishes.

The guards were catching up, when Mei remembered her grandmother'story: "*Whoever jumped into the chasm, believing in its magic, would have their truly most desperate wish fulfilled"*

"On the count of three, jump." They both knew it was their only chance left now.

"Three." The could hear the thundering footsteps. "Two." The shouts. "One" The clouds of dust. She grasped his hand and jumped, with her heart strangely calm.

When Peng came to, he was in a chair of a room with no windows, with a desk with multiple gadgets. It did not interest him very much, although his eyes lingered on a button which said 'fly'. Where was Mei?

He frantically searched – within minutes, he had explored the whole of the machine he was in, finding the directions to the outside and a few notebooks full of drawings of invention ideas he had toyed with before himself, the 'spaceship' where he was (as the author called it) among them, but not Mei. Perhaps she was outside of this spaceship?

He went back to the original room and pressed the button on the notebook which was supposed to open the trapdoor. It turned out to be the very spot he was standing on. It was a small platform, and it was lowered by a rope woven with iron threads to the ground about a meter below. To his surprise, there was a small crowd gathered there already, and as he came down, they all cheered, with some bowing.

"Hello…?" He mustered, with a wave. "Have you seen a young woman pass by? All dressed in white, she might have looked like she was in a hurry."

"A woman? No, good sir, but your appearance is a miracle!"

Six years later, Mei was surprised to see a child run to her, announcing a visitor arriving in an extravagant machine, asking to see her. She sighed, looking out the window. It was surprising how much the village had changed since her arrival. And today was her birthday in her year – an important occasion to celebrate. When she had arrived, the town was infested with plague. She had saved many, passing on her medicines to many students and eventually become a hero, somewhat. But Peng had not come with her.

The visitor walked in the open door. She turned her head, and gave a little gasp of surprise. She would have fallen into a chair if she weren't already sitting down.

"Peng?"

"It's me, Mei. I know all this is quite extravagant, bringing the spaceship and all, but I thought that this is the day. It's your birthday, and mine, and it's our year, and I finally figured out how the abyss of wishes works, so I came – forgive me for intruding if"–

But he had said enough, and she knew that his rambling was only caused by nervousness. She stood up, and interrupted: "Not at all, come, take a seat." He seemed to be relieved that she was still friendly.

"If you still"–

"Yes, I do."

"I was thinking since both our wishes have been fulfilled, it would have been nice to settle down, start a family"–

"We can keep working for our wishes."

"Yes, but Mei, will you… will you marry me?"

She smiled, knowing that he hadn't changed a bit for the worse in the past six years. "Yes. Yes, with all my heart."

Far away, in the Village above the clouds, grandmama saw two stars shoot across the sky, finally clear for once in years. They reminded her the two threads she had been using to embroider a new quilt, one with two pearly white silhouettes on a dark cloth, a man and a woman. In her heart, she knew they were an inventor and a doctor. She sighed contentedly, watching the shining trails the stars left behind, knowing that Mei now lived in the land of dreams.

Li Bai and the Dragon

Harrow Beijing International School, Gao, Kelly – 12

Long ago, a magical dragon lived on Mount Huangshan. As people say, the dragon protected our emperors of China and their Alchemy. There is also a saying which says this dragon defeated our enemy during the new year's, Monster Nian. Some says Nian is defeated by colour red, some says Nian is scared of red as this dragon is covered with red scales, glittering with gold. Even though there's so many stories about this dragon, people had never seen a shadow of him.

A Poet of the Tang Dynasty, Li Bai, heard this story. He was wondering about the scenery and this magical dragon. If he could be the one who sees this dragon first, this could make him famous! Also, people say the Alchemy of all emperors are done there. If he finds some kind of elixir, he could live forever! With these dream–like thoughts, he started his journey to the magical and mysterious mountain —— Huang Shan.

First of all, he prepared some food for his journey. Some pancakes, with his favourite white wine, companied with braised meat. Li bai thought of the route he's going on to get up to the top tips and then started. However, with the steep and magnificent peaks of Huangshan, it is quite different. The mountains and rocks had different shapes and gestures; some are like immortal creatures, some are like monkeys watching the sea, some are like animals eating watermelon, and some are like warriors fighting. Li bai thought about it, and his heart hanging up again, because he realised how dangerous the peak of Huangshan could be. An overpass was built between the two peaks, with a length of 18 meters. It was suspended on both sides and the abyss was at the bottom. When he thought of it, he was frightened.

Slowly, Li Bai's heart that was beating strongly began to feel less pressured. The sea of clouds on the mountain was very beautiful. Looking at it closely with a stare, it looks like a layer of thick fog covering the strange peaks and scenes. As soon as the wind blows, the white clouds became like a pair of white butterflies dancing, flying around the mountains. Li Bai looked up again. Ten miles away, it's like the ocean where he can't see the edge of it. It submerges and only shows the peaks. It's like an island on the sea which looms in the mist. Li Bai thought he was walking into a fairyland from a fantasy!

Looking and enjoying the scenery, Li Bai seemed more excited to what the dragon and this landscape would look like. The scurries and leisurely pace abruptly changed to the vigorous strides, strengthened with excitement.

Unfortunately, rain poured onto this curious poet, which made him stay in a stone cave, lighting up some fire to avoid the coldness and the damp outside. After a while, the rain was still pouring. Not only did it not stop, it smashed and pounded onto the stone floor of Huangshan.

In this way, Li Bai was trapped day by day in that cave. Finally, in his desperation, the torrential, uncontrolled rain finally stopped. All of a sudden, it became so quiet. When Li Bai came out of the cave, the cool air came, with a fishy smell. The sun shines on the road washed by the heavy rain, and the mountain road seems to be paved with a layer of bright glass; the sun shines onto the trees on the mountain, and the trees seem to be covered with pearls and agates.

Suddenly, Li Bai saw something vague, flying over the sky. Slowly, it became closer and closer. It's the magic dragon! It's not like what everyone said at home, this dragon is sapphire blue and glittering, sparkling with gold. Gently, it landed in front of Li Bai. Li bai was shocked, unable to believe that he saw it, he saw the dragon of legends, the dragon that was famous. When he recuperated from the excitement, the dragon grabbed at him, taking him up the blue sky and flew. Li bai was shaking through his way, where he never saw the world from this special angle of sight, and being held by an animal. His feelings changed like the route of a rollercoaster, up and down, excited and frightened.

The dragon took him to a temple, where it is cold, and wet. Thousands of stoves were together, where the dragon finally spoke up: "I'm the one you're looking for. I am a normal dragon with no power, not like what people said. They say I'm red, where I am blue. They said I scared monsters away, but it wasn't anything to do with me." The dragon opened one of the stoves and continued: "Millions climbed the mountain to find me, but they were all the same. You are different, every time someone comes, I make the rain pour, and none of them waited till it stopped, but you did." The dragon handed Li Bai an elixir, where words on it said: "ever young". As the claws of the dragon slowly let go the hands of Li Bai, it flew up, and said: "The only reason I stayed was for this elixir, this is from the emperor that saved my life, and now I'm giving it to you." So quickly, the dragon disappeared.

After that, Li Bai stayed, and lived at Huangshan in seclusion. He ate the elixir, wrote a lot of poems for this mountain, but never saw that dragon again. No one ever knew this story, only Li Bai and the blue dragon, who went to find his savior.

Tales from China's Magical Mountains

Harrow Beijing International School, Guo, Daniel – 13

A thing I commonly find cliché and banal in regards to works about mountains is how they are generally portrayed by writers. Nebulous clouds surrounding a supernaturally tall mountain that seems to reach the heavens, and Sages with unparalleled wisdom giving out abstruse advice to all that seek it before ascending to heaven halfway through the story in an unrelated interlude, ant the protagonist being a clueless young man who seeks nothing but catharsis or closure from a traumatic event. It might seem interesting when you read one example of that trope but it would soon turn insipid to you. And so, I find myself in the exact spot in which I had just so described a typical mountain story to be, a clueless young man attempting to find oneself amidst a sea of tourists and denizens of the mountain.

"Move on! Come on, what in blazes are you waiting for!" came the voice of an irritated tourist. Muttering a quick apology, I slid my card on top of the scanner and waited for the automatic fence to open. After quickly rushing past the unhurried crowd at the temple's entrance and entering the temple what greeted me was exactly as I had thought would look like, the sagacious monk who gives cryptic pieces of advice to all that seeks it. I see that he is still not done with his banter, it seems that I will have to initiate a conversation then. "Sorry, traffic was a nightmare" the cacophony of noises came to an abrupt end, a veritable sea of heads turned in my direction, looking at me in either amazement or just simple condescension. I guess that some religious people did develop a superiority complex of sorts to those who seem secular like me, but anyway, I have my things to attend to.

"So, this is the case, is it not?", the 'wise' monk inquired, I found myself struggling to give an appropriate answer. "I--Uhm–yeah plan on taking up a position of-----um---yeah! A tourist guide to know more about myself!" Mr. Monk raised his eyebrow at my answer, probably because people like me who are still attempting to find themselves at the age of 30 generally tend to come off as a hopeless man just days away from a suicide attempt. Though to my surprise, he sighed and shooed me away to whatever post I signed up for.

"Ok, the gist of this job is to just loiter around the entrance of this mountain until a tourist comes up to you and asks for your assistance. You put on your Mr. Polite and Cordial façade right when they come up to you can take them on a long tour around the mountains! Wahoo." The man in charge had an imperturbable attitude befitting of a man of his stature. Bob Wugert, an American who immigrated to China in the 1980s, first undertook the responsibility of starting the tourism business in this particular area. So, he's essentially the boss around here, the perfect example of the jaded professional trope, having worked in the tourism business for more than 40 years, he knows every inch of this area, the best places to buy souvenirs and even the finest bistros around here, which is about everything you need to know as a mountain guide. He continued to talk about how the whole process of taking a tour around the mountain went and eventually came upon the point in which I was most curious about, regarding how to deal with cantankerous clients.

"And so, I gave that guy the good old slugger! You should have seen his face, swollen in all of its glory! That's what he gets for attempting to humble the great me! Bob had started ranting about how he treated intractable clients, with a fist to the face. Anyone else would have gotten fired on the spot for the mishandling of clients. And the possibility of the company losing money and reputation due to assault, but Bob Wugert is the Jeff Bezos of the Tourism Industry. Just having him here earned us enough prestige and renown for our rating on multiple internet platforms went up from 3.7 to 4.8! Getting rid of him would be like selling Mcdonald's African Burgers during the African famine. vacuous, simply vacuous.

"Young man! I ask of you, what in the heavens is this?". An irritated tourist raises a complaint. Shrugging I move on to the next part of our tourist trap. A statue of the Buddha pointing towards a shop. According to Bob, it was de rigueur for Buddhists to obey their god, so buying what their god wanted was considered obligatory. While this may seem heretical or offensive to certain people, do note that All is fair in love and business.

It has been about three weeks since I have arrived at this mountain and took up a position as one of the mountain's innumerable tour guides. My first paycheck is due soon. I have a decent rating on AdviserTrip(OC app) and everything else has been progressing well enough. Still, I have not acquired the one thing I came here for, Enlightenment, not in the spiritual sense but rather just to know why I came into being. The chances of me coming into existence are around one in several billion, yet I have not accomplished anything noteworthy yet. For an agnostic like me, I still do believe in divine forces beyond the comprehension and reach of mankind, so the question of why I got chosen plagues me to no end.

Splat, splat. It has been raining nonstop since morning and there are no signs of it stopping soon. God, this seems like one of those cliched scenes where Mr. Wise sage will soon approach me and give his judicious advice, Mr. Sage, I am waiting! And soon enough, he arrives. "Hello, young one, what brings you to sit here in desolation?" I turn my head around to get a glimpse of who spoke to me. And the same person who conversed with me three weeks earlier in that temple was standing right behind me. And so, making full use of this opportunity, I ask him the question that has been bedeviling me for so long. "Why was it me who came into being?".

Leading me into his temple, the sage starts to speak. "I see that you have an existential crisis, am I wrong?", shaking my head, he continues. "I've said this to many young men and women before, and you shall be one of many to hear it, what defines you is not what you accomplished in life but rather how you look at life. A philanthropist who has saved many lives considers himself normal because he did 'What he was supposed to do'. The very definition of good is so twisted that a murderer who tortures other murderers could be considered as 'good' in a sense and be sent to heaven instead of hell. A judge who has followed all the rules of the judicial system might be considered essentially a sinner because of the punishments he brought forth, know that there is no true definition of good nor bad, you not accomplishing does not mean that you are a bad person, or a good person, you decide who you are and why you are, it all boils down to whether you think you are content with your being or not."

It was on that day that I realized cliched scenes do bring forth enlightenment and closure.

Time for Action

Harrow Beijing International School, Helian, Mars – 12

It was a misty morning when we finally arrived at Huangshan in Anhui Province in eastern China. I was part of a research team that would look at the wildlife in Huangshan. I had heard that there was a mining company has found valuable resources such as coal and bronze in these mountains and are damaging the environment with their excavations.

There was a chilly mountain breeze, and the trees towered above us like immense behemoths. Some of them were as old as one thousand years. As we exited the main road, and proceeded onto a dirt track, I heard an inexplicable crash in the distance. I took out my binoculars, and there it was, the loathsome mining company, clearing away at the trees so that they could start another mine. Oh, how I hated those people, caring about nothing by themselves and money.

Five thousand feet above, a free eagle was soaring majestically through the air when it heard a tremendous crash from behind. It turned round and saw the most hideous sight. The rumor had been true about the yellow monsters, ten times the size of a tiger. They ripped trees right off the ground and flew dirt into the air, as high as 10 meters! In a flash, it cleared a huge area of 50 meters square. Then came the worst of it all. They started to drill through the ground, shaking it like mad. The eagle was dazed by all this unacceptable behavior. What were they doing? It flew away to alert its other fellow eagles.

Back on the ground, I looked around us, there were animals and trees all around, but something wasn't right. There was a hint of aggression that all the animals, from the smallest ant to the distance roar of a tiger. Even the smallest plants seemed to be leaning away from us.

Interminable days went by without much progress. We had come here a week later than the mining company, and we can barely find any animals to study. The only ones that we were able to capture pictures from were the ones from far away or the ones that we could only glimpse. Whenever we saw the animals, up close, they always ran off. Then, on a crisp clear night with a bright full moon, I fell into a heavy sleep after another day of hard work. But this night was different. I dreamed of a goddess in robes the color of the pure white moon, approach me. "Who are you?" I asked her.

"I am Yaoji, the goddess of the mountains, and I am here to give you an important task, and if you succeed, then the animals of this mountain range will be free." She paused for a second and looked in the direction of the excavation sight. "As a reward, I will show you something that no other human has ever seen, species that were only assumed to be myths." Looking at me solemnly, she asked "Do you agree?"

"Yes, I will not disappoint you." I replied. Questions swirled in my head. What was I going to do? How am I going to stop such a big project and immense mining behemoth?

"But ho…" I was about to ask one last, and most important question, when the goddess, started to fade.

"Seek you own answers," And she dissolved into the distance. Then, I was all alone. That was when I realized that someone was calling my name.

"ROBERT, ROBERT, WAKE UP!" a cold shower of water crashed into my face as I sat up immediately, and there was my friend Peter the camera man, with an empty blue bucket.

"What's the time right now?" I asked.

"It's well past 9 now, and breakfast was supposed to start at 8!" He shouted. "At this rate, we're never going to finish this goddam book of yours!"

"All right, all right, calm down a second," I said, "There is a change of plans, can you call everyone to come and have a meeting at the courtyard outside my room."

Deep in the forests, a different meeting was being held. Animals of each species. The tigers gathered on a huge flat rock, while eagles congregated on the mountain tops, and rabbits crowded in dirt holes. The subject that they were talking about was the yellow monsters and what to do.

"We should attack the humans; they are no stronger than us," said a young tiger to his fellow tigers.

"But there are huge monsters that they control!" Said an older and wiser tiger.

In the eagles' nest, the suggestion was different. "Maybe we should go further west, there is no humans."

"But we don't know what is out there, and this is our home!" Replied another eagle.

In the rabbit hole, the suggestion was even sillier. "They aren't effecting us that much, right? So, we should just put up with it for now," said a young rabbit.

"Small problems always turn into big ones." Said a wise old rabbit helplessly, "We don't have a concrete plan, but we can't just do nothing."

Back in the temple courtyard, the same gloomy atmosphere was there. Not a single person could think up a good idea how to stop the contemptible company from destroying the environment.

"Let's all end it here. Maybe we will think up something tomorrow."

That night, as I lay awake in my bed, I kept on thinking about all the things I've done to the environment, and all the different ways I've done it. Then, I got it. I would make the Chinese public start to become aware of this happening in the Huangshan mountains. Now it was time for action.

Hope

Harrow Beijing International School, Jiang, Hannah – 11

I had always admired the great, bulky barrier in front of my hometown– Mount Huangshan. When I was an innocent young child, free of worries, free from the burning flame of rules, free from the invisible chains of responsibility, I used to admire the mountain. It used to be a blissful atmosphere filled with joy and jubilation. It used to be the cherry blossom toys I made from the cherry trees perched on top of the granite peaks, which reminded me forcedly of a miniscule werewolf perched on top of a cliff at full moon; lonely, yet proud. It used to be the rustling of bushes of the young pups, engrossed in their own adventure, and the howls of their mothers. Now, it's just a piece of moldy rock in my eyes. I had never wanted it to wither and rot, but life changes, and you have to get on with it– like what I did when my mother could not and would not anymore– and moved to a new home: heaven.

"Hope. Never give up, whatever you do. Keep hoping for new opportunities in life. Come on hither–" she would sigh and hug me tight, breathing more words of encouragement into my ear. Those were my mother's last words. I keep them pressed hard to my chest every day before setting out to another day full of hurdles to jump on the path of life. But sometimes, I just couldn't bear thinking of my mother's soft face, repeating those words, staring deep into my eyes, reaching far below the sorrowful pupils.

The memory of my mother always pained me, for the ceaseless words she used to say did not pass unheard and forgotten. I can still remember the sensation when I would come back from a week's camping trip with my friends, my mother would embrace me and cry. "*Is this my darling Hope? Why, she is all grown up now! Is this my little angel?"*
I would roll my eyes and respond. *"Come on mum, I've only been gone for a week!"*
"But you've grown so much, and you're awfully pale! Was it too cold at the campsite? Did you catch a cold? What did you do?"
I remember I had found my mother irritating, bothersome. Sometimes, I even hated my mother for her lack of incisiveness. But later on in life, I soon realised that all of those unnecessary actions, fussing about and those embarrassing hugs in front of my friends were actions of love. They were never futile.

I also thought of the mountain my mother used to adore and worship. As she had a rather garrulous temperament, I had hardly believed the myth she told me years and years ago on the very same rock. She said that the rock changes in your vision based on emotion. Obviously, it was some fraudulent folklore that her family had foolishly believed in. I refused to believe it– until her death. Her death that changed everything.

So, I paid a visit to the Yellow Mountain.

The navy–blue sky looked peaceful for once in what seemed to be a long time. There was only the muffled sound of thunder that was happening far away as I watched the breathtaking horizon. The sun had almost set, painting the dazzling sky into apricot and red. I was looking up with glee and hope when the first thunderbolt struck– a sign that I had been wrong, that the storm was still going to continue, that my fears are going to keep haunting me until my dying day. It blazed brilliantly against the sky and sea, which made it more obvious than ever. More followed. There were openings in the cloud now, as if the sky were torn into pieces. Then came the rain. It came down in a sheet, soaking the sand, filling the agitated sea. Everything was raging around me; I felt the sky's anger and I shuddered.

In an instant it stopped.

The storm broke. The clouds closed like curtains as if signaling for the end of the show. The rain still fell down, but the arrows which had been hard and piercing a moment ago turned to soft and rubbery ones. It was as if no storm had happened, except for the single fact that a line of seven different colors in a curve was coated onto the landscape– a rainbow. The first symbol of hope was violently bright, and with it came another gift. I could see the radiant horizon again.

"Rainbows were often the signs of hope, Hope." Rang my mother's voice in my head. "*They speak directly into our troublesome heart and soul, filling us with awe and energy of love pouring around us. Remember, that anything which strikes a blazing light into your life always require the bloodiest of battles. So in a way, the light was never a great beacon of hope, it is just so because it was the only thing that shone during the dismal ages. No one ever sees the same rainbow, and when you see one, recall the fact that this rainbow is from your own horizon. Rainbows are also the sign of Magical Blessing, Hope. They'll bless and bring fresh beginnings and new prosperity."* And so, my mother was right again. Coming here was never a mistake. The mountain had blessed me. I could feel the tingling sensation of the warm rain hopping playfully in my hair, then rolling down my back, then jumping into my shoes. I sank down to my knees, crazy with joy. Looked up, and it was gone. The symbol of hope vanished. Yet, it couldn't have just left me– could it? Half doubting myself, I rubbed my eyes wearily and looked up again. The band of colors was slowly fading away, melting into the vivid scenery. Nevertheless, it was shining effulgently as it trotted away tranquilly.

So keep this in mind– dear reader– the darkest days come with the most incandescent times. Never hope for just the light, hope for a change in life– whether abdominal or eminent, it should always be acceptable. But when the aphotic approaches, be ready for the rainbow, the rainbow that will bring the meaning of life, the rainbow that will pour a bucket of realization over the bleary eye of misconception, the rainbow that will set the bonfire of hope ablaze. Hear my mother's voice like I did, and bear in mind the priceless words and the bodacious quotes she used to repeat on the towering rock– the Yellow Mountain. When the path ahead of you is blurred by the fog of secrecy, jog your memory for these two words: *keep hoping*.

The Magical Huangshan in China

Harrow Beijing International School, Lai, Toby – 11

Clutching my stitch, I gasped for fresh air. There was still half way to go. I took out my flask and gulped down the rest of the water and redeemed myself. I looked at my hands, they were covered in slimy moss and cuts were plastered all over it. I winced as the water in the moss went into my cuts and made them sting madly. The sky was growing dark and clouds glided across and gave me the signal that I had to take my flashlight out. I shone it towards the floor and eerie looking bugs scattered across the floor, running in every direction. I looked in front of me, staring at the top of mountain, that was my destination.

Soon after, it was like I was never going to make it. The sky was pitch black but the small of the fresh air kept me awake and alive. My bag was heaving down and my flashlight was running out. But the scene was beautiful, stars spreader across the sky light a massive blanket and the crisp sound of leaves rustling in the air made my body feel relaxed. As I carried on, the sound of animals joined in with their friends, they scattered along the trees and ran from bush to bush. Night became dusk and dusk became dawn, the sky brightened and the sun came up. Finally, I made it. The sky looked magical, gold, yellow, red, orange, all mixed together to make a beautiful ombre. Below me, a pool of clouds floated dreamily there. I wanted to jump down! As I looked further out, I felt like all my worries were gone. The wind brushed past me as though it was keeping me away from danger. I sat down and enjoyed the view. Then I saw……. A village?

I stood up immediately. Was there a village floating just outside this mountain? No wonder people couldn't see it, it was hidden amongst the clouds and it seemed very small. I wanted to get there, but how? Without thinking, I jumped onto the clouds and they surprisingly stayed! I didn't know what to do, but I apparently the clouds did, as soon as a got on, the slowly glided my towards the little village. When we got there, I cautiously got off and started wondering around. It seemed like no one was there, the village was empty but seemed quite new. It was like a dwarfs village. There were tiny trees, tiny benches, tiny houses, tiny kitchens, tiny everything. I could easily squash them if I wasn't careful. It was just a normal village, but everything was tiny. Suddenly, I heard a tiny little sound behind me. I looked over my shoulder and saw tiny people coming towards me slowly. They all looked scared as though I was going to eat or kill them all. I was amazed of how many there were, families and families were living in this tiny village! Deciding I shouldn't be rude, I merely said, "Hello." But it seemed as though my voice was coming out through a mega phone for them because they all covered their ears and glared at me with disgust and hate. I awkwardly bit my lip back and started around.

"BACK, ALL OF YOU!" Boomed a voice from behind me. This voice sounded normal, a voice like mine. At once, all the tiny dwarfs scattered back into where they came from. I spun around and saw an old man, around the age of 70. He had a long, white beard and half moon spectacles that hung on his nose. He looked fierce and I didn't want to mess with him. I gulped," I'm sorry, I really didn't mean to come here. I was just looking from he mountain across and saw this village." To my surprise, he smiled warmly, "Oh no, my dear I think you have mistaken me. Those people, even if you would say they were people (he chuckled), are not my servants, nor are they and family or friends of mine." Looking at my puzzled face, he carried on," On one long, snowy day ago, I was walking up this mountain myself to find I hidden statue that contained my ancestors secrets. I came across a tiny, tiny snow−covered house near a bush. First, I thought that it was a block of wood, but when I saw windows, I knew this was something. I bent down, and peeked into the hole, finding not but one, but a whole family of dwarfs. They were stuttering about in the house, each doing their own thing. Knitting, washing, cooking, some warming themselves near the fire, anything that humans would do. I started looking for more and sure enough, I found 8 more of these minute houses. Then, one of the dwarfs from a house came out and saw me, he quickly alerted the other dwarfs and houses and then everyone came out. The all looked terrified, it was quite funny actually, all whispering frantically to each other and glancing at me every once in a while. Soon, I told them if they knew where this statue was. At first, they didn't really get what I mean so I told them what it was called. Immediately, they told me if I went further down the mountain, I would find a pool of clouds, I had to jump on and they would already know where I was going. Sure enough, when I found the clouds, they took me to a place where the trees and plants were blooming, even though it was winter. Nature was beautiful. The dwarfs even came.

I found the statue and finally unlocked the truth about my ancestors. Ever since then, I made the dwarfs better homes but told them I had rules and restricted areas they couldn't go to. So, the reason why I shouted at them when I saw them was because this is where my granddad was planted, yes, this tree was my granddad. He was one of my last relatives that existed." He ended, as he looked at me, it felt like he was giving me the feeling of being x-rayed. I simply nodded, feeling quite tired.

Although it was morning, I was keen to get back home, I said goodbye to everyone and before I jumped onto the clouds, the man gave me what looked like a fragment of a mirror. "This is a two-way mirror, if you need me, just speak my name into the mirror and I will see you from my end of the mirror (he held up a piece of mirror just like mine). I might tell you this now, but I am your great-great grandfather. Yes, I did go missing a few years ago because I went looking for the statue. By the way, I'm DaoFu." I looked at him in horror, a memory clicked in my brain, exactly 7 years ago, I remembered may grandma sobbing in her bedroom because DaoFu went missing. She thought that he was dead, somewhere unknown. I didn't really know much back then, but I did know that everyone in my family was stressed. As I came back to the real world, I started into my great-great grandfathers eyes at didn't know what to do or say, so I just walked back to the cloud pit and made them take me back to the mountain.

When I was walking down the mountain, something clicked in my brain, I quickly took out my mirror my great-great grandfather gave me and spoke loud and clearly, "DaoFu!" At once, he appeared on my mirror and I hastily asked, "DaoFu, why were you looking for the hidden secret of your ancestors?" He looked half surprised and half calm when I asked him, "I was trying to find the fifth spirit they left me." He said simply. My mouth dangled open, was there really a thing as a fifth spirit? My thoughts bombarded me as I went back home but that didn't stop me from being too distracted. What was the fish spirit? I knew there was water, fire, earth, and wind, but what was the fifth one?

Suddenly, I woke up with a start, I gulped the fresh air and sat still, not sure what had happened. I got up drank a cup of water and I don't know what made me do it, but I started finding for the mirror in my dream. I had a feeling this mountain and village existed, but I wasn't sure. Some part of me was happy that this was a dream but the other part of me seemed down, I didn't really have any close relatives, my parents died when I was four and my step parents aren't the same. Yes, they are nice to me and all, but just having someone that will know me so well and loves me forever just isn't the same…….

The Magical Mountain Story

Harrow Beijing International School, Liu, Sophia – 13

The comet's tail spread across the dawn, a red slash bleeding above the golden land that shimmered with tremulous light like a wound in the pink and purple sky. The pallid winter sunray penetrated my vision. There was something different today, an edge in the vibrant morning sunlight that made my hackles rise, its the third year here, I remember clearly. It was a memory engraved into my mind and never to be flattened again.

My skin was drenched as the cotton sheet tangled around my legs, damped with sweat. The cotton stung onto the bruises, clinging onto my bloodstained legs as I squirmed at the horrendous pain as it tore me apart. My stomach churned, threatening to spill, clenching firmly, I blinked my eyes to make it adjust to the dazzling sunlight.

Then everything went black, and I find myself plummeting down the sky as it embraces me, the tender wind coating me. Suddenly, there was an unbearable pain igniting inside me as I forced my eyes shut, helpless in the sea of invincible wind overwhelmed my mind. Then the immense laughter of the hollow wind quietened in the distance, the pain began to dissipate, but I could still feel the power pulsating inside me.

I tried to scream, but a knot was strangling tighter and tighter on my throat.

Gods save me. I am going to die.

'Die. Die. Die.' A raven shrieked beside me incessantly as I continue to fall. Tears meandered down my face, slipping through between the thin lines of my moistened eyes as my childhood backfired me.

Then everything went blank.

Then there was a man looming above me. I winced as it entered my mind. This is not my memory, no. I remember clearly, everything.

Do you?

He grasped onto my arms and held them tight, digging into my skin like a serrated saw. His touch was scalding hot, currents of excruciating pain drowning my body inch by inch, devouring me into pieces. His story–book smile sharpening into fangs, dripping with dark crimson blood as his eyes thinned into two ferocious lines. Her skin burned hot against mine as my body was set with a blazing fire. I screamed, but nothing came out. My body disintegrated as the fire spreads across my body until there was nothing but a pile of steaming, charcoal black ashes. The last thing I saw is him with his fake saccharine smile.

'That's what you always wanted, am I correct?'

The icy courtesy in his voice was shattering me more.

'A curse. Your family and the bird was an obstacle to my success. And you child. Do you think they will believe in your frivolous words than mine? '

I screamed until my voice was hoarse and my throat throbbed, a chimney of smoke traveling and streaming up my windpipe, deteriorating and enhancing the pain in every inch of my throat until I feel my consciousness drift out of me. I can still feel my arms smoldered with flames where the claws were engraved.

The night captured every soul, hushed every noise until the world is a tedious, dull blankness, the whirlpool of nothingness. I stayed there, cringed on the callous mattress as torrents of time brushed against my cheeks. Who am I?

Who?

And everything turned white again,

I am dead. I must be.

Visions. Thousands. Millions. It illuminated the whiteness. It appeared simultaneously as it all scrolled down like watching millions of movies at a time.

I saw my owner, his silhouette towering over me. His hands spread like a spider on the sophisticated stone sculpture. His ebony face as white as dead men's bones as his prolonged fingers clenching onto the lion sculpture.

I saw it then. The golden mountain, a transcendent it was untouchable. It stretched across the horizon like the red and pink color coruscated like pink tourmalines under the shower of sunray of the winter sun. Master swiftly turned around and scrutinized me as his cold expression morphed into a cold stare, his face distorted. And my whole scene changed.

I was laying on my back as a wooden stick pummeled down. The log was like a frozen stalactite. Blood oozed down my spine as I grimaced, tightening my jaws as the consecutive pain strike me again and again. Then my opaque vision cleared, I saw my owner. Standing there, his hat casting a dreadful shadow over his long sullen face, it tilted to one side as a glimmer of dwindling sunlight slanted down, a boundary line that separated the dark silhouette and the vibrant color in the vivid sky.

Then my master spoke, his voice like thunder oscillating in the air.

"Now tell me. What is your connection with the golden mountain?"

Screams, millions in complete anguish were appearing in my mind.

I sobbed.

"I… don't know."

The next moment his hand was tightened onto my throat.

"Deception will only jeopardize your chances of survival." He snarled. "Answer again."

But I can't. He knew it.

I can sense hordes of people gathering around, and whispers arouse like grass susurrating under my feet.

He was choking me, blatant under everyone's eyes.

I can see the master talking again.

But his voice was dissipating into thin air.

Or.

Is it me who is fading away?

Living and dying, the latter was a better option. Wind fizzled like bees beside my ears. My eyelids fluttered open, and I discover myself in the middle of nowhere. Everything was white. The pellucid water beneath me a canopy for my scar, the surface glinting like iridescent scales. Hastily, I looked around myself and froze. Cotten still clung onto my entangled hair, my tattered thin layer of fabric clothing is still here.

I am not dreaming.

I examined around the place, trodding forwards as I felt the water current pressing against my knees. It is an unprecedented freedom—a kind of joy I have never experienced before. But at that moment. I heard a voice.

"Jo?"

I frowned, unmoving on my track. I did not ever been given a name, but this name was, however, familiar. To my instincts, I answered.

"Hello?"

"Does it hurt?"

I was startled by that question. I peeked around, trying to find the voice source until that girl spoke again.

"I'm not visible. It's useless trying to find me. I'm…only a voice in your mind…an imaginary friend."

My body tensed, a chill gradually crept up my shoulders like serpents crawling towards the nape of my neck. I always thought it was a delusion haunting me after the three years of torment—a delusion of somebody watching behind my back. But it came out to be true.

Then the whole world plunged into immense silence. The sound of the tranquil water underneath suddenly seem so reverberating in the air.

She began her story.

'Once, we lived in complete serenity. Being one of the most entrusted family to the dictator, therapist to the reverent beast—the Pheonix. The Pheonix was wide—spread to be a good omen, a symbol for peace. They reiterate our ancestor's words: 'The phoenix's fire that ignites the night' They said it averted wars and saved our kingdom from the verge of destruction. They say centuries ago, at a war we are doomed to lose, it soared into a night and dyed the sky blood red like splatters of paint tracing into the distance against the darkness. It returned to the old king's shoulders then, its claws like arthritic fingers of silver strings entwining securely around the king's armor. The enemy was dumbfounded, and so they succumbed and relented, and a peace treaty for twenty years was signed.

But Alas. What we feared has come.

The tyrant—our king, was a prudent man but an avaricious man, his thirst for power blinding his eyes. He told us he lived in a corporeal world, not a world with mythical creatures that surpass his power. He killed the Phoenix.'

Her voice was trembling.

'The…citizens…were outraged, their indignation arose like what the dictator expected. He made his response; he eliminated my family for failing our duty. Setting a hideous curse on me.' She winced. 'He cursed me to reincarnate right here and to be starved alive. To the citizen's satisfaction—sacrificed to the gods.'

Her whole voice was shaking with vexation.

I don't even know who I am. I woke up to the world endowed with the ability to speak, but a vacant memory awaiting to be restored. Live a life as a low servant for my master. I was interrogated with coercion every day. Being asked if I have any connection with the golden mountain. Beaten up if I tell them I don't know. At last, I raised my eyes.

But I was here.

In my damp and tiny cottage.

By my own.

Drifting away into the night as the translucent purple and blue clouds fell into twilight.

"I haven't told you. I am you. You are my next reincarnation. I am dead now. I have watched you for years they found you. The last few surviving explorers that belong here brought you with them. You were lying on the ground—blood trickling onto the grass like the blooming red blossom of April. Our home before was on the golden mountains, people called it the godlike mountain, just because people that do not belong there was not allowed inside. And nevertheless, slaughtered."

She leaned forwards, her voice muffled by her tears.

"Good night."

Abruptly she stopped.

"And let this sleep be eternal."

Home

Harrow Beijing International School, Wang, Eddie – 13

Warmth permeated the darkness of slumber. Slowly, slowly, yet surely, the world shimmered into existence, flooding into my consciousness. The curtains scintillated with soft rays of light, while the fresh echo of birdsong hung in the fresh morning. It was the dawn of a new day, the dawn of a renewed hope.

I arose from my bed, stretching my limbs to rid them of weariness, and slipped on my shoes. Yearning for the embrace of illumination, I sauntered across the wooden floorboards to the faintly glowing window frame and yanked the beige curtains apart. Brilliant radiance surged into the small area – the sun in full glory – like a phoenix bursting through the confines of its prison, unleashing the true extent of its might. The light coruscated onto the ornamental dragons upon the cerise carpet, igniting the mythological creatures' eyes with a passionate flame, almost as if they had passed into the realm of the living – the legend of **画龙点睛** became reality.

No longer capable of containing my enthusiasm, I strolled past unadorned bookshelves accommodating a few children's books, past multitudinously coloured oil paintings of the mountains, bursting out with exclamation onto the mountainside. Emerald blades of grass shone silver with fresh morning dew, an earthly reincarnation of the celestial tapestry of stars that dominated the night sky. A gentle breeze stirred the sweet mountain air, caressing my cheek lovingly. Mountain ranges and jagged peaks unfolded into the distance to the edges of my sight. The fiery sun was rising from the far off horizon, alighting the mists in a blaze of crimson. Bathing in its golden light, I welcomed the daybreak as I had done every day of my life. This was my true home.

But today, something was different – a slight, almost unperceivable disturbance in the calm ocean of time.

Today was the end.

In a single moment, everything came cascading down upon me. Realization of the truth unfolded. And the truth threatened to devastate, to suffocate, to choke. Today, yes, today, I was to leave the mountain, the beloved place I had spent all my life, forever. The imminent future cast a shadow into the depths of my heart.

"Li Jie!"

I swivelled around. A few metres away stood my grandmother. She was an elderly woman, quite petite in stature, with flowing white hair. Her face was round, and though etched with wrinkles, still bore the liveliness of youth, characterized by the warm smile forever imprinted upon it.

"Grandma!" I ran up to her.

"My dear," she said. "Are you ready to leave this afternoon? Have you packed?"

"Yes, grandma."

"Good boy," she responded. "I'll miss you."

There was a tone of distinguishable sadness in her voice.

"Aren't you coming?" I eagerly inquired.

She decided not to say anything, but instead stared at me with those deep dark eyes of hers. Through them, she conveyed a message, unable to be expressed by mere vocality. Through the lifelong bond we shared, I looked earnestly back into her gaze, striving to understand it. But when I gasped her meaning, I was at an immediate loss for words.

"But…but…" my voice trailed away.

"No, I'm afraid not. But I am sure that you'll be fine in the city – just imagine going to school! Your parents will take good care of you. And you can come back every summer too." She wrapped her arms around me, stroking my hair gently with her hands, weathered from years of hard labour.

Grandma was born of the mountain itself. Her passion, her determination, her vigour, and all the other constituents of her ephemeral body seemed to be bound the eternal spirit of the rising and falling massif. She was just as loving, just as unwavering.

I anticipated, dreaded, the moment when the car would come. To pass my time, I sat down on a stone outcrop, staring aimlessly at the ever–rising sun bestowing its light upon the world. I was at peace to think, to ponder meticulously, yet I could not think of what was to come. Or maybe I dared not. Sorrow clawed at my soul. Of all that I would lose, there was the hard farewell to my grandmother. She had brought me up on the mountain, and generously looked after me for 7 years, while my parents earnt a living in the city. Now I was going to join them in that mysterious place. That left grandma alone by herself. How could she possibly cope? Sick with the idea, I forced it into the most obscure corner of my mind, and instead focused again on the sun. It was the only everlasting, unchanging object, after all.

But, alas, some time later – I knew not how long had passed – the sound of tires on soil reached my ears. Slowly rolling up the mountain path was an old, battered, grey automobile. It came to a halt before me, throwing dust into the air. A door opened and a thin figure clambered out. It was a man, wearing a dusty jacket and bleached jeans. My dad had come to take me.

"How's the past month been son?" he called as he walked over.

"Um… great, I suppose."

"So, are you ready to go to school?"

I remained silent. Grandma emerged from the hut carrying my travelling bag.

"Of course he is!" she exclaimed to my dad. Then, noticing my speechlessness, she turned to me and asked, "Aren't you, Li Jie?"

Something snapped in my mind. I turned away, sprinting up the hill as if my life was at risk, screaming my resolution of staying on the mountain. At that moment I didn't care about what I was doing, where I was going, I only thought of escaping the miserable evil that wanted to take me from my home.

Behind me, the rough voice of my dad yelled, "Where do you think you are going Li Jie? Get in the car you disobedient boy!"

However, grandma stopped him, "Son, we cannot force him to do anything. It is his choice."

My choice.

That halted me.

Yes, it is my choice.

I carefully weighed the options. *Was I willing to do this? Could I really leave all of this behind? My childhood? My home?*

I ardently sought an answer from deep within.

But there is so much to life. So many wonders I have yet to experience. Then, something my grandmother told me years ago resurfaced in my memory. *Li Jie, change is a fundamental part of life. We need to learn to accept it.*

So, was it okay for me to leave?

I already knew the answer.

Yes.

I compelled myself to move my feet. Gradually, step by step, I made my way back to the car. As I neared, and my choice became evident, both my dad's and grandma's faces lit up in joy. My dad extended a hand. *The gesture of acceptance.* The final decision. I took it.

The soft monotone rumble of the car engine droned on. Sitting in the backseat, I gazed out of the window at the now–distant peak. From afar, it took an imposing stature, like an ancient supernatural pillar created countless aeons ago to hold up the sky itself, but its magnificence remained unmatched. The sadness that plagued my heart was now washed away. Home is where the heart is, and, though I have left, my heart would remain in this beautiful place, always. The sun was now setting, its inferno dimming as it approached the horizon. The moon would then rise, and then the sun would be reborn once more. Yes, just as the cycle of the sun and moon would never cease, the challenges I would face are endless. But I was ready for whatever came my way. Taking one last glance at the mountain before it faded away, I turned to focus on the journey ahead.

The Magical Mountains of China

Harrow Beijing International School, Wang, Letian – 13

He fell. And fell.

ZhangWei's eyes fluttered open as he realized that he was drenched in his sweat. Great. Another night, same nightmare. The familiar scene played through his mind. He tried to block out the dream, to control it from forming, but of no avail. It was still dark outside, and ZhangWei wanted to get some sleep but was afraid to fall back into unconsciousness, should the dream choose to attack him again. Hanging just above the waterline of sleep, ZhangWei lay on his bed drearily, as if his soul has escaped him and evaporated into the dull air around.

The weather outside was calm, with a mild, brisk wind breezing through the trees. The sky was as clear as ever, and stars were twinkling brightly in the night. The moon hung there, like a white balloon inflated to full size enlightened, but only lost in the vastness of space.

Morning arrived way too quickly. The day was, as usual, dull and boring. Going to work, having lunch, daily exercises, back to work, and back home at 10:00 p.m. straight. At first glance, ZhangWei looked about the most normal person you could see.

He had no clue how special he was, or how he would change the world…forever.

As ZhangWei rested upon the latex mattress, he rethought his day: he thought about the holiday he planned to go to Huangshan—he was looking forward to that, as it meant that he was finally allowed to take a break from work after persuading his superiors. Everything on that holiday was planned out perfectly. What could go wrong? What could go haywire in such a place as Huangshan?

What ZhangWei did not know at the moment was that everything was about to go very, very wrong.

On the first day of the holiday, ZhangWei rose early. He could not contain his excitement anymore. Every bit of the waiting and craving all added up to this day. It was time to go.

The adrenaline pumped through his body as if he had just received an electric shock. Even the 4 hours of mundane driving didn't seem so bad. The brilliant sun shone over the car's window, pouring into his sight. It was a cloudless day, and a flock of pigeons were flying past, forming a triangular shape in the sky as they soared through the air. ZhangWei dreamed that he was as free as a bird, without the shackles chained by his work. He just kept driving and enjoying the sceneries that mother nature gifted him. Suddenly, out of nowhere, he noticed a little road to his right. It was barely visible, hidden by clusters of bushes, and it seemed to lead up into the mountains.

ZhangWei didn't pay much notice at first—after all, it was just a road—but eventually, curiosity overtook him. He knew that he shouldn't drive off course, that he should stick to the plan, that he was only several miles away from his destination, but the temptation was too hard to resist—it was simply the power of human nature. It was like that phrase, 'curiosity killed the cat'. All ZhangWei cared about was that 'satisfaction brought it back'. He pressed on his brakes, looked through the rear–view mirror, and hesitated for a second. He let out a little sigh and reversed his

car back to the spot where he saw the tiny road. As he got closer, he saw that there was a trail of footprints—only a single set of them—stretching into the abyss of the mysterious mountains. ZhangWei finally gave in to the temptations, turning right and driving in the direction of the trail, leaving the main, safe road behind and entering the path into the mystical mountains.

ZhangWei turned on the headlights of his 2018 grey Range Rover, the prized possession that he'd bought with his three–year savings. After some time driving into the unknown, ZhangWei had lost track of time. He didn't even have much of a clue whether it was day or night, seeing as the tall, wide trees obscured his vision of the sky. Making matters worse, he'd forgotten to wear his watch and his phone was out of battery, which was peculiar because he seemed to remember it being full when he'd left, and he hasn't used it that much. Exhaustion soon took hold of him, and his eyes began to get heavier and heavier as his stomach started to rumble. He decided that he'd take a rest and sank into his plush leather seat. ZhangWei closed his eyes and fell instantly into the sweet, oblivious balm of sleep.

Hours ticked by unnoticed by ZhangWei, and as he opened his eyes, he felt utterly astonished—darkness had disappeared all around him, and he was lying in a snug and comfy bed, with god's warmth coming in from the window. ZhangWei took a moment to take it all in. He appeared to be in a thoughtfully furnished room, with windows on the left and a door directly opposite the bed. All the things in it were made from natural resources, mainly carved poplar. The room itself was quite large, containing a bathroom with a large tub. Most interesting of all, there was a little piece of paper on his bedside table, and on it, scratched in a sort of messy handwriting, was a message: "Do not leave this room."

Once again, ZhangWei was at a crossroad. The voices inside his head started debating with each other, something that happened a lot when he was in a dilemma.

"You should be bold! Walk out the front door and see what you might find," the confident him declared.

"No! Of course not. You've already risked it once and that was how you ended up here, of all places," the more nervous he argued.

This little debate continued for a few minutes (maybe even a few hours, who knows) before ZhangWei made the final decision. Once again, his curiosity got the better of him, and once again, he walked towards the unknown, barely conscious of the possible aftermaths of this particular action. The door looked relatively safe, even somehow inviting, and ZhangWei walked over and pushed them open, subsequently stepping into his destiny.

The door slowly creaked open. Little by little, ZhangWei started to see what was behind it, and little by little, he regretted opening the door at all. Behind it was a balcony—a very large one, with no fences on the side. It was high up the mountains, located on a cliff. What was worse was that a young Yinglong was guarding the door. ZhangWei studied mythology at work, so he recognised the dragon instantly. He had never believed in the myths in his entire life, and he certainly did not expect to see a living, breathing proof. The Yinglong, now awaken and aroused from his deep sleep, did not look friendly. The fiery gaze in its eyes gave ZhangWei the impression that it was not pleased to be woken from its slumber. Suddenly, he felt small, weak,

and puny compared to that dragon. Getting eaten alive by a fifteen–foot–long beast was not on his to–do list for the holidays.

ZhangWei froze. He wanted to move, to run for his life, to avoid the dragon's tail from cutting through his spine, but his legs were frozen.

A million questions swam through ZhangWei's mind: Will I die? What can I do? How do dragons even exist?

Alas, he couldn't answer any of those. The dragon charged forwards, and at the last second, ZhangWei unfroze. He knew that he was no match for the creature, which left him with only two options: either stay, get swallowed by the dragon and die, or jump off the balcony and die. Neither were too inviting at the moment. Then, he saw a wide silk sheet spread on the couch. Using all his courage and determination to stay alive, ZhangWei snatched the sheet, and, closing his eyes and using it was a make–shift parachute, jumped.

Of course, the dragon didn't follow (apparently even dragons were smarter than him) but ZhangWei also had absolutely no experience on how to stay afloat in the air.

It soon became clear to him that a silk sheet could not be used as a parachute. Cold air rushed past his body, and Zhangwei could already see the ground approaching fast.

Nope, he thought to himself, I am not going to die like this.

However, there wasn't much he could do about the situation, so he closed his eyes, bracing for the impact…

…Nothing happened.

Zhang Wei opened his eyes and realized that he was still falling. He looked up. There was nothing there. He had long fallen far from the comfort of solid ground. The Huangshan was above him, suspended in mid–air. Zhang Wei looked back down. He could not see a landing.

And so he fell. And fell.

And fell.

And maybe, just maybe, that was his destiny.

The Magical Mountains of China

Harrow Beijing International School, Xue, Haotong – 13

Once upon a bygone time there was a boy who lived in the magical mountains of China.

The graceful lithe shadows of the tall willow trees caressed my face. I gently bled into consciousness, then wakefulness. I sat up, a jolt of tranquil arcing through me, guiding me to the present. The day had begun. I looked around, each breath another invigorating presence. I was on an elevated stone slab, perfectly rounded by the gradual wear of waterdrops, glistening timidly. To my right, an unassuming but vibrant abode was perched in the dark brown soil, it's unpigmented walls and ornamented ceilings encircling the courtyard I was in. Overhead, a vast swathe of cool, iridescent leaves wavered in the morning breeze, casting a greenish hue onto the courtyard. I supposed sleeping on a stone slab would have been uncomfortable, but in the years since my mother's passing, I'd come to be content with anything the mountain offered.

He led a peaceful life.

Directly ahead, I spotted a faded brown pitcher, carved roughly in a rounded shape with a large spherical body just small enough for me to carry ending in a light brown opening at the top. Next to it were several musty scrolls I used to record my travels. Time to get to work.

One of nothing but survival.

I slowly stood from my makeshift bed, stumbling a bit from the vertigo and slipping into a pair of adobe–colored pants, and walked over to the pitcher. With a heave, I picked it up, cradling it so that it doesn't fall and strolled out of the courtyard, mentally going over my trek for the day to a nearby creek, where I could resupply on water and stay the night before planning out the next day. I gingerly bent down and with a flick of my arm, collected my scrolls and walked out of the courtyard.

He carried the oppressive burden of loneliness and the numbing finality of always knowing where to go.

Save the seldom utterance of alarm when I trip over the occasional log, I remained silent for most of the next segment of the journey, content with the mellifluous flow of creek water and the chirping of birds overhead as company. Though the winding mountain path I took was supposed to snake around the edges of Huangshan, the thick canopies of sycamores obscured most of the view down the side of the mountain. To the other side, a wall of caramel rock stretched endlessly upwards, dotted with the occasional mass of greenery.

But he'd grown to be content with nothing but loneliness as a finality.

A holler rang out from directly ahead. I paused, listening, noiseless amusement crept through me. Another holler. A velvety rustle of leaves. A flash of maroon. I smiled. I gently set down my jar and ran ahead. I bent down and picked up the little critter. It stared up at me, it's blue green eyes a sun of joy to my otherwise mundane day. It cocked its little head. My heart melted. I wanted to keep it – make my home his. But alas, no. I haven't the time nor the room for a companion. My smile turned wistful. It's always been like this – me on my own with nothing but the clothes on my bag, trekking across these mountains, not to be bothered with or bothering anything else.

Or had he?

I kept going.

The journey was long – one I had to make alone – but it never got old. For the next few minutes, I cleared my mind of all but the wonderful feeling of peace as the quietly alluring rushing of clear water grew louder as I neared the spring. A few minutes later, my journey was finally rewarded with my emergence from the forest into a large granite clearing. To my right, was a Chinese painting brought to vibrant animation. Clouds. Tremendous, rolling clouds, draped over jagged mountains of all sizes, like a translucent veil, gently caressing looming giants of rock,

crinkled with wear but standing defiantly against the wind. Illuminating the entire scene was an angelic glow emanating from the east, it's yellow hue a laipsing presence of warmth and serenity. Greenery dotted the mountains. I grinned at the magnificent scenery. I admit that I was fairly oblivious to the outside world, but I doubted such beauty existed elsewhere of these mountains.

He tried to convince himself that he had, pretending to enjoy every view he came across. Quite difficult when he knew his stay in these mountains may as well be imprisonment.

Nevertheless, the view wasn't what I was here for. I turned around to yet another majestic sight. This time, a waterfall – what seemed like a million tons of water crashed down from the top of a rocky hillside a dozen meters above me, the droplets it sprayed a formless cloud of moisture randomly settling on greenery and the occasional passing creature, eventually joining the iridescent pool the waterfall created. I regarded the waterfall with excitement, taking mental note of its proximity to my home. I walked forward, bending down to wash my face and drink before filling my pitcher.

Even more so when he had never known anything but these mountains – which he'd come to recognize as beautiful – and the fringes of survival.

As the clear cool water meandered down my face, a thought struck me. I was never one to believe in epiphany – the notion that great revelation could be made in single instants of brilliance had always bored me. After all, there was no point in great philosophical realization when I have never and will not ever be anything greater than a tiny part of these mountains. But as I washed myself in the creek, the water cleansing my body of grime and dust, I could've sworn that I'd come to one.

Perhaps he'd accept it.

Everything is meaningless. That was the hard, stone–cold truth.

Perhaps I could fool myself enough that the illusion of meaning could come to be. But no. In the end, even if I am forever, even if these mountains and their memory of me will stand the wear of time, it will be meaningless. Fate, even true, final fate, is meaningless in the face of the simple fact that all – even the flow of time itself – will come to an end. Even true immortality will eventually become nothing but consciousness in an endless see of meaninglessness where no amount of consciousness could make any difference. The only true meaning – meaning to stand the final sand of time comes from surpassing meaning itself.

Even on a smaller scale, I will never amount to anything more than a lonely boy living his lonely life in these lonely mountains. Everything was laid out in front on me – the winding mountain path, the tranquil flow of creek water, the exhilarating whistle of wind. Then death. Nothing I will ever do will be known by any other than myself. No matter how brilliant I was, no matter how much merit I deserved, I will die without meaning. The worst part was, I knew this. I *knew* that I will die meaningless. I *knew* that there was no hope for anything greater. Perhaps that was the most terrifying part – the mirthless understanding of the finality of my road in life granted to me long before it's realization. How cruel!

And yet, there was no escaping it – existence is but the paradoxical trap of meaninglessness finality for mortals and meaningless infinity for immortals, locked in a vicious cycle. I thought of my scrolls, a record of my everyday life. Perhaps one day someone would find them. But even then they will be nothing but proof of the fact that my existence is nothing but an endless dredge.

What he did not realize, however, was that sometimes, meaning is created not by accomplishment, merit, but by true appreciation of one's own beauty, for the universe and all that shapes it is but the endless tyranny of trying to make something comparable to itself but never succeeding if not for the willingness of certain people to not surpass but to truly understand the endlessness that is their own existence.

Perhaps there was another way. A method to circumvent meaning and life's apparent gaping void of it. No, there wasn't. But one thing's clear – since meaning is only an illusion anyway– I might as well end it. I stood up, my face still a mask of serenity and fulfillment. My pitcher and all my scrolls lay at my feet apathetically. No rush of euphoria overcame me as I walked to the edge of the cliff. No longing of a better life – for there was none. Nothing but the intimacy of my sudden realization to accompany me as I stepped to the edge of the cliff.

But alas, acceptance was not an option, for the only way one controls true meaning is to deprive the world of the meaning it once held.

In other words, the only control one has over their own fate is to end their own life.

Tales from China's Magical Mountains

Harrow Beijing International School, Zhang, Annie – 11

Even the dust mites floating about in the air were luckier than her, Eliza thought as she slumped against her car seat. They were nice seats too, very new. The whole car was new, bought by her father for this annoying trip to the mountains. Eliza hated the mountains, they were the reason why her parents had gotten divorced. She remembered the look of disgust on her mother's face, when Eliza's father had chosen the mountains over her. Eliza didn't blame her mother, who would want to live with a man who chose nature over her. Eliza thought about how beautiful her mother was, how compassionate she was, how warm her smile was compared to her cold father. Who never seemed to smile, except when he was in the open air. That was why she chose to live in the city, the capital, just to spite her father. Eliza loved to see the contempt on her father's face when he had to drive into the city, a place where nature was constricted to small splotches. Eliza must have dozed off, for when she opened her eyes again, all she saw was a vast forest. Thick and green, beautiful too, but not as pretty as her mother. Eliza adored her mother, who was an accomplished and independent woman. CEO of an international company, and nobody deserved her. She sighed, and looked once again out of the window. There was a sign, advertising a cabin in the woods. In the advertisement, there was a happy family, the parents leaning into each other, and the kids, with fake smiles plastered onto their faces. Eliza snorted, she wished that life was as amazing as the advertisement said it was. She breathed in that new car smell, a sort of leathery smell, the kind that her mother hated, because it made her carsick. Eliza believed that she too got carsick on this kind of smell, insisting that just inhaling it made her head spin. Unfortunately, her dad thought that this was poppycock, and bought the idiotic car anyway. She groaned, it wasn't the first time that she had groaned on this trip, and it certainly wouldn't be her last. "What?" Eliza was startled by her father's reply. His voice was deep, and gravely, always with a hint of danger. During the last 53 times she had groaned throughout this trip, her father had generally ignored her. As usual. There was a reason Eliza's father had noticed her groan, and she knew perfectly well why. She had made the groan super load and super annoying, so that it was impossible to ignore. Still, her father rarely cared about her presence, acting as if the bundle of atoms that made up her had never been created before, much less with help from him. "What?" Eliza's father repeated again, this time with agitation and impatience. *Oh, and he's the one who's impatient,* grumped Eliza. Still, she knew better than to argue with her father, she simply replied in a sweet voice, "how much longer?" She watched her father's face change from white, to red, to purple, and then back to its tan color again. "Ten minutes" was the short, curt reply. Yup, this was her father, the complete opposite to her fun, cheerful, lovable mother. How they came to marry and create her, Eliza had no idea. "By the way Tan−" her father started, "it's Eliza" she cut in with a curt smile. Her father gave a cold smile, the kind of smile that wasn't quite fake, there was some warmth in it, and yet it never seemed to reach his eyes. It was very charming, and highly disarming. "Yes, the English name that you gave yourself" Eliza glared at her father. "Do you know anything about the mountain, which is called Huashan, we are going to?" And without waiting, launched into a lecture.

It was only an hour into the hike, and already Eliza was sick of her father. He had scoffed at her when she tripped over a bush, and then there was the rock incident, which left Eliza in a sour mood. After another hour, they arrived at a clearing. It was dusty, crawling with insects, and had no decoration. "Is this where we're staying?" Eliza asked, curious. She had never gone camping before, her mother insisting that it was full of germs, and unhealthy. But here she was, in the middle of a germ ridden clearing, getting ready to sleep. "Do you know how to gather wood?" Her father didn't even look at her. As usual, but she wasn't really bothered by this. She shook her head no. Her father turned away disgusted, but Eliza didn't care. She glared at her father's long shaggy hair, which always covered his features. Revealing nothing but two coal black eyes, which were always filled with contempt. She swore that she heard her father mutter the words "useless". What? Her father was calling *her* useless? The man, who had broken her mother's heart, who had never even cared about was calling HER useless? Eliza was furious, normally, she wouldn't bother about her father. But this was different. Normally, she wasn't out camping with her father. Normally, her father had ignored her, and just taken her for ice cream. Normally, her father didn't call her an idiot. Eliza was seething now. Even though she was bleary eyed, she was determined to show her father that she was not a useless doll. Stumbling and grabbing for purchase, she made her way into the woods. Eliza was confident that finding a few

twigs couldn't be that hard. But, she was wrong. She had strolled for a few minutes, groping around in the dark, when it came to her that she should probably turn the flashlight on so that she could see. And then it hit her. She had forgotten to bring her flashlight. "Eliza, how could you forget a flashlight?" She muttered to herself, as she turned around looking for the camp. Except there was no camp. She had wandered so far into the woods that she couldn't find the clearing. "Alright" Eliza murmured, "I'm alone, in a dark scary wood, with no food, shelter or light. Well, there's bound to be light in the morning." She stood, slowly, and thought *well, I haven't been eaten yet, so that's good.* Then she remembered that she was alone. Speaking to herself was the same as thinking to herself. That was kind of creepy but, *what was that?* Eliza whipped her head around. There, in the bushes! A lantern was glaring at her, *glaring?* She must be losing her marbles, Eliza shook her head. Was it her imagination or did the lantern come closer? "Oh look, it has teeth!" She muttered deliriously. Wait a minute, teeth? Eliza leapt to her feet, *nothing like a teethy animal to wake you up.* She thought, as she raced away into the woods. It was not a cloudy night, and yet no stars in sight. Or they were out but the trees were blocking them. No worries, she couldn't read them anyway. Then, Eliza saw something straight ahead, it was moving, and she was moving towards it! With a screech she stopped, whipping her head around. Her eyes, looking, searching, for the monster that she knew was there. Then she saw, it, a pair of eyes, licking its pointy death tools. Eliza curled up, and closed her eyes, waiting for the monster to come near her. It crept closer and closer, Eliza could feel its breath on her neck, like a gust of summer wind. And then, a warm tongue licked her face. Eliza looked up, a puppy, was licking her face very enthusiastically. "What have you got there Nella?" Said a grainy voice, Eliza looked up, there was a man, who was more like a grizzly bear than a human. "A little girl eh?" Eliza nodded slowly. "Well, you'd better come with us then."

Eliza looked out into the ocean blue, standing on the cliff on which the bear man, named Gerald, had found her. She had learnt a lot with him, over the years which she had spent in the forest. Turns out that the forest wasn't as bad as it seemed. There were cures in the forest that could save lives. But this time, she wasn't going anywhere into the forest. "Bye girl, take Nella with you." Eliza turned, tears in her eyes. "Go home, where you belong." At that, the man left. Eliza sighed, and turned towards the direction, of the city. Leaving, one of the amazing mountains of china behind. And heading towards "home". She remembered what Gerald said, "it may be hard, but nothing is easy girlie. The mountains may be amazing, but it is not your home." Eliza smiled, and patted her dog, "what do you think girl?" Her dog simply licked her happily and trotted forward. Eliza let out a laugh and followed.

The World Below

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Cheng, Jessica – 12

Father always said Mother's words were rubbish. There was something below us? Impossible. Our kind were so educated and talented in every aspect that it was utterly preposterous that we wouldn't have noticed people living below us. Impossible!

Mother died a year ago. She killed herself. Father said she never cared for our perfect family, which is why she did such a thing. He suspected something like that would happen as soon as she started sprouting words of madness, about places in the 'World Below'. She prattled on about how breathtakingly beautiful it was: where birds sang elegantly, where mountains reached for the heavens , where meadows and fields stretched as far as the clouds in the sky.

But obviously not, he would scoff, all mountains were short and stubby, our home – our Clouds – was glorious, not to be compared to those ugly mountains; how disrespectful of her to compare those *things* to our Clouds – to our Sky?

Father would sometimes peer out the windows and wonder what Mother saw in the dull sight before us. Plain mountains and plain fields, plain grass and plain rocks. What was so special about that?

I used to be very close to Mother. She would tell me stories about everything, about the supposed 'World Below' and our Clouds. I would often ponder why Mother would throw away what our world considered a 'perfect' life. What could have been so bad here that she would have wanted to leave – forever?

All of a sudden, I felt an overwhelming urge to jump off the nearest cloud and plunge head–first into the unknown. Mother would have approved, she said that: 'Life is a journey, do what scares you most, and you will finally start the journey of life.'

Jumping off the Clouds. It was a ridiculous idea, but no one would notice I was gone anyway; Father was too busy obeying every command of the King that he didn't have time to bother with me, his youngest son. As for my siblings, they didn't live with me and Father anymore, each and every one of them was married to rich royals or something of that sort.

No one cared about me anymore as soon as Mother left. If no one would notice, there was nothing to worry about, nothing stopping me from free–falling into the 'World Below'.

The more I thought about the absurd idea, the more I was convinced that I could do this. Nothing was planned, nothing was arranged; for once, I had no idea what to expect there. The anticipation, the thrill, the excitement were all so mind–boggling. The prospect of leaving my perfect world forever was delightful. I would never have to listen to Father and his idiotic ideas again.

Swiftly, my mind was made. Mother was right; maybe this 'World Below' would be interesting. It would be an adventure, an experience of a lifetime! My confidence grew and grew like a flourishing flower; I could do this.

One step at a time, one foot in front of another, slow and steady. I glanced back one last time at my home – my prison for the last 16 years. Looking down into the unknown… I plummeted into the dark void beneath me.

The air around me dropped by a hundred degrees; everything was a blur as I fell rapidly. My breathing staggered as I saw that I was headed nearer and nearer to the ground.

BAM! It was as if a tornado had hit the realm of the 'World Below'. I dropped aggressively onto the ground. Hurriedly, I stumbled around – blinded by the light – and tried to look for something – anything – to place my bruised hand on. I touched… something wooden? Cautiously, I opened my eyes to see a sign: "Mountains of Huangshan".

I looked around, and it hit me that I was free at last! Joy fluttered in my stomach. Here I was, in the World Below – the Mountains of Huangshan. This was more exquisite than anything I ever imagined.

I gaped at the stunning scene before my eyes. Birds of all kinds soared above me, as if they were enjoying their freedom, just like I was. Dandelion fluffs danced around, causing my nose to tickle with glee. Soft green fern surrounded the earth, the feeling of nature and creation was flying everywhere. The scent of wild flowers overwhelmed my senses, everything here was just so amazing.

At that moment, the thought of home and the 'perfect' world I lived in disgusted me. A world in the Sky where we had no freedom, no liberty, no decisions of our own. I stood there paralyzed, how did I live in that world, where the *real* perfect world existed, right below me?

All my life, I had been hidden in shadows by people around me, not knowing the truth. I had been lied to; I had been told that there was nothing below us. The World Below was just stories to scare youngsters with. But there was nothing scary here in the Mountains of Huangshan, it was just rainbows and sunshine – literally.

At that very moment it dawned on me: this was when I *really* started living; the life before me was just a series of orders and expectations. Here I was, living *my* life, the way that *I* want to live it. No one could twist me again into someone as shallow as the person I once was – living an empty life without meaning. The people of the Clouds were special, there was no doubt about that, but others were too. It was just that we boasted and bragged our way to the top, about how advanced we were, how we got to live in the Sky, how we left all the puny people below to death and war.

Nevertheless, the World Below was just as beautiful and fair as the Clouds, just as it was different. Here, I was absolutely *free*, while up in the Sky, it was like an empty cage that I was trapped in.

Mother had been right all along, there was no *real* life in the Clouds, it was just a prison – however splendid it may be – just a beautiful prison. But here in the World Below, I could lead a better life, without anyone ruling me. I could start *living*.

A feeling of contentment washed over me, this was a place of real beauty; the World Below, the Mountains of Huangshan.

Somewhere Out There

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Cheng, Katelyn – 12

Hundreds of deep, boot–prints traced the fresh white newly fallen snow as a group of middle aged discoverers trekked the proud mountains of Huangshan that reached up to the clouds. They searched and searched looking for treasure from the tip of the mountains to the deep green grass that filled the land until the glowing orange sun started to fall. They went from mountain to mountain digging for hundred year old fossils and hidden treasure that was said to have been found in the mountains of Huangshan before. They dug in unison checking through every piece of snow. Every bit of snow they dug aside, a piece of hope left their bodies. They found nothing, leaving their hearts devastated.

The leader of the group shouted, "Head back! We ain't going to find anything here!" All the tired out discoverers' worn in leather boots traced the snow yet once again as they mumbled tiredly to each other returning home for the day.

All of them except for one. One younger man's dream was to find something. Something extraordinary. And he *knew* that this was the place. His name was Lewis. Lewis pulled his scratched, grey fogged up goggles off and his entire sight turned to colour. His cold purple lips could feel the slight wind as the cold breeze touched his face. The smell of fresh snow and nature filled his nose in one breath as he gazed star–struck, into the beautiful blue clouds and the orange–yellow sunset as it warmed his body. Lewis was too busy admiring his sights that were as pretty as a picture that he didn't notice the rest of his team had already left him behind.

He screamed, he shouted, he looked, but no one was there. He was alone. The sky turned darker and darker. The wind grew stronger and stronger. And Lewis started to panic. The sky eventually turned as dark as a black hole, and the wind howled as it blew Lewis' hair side to side passing his frightened face. Afraid, Lewis quickly checked his electric watch that was nearly out of battery, desperately looking for help. Lewis stared in disbelief as he watched the darkening screen of his watch display a sign "no battery left". A small red light which quickly turned black flashed in his face. He had lost connection.

Lewis rubbed his freezing face onto his deep army green coloured down jacket as his eyes started to become weary and his vision started to blur. But he knew he couldn't rest just yet, he needed to find a safe place to rest for the night. Barely opening his eyes, Lewis walked slowly like a zombie one step at a time looking for a place to stay. He suddenly got too tired to walk and a quick gust of wind wrapped around his body as he collapsed onto the soft snow.

During the night, glowing stars sat amongst the jet–black sky, looking over Lewis as he laid on the mountain. The long snowy night had Lewis' body freezing as cold as an ice cube. His fingers were shaking, and his nails and lips were turning as purple as grapes. The mischievous wind quickly woke Lewis, pushing him from side to side. Lewis quickly sat up, rapidly checking his surroundings. As he sat up, the purple and orange coloured sunrise had Lewis in shock, rubbing his eyes checking if this was all a dream. Silence filled the mountains as Lewis took a deep breath, trying to stand up. His body was still numb from the coldness, but Lewis once again had forgotten, he was all alone and he didn't have any food and he had lost ALL connection with the city.

Alert, Lewis knew he *needed* to find food. With his stomach rumbling, Lewis scanned the deep mountains for food. He went from mountain to mountain, tree to tree, but nothing was found. He then remembered his childhood favourite book of the Huangshan Mountains. He suddenly started to dig like a beaver through his overfilled backpack, and right at the bottom was the book. He opened his book, remembering all his memories of the past, flipping through the crinkled up pages that were almost falling apart. He found one page and read the following lines: "Gracie knew she was lost, and needed to find some food, so she hiked and hiked past all the mountains and discovered a secret village! The secret village's name was Huangshan Village, and when Gracie entered, she saw an unbearable amount of food, from dumplings to noodles, they had everything….." This book had Lewis even more hungry than he'd ever been before, his stomach was roaring. Even though that book that Lewis had was a children's book, and probably wasn't real, that was his only hope. Lewis was determined.

Hoping for luck, Lewis followed the cartooned map of the book, carefully trying to figure out what was saying, as over all these years, the writing and print on the book started to fade. This was Lewis' only hope, so he kept on walking, keeping his head high like a lion. One step more he took, one step closer he was to food. After hours and hours of walking, Lewis finally reached his "destination" his tired and sweaty body was still numb from the cold. His fingers were now blistered and snow stuck to his clothes from the snowstorms he conquered on the way. "Finally!" Lewis shouted with all the energy he had left. Now all that was left for him to do was find the hidden village. But it wasn't going to be that simple, Lewis walked around checking through every centimetre of the land, but nothing was found. In complete disbelief, Lewis was in shock as he looked around and nothing. Nothing! He was in the middle of nowhere.

Lewis quickly dropped to the floor, still disappointed. Lewis shut his tired eyes, as a small drop of water left his eyes and quickly turned to ice as it slid down his face. Lewis turned around, and rubbed his teary eyes to find a frozen sign that exclaimed " Huangshan Village". Lewis shot up like a rocket and quickly ran to his destiny. He couldn't believe that his book was actually real! This was a miracle! Running like a crazy woman, Lewis entered the Huangshan village, and colourful festival lights brightened his eyes, and the smell of fresh food entered his nose. The people in the Huangshan village were wonderful, they were extremely helpful and fed Lewis like a baby. Noodles, dumplings, and soup entered his angry stomach and Lewis was saved. He was even offered a place to stay by the caring village people. As he entered his room, he saw colourful handmade bedsheets and wall hangings, beautiful flowers and plants, and his eyes were teary once again, but this time, it was happy tears. The day quickly passed and Lewis was the happiest he'd ever been, he had good food, a nice place to stay, and even friendly neighbours.

But that wasn't the end. It was exactly nine minutes past 12, as a loud screeching noise grew louder. Lewis awoke off his handmade sewn bedsheets. He stared at a rising glowing green light outside his window, and quickly ran outside in his blue and white striped pyjamas. Lewis burst through the village door like a soldier, quickly scanning his surroundings for danger.

He looked at the rough ground. Huge green scaly feet with claws as sharp as knives. He looked in the sky. A gargantuan reptile face with glowing bright green eyes that were as bright as glow sticks. He looked up as far as he could. Dark thunder clouds circled around the monster. "Please, help" – Lewis.

The Shifting of Duplicity

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Hildebrand, Isabella – 14

"They are harmless, I swear to you. They have nothing but good intentions. This dragon, it saved my life!" I doubted they'd understand a single strangled word that stumbled out of my quivering lips. I tried to control the weeping, yet to no avail. King Bohai gazed at me with pity, "Xing's lost his mind. Go." With the wave of his hand, 3 broad–shouldered men heaved me from the floor– through resplendent doors, over the gold path, into my village. I said goodbye to her: Biyu. Tears spilled over her silken skin yet she smiled and cupped my cheeks as if it were another ordinary day; as if I'd see her the next morning. I would not. Soon I was being dragged out of the region entirely and her familiar grip was torn from me. I was thrust out the settlement's gates and down a hill.

I truly only had a fraction of understanding as to why any of this was happening– why I was accused of being a spy, why so many people were telling me I'd gone mad.

You see, I snuck out of our village with Biyu and slipped over the side of a rocky mountain; I hit my head and forgot everything apart from her. I woke between the claws of a brilliant red dragon that flew me over mountains and placed me in the center of my settlement after curfew had settled over my village. It left after introducing itself, Tiamat. People questioned my disappearance the next day, as if they knew me. They might have– I just couldn't recall ever knowing them.

This is what I tried to explain to the King when he blamed me of being a spy, having disappeared for a day. Biyu couldn't have said anything about my vanishing without implicating herself for leaving with me.

I reached the bottom of the mound, the soreness and sharpness of the pain pulsing through my body. A chilly, grating whiff of air blew over and combed through my tousled hair. I debated between sitting and weeping or trying to find Tiamat. Maybe I could multitask?

I walked a path clear of mountains and pillars of rock, wary of mountain lions and snakes. Sounds as little as a rustle startled me.

Tiamat had pointed at his cave while we were in flight, I thought seeking refuge there and then being flown to another province would be my best chance of safety.

Occasionally, I'd go off trail to glance at my province– a combination of deep maroon and blazing gold palaces, markets, roads and neighborhoods cluttered at the crest of a colossal mountain. It was impossible to miss.

A flaring pit of anxiety raked at the bottom of my stomach. Tiamat told me that my province's rivals were readying to attack our own, with the intention of slaughtering the citizens inside the ruby walls. I prayed it was simple gossip he'd picked up on– nothing more.

Whimpering and travelling on foot was not a compatible blend. Little distance was travelled the first day. A bundle of leaves made do for a raspy pillow for the evening.

A relieving curtain of heat from the sun crept over me with leaden steps, like a benevolent solace from the numbing night. I continued the path to Tiamat's cave, stopping to check if the red and gold buildings were still intact.

Tips of the palace were tinted a crisp black. I tensed at the sight. I scanned the markets and villages; I tried to convince myself that I was hallucinating.
I couldn't see much from where I was, but it seemed as if everything had been set up in flames at some point last night. I stared blankly; I was deciding how to feel, what to do. Yes, there was a gnawing flame of despair, resentment and regret– *that* I couldn't deny. But I could push it aside. I could let the only memories I have with Biyu slip away over time and deal with the furious swarm of emotions meanwhile.

I refused to resort to that.

My recollections of events with her had become the source of my identity. I wanted nothing more than to find her alive in the accumulation of cinder that was once a winsome state. My breath became precarious and fell out of rhythm quickly; I bent over as if someone had thrown a fist to my stomach. A mangled sob pricked the air, then a startling shriek. It took me a moment too long to realise these perturbing sounds were coming from me.

"Oh, be quiet. Not all of them are dead."

I whirled round, searching for the origin of the raspy, blaring voice. No one was within sight. "What?" My voice trembled violently from fear and misery, "Who– Where are you? *Who* are you?"

"In front of you."

I glared, puzzled, at the landscape in front of me. Green scales began to form less than 10 metres away, moulding into a large animal with wings. Bigger than large, I started to realise. Immensely, monstrously, *gigantically* enormous. The size of a dragon.

Which was funny, because it actually turned out to be one.

"It's Malinda, might I add."

Malinda was three times as massive as Tiamat– three times as stunning, too. Blonde horns stuck out her head, curled to a sublime degree, and glinted in the sunlight, a ravishing contrast to her lime scales. I gawked at her like a fool.

The creature bent down, her beak two times the size of my body. Her pupils met mine. I choked, "Dragons can– dragons– they can– what you just did?"

"Yes," She breathed, her scalding breath steaming against my glacial skin, "Most of us can camouflage as much as to become invisible. Your *friend* Tiamat cannot." She turned away.
"I'm supposed to take you to Tiamat. He's been waiting for you."

I simply stood as a response. She took it as an agreement even though I wasn't sure to trust her enough. She squeezed me between her claws and soon I was above the clouds, gliding over hills and the narrow spaces between poles of stacked rock.

We reached a mountain solely composed of stone, it may have been the most extensive mountain we had come across after 5 minutes of flying (we'd travelled a long way despite the little time it took.) Malinda didn't swerve to the left or right, she was flying in a beeline to the rock wall. We'd hit it if we were to keep flying at this pace, this direction.

"Malinda."

"...Malinda?"

"We're going to hit the wall."

"*Malinda!* What are you *doing?*"

I clawed at her nails.

I braced myself as we neared the crag, tucking my head under my arms. I didn't expect it to do much for the pain.

Almost a minute passed by. I didn't feel anything slam into me; the breeze of flight was still present. When I opened my eyes, dragons neighboured us, staring at me curiously. Their gazes skittishly flicked to Malinda every few seconds.

I don't know how we got in here, but we were inside a cave that seemed to stretch over an infinite space. Constant ripples of heat radiated off the baths of lava shifting at the bottom of the cave, the main source of light. Otherwise, little lemon crystals, pinched inside the creases of the walls, gleamed and mirrored off the plates of dragons. Walls curled into platforms at several levels, some bigger than others. Dragons tended to perch on the smaller ones, sometimes lying with two or three others.

Malinda continued soaring through the cave as if every eye inside wasn't turned towards us. Were they looking at me or her or *us?*

"Xing?"

A vermilion dragon pushed through the audience trailing behind. "Tiamat?" I grinned. Malinda considerately placed me on a platform, as tenderly as if I were a fragile snowflake, and left mutely. Tiamat joined me, flapping his wings as he alighted on the rugged floor. "You're alive, Xing."

"Clearly." I replied, extending my arms.

"Xing, you surely don't want to live in despair for the rest of your life, do you?"

"No."

"And your lover has died?"

"Yes."

"I'll do you a favour." His voice abruptly threw me into a trance, his vowels curling with inducement.

"Yes?"

"Death."

I choked on my breath. He smiled cunningly, his claws soon slashing through the air; through me.

Nature Preserved

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Jones, Kaelan – 12

I woke up at the crack of dawn and triple–checked that everything was packed for the perplexing adventure I had laid before me. My whole life led up to this moment and I was more ready than ever. My dream as a child was to go and explore the Huangshan mountains and bring back something breathtaking to my small village. The reason I was so keen on this adventure was because my father went exploring and his father went before him and his father went and so on. Now it was my turn.

I left at around 8 o'clock and was headed for the journey of a life–time. I hiked up the winding trail and by the time it hit 3pm, I finally reached the peak but I was exhausted. I had sweat dripping off my forehead and had already drained 3 litres of water. I decided to rest under some tropical trees that looked cozy and welcoming given my circumstances. I lay down and dozed off with my head resting on the trunk of an ancient tree. I dreamt of running through the woods and getting chased into an abyss of darkness–

I woke with a start when I heard a rustle in the bushes behind me. I jumped up and took out an ancient family heirloom, a combat bamboo stick. I started poking around the bushes trying to find the owner of the rustle but nothing revealed itself. I decided that I must have just imagined it due to my tiredness so I propped myself against the trunk of the tree and noticed the dazzling sunset that was occurring. I let myself get lost in the immersing colours of this astounding view that I felt lucky to get to see. Whilst I was appreciating the sunset, I noticed that I was far above the clouds and saw that it was like seeing a warm blanket made of cotton candy stretched out all the way to the end of the world. I decided it was time to settle down for the night and lay down on the roots of the tree and allowed myself to be taken into the land of dreams and felt all the exhaustion leave my body.
Darkness, and then light. Leaves getting swatted out of the way with a long bamboo stick, heavy breathing, sweat dripping. I'm running through the woods. I'm getting chased. I didn't have time to realise that this isn't the first time I've had this dream today because I knew that if I stopped, even for a second, I would get trapped. I hear footsteps behind me, '*or are they footsteps'* I heard myself think. There seemed to be a lot of noise but they sounded muffled and happened much faster than regular human footsteps.

I woke, sweat soaking my shirt, to the rustle in the bushes behind me. I poked the bushes again and still couldn't find anything. I pushed the thought out of my head and started packing my things up. '*What better place to start at than at the famous 1500 year old pine trees?'* I thought to myself and started venturing into the woods behind me. Darkness enclosed me like a cage as soon as I stepped into the looming woods. I could feel eyes watching me but when I looked around, all I could see were trees and bushes.

Another rustle. I couldn't be imagining the sound this time so I followed the noise of where the rustle was, my bamboo stick at the ready. I heard a squeak and then a blast and a flash of light that nearly blinded me. After regaining my vision, I went towards the sound of the blast and tried to find the source of the disturbance. I stumbled across a tree root that was burning at the edges and pried open. I kept moving forward to find the mysterious owner of the blast. I soon came to an opening in the woods and I regained good vision thanks to the natural light from the burning sun. I could now see that there was a tree swaying and branches creaking. Suddenly, I saw a golden blur drop from the tree and rushed over to a golden lump on the ground.

I could see it moving up and down slightly, it was breathing. I didn't want to get too close to this creature in case it attacked me and I just waited and watched this thing. After a few minutes, this animal slowly helped itself to its feet. It turned around and when I saw the face of it I gasped. 'The Mythical Golden Monkey' I whispered to myself in shock. I instantly got down to one knee in a respectful bow. You see, when Marco Polo got back from China and told all the Europeans about this Mythical Golden Monkey but everyone thought he was crazy and mistook this 'legendary' beast with a normal monkey. However, Marco Polo was right. There really was a legendary creature that was respected all throughout China and I have been the first to find it.

'The Mythical Golden Monkey' I whispered again. I couldn't believe my eyes and was still on one knee whilst this legend watched me calmly. 'Hello Mortal' he said, in barely more than a whisper but still loud enough for me to hear him. Here's the thing about this particular beast; this was the real reason my whole family went exploring for something in the Mountains but we were too embarrassed to tell everyone the real reason in case they thought we were crazy so we just kept it as a family secret.

I couldn't believe that *I* was the one to find him. Generations and generations have come to find him but no one was successful until now. The Monkey said 'Come towards me Mortal,' and I obeyed with anticipation. He sat on top of a stumped tree and was elevated whilst I was still looking up at him, on one knee. 'Congratulations, you are the first to find me.' he whispered again. I was still speechless but managed to mumble a simple thank you. I didn't know what was supposed to happen now but greed suddenly washed over me like a wave of water and I knew what I wanted to do. I slowly shuffled over to my trusty bamboo stick and in a blink of an eye, I had knocked out this magnificent creature.

I scooped him up in my arms and carried him to the ancient tree this journey began at. I started going down the winding trail that I came up on what seemed to be years ago. I was still controlled by greed and never thought about anything other than finally proving myself to my village and most importantly, my family. About halfway down the path, I noticed that the flowers were wilting and that tree trunks started darkening and shrivelling. Clouds seemed to be covering the sun and the air became humid and polluted. I didn't think much of it considering what I had just accomplished but when I was about to reach the bottom of the steep climb, a thunderstorm erupted out of the blue. I quickly realised that nature was angry at humans right after I brutally kidnapped a sacred legend from nature. I made the connection that due to me being violent towards the magnificent Monkey, nature punished us humans. I knew that the only way to stop this Earth from going into total chaos was to wake up this creature. I tried everything I could think of but nothing seemed to work.

An idea suddenly popped into my head and I gently placed the Monkey into a nearby creek. Nothing happened for a minute but then the Monkey's eyes flew open and he sat bolt upright. Nature seemed to stop all at once and the atmosphere changed back to how it was before I attacked this precious creature. The Monkey looked confused but quickly got a sense of what happened and looked at me with a raised eyebrow. I quickly told him the story with about a million apologies in the middle of the tale and when I finally finished and caught my breath the Monkey simply said 'OK, I forgive you.'. Relief rushed over me and I was soothed by those simple words. The Monkey then asked me a question that took me by surprise, 'How do you feel about a monkey as a pet?' he calmly inquired. 'Uh—' is all I could muster before he quickly said 'I'll take that as a yes then' and before I knew it, I was going home with a mythical creature in my arms and nature blooming all around me with love and affection. All I could think about was how beautiful nature was with it's blossoming flowers and the now orange sun shining over us like an orange balloon. Nature was preserved.

The Mission for Medicine

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Lau, Lyra – 12

Whoosh! The sounds of the strong winds grew stronger as the long wintery nights in Zhangjiajie city grew colder, and more unbearable. It was impossible to tell what time of the day it was without a clock, because the gloomy clouds never revealed the blue sky hidden above. The bleak sky has not seen a peak of sunlight in weeks, and the people of Zhangjiajie felt dispirited, especially Po Anne.

'Kassandra! Kassandra darling!' Po Anne tried to shout as loud as she can with her weakened, powerless voice. Kassandra, Po Anne's granddaughter, was busy feeding the chickens, and failed to hear her grandma tirelessly trying to get her attention. Minutes later, which felt like hours for the impatient Po Anne, Kassandra returned inside ; her shoes covered in dirt, and her hair all scruffy.
'Oh look at you! You're a mess! Hurry, get clean and fix me a cup of tea. I'm not feeling too well, you know how easily your Po gets sick these days.'
'Yes Po, I'm on it!' replied Kassandra enthusiastically, as she ran to get cleaned up.
'You know, you remind me of your mother. Always so eager and passionate. ' Po Anne said with as a warm smile grew across her face. Words like these always lit up Kassandra's heart.

As Po Anne carefully lifted the cup of tea to her lips, splash! Her weak hands got so shaky the tea had spilt all over the place. Kassandra's head swiftly turned at once, as she ran to go help her. Po reassured her she was fine. Kassandra knew that Po was unwell, but they couldn't do anything about it because there was no doctor in Zhangjiajie, as it was such a small, remote city.
'Po, I really think I should go. Mother said that the next time something like this happened, we need to start seriously considering when the time is right.'
'No, no. Im fine.'
'But Po! You are sick! I am still young, I can help you! You have to let me, just trust me Po.'
'The mountains are not a safe place for a vulnerable girl like you!'
'Who else is going to go!? Brother Ming is only 7, you want him to go?'
Po Anne sighed, this was a frustrating topic, and she hated every time it got brought up.

There was a well– known myth in the city of Zhangjiajie, that in the mountains of Tianmen, there was a hidden medicine, that could only be accessed by a soul that was willing to go through what the mountain had to offer. Of course, this was no ordinary medicine ; this medicine was said to be able to cure any sickness in both young and old, and it was located deep into the mountains of Tianmen. Many have tried to obtain this mysterious medicine in the past, but none have ever returned. The reason Po Anne was so against the idea of letting Kassandra go, was because years back, her own daughter, who was Kassandra's mother, had went missing trying to look for this medicine

'No means no!' Po exasperated. 'Now listen to your Po. I should be respected in this household, and you shall do as I say!'
Kassandra was taken aback. She had never seen her Po react this way ; but little did her grandmother know, Kassandra had a secretive plan up her sleeve.

The next morning arrived, Kassandra got up ; she made sure she didn't fall asleep the whole night because there was no sun to wake her up in the morning, and she only had herself. Frantically, she stuffed whatever she could into a rucksack that was the size of her, and left without a trace. Kassandra had planned on returning with the medicine before Po Anne went searching for her, or noticed she was missing. In her mind, it was going to be a hike up the mountains. She knew it wouldn't be easy and she had her all the stories, but she was not prepared for what was awaiting her.

She had reached the mountains, and started climbing what looked like a few flights of stairs. Easy, she thought. She quickly regretted thinking that, abd each step felt a mile long. There was no telling when the steps were going to end, if they even had an ending. They turned in a spiral way, wrapping around the mountains like a snake wrapped around a mice.

After hours and hours of gruelling torture, the fatigued Kassandra's legs grew tired, and she was about to collapse any second. Even though there was no sunlight, she could tell that night was coming soon, and she started to panic. Kassandra didn't know her mother had gone missing whilst in those mountains. Po Anne had told her when she disappeared that her mother grew sick, and there was no doctor to cure her. Po Anne was too afraid to tell her the truth because she was afraid Kassandra wouldn't take care of her in the future, and she would have nobody left.

Time was running out, the wind was so strong that the dry skin on her lips were peeling off. Her eyes could barely stay open and Kassandra eventually stopped to sit herself down on the stone cold steps, huffing and puffing . This was not some mountain you could just hike up. Back at home, Po Anne had was immensely worried about her. Kassandra was a humble child who never rebelled. She had already alerted the whole city, as it was so small ; everyone was now on a hunt to find the missing Kassandra.

Something sparked in Kassandra, this was a strange and unfamiliar feeling. She thought she heard a voice, one that sounded familiar. After some time, she managed to figure out what this faint voice was trying to say 'Go! Keep going and don't stop!' And then she realised why the voice sounded so familiar, it was her mother! Although it was only the voice of her mother she could hear, this was enough to fill her with determination. She ignored the sores, she ignored the pains, she kept pushing. Only a soul, that is willing enough, would reach the medicine.

Finally, she reached the top of the mountain. The steps had ended, and it seemed like all her hard work was about to be paid off. Well, there was one more test. This was no physical test, this was one that tested the mind. At the top of the mountain, Kassandra searched high and low for this medicine, but there was no sign of it. This was the mountains test. It was waiting to see what she would do next.

After a lot of searching, thinking, and considering, Kassandra decided to wait. She was going to wait as long as it took, even if it meant staying the night. She couldn't have went through all those steps, just for nothing. She knew there was going to be a sign, but she had to be patient. As Kassandra shivered in the chilly, bitter cold night, bing! It was like a lightbulb had lit above her head. She rustled through her rucksack, frantically searching for something. 'Aha!' she shrieked. She pulled out a charm that was given to her by her mother, and she was told to never use it unless met with a situation so severe she had no other option. The charm had the words '犧牲' on it, which means sacrifice in English. In order for this charm to work it's magic, you had to make a sacrifice. Kassandra knew in the back of her mind exactly what she had to do, but it wasn't going to be easy.

This charm was the only gift she had from her mother, and she always kept it around her because it made it feel like her mother was present. A sacrifice would mean she'd had to sacrifice something dear to heart. The charm. She held it tight, gave it a farewell kiss, took one last look at it, then threw it off the mountain.

Bang! A thunder bolt struck the moment it left her hands. A glowing light appeared above her, and it was descending from the sky towards her. Kassandra held her arms out and caught something. Anxiously, she opened her hands to find the medicine! It was a small bottle with the words 'magic' engraved on it. She had done it!

The excitement didn't last long as the storm grew stronger. Kassandra had to get back quick. Her Po was sick from worry and from illness. She ran like there was no tomorrow, she didn't stop once to look back. At last, she reached Zhangjiajie City. She went straight to their hut, where Po Anne laid, sick and motionless.
'Po Anne! It's me, I'm back! And I have the medicine.'
'Ka..Kassandra?'
'Yes Po, hurry! Drink this, It will cure you!'
Po Anne took one sip from the bottle, and slowly started to feel better.

Success! She had saved Po Anne, and completed a mission of a lifetime.

Baited

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Lee, An – 13

Bao Zhang, with his black hair plastered to his face, stumbled dejectedly behind Wang, his father; shivering as he went. Having been trekking for almost a day, he was exhausted and half asleep.

The craggy cliff side was completely capped with a silvery coat of snow and he could just make out the burly outline of his father, clambering up the mountain like a circus monkey. Trees sagged down like dejected lions after a missed kill and their branches were enclosed beneath a chunky sheet of bleak Chinese winter. Bao's fingernails scraped against the rough rock and his blood flowed thickly over his frigid fingers. Cold. But this was merely nothing now, he licked the bright red blood dripping down his finger and shivered as he climbed up the last precipice to catch up with his father.

Bao was used to being quiet, that was one of his hobbies. Normally it was his father who spoke; Bao followed his orders. But this time, in this place, in this country, things were different. Bao was erupting with questions and he struggled to keep them to himself.
"Baba"
Silence
"Baba" he shouted loudly, the snow biting into Bao's throat.
"What, son?" hollered Wang
"Where are we going, please tell me"
His father didn't meet Bao's eye, but Bao already knew the answer, and he regretted asking the question.
"You asked me this question before, you'll soon find out"
Bao dropped his gaze to the floor, avoiding his dad's angry stare. He merely focused on the sound his boots made every time it had contact with the diamonds of winter.

Crunch, Crunch, Crunch

Bao could see more clearly as the sun rose up, kissing the sky. The mountain lay in the distance like a colossal camel's hump; red streaks of light dashed across the sky like oily wet paint on a canvas.

But Bao stopped. He sensed something that wasn't right. Something out of place; very out of place. However he couldn't fit the pieces together. Looking up towards the mountain ahead, he could see the twinkling lights of a village, illuminating the fog. Bao smiled. There was fire. He would have some warmth.

Bao was used to not feeling welcome, but this was different. A ghostly mist encircled the village, but Bao and his father hurried on down the street, looking for any signs of life.

"A ghost village, right Ba?"
Silence.
They continued to walk in silence.
"Wang Zhang, my old friend, good to see you"
"Hello Jing Wei, why were you hiding?"
"Oh, that, well we needed to make sure it was you."
"Who else would it be?" Wang replied, laughing
"Many bandits these days, Wang, it's been a long time since you left"
Wang's smiled dropped into a frown
"I guess so"
"Well, come in, come in" Jing said, beckoning towards the door
"Dad, do you know them?" Bao just couldn't hide his surprise.
"Now now, who's this Wang? I asked for you, not your scrawny little servant here." Jing smiled, but not the happy kind of smile, the smile that showed all his golden teeth, and a few pieces of rice left over from his previous meal.
"Now Jing, this is my son Bao. Bao, this is Jing, an old friend."

"Son?" Jing looked surprised, almost shocked.
"Yes Jing."

Avoiding any more conversation, they entered the bare room. One old, but solid chair, stood in the corner. Some pictures, with the colour fading in them, hung from the rundown wall,

"Stay here Bao, I am going to talk to Jing for a minute. Alone."
If Bao had been a young boy, he would have shouted "No father, Don't leave me alone."
But he was not a young boy, and his throat was too sore for him to shout, so instead he mumbled a quiet 'Yes, father' and shuffled his feet. Uncomfortably.
He would have stayed like this until his father came back, but his inquisitive side took over. Pressing his year against the door, he leant in, straining hard to listen to every word his father said.
"Why did you call me here, Jing"
"It's the dragon, Wang, it's attacking us again"
"What have I got to do with it"

"I have to admit, that isn't a bad way to listen to what my father is telling your father, he's a village elder now, after all."
Bao jumped back, surprised.
His instincts told him to call his father, but he slowly turned around, facing a teenage girl in a red flowery dress. Her murky grey eyes stared at him, waiting for an answer.
"Now, who are you?"
"Fang, daughter of Jing Wei, the third elder to the right of Emperor Wu. You?"
"Um, I'm Bao"
Fang smirked.
"Oh, so you've met my daughter now, how fantastic"
And Bao spun around once more just to find Jing and his father grinning at him.

"I know what's bothering you, so just listen to me" Wang said later that evening
"Dad, I'm sorry I should never have..."
"It's fine, I know that you want to go home, just don't escape…"
"What? That was not what I was going to say. I was going to ask you what it is with you and dragons. I heard you talking about dragons with Jing. I'm not deaf."
Wang cursed under his breath.
"I'm sorry that I didn't tell you Bao. I need to kill this dragon, it is my duty"
"A dragon, are you mad?"
"I think so."

Eavesdropping, Jing crept away from the door, laughing under his breath.
"Dumb idiots" he muttered, cheerfully; then faded away into the darkness of the night.

It was a blustery afternoon–Bao and his father marched on down a street. The tall yellow flag of the imperial building waved at them, inviting them to come in. It was the only two–storey building in the village, so stood out from the rest. But his mind was elsewhere. Completely elsewhere.
"How did you come to meet Jing, Father?" asked Bao.
He felt like lately his father and him weren't talking much and he wanted to say something.
Wang knew this, and stayed quiet with his gaze planted firmly on the building.
They walked through a large gate, guarded by two men in brown armour, who greeted them with a polite "Hello, Sir". Approaching the building fast, Bao could just see a figure waiting for them; as they got closer, he realised that that was the person he was thinking of. That was who he wanted to see most.
He tried not to show this to Fang, and followed her through the muddy path which led to the building. He could see animal tracks imprinted on the ground but wondered if an animal could be that big.
"Ba, is that" Bao could not let the words out of his mouth

“Yes son, now be quiet”

Knock Knock Knock

They could feel a quiet hush coming from the inside of the building.

“Come in” a raspy voice shouted

The golden door opened, and Bao gasped.

He looked around the room, mesmerized. It was the first time he had heard so many voices of so many people talking at once.

“He’s our saviour”

“He is a star”

“He is the sacrifice”

At the centre of the stage though, was Jing. He motioned to the trio standing at the door to come join him and immediately they walked towards him. But Bao was confused, where was the dragon?

A thud rang, echoing across the vast theatre. Turning back, he noticed Fang closing the double doors. Then locking them. Twice.

“Wang, you know what to do,” Jing said, with an unusually high voice.

The crowd roared with delight and Wang absorbed all the attention.

“Where is the dragon Jing?” Wang asked. Scared. All kinds of questions ran through his mind.

“Let me tell you a story” Jing began

“Every 25 years, a dragon comes to our village and asks for two sacrifices to be made. The dragon provides us protection from neighbouring lands and this is the least we can do for him”

“Where’s the dragon?” Wang repeated

“We need two sacrifices to be made.” Jing replied, grinning.

Bao now understood the meaning of what Jing was saying

“Ba we need to go, Ba, now”

“We need two sacrifices to be made, which is why, Wang, I am sorry to say, I have to say my goodbyes”

And with a push, Wang and Bao were thrown into the open mouth of the hungry dragon.

The Dragon Master

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Ling, Amber – 13

It is said that if one kills a full grown dragon, they will have good luck for the rest of their lives…

The village of the Golden Dragon Hunters was the luckiest on the Mountain of the Yellow Emperor. The Golden Dragon Hunters had a reputation for killing dragons on the mountain but not getting killed themselves. In the old days, they killed them for protection, but now they killed them to keep the tradition. It was a rule for every man who turned seventeen to find, hunt and kill a dragon to be allowed to return back to the village. However, there was a legend about a lost scroll containing the secrets of the Dragon Masters that was passed down through each generation. Dragon Masters refused to kill dragons and instead learned how to earn a dragon's trust and receive their special abilities, writing the instructions on the scroll of Masters. However, Dragon Masters were banned from the village of the Golden Dragon Hunters since the last Dragon Master turned on the Dragon Hunters...

It was 253 BC, the 11th day of November, when a new child, Li, was born to Ming and Tong. He was a loyal, ambitious young child from the start. As time passed, his parents would tell him bedtime stories about the legendary Dragon Master. Li sometimes asked his parents if the Dragon Master might be alive today and could teach him to also be one. His mother and father would always say it was forbidden for any Dragon Master to set foot on the mountain.

The day before Li's seventeenth birthday, Li's Mother and Father had prepared a small cow–skin bundle with a spear and a hunting knife for survival. On his birthday, Li waved goodbye to his parents. The mountain was so steep that he had to grab onto the big rocks to haul himself up. As he climbed, he soon was above the fluffy clouds admiring the view. His shirt turned damp and stuck to his skin like glue. All around Li were cliffs and trees and a dark cave was spotted. A silhouette quickly flitted across the entrance from where he was standing. He excitedly ran towards the cave, thinking it was a dragon and he could quickly go home. However, when he got there, Li found an old person wearing ancient chinese male clothing sitting inside, stirring a small pot full of broth. The delicious aroma wafted up his nose and made his mouth water. He politely asked if he could stay and rest for a while, then helped himself to a small animal skin mat. As his eyes wandered around the surprisingly bright mountain cavern, they settled on the scarred gash along his right arm made by a Dragon Hunter's Shamkiv, a sacred sword given to men who passed the test of killing a dragon. The mark of the banished. His eyes widened at the sight of the scar. There was only one kind of hunter that would be banished with the Shamkiv mark: a Dragon Master.

Li couldn't believe it. The last Dragon Master was killed. How could he be alive? Is this why he was hiding in this cave? Li scrambled back in fear while the color drained from his face. His father had briefly explained that the last Dragon Master had turned on the Village Chief's father and killed him. The Dragon Master suddenly stopped his stone hard eyes from studying Li and asked if he was all right. He was surprised to hear that the man spoke in a woman's voice. Li slowly nodded his head, gazing downwards, not wanting to look him in the eyes. 'Don't be afraid. You are my grandson.' At first, his eyes widened slowly to look at his ancestor while his jaw dropped in surprise but then his gaze dropped in respect. Li gathered his courage and asked if he could be a Dragon Master. His grandparent closed his eyes to consider this, then nodded. However, in order for him to share the secret, Li must follow the tradition of the Dragon Masters: he must befriend a dragon on his own.

As he was searching for a dragon in the clearing a few minutes away from the cave, Li wondered about the beauty of the mountain that he had never seen before, since he had only known his village area. Lush green trees towered above him upon a carpet of vivid colored flowers with bees and butterflies fluttering around him. However, on the other side of the layer of flowers, there was a colossal dragon eating a sheep carcass in a grass clearing. It had silver scales as smooth as marble. Li carefully stepped into the clearing to admire the animal.

'Snap!' As he made his way over, he accidentally stepped on a stick. The dragon's head shot up in alertness, scanning its surroundings. When its gaze fell upon Li, panic dropped into its eyes as it opened its wings and started to stalk towards him. It blew fire and beat its wings so fast it created a swirling hurricane. Li screamed but he couldn't hear

himself. The dragon roared unforgivingly. Li came back to his senses. He started to race away, but he was no match for the dragon. His right leg was covered in blood and soot, so he had to stumble away. A typhoon of panicked thoughts ran through his head. He knew this was the end of his life, getting burnt to death by a dragon. Sadness began to settle in his heart as he realized how much his parents would miss him. The dragon started to suck in a breath as Li buried his face in his hands, covering his eyes, refusing to watch his last moment of life. Suddenly, a high pitched scream echoed around his head as Li opened his eyes to see what was happening and why he was still alive. All he could see was fire surrounding the Dragon Master while he spread his arms like a starfish in an attempt to protect Li. The Dragon Master had saved his life by sacrificing his own.

'No!' he screamed as the Dragon Master lay dying. 'Grandson. The reason I decided to become a Dragon Master was because I was the first female Dragon Hunter. I was fascinated by dragons even though it meant I had to kill them. My father didn't want me to become a Dragon Master so that's why I pretended to be a man. When I killed my first dragon, I was terrified, but finding out that I could be a Dragon Master meant that I could be next to dragons but not kill them. This made me feel reassured that I could chase my dream of being a friend to dragons. The instructions of the Dragon Masters are under my bed. Follow them and be the best that you can.' She spoke softly as life slowly faded from her eyes. Li cried over the lifeless body of his grandmother. The Dragon bowed his head in sorrow and motioned to offer a ride on its back. After Li had retrieved the scroll of the Masters, the dragon flew Li and the body back to the village. His parents, village Chief and all the villagers' jaws dropped to see him descend from the sky riding on a dragon. Many villagers shouted at him. They even threatened to throw rotten fruit at him if he didn't get off the dragon. As soon as they touched down onto the ground, Li was grabbed by his parents who hugged all his air out.. Li explained that he wanted to become a Dragon Master. His village was so silent, they could even hear a feather drop. To his surprise, the village chief suddenly spoke up and told everyone to go back to their daily business. He then spoke to Li's parents about an official scroll detailing what would happen to Li since he brought bad luck to the village because he didn't kill a dragon.

When the sun rose the next day, Li rushed downstairs but was beaten to the scroll by his parents. Ming and Tong were huddled around the scroll with their hands clenched so hard that their knuckles turned white. Blood drained from their faces with each word that they read. Li's eyes widened. His heartbeat increased rapidly. An elephant was crushing his lungs. After a few glances at each other, the scroll and Li, they motioned him towards a chair. Li desperately tapped his fingers on the table. They sat down beside him in silence.Tong buried his head in his hands in frustration while his wife seemed to have a sudden interest in her shoes. Finally, after the tapping of his fingers slowed down, Ming cleared her throat and slowly read what was written. Li's face gradually turned pale...

The Village Chief had sentenced Li to death.

Lost in an Emerald Abyss

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Logue, Ishbel – 12

Hacking and coughing, I push blindly through the smoky debris. Startled flocks of birds screech in alarm, flapping desperately to get away from the danger. My sight is soon blocked by the relentless smokescreen. I feel claustrophobic, like the smoke is trapping me in its wisp–like clutches. I push, and push, and push, until – without warning – the ground beneath me gives way and I plunge out of the red–hot metal. I am finally free, but with freedom comes clarity. As I gaze upon the wreckage, I can at last recall what had happened.
The plane had broken down.

"Hello?!" I rasp, "Is anyone out there?" My desperate calls are answered by the greedy crackle of fire and nothing more. Despair threatens to overwhelm me, but I force my mind to clear and turn away from the growing flames. No one in there can help me now. Trembling, I squint upwards, towards a distinctive nearby cliff, and search every detail for a clue to my whereabouts. Icy sweat trickles down my spine and face, giving the air a salty tint among the ash. Eyeing the serrated cliff sides, I realise where I am. Desperate for another clue, something to tell me that I am wrong, I scan the cliff sides once again, but to no avail. I'm in China's yellow mountains. Remote. Humid. And known for its stories about mythical creatures and monsters.

Against my will, I turn once more to the burning plane, eyeing the skeletal fingers of smoke reaching out to grab the light. I take a moment of silence to honour those who died before me. I know I should go, but I can't will my body to move, can't will my mind to think. In the corner of my eye, I see a winged flash of gold, soaring in circles like a bird of prey. Whipping around in shock, I search for the flash of gold, but the sky remains still, blue and lifeless. Ancient rumours of the yellow mountain's magic flash through my mind, but I force them away. It must've been a trick of the light. Suppressing a shiver, I clench my jaw and hustle away from the fiery graveyard.

I pass a trickling waterfall, the droplets sparkling like diamonds in the beaming sun, before falling into a mossy pool. I pass a colossal spike of rock, like a sword wedged into the ground, left for hundreds of thousands of years. I pass a vast, dense forest, probably concealing thousands of hidden treasures. Flocks of colourful birds dip and dive throughout the ultramarine blue sky, taunting me with their freedom. The forest floor almost seems to move beneath me, between the soft movements of the grass and the hurried scampering of the insects. Leaves dance in mid–air as they fall from the trees, creating a mystical ballroom in the sky. I feel hypnotised by the intricate movements of the leaves, until I remember with a start where I am and what I'm doing. Reluctantly, I continue my endless march, dragging my legs step after step, kilometre after kilometre. After an eternity of walking, my bloodshot eyes finally spot a desolate village balancing precariously on the edge of a sloping cliff. This will be my aim.

Panting hard, I haul myself up the cliffside, the jagged surface shredding my palms. The seconds drag into minutes, minutes into hours. The humid air presses in from all sides, soaking me to the bone, and coating my eyes and lips. A single bird sings a melancholy song, echoing throughout the mountains, sending cold needles tumbling down my spine. My panting seems too loud, my heart too fast, my climbing too slow. The salty odour of my sweat mixes with the delicate fragrance of the vegetation below me, creating a complex scent, one I have never had to smell before. Arriving at a ledge, I pause, exhausted, to rest my weary muscles. In the distance, I can still see the smoke curling greedily through the open sky. The tips of the chinese fir trees sway in a distant breeze, which eventually reaches my spot in the cliff and plays with my auburn hair. With the breeze carries the scent of ash, taking me back to my final moments in the plane – which could've been my final breaths as well. No one had known what was going on as we fell and fell and fell through the sky; panic had clouded our minds. I swiftly stop myself from thinking about the faces of the other people, the despair–ridden faces of their loved ones once they find out what happened. Strangely, I wish there were still people in my life, people that would feel despair from my death. Banishing these selfish thoughts, I tilt my head away from the breeze. My algae–green eyes follow the clouds – wisps of fluffy cotton – as they journey across the sea of blue. They seem to avoid the blinding sun, not daring to block its blazing beams.

Once again I see the flash of gold in the sky, this time more clearly. It looks like a vast, golden bird, shining in the sun. I strain my neck, desperate to give a name to this mysterious creature. A puff of red streams from its mouth, and then it's gone, as quick as it had come. My mind spins from this sight – am I imagining things again? Or was this beautiful, golden creature something of myth, of legend…

All of a sudden, joyous and inviting voices travel down from the top of the cliff. Hearing these voices, I carry on climbing with new–found desperation and hope. The village is inhabited. I can barely feel the jagged sides of the cliff, can barely remember the deathly drop below me. I can barely smell the rusty scent of blood as it slips from my ruined hands. I can barely hear that single bird as it continues singing, alone. I can barely think until, at last, I pull myself over the ridge and collapse onto, blissfully, even ground.

For a moment I merely lie there, collecting my scattered thoughts, and cradling my bloody hands. But then I hear the whispers. They crawl through the bristling grass and echo through the wind. They seem to come from everywhere, yet, when I scramble to my feet, I can't see their source. In alarm, I stumble backwards, away from the deathly edge, and towards what appears to be a strangely familiar, golden, life–sized statue of a dragon. Every last detail, down to the creases on its face, seem thought–through, and realistic. Each knife–sharp, gleaming scale is scratched, as if the dragon had once moved and fought. Its whip–shaped tail is held in the air, as if waiting to strike. Its claws are each several inches long, yet uneven – some slightly longer, and sharper, than others. All of these features are petrifying, but what really chills me to the bone is the hunger and greed, somehow etched, into its large, amber eyes.

I stand still, in shock, startled by the realism of this statue, and the similarity to the flying figure I had seen before. However, I quickly recover, as the whispers seem to draw me towards it, begging me to come closer, begging me to not be afraid. At first, I succumb to the yearning voices, taking a dreamy stride forwards, but then something seems off. The tail of the statue twitches. The eyelids flicker. The tongue traces the outline of its lips. Finally, the mouth opens wide into a gape– showing off thousands of large, needle–sharp, golden teeth – and the dragon, claws outstretched, dives towards me.

The Beasts of Huangshan

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Lui, Michelle – 11

Many people would wonder, 'what in the world is going on up there?' as they gaze at the ancient hills and mountains of rock. Huangshan never appears to have its mysteries solved or discovered, there are many places that the villagers haven't stepped foot on. That's why nobody would go up there. Stories are told and shared across the villages and they fear the gigantic fire-breathing dragon, living on the highest cliff of Huangshan. It is actually better if they just stay put.

High up, on one of the mountain peaks, a spacious hole sat hanging above a rocky balcony. The air up there was fresh and it constantly smelled of blooming lilies. If you were to 'gulp' the air, you'd be able to taste the flavour of tulips. All you would really be able to spot here are the decrepit ocean of stones and trees scattered around this humongous board-game like land. It was so still up there, every minute the only sound you would hear was the occasional chirp of a hungry bird. It was also usually damp and hot up there in the valleys.

In the hole, there lived a human. He was your textbook person; messy hair and some simple cloaks to wear. One thing, and one thing only, had defined him from everyone else. He spoke to dragons, the beautiful yet terrifying mythical creatures that would dwell in the caves of every mountain. You might be wondering, 'Don't be silly. Dragons do not exist.' That's where you're wrong. The human was raised by a colony of them, and he never viewed them as a threat like you and I do. From then on, he discovered many others who were intrigued by his existence.

There was Blue, the small dragon who spat teal flames whenever he sneezed. Another was Inferno, who could create rings of fire to protect everyone. One more was Opal, who could daze her enemies by flashing her gemstone-like scales. There are many others, but the list would go on forever.

He would whistle, and they would come, he would growl, and they would fiercely see what intruder had come to attack their master. His name was Xin.

The boy wasn't very old, yet not very young. However, even though he had existed on this planet for 20 years, not a single year had he ventured down to the villages that thrived below the kingdom of rubble. In short, Xin lived on the cliffs for his entire life.

On a terribly stormy day, Xin was woken up by the sound of the wind. It was humming a tune. It came and went, then came and went, just as if it wanted to annoy the boy with its screechy singing. The clouds were grumpy, and the fog clouded the area. Xin noticed something quite peculiar about his home. He saw the rubbish scattered everywhere. Surely he didn't leave the house in chaos when he went to sleep. The pawprints of a wolf and the clawed footprint of an eagle were found shortly after. Xin grumbled, confused. Whatever got into his humble abode overnight was definitely not one of his dragons.

Xin got outside and gave three sharp whistles. In less than a minute, the distinctive shape of Inferno came soaring over. He was looking particularly moody, and the fire that usually burned warmly above his head had gone out.

'What do you need, master? It's such a bad day. Maybe you could call me another time,' Inferno said gloomily.

'This is crucial,' Xin said. This is all translated from Tongue of Dragon to English.

The dragon trainer showed Inferno the footprints and his pantry in shambles. There was even a stinky present left by his ungracious guest. Only then did the fiery dragon decide to track down the beast.

'Hey, I see some footprints leading that way,' Xin exclaimed.

The two friends flew through the pouring rain. The tracks ended by the bottom of a castle-sized stone. There were cracks all over the bottom, and Xin knew it was probably a secret way inside. He tried pushing. Nothing happened. He muttered a few random words to it. Nothing happened. He tried a few more times, but you can probably guess what happened. Exhausted and angry, he returned to his home.

However the next day, Xin didn't wake up anywhere near his home. He was on the ground, stalactites looming over him. Scrambling up, the dragon trainer observed his surroundings. It was like a mountain, but hollow. There was a geyser situated in the middle. The only source of light came from the tiny hole in the 'ceiling'.

'There's a good boy,' came a purring female voice.

There were corridors around the edge of the mountain, and strange sounds echoed from there. A woman came, petting the eagle–wolf hybrid. Xin was furious, but also terrified. He never knew another person would be up here in Huangshan, living their life like he lived his.

'Well, well, well. Look what we have here,' she said, unsheathing her dagger.

She owned silky red hair and blue eyes that looked like they were made of clouds from a summer sky. Calmly, she pressed the dagger up against Xin's neck.

'Who are you?' he spluttered.

'That will be none of your business until you answer *my* questions,' she replied. 'What is your name and why do you live with those dragons?'

'I… I'm Xin,' he answered. 'I don't understand why my existence is so interesting for you. If you could just let me be…'

'No,' she said plainly. 'I always needed the dragons. They were for my hybrid–making experiment. My only successful result was Pumpkin.'

The eagle–wolf stopped preening itself when it heard its name. Xin was sweating profusely, as it was boiling in the mountain and the dagger was so cold against his skin.

'I live with the dragons because they raised me,' he said nervously. 'I never meant to harm you or anything, but your Pumpkin had invaded my privacy.'

'I wanted you to tell me where your beloved dragons are,' she said. 'I need one. Just one. And then I will fuse it with one of my ravens. Then your work here is done, forever you shall not be bothered again.'

'I can't,' Xin exclaimed. 'The dragons are my family. I cannot give even the most unknown dragon to you, because the rest of them will abandon me and take me as a traitor.'

The woman hesitated, then took the dagger off his neck. She looked disappointed but she understood. 'I guess months of my planning were wasted.'

Xin apologised, and accepted the woman's hospitality. She gave him a few slices of bread and butter, and a glass of milk, seeing as he was extremely groggy after an uncomfortable night's sleep.

Once he was up and ready, the woman introduced herself as Nicole and asked if he wanted to train Pumpkin, or perhaps even stay in the mountains for life.

'Pumpkin never really liked me, he only follows my orders because of food,' Nicole scoffed. 'I need a trainer who's had experience.'

'I don't have *that* much experience, I don't even train, I just stand there and give food to dragons who do what I tell them to,' Xin said, his face hot.

'Pumpkin loves food,' Nicole said, laughing.

From then on, Xin stayed as the woman's personal trainer. Of course nothing's changed – he stayed living in his cosy den on the peak of a small, rocky dome. However apart from having a simple week of sticking to his schedule every week, he now knows another person, just like him, staying in a hollow volcano, with mythical creatures of some sort.

It was better knowing that Pumpkin wasn't as harmful and evil as Xin expected, and so all of his worries were washed away into the ocean of relief, where the nervousness was tucked away in the corals. He decided not to go anywhere further than the villages, as the grains of seeds beneath the hills' cracks longed to burst through, and Xin didn't want to leave and miss the evolution of this very mountain.

The weeks, the days, the years passed by. The villages below the mysterious mountains remained unchanged. Many legends still lay up in Huangshan at the time, and still nobody wanted to venture deep. Stories were told and shared across the villages and they fear the gigantic fire–breathing dragon, living on the highest cliff of Huangshan. And it was and is, in fact, true.

Some people would venture to the mountains, once they have plucked enough courage. They would wander and wander until they found a specific spot. The view was astonishingly marvellous from where they stood. However, another beautiful shock, apart from a view, would be waiting for them on these towering boulders.

It was rumoured that a woman, riding a flying wolf with an eagle head, rode alongside a man on the legendary fire–breathing dragon, at a certain place and time.

Alone

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Luo, Venisha – 13

For the first time, she was alone. For the first time, nobody was there to tell her that it was ok. For the first time, Victoria realised that she was in danger. She had to think of a way to get back to the campsite quickly, because who knew what the night would bring?

……

Finally. Finally. Finally. They had finally arrived at the Mountains of the Yellow Emperor in eastern China – Huangshan. Victoria had been looking forward to this holiday for weeks and weeks. Her jaw dropped as they gradually descended into the misty mountains. They undulated in every direction as far as she could see. A thin, swirling layer of mist wrapped around the peaks like a huge opaque blanket. The mountains were covered from top to bottom with lush green vegetation, which were emitting a variety of different sounds – the hooting of monkeys, the chirping of birds and insects and the growls of the predators that lurked in the shadows of the forest floor. The air was extremely humid but pleasantly cool as evening settled in.

They slowly approached a bare patch of land near the peak of one of the steep mountains – this was going to be their campsite. After setting up the tents and unpacking all the equipment, Victoria and her parents decided to explore the jungles. They slowly trudged towards the perimeter of the forest and entered its depths. The brown earth was wet and spongy underfoot and the trees stretched up into the distance, their leaves spreading out to form a canopy high above their heads. Thick vines intertwined overhead, blocking out the sunlight. The floor was littered with moss covered rocks and crawling with dozens of types of insects. The greenery all around them was so thick that they had to use a knife to slash through all of it to get around. Animals peered down curiously from above the trees as they passed by, surprised to see unexpected visitors. Their yellow eyes fixed unblinkingly on the three tourists. In the distance, a small waterfall roared. Water cascaded downwards like a transparent curtain. Once or twice, Victoria even saw blurs of colour traveling in between the trees. However, when she looked again to see what it belonged to, it was gone.

Victoria and her parents walked on and on, but the little sunlight they had was already starting to fade quickly, so they decided to head back to the campsite before it got too dark. The three would continue exploring the next day.

And they got back just in time.

The beast slunk back into the forest, disappointed that it couldn't catch its prey. But it was determined to try again the next day.

The following morning, Victoria and her parents got up at the crack of dawn to continue exploring the place as much as they can. So they entered the forest for the second time, but it was ready. The silence was suddenly pierced by an angry growl. Victoria and her parents were instantly alert, their eyes darting left and right, searching for the cause of the noise.
" What was that?? " Victoria whispered, scared. Before anyone could suggest that they go back to their campsite, where most of their resources were, they found the leopard blocking their path.
" Run! " her mom shouted.
Victoria didn't need to be told twice; she was already bolting in the opposite direction. Her parents raced after her, but the leopard was closing in. Fast. Trying to divert the attention to themselves, Victoria's parents ran in one direction whilst she ran in another. It worked. The leopard quickly turned around and started chasing after her parents. However, Victoria didn't stop running. Every muscle in her body was screaming in agony for her to stop, and she could barely breathe, but nevertheless, she ran on, weaving in between the trees, trying to avoid trampling the plants and getting her feet stuck in the mud.

Eventually, after what seemed like hours, Victoria halted where the ground had finally stopped sloping upwards. She bent over, catching her breath, trying to take in her surroundings. But this was no longer the forest that she was familiar with, the forest that was close to their campsite. She had lost the leopard all right, but that wasn't the most worrying thing right now. She was lost. With no one to help her. In desperation, Victoria quickly scaled a tree, but

all she could see was the unfamiliar canopy of trees spread out beneath her, going downhill, and the silhouettes of the steep mountains in the distance. She had no idea which direction the campsite was; she had not been paying attention, having been focusing on escaping.

Without any other plan in mind, she decided to retrace her steps and started walking back the way she came. She continued walking. And walking. And walking. Despite her best efforts, Victoria could not spot anything that she recognised. Just as she was about to give up, a creature suddenly appeared in front of her. From the waist down, it was a stallion, as white as snow, its tail swishing back and forth, but from the waist up, it was a human. A centaur. It quickly signalled Victoria to get onto its back, and still staring open mouthed at the creature, Victoria hesitantly climbed on. The centaur immediately took off, gathering speed. The forest around her instantly became a green blur, as if she was looking out of a window of a high speed train. Occasionally, she could spot the bright plumage of birds high in the trees and brown tree trunks, but they were going so fast that none of the details could be seen. After only a few minutes, the centaur slowed to a stop. Victoria got off shakily and turned around to thank it, but it had already disappeared into the shadows. Up. Up. Up.

The blue cable car rose up the side of the mountain, gliding up the wire. Li stared out of the plexiglass windows. Beside him, the peaks jutted up, penetrating the ever present blanket of mist. There was nostalgia in his heart. The tranquil forest was spread out like a carpet under him.

The other passengers were busy snapping photos and shouting about how beautiful it was. Li paid no attention, and continued staring at a single peak. His eyes followed a thin path barely visible, into the mists. This was a path that his young self had trotted on a thousand times.

The cable car stopped, startling a brooding Li. He stepped off, breathed the fresh mountain air, and sighed. This was the air of his childhood. It was revitalising, refreshing. It washed away all the fatigue and grime of the city. Li's lungs welcomed the air, inhaling large quantities of it, rinsing every last tired particle itself in the elixir.

But he didn't want it. The repetitive, machine–like routines of urban life forced his revitalising mountain air out of his mind. Li's mind switched back to his work. He was here for a purpose. He was not here to emulate the intoxicating mountain air, he thought. He cleansed his mind, and set off.

The winding steps of Huangshan were made out of old, cracked stone. Small insects and ants crawled in the cracks, scurrying among the fallen leaves. It was autumn, a season traditionally represented by the Chinese element of metal. Li smiled as he stroked the shining accessory on his suitcase, forged in the shape of a rampant tiger. How fitting.

Every step was a pain to him. Li had spent two decades in an office chair, his wavering confidence bolstered by coffee and tea. In his office chair, Li had developed back pain, despite his young age. His knees cracked at every other step. The burden of his suitcase weighed heavily on his right arm, threatening to dislocate his shoulder.

Li deliberated painfully in his mind over his next step. He had come to crush the last resistance of holdout peasants on the mountaintops, their will weakened by money and technology. He was meant to strike the final blow. But he had seen all the simple and elegant beauty of Huangshan. It drew him in, a refreshing respite to the artificial neon jungles of the city. It wasn't glamorous, but it felt… real. It wasn't crafted in any way. It was pure. It had existed since the dawn of time, created by a power that no one knew. It was unlike the plastic displays that were so embellished, they felt alien and fake.

Then he thought of the technology, the access to convenience, and all the luxuries of city life. *Yes,* he thought, waving away all the mists of the mountains. He didn't want the mountains, even though it was his birthplace. It was never wrong to reject something bad for something better.

But which was truly better? Li pondered as he walked up the steps. He had lots of time, and he could spend the day thinking. The two notions fought in him like wolves, with unwavering ferocity. For a moment, he stood there, trying to make up his mind, before a shouting tourist broke his stupor. He frowned, and continued walking.

Before long, he had reached his hotel. Li knew he was unwelcome. His picture was all over the village community by now, and the reception glared at him as they handed him his room card. The bellhop pushed his luggage with surprising force. Li knew that he was exerting his anger on the luggage.

#

Li had a terrible first day on Huangshan. It wasn't strictly his first day, of course, since his mother lived here. It was where he was born. No, it was his first day as a visitor. And the hospitality of the hotel staff had been cold, to say the least. Somehow his actions merited such a response. Or perhaps it was his intentions?

The waiters had spilled a bit of chicken soup over his pants, before proceeding to make an even bigger mess of it by rubbing on the puddle. Then, when he picked up his spoon and tasted the soup, he realised that the cook had accidentally put too much salt on purpose. It was far from his childhood meal of choice. This wasn't something his mother would make. His mother…

Li nearly struck out at his servers for violating such a sacred childhood memory, but his manners prevailed and he coldly downed the rest of his soup, as not to offend his hosts.

When he returned to his room, he checked everything. He found some traps. At least his bed wasn't dirty, he thought. Then he opened his laptop to check his emails.

The desk was somewhat greasy. Whether it was an ill-executed trick or not, he did not know. He sighed, and opened QQ. Nice.

"The transaction has been backed up. Fear not. Do your thing and the money will flow in."

Great. Now all he had to do to get 10 million dollars was to persuade twenty-something stubborn villagers. Well, at least he wouldn't have to worry about the exact financial matters anymore.

#

As Li shouldered his bag and prepared to leave, a man stopped him. He wore simple clothes, and appeared to be a villager. He spoke sternly.

"We have lived on this land for centuries. Do not dislodge us. Only the foolish do so. Sir, I ask that you turn back. We do not intend to utilise other means to stop you. Please, leave."

"No. It is time for you to go to the city, and to learn about technology. Your roots are outdated, your ancient traditions inferior. Please, let me go about my business."

The man's eyes flared up. "Man, do not insult my culture! Inferior or not, it is mine. I will uphold it, like my ancestors before me. I hope that you will feel remorse. Whatever you say, I want you to know that we do not yield."

Li pushed him out of the way, and set off at a hasty trot.

#

Li was fully exhausted when he arrived. He was plagued by the words of the man, and by his childhood.

The villagers were arrayed before him, each of them bearing an expression of contempt. Then, someone spoke.

"You city-dweller, can you please respect us? We don't want our peaceful land to be replaced by a concrete box. Whatever you offer us, we do not accept. We are the true guardians of our land, not-"

Li interrupted her. "No. The concrete box will bring you tons of money, more than anything you could ever dream of. You could have actual WiFi. Your children will go to school—"

Another villager waved his hand angrily. "NO! This is our land, not your land. We are happy here. Go!"

A third villager stepped up. "Li, you were born here. You are a traitor. You want to destroy the place where you were conceived. I'm old. I knew you. When you left, you were an innocent child of the mountains. Now, you reek of greed and treachery. If they truly want to evict us, then send a less offensive man. "

His expression softened. "But perhaps you were never a city man. Perhaps you can redeem yourself…?"

Li's mind flashed back to his distant childhood memories, the man who had stopped him, the pleas of the villagers. His mind flashed back to his gentle mother, his father, and their breakup after his mother couldn't adapt to the city. Li's mother had cried when his father took him to the city. Before that, his kindly grandmother and his mother had cared for him. He had mountain blood. He thought of the mystical stories of the mountains, those bedside stories that had accompanied throughout his childhood. The Flowering Pen. The long ridge that resembled the back of a fish. Legends of seductive foxes and wise sages.

And more. He remembered the mists that surrounded him, when he had run up and down the mountain slopes. His grandmother often yelled at him for that, saying that he could slip and fall. He remembered the berries, the many flowers, gorgeous wonders that he could never see in the city. He remembered the dragons and *qilin* who dwelled in the mists and clouds, in the legends at least. He remembered the ancient pines, so large and so tall that it took ten villagers to hug it.

Such were the mystical mountains of China.

Li looked at every villager, examining their expressions. Some were defiant, some hopeful. Then, the true Li took over.

"I support you," Li said, to the applause of the villagers.

"Just a little further," she thought to herself. She knew it had to be somewhere around here; the forest was getting more and more familiar. Just as she had predicted, their campsite was right around a cluster of tall trees. Everything was the same as they left it in the morning.

Except her parents were nowhere to be seen.

The Huangshan Village

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Sun, Zhaoping – 12

Up. Up. Up.

The blue cable car rose up the side of the mountain, gliding up the wire. Li stared out of the plexiglass windows. Beside him, the peaks jutted up, penetrating the ever present blanket of mist. There was nostalgia in his heart. The tranquil forest was spread out like a carpet under him.

The other passengers were busy snapping photos and shouting about how beautiful it was. Li paid no attention, and continued staring at a single peak. His eyes followed a thin path barely visible, into the mists. This was a path that his young self had trotted on a thousand times.

The cable car stopped, startling a brooding Li. He stepped off, breathed the fresh mountain air, and sighed. This was the air of his childhood. It was revitalising, refreshing. It washed away all the fatigue and grime of the city. Li's lungs welcomed the air, inhaling large quantities of it, rinsing every last tired particle itself in the elixir.

But he didn't want it. The repetitive, machine–like routines of urban life forced his revitalising mountain air out of his mind. Li's mind switched back to his work. He was here for a purpose. He was not here to emulate the intoxicating mountain air, he thought. He cleansed his mind, and set off.

The winding steps of Huangshan were made out of old, cracked stone. Small insects and ants crawled in the cracks, scurrying among the fallen leaves. It was autumn, a season traditionally represented by the Chinese element of metal. Li smiled as he stroked the shining accessory on his suitcase, forged in the shape of a rampant tiger. How fitting.

Every step was a pain to him. Li had spent two decades in an office chair, his wavering confidence bolstered by coffee and tea. In his office chair, Li had developed back pain, despite his young age. His knees cracked at every other step. The burden of his suitcase weighed heavily on his right arm, threatening to dislocate his shoulder.

Li deliberated painfully in his mind over his next step. He had come to crush the last resistance of holdout peasants on the mountaintops, their will weakened by money and technology. He was meant to strike the final blow. But he had seen all the simple and elegant beauty of Huangshan. It drew him in, a refreshing respite to the artificial neon jungles of the city. It wasn't glamorous, but it felt… real. It wasn't crafted in any way. It was pure. It had existed since the dawn of time, created by a power that no one knew. It was unlike the plastic displays that were so embellished, they felt alien and fake.

Then he thought of the technology, the access to convenience, and all the luxuries of city life. *Yes,* he thought, waving away all the mists of the mountains. He didn't want the mountains, even though it was his birthplace. It was never wrong to reject something bad for something better.

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The Mountain of the Yellow Emperor

Heep Yunn School, Chan, Hiu Yau – 14

"Huangshan, the misty mountain, is the origin of many myths. Hidden by mist, no one truly knows its real appearance, no one truly knows what terror is within, and no one truly knows what magic dwells beneath the misty cover.

"This moun…" she burst into fits of coughs, cutting off her sentence. Despite her attempt to hide it, I saw traces of blood.

"Gran, you don't have to continue," I cared about her health more than her stories, no matter how much I loved them.

"I'm fine, let's see," she paused in thought, fidgeting with the piece of jade strung around her neck. She said it was magical. "I shall tell you the story of Emperor Huang, who became an immortal dragon in HuangShan. He..... "

Gran finished her story and blew out my candles.

That night, I dreamt about dragons living on a misty mountain.

⋆ ⋆ ⋆ ⋆ ⋆ ⋆ ⋆ ⋆

A week later, the doctor came, he said Gran only had a week left.

Our only hope was the tale of a man who miraculously healed after visiting Huang Shan. It was rumoured that the mountain has exotic herbs, some even say that the Yellow Emperor healed him.

I remembered Gran's folktales. She always believed in them. Could those about Huangshan be true?

⋆ ⋆ ⋆ ⋆ ⋆ ⋆ ⋆ ⋆

That night, I couldn't sleep.

I couldn't give up without at least trying.

But Gran caught me sneaking out.

"Are you going to Huangshan?"

"... Yes."

"I know you want to help but… It's dangerous."

"Gran, please!"

She sighed, "It seems that I can't convince you not to go… It will be dangerous. But how can I doubt your ability like they once did to me? Go to the tallest peak, the Lotus peak, which is where the Yellow Dragon's lair stands." She reached for her jade, "Take my jade with you. This way, part of me will be with you, even if you don't make it back in time."
It was still dark when I arrived at the mountain.
Mist surrounded me as I went forward, shrouding my vision. I couldn't help but think that something was in the shadows, using the mist as their cover. Creaking sounds came from my left. A pair of glowing red eyes stared at me from a cave, I ran.

A shadow caught up to me. I was too slow. But it backed away as soon as it faced me, staring at my jade with horror. The jade emitted a warm glow that encased me, a protective aura that kept monsters at bay.

I was running from a relentless monster when I stumbled into a tunnel lined with peach blossoms, entering a clearing. A man shot the monster. "You okay? Why are you here? It's dangerous."

I told him about my quest to save Gran.

He offered to host me for the night and I accepted. "You will face Xingtian on your journey to the Emperor's lair," He handed me a sword as I prepared to leave the next morning. "I hope this can help," he smiled, but it didn't quite reach his eyes.

As I left, I turned back to look at the blossoms. The flowers were gone, the clearing too. A thick mist covered the entrance and I couldn't see the tunnel anymore.

Was it all a figment of my imagination?

I shook the strange feeling and continued hiking. I thought about the story of Xingtian, the giant. Gran said he was beheaded by the Yellow Emperor. He then used his nipples as eyes and belly button as mouth, hitting his shield with his battle axe as an act of defiance. Why was he here? Was it a challenge for visitors?

Two days passed. I looked out for the giant, but he was nowhere to be seen. As I climbed another hill, the mist thickened, shrouding my vision.

Then I heard it. Sounds of metal clanging against each other, and grunts of fury as loud as thunder. *Xingtian*. He was clad in nothing but a pair of ripped pants, exposing his bare torso that was now his face. I unscathed my sword. A red jewel gleamed brightly at the end of its hilt as the mist served as great cover for me.

"Hey!" I called for his attention, then quickly ducked behind a rock.

"All intruders shall face death!" He bellowed.

He stepped closer to me. I struck, slashing off one of his toes. Hollering in pain, he thrashed and hit around blindly. I rolled out of his strike zone.

To my luck, the mist seemed to have cleared a little. And I saw my solution.

I dove for the vines, yanked one off, and tied the end to a sturdy rock. I ran around the giant in circles, using the mist as my cover.
As I almost finished encircling him, he saw me. My blood ran cold.

He lifted me off the ground towards his mouth, as in, belly button. I tightened the vine before he could notice them. Since the giant lifted me up, the vines were able to wrap around not only his feet, but his torso. He tripped and fell, dropping me to the ground.

Xingtian was tied up.

"Bravo," somebody clapped from behind me, "I knew I could count on you to defeat Xingtian."

I turned. It was the man who saved me.

He smirked, "You trust so easily, all it takes is a bit of illusion from a Fangshi like me. People are so easy to fool as long as they believe, everything will become real for them."

Anger seeped through me, so that was why the peach blossoms disappeared when I left. "I put a tracking jewel on the sword and followed you. You did me a huge favour, young man, I could never have gotten past Xingtian without you. Now, I can rule for eternity!" His laugh echoed through the mountain, sending chills down my spine.

"Do me another favour and stay here." He flicked his hand, a cage materialised around me. And he disappeared into the thickening mist.

I trusted the wrong person. I must stop him! I yanked at the bars of the cage. It wouldn't budge. "Ugh!" The mist thickened even more. For a split second, the cage seemed to blend into the mist, appearing to be see−through, unreal.

Of course this was an illusion! The Fangshi's voice ringed in my head, "People are so easy to fool as long as they believe, everything becomes real for them." I couldn't break free because I thought of the cage as real!

Not real, I told myself.
My hands passed through the metal. I broke free and ran up to the Lotus Peak, hoping I wasn't too late.

Two lions guarded the entrance at the temple. "State your intentions, boy, or you shall face the wrath of the lions."

"I am here to stop the Fangshi…"

"No worries, child, we took care of him." Traces of blood dripped from the lion's lips. I shuddered.

"What are your other intentions?"

"I'm looking for a panacea for my ill grandmother. The Emperor is my last hope."

"What a brave hero with a kind heart, go in."

I stepped inside and was faced with a majestic dragon.

"My brave young hero," the dragon boomed, "Very few were able to arrive here."

"I'm here for my grandma."

"Your grandmother was a brave heroine. She once protected this temple with her life, preserving my essence." A bag of herbs, wrapped in paper, appeared on the floor in front of me, "Feed her this medicine. My companion Qilun here would give you a ride back, I wish you all the best."

Gran told me about Qilun before. Perhaps this was why she believed in myths, she experienced them. The Qilun took off and soon we were back home. But I was too late.

My mother was weeping next to Gran's bed.

"This shouldn't…" I dropped to the floor, tears spilling out of my eyes.

I clutched the jade on my neck, the only thing Gran left for me. The jade glowed hot, illuminating our cottage, blinding us. When the light died down, it magically went back to Gran.

She opened her eyes.

"How…?"

"I told you a piece of me was in the jade. It was enchanted to store part of my soul, and perhaps, scaring off some monsters too.

After Gran downed the medicine, the lively brightness returned to her eyes.

As I went to clear the used herbs, I noticed mist had clouded over the pot. When it cleared, I peered inside. All the herbs have disappeared, not a trace of medicine remained.

The paper that was used to wrap the herb fluttered from the table to the ground in front of me. There I saw:

She was saved because you believed and held hope in your heart.
The panacea, my child, is your faith.

The Path of Pain to the Peak

Heep Yunn School, Chan, Xin Kei – 13

1837, Mudu (a village at the foot of Huangshan)

One month old

A baby born inked. Lim was inked. An angry red birthmark spread across half of his face, like an entire continent on a map. "Look how gross he is! I bet his mother did something bad during her pregnancy!" Callous cackle echoed in the tiny room where the new mother lay exhausted. She glanced at the tiny baby next to her, the birthmark, rancorous and raging, escaped her vision. In his face, she saw only her entire world.

"Rise higher. Rise above. Rise beyond," she whispered to the sleeping babe.

1842, Mudu

Five years old

A boy. He was only five, but he might as well be fifty. He knew of prejudice, knew its bitter taste. He knew of pain, felt its sting from the heat of a palm. He knew of hatred and its burning touch that set fire to his soul, but not his skin.

He was a boy who could not ambulate through the village without being laughed or stared at. Like how water could flow and evaporate in thin air, he would disappear whenever he encountered any of the village children. It was as if his shoes instinctively knew where to run when bullies came. Like an iguana, his clothes changed colours whenever he needed to hide from snickers and smirks. This was Lim, a master at disappearing.

Lim looked up where the cloud mists hugged the mountain like a comforting blanket, a tender shelter for the peak from the wind. "*Rise higher. Rise above. Rise beyond,"* the clouds seemed to write a message with their tendrils curled across the sky. And by noon, the mists would have disappeared, just like Lim.

1849, Mudu

Twelve years old

A man. A man who could outfarm, outplough, outharvest any villager twice his age, twice his size. But all he wanted was his mother to outlive him.

He looked down at his mother's grave. The salty tears flowed into his mouth, bringing the bitter taste of sorrow. Sadness was like a river, cold and unending, chilling his heart, deadening his mind.

He was in the field that fateful afternoon. Hard at work in the heat of the summer, he was too far and too tired to hear the screams of "Fire! Fire!" The villagers heard his mother's cries. *They* smelled the smoke. *They* felt the heat of the flames. But *they* did nothing! All out of fear that their children would be cursed just as her son was if they touched her.

Bitter. Unforgiving. Pain.

Was it his fault?

Flames of resentment burned within, brimming in his chest, as hot as lava. Near her grave, a broad belt of silver brocade wound its way in front of Lim, mirroring the person that he was disgusted of. Himself. In the gurgling of the stream, he heard the laughters and guffaws of the villagers.

"Lim, look at you, I bet you did something horrible in your past life"

"Lim, get away from me, I don't want to get infected by you!"

In the ripples of the water, glass shards reflected off its surface in tiny but sharp and painful memories. The evil curl of a lip after an insult. The narrowed eyes before a well–aimed shove. The wicked sniff before a snicker.

He jumped into the water, wishing to drown the hot, angry feeling, wishing that his tears, his birthmark, his guilt would be washed away.

Under the surface of the water, he heard his mother's voice, garbled but unmistakably hers. "Lim, it is time to head home! *Rise higher. Rise above. Rise beyond.*"

He saw her face, waiting for him at the surface and swam eagerly up. When he broke through, her face was gone. All that's above him was the mountain that touched the sky, and the clouds that played around its peaks.

1852, Mudu

Fifteen years old

An outcast. An outcast who had no other features. Not his hands that could turn a plough faster than a full grown man. Not his legs that could outrun the swiftest rabbit in Mudu. It was always the birthmark, a curling and lambent flame burnt on his face. This was Lim.

He had desperately wanted to join in the festivities of the Summer Solstice Festival. The villagers of Mudu were praying for prosperity, racing dragon boats and enjoying the roasted pig to celebrate the Summer Solstice Festival. For once, he wanted to be included. For once, he wanted to be a part of the villagers. For once, he wanted to join the festivities.

"Get away from me!"a villager jeered. "I don't want to get infected!"

"I am not infected, why can't I join?" Lim protested.

"Look at the birthmark on your face, don't spread it! Don't bring a plague to our village!"

The familiar words slammed into him. It was always the same. The hatred, the fear, the anger that burned against him. When would he ever be seen, truly seen, as a person and not a birthmark?

Suddenly, he wants to get out of this place. The words he grew up with came again like a siren song. "*Rise higher. Rise above. Rise beyond.*" Determined, he set out one foot in front of the other, eyes fixed on the cloudy mists of Huangshan. He didn't know why. Didn't know how. But he felt lured to conquer its peak.

Moss and lichen covered the boulders sprawled in rockery of mother nature. The worn path snaked through the blanket of grass with thick dark green boughs arching over it from each side. The sky vanished almost completely, only a few fragments of blue remained, like scattered pieces of a puzzle. The air was filled with the fragrance of leaves and loam, damp too. The silence caressed his skin like a cool summer breeze, soothing his soul. Lim climbed the mountains of Huangshan. Fear crippled him but he was keen to conquer the mountain. He cared little about the wet mud that stuck into his shoes or the branches that dug into his shoulders. He was eager to leave. Eager to finally arrive.

"Rise higher. Rise above. Rise beyond."

Two months later.

Over many moons and over many suns, he finally reached the peak of Huangshan. There was nothing higher, above, or beyond than this. The quiet curl of the mists was comforting yet unnerving at the same time. Lim felt that something momentous was about to happen. He just did not know what it was.

The sound of quiet footsteps broke the silence. The footsteps were coming from the mist, towards him. Closer. Closer. *Closer.*

"Helloooo?' Lim asked, timid, hopeful and scared all at once.

And then. And then the silhouette became clearer. Clearer. *Clearer.*

It was a man. An old man with a mottled scalp ambled out with a shuffling gait. It was not his gnarled hands that surprised Lim. Nor his grey scraggly beard. But his red birthmark on his left part of his face, its outline exactly like the missing part of a map on Lim's face. Lim stood up with a jolt. He was both flabbergasted and bewildered.

Every muscle of his body had just frozen before a grin crept into his face.

"There is no need to *rise higher. Rise above. Rise beyond*. You are safe here now. Welcome to the *Village of the Inked*."

High up on this mountain, Lim was finally home.

The Soul Trader

Heep Yunn School, Chow, Lok Lam – 15

'Noel! Could you just put down your phone for a while!' Amanda demanded.

I groaned and completely ignored my mother.

My dad, Nick calmly whispered, 'Do you really think she works? She's like an old witch living in those "Chinese Magical Mountains"!' Amanda gave a weak smile back. I frowned and asked, 'Nick, who's...?' Amanda interrupted, 'Noel! How many times do I need to tell you not to call your parents by first names? That's very rude!' I rolled my eyes and spared no response.

The car travelled for a long distance, with all the sharp turns and mischievous intersections. Looking out the window, I saw clouds running fast across the sky with the carry of the wind, as if they were children on a piece of grassland. There were villages sitting quietly above them, like calm and wise grandparents taking after their grandchildren. There were those pine trees which stood at every top of the mountains, watching over this planet. They made up the view that took my breath away. I rolled down the car window, the air seemed to get colder as we travelled along the mountain roads. The car seemed to be more and more distant from the world, it gave off a mysterious vibe as if we were going somewhere secret.

We finally stopped at a village. Getting out of the car, I noticed the stone beside the village entrance. I walked closer towards it and brushed my hands over the words.

'Surrender your body in exchange
Once traded then never change
Underneath the surface of strange
Lies a new beginning which was rearranged'

'Surrender?' I wondered. Nick dragged me away into the entrance of the village before I could understand the meaning of the poem, but it was still on my mind.

We walked into the temple of the village. This temple was different. Looking around the temple hall, I also realized the most peculiar thing was that there wasn't a single person around. Replacing the statues was an ancient book in the middle and a stage behind it, the stage was like those stages for consecration. I walked closer towards the book, the aged pages lied open and were covered in dust.

An old woman walked in. She introduced herself to my parents, with a very polite tone, 'These two must be Mr. and Mrs. Pang. I am the person in charge of the temple, you can call me Nadia. The manners education class is ready…' 'Again? Amanda, is this your tricks...' I burst in instantly but was then interrupted by Nick, 'Noel! Do not call your mother by her first name!' Nadia urged, 'His manners will be corrected, now shall we begin?'

'Now may Noel step onto the stage please.'

I walked unwillingly onto the stage, thinking this was just another silly act of Amanda trying to change her son's 'misbehaviors'. Nadia flipped her ancient book onto the correct page and read, 'Upon the stars…' I could only recognize the first sentence, then there was some foreign language that I couldn't understand. I stood there plainly listening to her reading. When she finally finished, I gave out a long sigh. I walked towards Amanda and Nick and interrogated, 'What act are you playing again this time?' Strangely, they ignored me, plainly glancing at the stage.

I turned around and I saw … 'myself'!

I saw 'myself' up on the stage, as if there was a mirror in between. I was shocked, my heartbeat was racing fast. I saw 'myself' tidying up his clothes which I never do. I rubbed my eyes and stared at him. He walked downstage towards my parents and said with a polite tone, 'Mom and Dad, thank you so much for doing all of these for me.' Amanda and Nick were so pleased with what they saw. But I was so confused that I shouted, 'Nick! I'm right here! Amanda! He's fake!' Nick gave a written cheque to Nadia then they walked out of the temple, without a single glimpse back at me.

I was so terrified like a deer falling into a hunter's paws that I screamed, 'Mom! Dad! Don't leave me!' I tried to run towards them but I fell onto the floor. I could do nothing but stared at them taking a fake 'me' away. Their car travelled away, getting smaller in sight. The sense of hollow inside me grew larger in contrast.

'It is of no use.' She scoffed, 'You stupid humans, always regretting when you finally lost the things you care.' I spoke slowly, 'What…' She began, 'It is called soul trading.'

'This act of soul trading is my mission and what I was born to do. This career of mine began when I found out that some rich people wanted to live forever. I had this idea of soul trading to satisfy their desires. They pay me, I get them another life.'

I yelled, 'What does it have to do with me!'

'You see, I cannot plainly create a human being. Therefore, I thought of a plan– education. Stupid parents want their kids to be better, they even believe coming to these places would 'heal their children's evil souls'. Therefore, I exchanged their children's souls with the rich folks.' She smiled as if she thought there was nothing wrong. I paused for a while then said, 'What? My body was exchanged?' I looked down at my hands, they were slightly transparent, but I could already see the wrinkles on them. I blinked for a few times to ensure I wasn't seeing things.

Nadia walked over to me and took my hand. She dragged me to the ancient book and flipped it open. She continued, 'Long before, I was sent to this beautiful and mysterious mountain.' She pointed at the first picture of the book, it was a picture of a younger her holding the ancient book while standing at the top of Huangshan.

Nadia glanced at the picture with a sorrowful eyesight. She spat, 'It was lonely living here. Those villagers went far away after they heard my plan. Sure, there were poets and storytellers who were inspired by my story but most people thought it was cruel. News was spread among nations and a rumour of evil souls on Huangshan was developed. Huangshan was said to be mysterious and I was left here all alone.'

I stared at the picture, 'It is cruel.'

'Your parents got a well–mannered kid, the rich guys got to live longer, I got the money and you got to stay in this beautiful village. Ain't that good?'

I glared at her and whimpered, 'You can't just break families like that...'

I recalled the moments when I was actually happy with my parents and I continued, 'You are no one to replace families!' She scoffed again, 'I've been here since forever, and I have only seen those parents babbling about how their children should improve. If your parents really love you that much, why would they be changing you against your will?'

I was dumbfounded.

Months had passed after the day I arrived here, that horrible memory of me exchanging souls still haunted me every night. Mom and Dad were never back, probably they didn't realize the kid wasn't me or they were satisfied with a well−mannered kid. The only thing that could calm me was the magnificent view of Huangshan, the clouds still floated past every day. The world was changing and this view was probably the only constant in changes.

I was left in charge of this temple after months of training. I signed myself up because I wanted to prove that the world didn't work like what Miss Nadia said. I still believed that families cannot be torn apart, I just needed some proof. I walked towards the entrance of the village and stopped at the stone. I brushed my hand over the words which lie upon it.

Would things be any different if I had looked more carefully at the poem that day?

A family walked in, the parents greeted me but the kid rolled his eyes. I smiled as if I saw the shadow of my youth.

'Good evening, Mr. and Mrs. Wong. I am the person in charge of this temple, Leon. The education class is ready.' The kid walked onto the stage with his body shivering.

I turned the ancient book and flipped to the correct page. 'Upon the stars…'

Suddenly, the kid screamed, 'Mom! Dad! It's so scary!' He ran down the stage towards his parents and hugged them tight. He sobbed, 'I promised not to be rude!' His parents hugged him back tight. His mom patted on his head and said softly, 'Sweetie, we won't make you do it if you don't want to.' His dad nodded apologetically at me.

'It's fine, I wish you a happy family life.'

Watching them walk away in perfect harmony.
I thought I found my proof.

The Answer

Heep Yunn School, Li, Nicole – 15

I didn't know why I was there. People said that the 'secrets of fame and success lie in the mists of the Yellow Mountains', so let me see if the 'generous' mountains could spare me from my heavy debt back home.

It was dusk when I hiked on the Cloud Valley Scenic Area alone. The howls from panthers and squawks from eagles seemed to be communicating with each other. On the way up from Yungu Temple, my tiredness and annoyance rose. With the ponderous travel backpack on my arched and sored back, I was forced to rest beside a stone statue. It was a man in a long cloak, holding up his hand as if to show the way. 'I don't like this.' I muttered recurrently, although I did feel a bit of reassurance knowing that at least the statue cared.

When I was struggling to stand back up, I lost my balance. As I tumbled down the hill, every part of my body was being cut by the unforgiving rocks, but I could not cry in pain. Alas, in the midst of the excruciating pain and despair, I felt a forceful punch on my skull, and everything went dark.

I woke up to the mellifluous sound of a traditional Chinese instrument, alongside the rippling sound of waterfalls. Feeling drowsy and alert at the same time, I frantically tried to prop myself up. 'Fear not. Haste will not get you anywhere.' A deep masculine voice chuckled. Following the source of the voice, I saw, with blurry vision, a basic outline of an old Chinese man who was wearing a cloak.

'Wh...who are you? Where… where….' I felt unsafe with this 'kidnapper'. However, with my soreness and pain in my body, I was in no form of defending myself. 'I am not a kidnapper, and this is my cave. If you feel at least a bit better, have some fruits, and go home.' With the melody of Erhu soothing my tense mind, I began to put down my guard. After a bit of rest, I tried to leave.

'Stay. I sense that you came here to search for the secrets of the mountains, so I will now point out the way.' I chuckled. I never cared about the so-called 'secrets' of the Yellow Mountains, so I was quick to refuse his offer. However, as odd as it might sound, I was allured with the temptation to know what was in the 'Pandora's box'. I decided to follow him.

He led me along the hiking trails of the mountain. As we walked in silence, it was then that I first started to appreciate nature. We were very high from sea level, and looking out, the waves of mist spread out in the air, masking sources of life on the mountains. Of course, this cheeky act of the mist could not deceit me as the wildlife shouted and competed for attention. Yet, they competed with laughter and peace. I then saw the mountains as full of life and vivacity, and I started to smile. The grass crackled softly beneath our feet as I continued exploring the depths of the Yellow Mountains.

'There you go.' The man said. I realized that I was not alone. 'To discover the secrets of the mountains, you first need to let go of your ego and befriend the mountains. Nature always seeks for reconciliation, but it is man who denies its good intention. Anger brings much sorrow.'

As we walked further into the mountains, he looked at me and said in a serious tone, 'You are a good man. You are just lost.' I was shocked. He had said exactly what I feel. I felt numb and lost. He glanced at my defeated expression and said, 'No man is a perfect man; no gold is sufficiently bare. If you want a change in your life, you will have to learn.'

We sat down next to a spring. Strands of thin light came from the sky and showered onto the emerald waters. I took a whiff. The fresh smell of nature never fails to calm and amaze me. Just when I was immersed in the beauty of nature, the man told me something that would forever change my life.

'Your desire for fame and wealth destroyed you. Life is not about materialism. It is about spiritual cultivation. It is about not being jealous when you see others getting better than you, but to applaud them. It is about not feeling defeated when facing obstacles, but to overcome them with courage. It is about love, it is about wisdom, and acknowledging the fact that we know nothing. This is the meaning of life.'

I froze. I could not believe that after all these years of thirst for money and power, I only came to a wrong approach to life. Despite seeing my stunned expression, the man grinned with satisfaction and continued.

'You see, the mist and the odd-shaped pines are the spirits of the ancestors who chose to cultivate their minds in the mountains. They became the source of all lives in the mountains, which explains why our King, Huangdi chose to make the elixir of immortality in this place and why many new species are found here.'

'A long time ago, it was evident to the scholars and the wildlife that wherever civilization was present, devils of rage, distrust, jealousy, and greed could be found. These devils were distractions from the true meaning of life, which was the cultivation of the spiritual mind. This was the reason why scholars retreated to this very mountain. They fed their minds and spirits on the beauty of nature and the tranquillity of the mountains. They let go of all the desires and greed and dedicated their lives to find the meaning of life. When they died, their spirits stayed in the mountains, guarding and leading the people who went to the mountains in search of spiritual success. This is why the mountains remain solemn and mysterious. This is the story of the mountains.'

After listening to the wise man, I gasped in awe. He woke me up from my ignorance. Before, I was a penniless man who had deep hatred and jealousy. I was obsessed with money and jealous of others' achievements. Now I knew. Being consumed by materialistic possessions and jealousy kept us from love and life.

I walked the man back to his cave. However, he gestured me to the steps following the old cableway. He stood with me beside a pine tree. 'Look at the beauty of nature. Contemplate what I have just said. You will know what to choose; spiritual or materialistic wealth.' Then, unexpectedly, he chuckled, 'Centuries ago, I gave advice to a young man like you. You remind me of him.' Abruptly, the man turned into the exact stone statue that I had seen before I tumbled down the hill. I now knew who he was. He was the rock statue, 'Immortal Pointing the Way'. Legend has it that he once pointed a man on the way to a happy life and success, and now it was he who led me from darkness to light, to truth. In that very moment, I have decided to develop spiritual cultivation in this mountain, where I was reborn.

After moments of solitude, the sense of responsibility slowly but surely marched into my heart, reminding me of my long but meaningful journey ahead. After sending the statue my last smile, I grabbed the fruits he had given me in the cave, my worn-out photo with my family which I had brought for this trip, and started walking towards the peak of the mountain. Throughout my hike, the mystic rock inscriptions and the ancient pine trees pointed me the way, and I felt more and more connected with life. As time passed, I was more immersed in my thoughts with the meaning of spiritual cultivation. What am I afraid of? What is wisdom? How does one obtain true peace?

I arrived at the acclaimed Nine-Dragon Waterfall. The nine levels were equally almighty, but they coexist in harmony. Each level of waterfall originated in different places but they all ended in the same pool. Isn't life the same? We humans are born with different backgrounds, we take on unique journeys throughout life. Regardless, as the Bible has said, 'Ashes to ashes, and dust to dust; in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection unto eternal life'. Just like how the different levels of waterfall all ended in the same pool, life will one day come to an end. So what's more important than embracing the present?

Slowly, I found more and more inspiration from the Nine-Dragon Waterfall. Determined, I set down the fruits that the man had given me on the floor, and with the sound of never-ending waterfall accompanying me, I closed my eyes and started my journey to enrich my spiritual wealth.

The Immortality Elixir

Heep Yunn School, Ng, Hei Yan – 14

What is death? It is something unavoidable, a natural process that happens to everyone in which all of your normal biological functions stop and you would close your eyes for the last time to abide in darkness and silence. It is something that I, Emperor Xuanyuan was terrified of.

Before I used the immortality elixir, I was a successful ruler who led countless men to victory in wars and my country was showered by riches. I appeared fearless among my people, as a powerful emperor, but it was nothing but a mask I put on for show, for I am haunted by the inevitable, death. One day, the glory that I brought to this country would end. My rule upon it would be over as I breathe my last breath in this palace.

I searched far and wide to find a way to avoid death, but to no avail, until I stumbled across the findings of a dead alchemist in the royal library. Fu Qiugong was an infamous alchemist who dedicated his whole life to achieve immortality, until his own research doomed him, as he fell to his death when trying to gather the ingredients for the immortality elixir.

I was not expecting much when I first read this book but what I discovered left me in awe. The findings concluded that an immortality elixir could be made with the life of others. Once you have sucked out a person's life, you could live another year without the fear of death. In other words, if you take enough people's lives, you can live for as long as you want, or immortality, as I would call it.

With this newfound information, I wasted no time to begin constructing a contraption that would create people's most desired dream and suck out their lives, while generating mist that covered up the piles of bodies. I would place the contraption somewhere that it was inescapable, and I knew the perfect place for it——Yishan, or Huangshan as people now call it.

On the 100th day, the contraption was finished. I began heading to Huangshan, leaving my trusted chancellor in charge. I set foot on Lotus Peak, the tallest mountain of Huangshan, so tall that no one would even dare to come up. As I gazed upon the breathtaking view that Huangshan had to offer, I started the contraption. Mist surrounded the mountain within seconds, and I was no longer able to see the foot of the mountain.

Word soon spread about the emperor who never returned after his visit to Huangshan. Grief filled the country as people mourned their missing emperor. To commemorate me, they named Yishan to Huangshan. Centuries after centuries, an endless number of people had come to Huangshan, each having different objectives and desires. My contraption created thousands after thousands of illusions for the people who stepped foot on Huangshan, each falling victim to my machine without fail. The peace and silence of this little village of mine seemed to be the only form of civilization that was seen on this mountain. Animals were my only source of company and what was keeping me sane from the silence of this mountain.

It was just like any other day when everything went south. I was walking out of my door when I saw something that I didn't think I would ever see again in this lifetime. Another living human was standing in front of my door. Cold sweat dripped down my head as a hint of panic rushed through my body. How did he get through the mountain without falling for the illusions that the contraption created? The contraption showed no signs of malfunctioning when I checked on it last night, so how did this human get past the machine?

"Greetings, Emperor Xuanyuan. Pardon me for such a sudden visit. I am the person who created the immortality elixir, Fu Qiugong, or should I say, the ghost of Fu Qiugong. May I ask if you used the immortality elixir from my findings?" the ghost of Fu Qiugong said.

"What are you doing here? Yes, I have used your findings to make an immortality elixir, but I do not see how this may affect you. You are a ghost, no longer a living being of this world, I do not see how me making it would cause you any trouble," I replied.

Fu Qiugong chuckled, and said, "Oh no, it does not affect me at all. I am just here to stop you from using the elixir. You could have done so much more if you had not used this elixir of mine, just like my friend Rong Chengzi. He was quite the talented young man." As he continued, his expression slowly morphed into a sad, gloomy look. It looked as though he was lost in his own memories of his friend.

"But why? I don't understand. Why should I not use your elixir? I have gained so much more than I could ever have when I was a human. I have gained immortality, I saw the world changing in front of my very eyes. I saw the changes of this mountain. I saw history happening. I could not have gained these if I were a human," I smiled to myself. With the immortality elixir, I had experience so much more than I could ever have. There was no way I am giving up on using it.

Fu Qiugong simply smiled, with a hint of sadness on his face.

"Let me tell you a story, a story of two alchemists who wanted to be immortals. They, like many others, were afraid to die more than anything else on this earth. They decided to put their talent in alchemy to use to create an immortality elixir to prevent the inevitable. In the end, they succeeded in creating the elixir, and one of the alchemists wrote down his research into a finding. However, by being an immortal, they had lost so much more than they ever wanted to. Sure, they gained immortality, but at what cost? They could not see their families ever again, as they never aged. They lurked so far into the woods that no one could ever reach them. One of the alchemists was driven into insanity from all the things he had lost and vanished into the woods. The other alchemist faked his own death, and he lived in regret for the rest of his life, realizing the mistakes that he had made by creating the immortality elixir. After his death, he searched every corner of this earth as a ghost to see if anyone had used his findings to be an immortal, and attempted to stop those who did."

Before I could utter a single word, the monk stopped me and continued speaking. "How much have you lost because you used the elixir? You could not see your family because you had to stay in Huangshan. You have not seen other humans simply because you had to stay in this mountain to use the elixir. How many times have you wanted to give up because you feel so bored in this mountain doing the same thing over and over again? You can't rule your country anymore. You have been so close to insanity so many times, yet you go on, simply because you have gone too far to stop using the elixir. How many lives have you taken away to make the immortality elixir? Death is unavoidable, you cannot escape it. The more you try to run away from it, the scarier it will be. Death is just another part of the circle of life, a part of nature. Xuanyuan, accept death."

The words of Fu Qiugong hit me in the heart. I wanted to argue that he was wrong, that I had not lost anything by using the elixir, that I was not a coward who was afraid of death. But deep down, I knew he was correct. I couldn't lead my country to further glory and prosperity. I could have experienced so much more if I had carried on being the emperor of my country, instead of this dull and mundane life that I have right now. How many families have I destroyed by taking away the lives of their loved ones? The feeling of regret rushed through me as tears streamed down my face.

I walked towards the contraption that I had built thousands of years ago and stopped the contraption. It stopped working after mere seconds. The mist that I created with the machine still surrounded Huangshan. It would probably take another thousand years before it could disappear completely. I looked back at Fu Qiugong, who reached out a hand at me. As I took his hand, I felt my body slowly vanishing away. Fu Qiugong and I became nothing but two glowing orbs, and we flew to Tian as we both finally accepted death.

Kismet

HKUGA College, Chan, Wing Tsun Valerie – 12

To be honest, I had never expected my first month in China to end up like this.

But here I was, perched precariously on a flat marble slab, with nothing to defend myself against the harsh winter winds except for a flimsy windbreaker. This… wasn't exactly a typical Christmas Eve.

Really, this wasn't even close to what Christmas Eve should be like, but well, I couldn't really stay at home. It wasn't even a home to me, when I couldn't understand what everyone was talking about most of the time.

And besides, I still didn't understand why we had to come to China. Father's apothecary was doing wonderfully in London and life was better than ever when he announced two months ago that we would be going back to his hometown in Huangshan City to have more 'business opportunities', apparently. The whole family had to emigrate to this rural town where the only appeal was the picturesque landmarks– which, for your information, weren't what they looked like on the web.

So the only logical solution was to run away, and since for some reason, I had been drawn to Huangshan Mountain since day one, I had naturally resolved to spend a week on Lotus Peak. Nothing ventured, nothing gained, right? The fresh air– and my disappearance– would probably make my family change their minds and bring me home.

I sat there for what seemed like forever, wallowing in self–pity and mindlessly kicking my legs against the circular marble slab I was sitting on. I had been walking for hours and on several occasions climbing over small landslides until I reached a rather flat area, strangely devoid of trees and barren except for the slab that she was sitting on, inscribed with Chinese characters that I had never even seen before.

The stone was cool against my touch, and I figured that it was as good a place as any other to rest tonight, and as I idly doodled on my diary, I swept my fingers across the carved characters, covered in a thin layer of dust and slightly warm to the touch.

As I tried to speak the characters out loud, stumbling over many unknown words, the carvings grew hotter under my palms until a glow started emanating from inside the marble. My eyes widened in alarm and I warily backed away, but it was too late.

A silhouette had materialized and started to take the shape of a person with long limbs and a lean body. I couldn't bear to look, in fear of it being one of the shapeshifters that the superstitious elders had kept going on about. But still, curiosity overtook my common sense and I opened my eyes slightly to see… a boy.

He had dark floppy hair that covered almond shaped brown eyes and looked around in confusion. His movements were easy and elegant and reminded me of ancient nobility in the novels that I read, and as he registered my presence, the boy bowed slightly and spoke in a dialect that I didn't comprehend.

"I'm sorry, I don't speak fluent Chinese," I apologized, hoping that he would understand what I was trying to say. "I'm Harper, and you are…?"

A look of comprehension dawned on his face and he started speaking in English. "Oh, good day, Miss Harper," He greeted me with smooth English. "My name is–" He paused, then said, "Edward."

I couldn't think of anything to say that didn't border along the lines of 'how did you suddenly appear', but the boy didn't say anything either, so we sat there on the rock in quiet, albeit slightly awkward silence.

I stared morosely into the darkness in front of me, tall, willowy trees wailing the vehement force of the glacial winds, small specks of snow brightening the dark, dense clouds that obscured almost everything from view, calling to mind the tale I had read of the two lovers who had jumped off the cliffside of Huangshan together instead of being sentenced to severe punishment for their forbidden love, much like the story of Romeo and Juliet.

The boy suddenly spoke, jolting my mind back to the present. "Are you a… tourist?" He asked hesitantly, as if he was unsure of the term.

"I'm not a tourist," I snapped frostily before I realized the huge mistake that I had just made. "I mean… I live here in Huangshan City, yes, but it's not permanent–" I cut off abruptly. What if this boy was some… ancient, vengeful spirit trying to punish me for wanting to go home? "What about you?" I tried to sound pleasant and failed miserably.

He arched a brow at me. "Do you want to know?" He replied cryptically, and for some reason I couldn't understand, I nodded, and Edward placed a pale, cold hand on my wrist. Before I could jerk away, everything in front of me seemed to be wiped away in a blur of white.

I found myself alone and on the same slab that I had been sitting on, only with a small rock outcrop sheltering me from the merciless storm that was drenching everything within visibility. The dim hubbub of voices made me turn, and I could then see three middle–aged men crouched over a crudely fashioned bowl that they held over a small flame, chanting some kind of poem together.

In the corner, a slim young boy was leaning against the walls, with shadowed eyes and a downcast expression. He was… Edward?

The plumpest of the men looked up in his direction. "Edward," he beckoned to the boy, who hesitantly walked over with reluctance. "But Father– Emperor–" The man, who was apparently a king– which meant that Edward was royalty– didn't even look in his direction, forcefully grabbed him by the arm and cruelly dunked his head into the murky, bubbling concoction he was brewing, a twisted smile appearing on his face. "This is for my own good, son," he said, and as the scene faded away, Edward limp and lifeless in the king's grip, I was left staring in horror at the boy sitting next to me.

"Who even says 'this is for my own good'?" I quipped, trying to lighten the mood. Edward didn't speak for a long while, and when he did, his tone was grave.

"My father was Huangdi," he started. "The great 'Father of China'. He came to the mountain in search of immortality, but in order to live forever he had to sacrifice me." A bitter expression flitted over his face. "He did it. No hesitations. But what he didn't know was that he had unwittingly condemned me to an eternity of being trapped in this marble, never to be freed unless someone read out the inscription."

I was speechless, but even if I had said something, it wouldn't have mattered anyway. I bit my lip and quietly touched his arm. "Harper." Edward said carefully, "I think you should go home." I didn't answer him, but I knew he was right. The first colors of dawn were starting to appear on the horizon, splashes of golden yellow and orange brightening up the sky. Edward didn't say anything else and I hugged him.

No words were needed, but he understood and smiled sadly at my earnest face.

I had to go home. To be completely truthful, I had no idea what even possessed me to run away. I mean… true, London would always be my home, but well, those were my parents, and deep down I knew that this place wasn't that bad.

"Thank you," I told him quietly and started sprinting down the cobbled stone steps, slick with snow. Edward stood there motionless, his expression not betraying anything and devoid of emotion. "Would you… want to come with me? Leave the mountain?"

Edward finally spoke, "No, Harper, I can't… this is the last piece of me left," He said, his knuckles grazing the marble slab. "I cannot leave."

"Please," I begged. Yes, he was a total stranger. Yes, he was probably from eons ago. But he was still a child deep down, and I did owe him for making me realize that I belonged with my family. Edward disappeared and materialized in front of me, his gaze softening as he kissed the back of my hand.

And then, he faded.

“Edward?” I screamed. But he was gone. All that remained was a small whisper, over and over again in the back of my head. And as a thick mist started to surround me, a single tear dropped from my eyes.

Now here I was, alone on the bus, my notebook spread on my lap. The driver smiled at me, his eyes crinkling. “Up so early, lassie? Merry Christmas.”

I replied politely. “Merry Christmas.” My mind raced with unspoken thoughts, but as I picked up the pen, I could only write one sentence.

‘I found out the true meaning of kismet on Christmas Eve. Or should I say, kismet found me.’

Tales of Kayla and the Mystical Creatures

HKUGA College, Leung, Yat Laam Ashley – 12

Hi, I'm Kayla, an eleven year old explorer. I can't wait to tell you everything! First of all, I'm adopted. Yes, you can stare in disgust and then ignore me like everyone else. I'm told that my parents died in a murderous fire ten years ago but I always feel like the truth wasn't as simple.

My adoptive parents brought me on a vacation to China. I explored the mysterious mountains and made a huge discovery that totally blew my mind!
After an overnight flight trip, we arrived there. We followed a tourist group to visit Huangshan which is famous for it's unknown mysteries! When we arrived at the bottom of the mountain, I gazed upon it and gasped in amazement! It's humongous in a phenomenal way. That's when I accidentally left the tourist group and wandered off into the unknown…

"Whoa!"I tripped over a spiky rock and fell into a bottomless hole with my right leg injured!
All of a sudden, I ended up in a peculiar cave...at least that's what I thought.
But unlike other successful explorers, I was agitated. I was limping with my right leg bleeding, frantically searching for a way out. I trod the muddy ground and pushed myself towards the highest point where I might be able to climb out, but it was no use.

I hopelessly flopped against the cave wall but then the sound of an elephant call caught my attention.
Turns out, it was a fascinating creature! It was as small as my palm and had the trunk and ears of an elephant. However, it's body was really furry and it had a curly tail like a pig. It's fur was light brown with the scent of a brownie.
"I can't believe it! I'm the first person to discover you! I'll call you...Elepie!"I remarked as I doodled it onto my book. I would disclose this to the human society!

Not only had I discovered Elepie, but he also led me to other kinds of seductive creatures, such as extraordinary turtles that move unbelievably fast, enchanting antelopes that could run on air and mind blowing owls that literally blow bubbles as big as your head! I had such a wondrous time that I didn't realise it was getting late.

I promised I'd visit them again. My leg is better after resting for a while, so I climbed up the hole.

I had an urge to announce this stunning place to the world but through Elepie's gesturing, he told me the cruel things that human society would do to them. It felt like being kicked in the gut, not able to let others know what I've done, but deep down, I knew keeping a secret would be worth it. I wished to let others know, but keeping secrets is part of an adventure.

This month, I've been visiting the creatures each day and playing with them, until one fateful day…

"Breaking new! Police found dead bodies buried with bones of weird creatures. The police led to a conclusion that people were killed by the creatures ten years ago, including Benson Wong, Ray and Iriana Anderson and Cathy Lee."

"Wait, did she say Ray and Iriana Anderson? As if, Ray and Iriana? My biological parents?"

Tears poured down my face. How foolish was I, to become friends with those murderous creatures! I must avenge my parents.

That night, the guilt of betrayal was bugging me. I handed the creatures to scientists.
In the middle of the night, I snuck out to search for the truth. So I met up with Elepie who was hiding in the cave, frightened. The poor thing was shaking nonstop.

I tried to recall my memory about my parents. However, I sulked profusely every time I thought of them. I steadied my trembling cheeks, dried my tears and held myself together.

My adoptive parents once told me that my parents were studying zoology in China when an earthquake knocked down some flammable chemicals in the lab and lit up the building! That was ten years ago, and unluckily, my parents passed away because of it. Fortunately, I asked my adoptive parents to write down the address on my headband. Right then, I stood up firmly, feeling the courage to start the investigation!

Elepie and I snuck aboard a train. My heart beat got faster by the second, like it was a drum, hit by fear and doubts. If my parents really were killed by these creatures, why was I told that they died in a fire?
Right then, I could tell the train was moving fast, the view from the windows were all blurry. But for once, my head and heart were both telling me what to do.

I searched from block to block for the right address, until I found it! The building was untouched after the incident so whatever I found in the room belonged to my parents. I couldn't believe my own parents had walked on the very same floor before! There was a bag with their names on it. Next to it, there was a shallow antiquated cupboard.

I reached inside but there was an odd brick sticking out! Elepie jumped inside and pushed it.
"A hidden drawer!"I whispered out loud. There was a diary inside!
I blew the dust away and quickly flipped through it...

My parents weren't killed by the creatures! This is my mum's diary...

Dear Diary,
Richard found fossils of mythical creatures a year ago. But right then, others didn't believe him. However, today, Richard, Ray and I finally found those living creatures! I was exhilarated. But we realised we should protect them from the humans. Richard told Ray and I to fetch him a magical bone that could save them! I'm heading to the museum to get it. Those creatures are lovely and I would do whatever it takes to protect them. I'm sure baby Kayla agrees. I left her at the dormitory but I'll be back soon.
Iriana

I immediately collapsed onto a chair and was about to faint! I figured out what really happened!

Mum and Dad went to get the bone but there was an earthquake that made the building on fire! After many years, the archeologists thought that the creatures killed them! My parents were animal lovers and explorers too!

I finally knew the real truth! Before we knew it, Elepie and I reached the research centre.

An idea popped up! I threw a rock through the window and activated the sprinkling system. While the scientists were busy shutting off the system, we freed the creatures! I felt like an action hero!

I knew adventuring was in my blood! We ran as fast as we could to escape. Elepie led the creatures back to the cave while I went to find that magical bone mentioned in the diary.

I asked the museum guard to let me use the bathroom but instead, I headed to the animal fossil section. There, I swapped the magical bone with a plastic toy bone. The magical bone had words scribbled on it. I promptly stuck it into my backpack.
I squealed with delight! I finished my parents' mission!
When I rushed back to the cave to announce the good news, I saw how happy the creatures were. Elepie blew his trunk when he spotted me with the bone. We sat down and checked out the writing on it.

"High above the clouds, on the mountain of myths,
lies a magical roam, full of creatures with gifts.
But the humans are cruel, they don't belong together.
By the power of the bone, the creatures can stay away forever."I read aloud.

The bone opens a gateway to a magical roam, where the creatures can finally stay safe. This is all great news! But when my eyes and Elepie's met, he was filled with tears.

“I guess we’ll have to say goodbye.”I hugged the fur ball, squeezing him so tight that he couldn’t breathe! He blew his trunk softly and hugged back.

I was about to wave the bone in the air to close the portal to the magic roam, but then, I spied an army of scientists marching up the mountain!
“Please close the portal, please please please!”I exclaimed as I waved the bone. The portal shut right on time.

I fell on my knees, crying my heart out. When the scientists interrogated me, I just shook my head and told them I didn’t remember anything.

So there you have it, here’s my story. I made the discovery of a lifetime:
Special people show up in our lives, they inspire us to do great things, they make each day better, but sometimes these special people go away for a good reason. Who knows, I might get to see them again...

Was This My Destiny?

Hong Kong Adventist Academy, Narayan, Siddharth – 12

Long ago there was a mountain with mist around it, my ancestors always thought that place was only for gods. They believed if you are a human and entered that place you will be sent to the death realm. Centuries passed and no one ever went to that mountain until my ancestors' village got attacked. They had to evacuate, it turns out that we lost the misty mountain. Thousands of years later I was born, but when I was born our village got attacked by the same people who made us leave. My parents put me in a basket and threw me in the water.

After a few hours of floating in water a group of monks took me. They raised me like their own child. They trained me like a warrior, strong, fast and wise. All the time when I was tired or gave up this one old wise man came to me and said "you are destined for this don't give up.". That night I had a nightmare and woke up, turned out it was real. All the monks gathered around me and gave me all their powers, and the old man was finally saying what I was destined to be. "You were always destined to be" Boom, everyone got blasted and I was the only survivor.

Then I had no one. I was just walking for days, and I finally reached a place. When I asked people what that place was they'd just ignore me, but I had received power from monks. They knew how to speak in chinese but I didn't know whether it was China or not. I asked in chinese what this place is and someone shouted out that this place is China. I went looking for shelter, Until I found a rich weak man being robbed by a gang of robbers. I thought I could steal the money with them but I could only use my power for good.

I went and I tried talking to the robbers but they pushed me away. I got mad and punched one of them. That guy went like 1km away and the robbers ran away. I took the rich person to the pharmacy. Then he came to me and said " I am such a corrupt rich person why would you want to save me?" I said I don't know, all I wanted was food and shelter. You were the only one I thought could provide me these. He said you are innocent. I will keep you in my palace because you saved my life.

Years passed and I grew stronger. One day the rich guy was wounded. I asked him how this happened and he said there is this army trying to kill me and you. I went out to fight the army but there were the greatest warriors of all time. Lord chkish Lord memeky Lord pppopo and lord bob. They were too powerful but I didn't give up, until I got beaten till half death. Then I thought that they were more powerful but I am more evasive, I ran as fast as I could and reached near a misty mountain. Was it the mountain of the death realm? I checked the piece of scrap that I always carried around and it was exactly like that.

I thought to go up there because even if I didn't I would be killed. So I went up and after days of climbing I reached there. It was a temple, when I stepped in the temple I saw a person there and he was trying to lift a shiny gem. I went there and I tried to lift it and I did, the old person said "kagetoshi?" I asked him how do you even know my name? Then he slapped me and said, how could you forget your own brother? We both were crying with joyce. Then he asked me, how did you escape? From who I questioned. Then he said this army that was trying to kill you before and since you were born.

Then he said one of the predictors of the army told their leader that you will destroy them. They were looking for you and trying to kill you. The gem you have will give you lots of power I don't know what kind of but I know this. This is our chance for revenge. So I picked the stone up and then something strange happened, two realms opened up. The holy realm and the death realm my brother yotokoshi said go in the holy realm I will go in the death realm.

I went in. I saw gods over there, and when I was walking they bowed to me. I asked them why are you guys bowing to me, I am a normal person. They said you have to be worthy and have great power to come here, and so we admire you. I walked until I found a big wand and a robe. The gods told me to put it on and hold the wand and I will get great power. I wore it, and I felt way better and so I exited the holy realm.

When I came out it closed, and my brother went into the death realm. He went in, but no one was over there. There was a big sword and heavy armor. Then the god of death came and told him, what you have worn is the armor that is indestructible and a sword that is used by gods. He came out and then we were ready to battle.

We returned down to that empire in China. We challenged the leader for war. He agreed and started to laugh like a crazy man. We started the war and my brother destroyed the army with a few swings of the swords. And I killed all the warriors with my huge magic wand. We had defeated everyone except the leader. Me and my brother didn't solo on the leader because he can only be killed by a god or anyone who is as strong as the gods.

We didn't believe we were so strong so we fought him together, and as we thought he was horribly strong. He pushed my brother away, took his sword up and.... I don't know what is going to happen. I close my eyes and hear a sound, a metal sound, my brother has an indestructible armor. We are fighting him but we cannot do anything because he also has the same armor as my brother. I use my wand to make his armor disappear and my brother's sword slashes through him.

We finally have gotten our revenge, said my brother. We found out that the emperor died so they chose me to be the emperor. I said this could not have happened without my brother. So they started to say that we can divide the empire. I agreed. Was this the destiny the old man was talking about or is my story going to be longer?

Tales of China's Magical Mountains

Hong Kong International School, Tin, Cheryl – 13

My family and I live at the base of a great, magical mountain. Few go to the mountain, and none come back from it. The boundary of the village is the closest we ever go. There is a story about that particular mountain, that if somebody leaves a gift for the gods at the top, they will be granted a wish. Only one of the oldest men in the village claims to have tried this, but most don't believe him and even thought he was insane!

When my little brother fell sick, the village doctor said the disease had no cure and that my brother was going to die. I decided to beg the gods for help.

When I told my parents that I have needed to go on this journey, they said it was not real and that they didn't want to lose both their children. Not caring about what they said, I decided to ask the old man. The old man told me that he had been to the mountain when he was young, and that his wish was granted. He asked me if I realized how dangerous it was, I said in return that if I could save my brother I was going to go anyway. He offered to show me the entrance to the mountains and told me I would need my warmest clothes. I agreed to meet him the following day to begin my journey.

I needed to find a gift for the gods, something that they can't have up there but something that we have down here. My father is an amazing baker, so I know how to bake bread. I ground the grain and mixed in the water. I carefully kneaded it until it was smooth then set it by the stove to rise. After it had risen, I baked 3 golden loafs that split on top and were soft and fluffy inside. I chose the best one as my gift and brought another one to eat.

Early in the morning I hugged my brother farewell and worried that he was so pale and green–looking. I promised to hurry. I walked to the boundary of the village and met the old man who turned and started walking. I followed. By midday we reached a river. The old man told me that I should follow it upstream and then when I reach the end of it, look down and find the start of the river. That means that I must almost be there, at the top of the mountain. After that he said look to the peak and climb! He told me he was worried that he would never see me again and gave me a wooden staff and fur coat that he said he had brought with him on his own journey to the mountain. He told me that the mountain was sacred and that if I was to undertake this journey, I should not harm a single creature on my journey.

I walked and walked, and when it became steep, I climbed and climbed. The weather grew colder and soon night was approaching. I shivered, pulled the fur coat around me, and pushed on to continue looking for somewhere to shelter for the night. It got chillier and darker and soon I could no longer see. I listened to the sound of the water and carefully climbed the rocks knowing that if I fell, I would be washed away to my death.

When my hands were frozen and I was too numb to continue I found a place where the wind was no so fierce, curled up and quivered myself to sleep.

When I awoke it was freezing and looking to the summit, I realised I had a terribly long way to go. I drank some water, ate some of my bread and continued climbing.

As I climbed and shook from the weather, the frosty air grew thin and only the fur coat kept me from the piercing cold weather. I tucked my nose and chin down under the collar and pushed on. I ate more bread when I needed and drank water from the stream.

Soon the trees began to disappear and there was only rock and snow. The stream was also getting smaller the further I climbed on. I looked for somewhere to sleep but as night approached, I could find no shelter. Further up the mountain I saw some smoke and hurried toward it as dusk fell. The smoke came from a hold in the cliff and below it was a small wooden door. I knocked and it was opened by a tiny man. I asked could I please spend the night and he said his house was too small and anyway he didn't have any food. I told him I had half a loaf of bread that I could share with him. He told me for a whole loaf I could stay inside. I told him I needed the other loaf as a gift for the gods. He told me that was only a story. I should give him the bread, spend the night and then return home and that only death awaited me on the mountain. I had no choice and gave him the loaf, only having half a loaf left.

The following day the gruff old man mumbled and grumbled and called me crazy but told me it had been a long time since he had bread and anyway my bread was the best he'd ever had. He told me a little girl had no business going up the mountain but if I must I should get going right now so I'll reach the top sooner rather than later.

The wind was strong, frigid, and flakes of snow blew in the air.

A storm came up, then all of a sudden I couldn't see anything, and I couldn't hear the stream either.

I climbed along the river as it got smaller and smaller, going higher and higher. After I found the start of the river where it poured from the mountain, I looked up like the old man said and could see the peak. Finally, I arrived at the peak of the mountain after hours of climbing and scrambling. The top of the mountain was flat. I could see to the horizon in every direction and far below I could see my tiny village. I wished my brother was here to see it. The peak of the mountain was covered in tiny silver flowers. As I had no gift I gathered up as many as I could and lay it at the edge of the mountain overlooking the village any my brother.

I made my wish that my brother would live a long and happy life and waited for a sign. I had very little energy left, and the cold was too bitter and strong. Eventually I curled up beside the flowers and collapsed, not moving a muscle.

When I awoke, I was warm and in a soft bed. A woman was sitting beside me. She told me that she lived on the mountain and grew the silver flowers that only grew at the very highest part of the mountain. She asked me what on earth such a young girl was doing, so I told her about my brother and my journey and my wish. She then said that perhaps my wish had come true because the flowers she grew could be made into a very potent medicine and that she could help me make it.

I happily thanked her and gasped as I realize she was one of the goddesses. She smiled softly at me and generously gave me the cure for the disease. I thanked her once again, inclining my head forward slightly. Looking at the far way down ahead of me, I sighed and had said to myself, "Do I really have to do this all over again?" The beautiful goddess had responded, "No, my dear. If you don't wish to go all the way back, just close your eyes and I'll guide your way." Even if I hadn't understood what she said, I did as I was told and shut my eyes, cradling the medicine in my hands.

Seconds later I was back in the village. I ran to my brother as quickly as I could, panting as I went, and handed him the bottle. Drink it, I had said. Giving me a funny look, he did, gulping down the pungent liquid. I watched him get better right before my eyes. Rosy cheeks, back straightening, a glowing smile on his face. He had screamed and shouted in joy, and as my parents rushed out, I took the third piece of bread I had baked and headed out to find the old man. When I did, I gave him my much appreciated gratitude and the bread, telling him the amazing story of reality that I had been through.

Reverie in the Clouds

Hong Kong International School, Zhao, Jasmine – 12

After climbing the Yellow Mountain for a few hours, I saw my first destination; the Monkey Watching the Sea rock. I remember my mom telling me how it got its name, "the stone is shaped kind of like a monkey. It's perched on the edge of a cliff, overlooking the sea of clouds. No one knows how it got there or how it stays balanced—all a part of nature's wonders."

I walked over to the large rock and the first thing that I noticed was the spectacular view. The sea of clouds was gracefully and swiftly flowing. *Wow, it looks just like the sea.* The clouds were ever-changing; one moment its waves were crashing onto the shore, the next, it looked as calm as a river flowing peacefully, just like my thoughts. The next thing I saw was that the rock actually looked like a monkey. *Could this be the rock of the famous Monkey King, Sun Wukong? I heard that he lived comfortably in the Mountain of Flowers and Fruits before leaving and seeking a life full of danger.* He had a lot of fun with his monkey friends when he was young; they played games and ate the peaches and other fruits on the mountain all day long. *Why would he leave his comfortable home? If I were him, I wouldn't. Actually, I still miss the good old days when I was younger. I could spend hours playing on the playground or staring into space doing nothing. I wanted to freeze time and stay a 5-year-old forever. Now, I have so many more responsibilities and schoolwork to complete. I have to practice the flute every day and practice soccer every day also. Even though I spent most of my time outside of school doing homework, I always have at least 1 sheet of homework that I don't have time to finish until the morning that it's due. Life is always so stressful. I don't understand why the Monkey King would choose to leave the comfort and fun of his own home and embark on a dangerous journey.*

All of a sudden, a voice asked, "Young one, do you need me to answer a question?"

"Who are you?" I asked cautiously. I didn't know if the voice was real or if it was a mere figment of my imagination.

"I'm the ghost of the Monkey King. I heard your question in your mind. Now to answer that question, I had a good life playing with my friends all day as I'm sure you already know. But, when there is nothing else to do, it can get pretty boring because I had no goals, no purpose, and thus no meaning in life at that point in time. Then, one day one of the senior monkeys on the mountain had died. I was devastated, I thought, 'my job as king is to make my monkey's lives better. If my monkeys could become immortal, that would make their lives a lot better.' Even though I had the responsibility in my life to help my monkeys since the day I became monkey king, I had just realized it. My purpose in life was to make my monkeys' lives better. And that's the reason why I left the Mountain of Flowers and Fruits; because I was pursuing the purpose of my life."

If he didn't leave his comfortable home and leave his comfort zone in search of purpose, there wouldn't be the adventure of Monkey King stories, and we wouldn't even know that he existed.

It's true that I had fun when I was younger, but, just like Sun Wukong, I realized that I couldn't stay like that for my whole life. When I was five, if I could play all day I would be thrilled, but I wouldn't be happy in the same situation when I'm 15. Everybody has to take up responsibilities and find out what they're passionate about; that's how people grow up.

But I'm still not sure that I want to grow up.

"But what if I still want to be a child forever?" I asked the ghost.

My voice echoed in the vast sea of clouds, and I didn't get a response.

It looks like the ghost of the Monkey King has already left.

I took a deep breath in, looking around at my surroundings. The sea of clouds kept changing and shifting, almost blocking my view of the path—time to head to my next destination for the day.

I finally reached my next destination, the illustrious Lotus Peak.

The first thing I noticed when I got there were all the lush green pine trees. They looked healthy, brave, and bold, contrasting against the dullness of the gray granite. I watched the sea of clouds flowing by. The clouds flowed like a sea, moving at a rapid pace, just like my thoughts.

"Wow, all of these pine trees must've been here for a long time," I said out loud.

"Yes, we have," a voice said.

I turned around abruptly to see who was talking, only to see no one, just trees.

"Who said that?"

"Oh, just me," the same voice responded.

"Who are you?"

"I'm a pine tree," the voice said, "people always come to me for advice with their problems, and I assume that you've come here for advice as well?"

"Yes, sometimes, I wish that I were still a 7−year−old, without any troubles. I still remember when I used to get dulce de leche ice cream after riding my bike in the evening, with fireflies lighting the path. Now, it's so different. I feel like sometimes I don't want to grow up and want to be a kid forever."

"Why yes, of course. I have been standing here for 1,500 years. In those 1,500 years, I have seen a lot of things. I have seen countless emperors come to this mountain trying to get an immortality potion. Sadly, none exist."

"I know that there's no such thing as an immortality potion or something that will stop you from growing up. But, when I read Peter Pan, I still can't help the feeling of wanting to be a Lost Boy and never growing up."

"Everything happens for a reason. Adults can still play on the playground, even though they're not children. They can still ride bikes and eat ice cream."

"Oh, that's true. I guess it's just the spirit when you're a kid that makes it feel different. You don't have to ride your bike while lifting the burden and guilt of not completing your homework. You don't have a care in the world, other than the task that you're doing at the moment."

"Everyone is growing, even I, who's 1500 years old already, am still growing every day. As long as you have the heart and spirit of being young, you can still feel young. Since human life is so short, you need to make the most of your time here on Earth. You can't live in the past or in the future; you need to live in the present. That means you have to stop reminiscing about the past or worrying about what the future will bring. You have to focus on the present. Enjoy every moment while it lasts."

"Thank you, pine tree, for your advice."

I looked at the sky once again. This time, to my surprise it was completely clear of clouds. I could see the Light of Buddha shining through. The Light of Buddha shone defiantly against the sun, reflecting the rainbow of colors; the journey that I had been through to get here. The sea of clouds had cleared, just like my thoughts.

I gazed out at the beautiful scenery of the Yellow Mountain; jagged peaks of the mountains, the mystical sea of clouds, the enchanting and majestic light of Buddha; thinking about what the pine tree and Monkey King ghost had told me; ready to accept the past, live in the present and change the future.

A Tale From China's Magical Yellow Mountains

Hong Kong Red Cross John F. Kennedy Centre, Chan Man-Li, Cecili – 16

Today my friend Alex and I went hiking on Tai Mo Shan, Hong Kong's tallest peak and something magical and unbelievable happened to me.

First, we took a bus to the car park near the top and from there we went up to the peak where you can get the best view.

"Hey, Dennis," I said. "Look over there. How wonderful the view is!"
I walked toward the cliff to get a better look but suddenly, I fell down a hole.

"Oh! Help me!" I screamed. "I can't see anything." Everything was dark. It was frightening, terrible and horrifying.

Luckily, I didn't die. I had slipped through a time gate and passed back through time into the period of the Tang dynasty and had found that I had become a government officer. I had a lot of money, elegant clothes and priceless treasure…However, I was not happy at all. I saw many corrupt officials paying bribes to a corrupt warlord called An Lushan to buy themselves higher ranking positions. Corruption prevailed in the imperial court. I heard that An Lushan's wealth was even greater than the government's, and his ambition was getting bigger and bigger. He hoped to become Emperor.

One day, when I went out of town to the market, I saw many people starving, and dying on the ground. This sight made me realize the meaning of the poem written by Du Fu:
"Behind the red lacquered gates, wine is left to sour, meat to rot. Outside the gates lie the bones of the frozen and the starved."
I felt ashamed. Because even as an official, I couldn't help them with anything.

I walked on sadly until finally I came across a temple. I opened the door and there I saw the pathway to The Yellow Mountains and nearby were Du Fu and Li Bai were playing chess.
I said to them,"Why do you just sit here playing games and don't think about how to help the hungry people? Are you just careless idlers?"

They said "We have been practicing our magic in The Yellow Mountains for many years trying to call a future man to help us change the fate of our country. Finally, you have come. Welcome. All this hunger has been caused by An Lushan, who is destroying The Yellow Mountains to collect the magical stones of power that lie buried underneath."

In a great panic I said "What! You made me come back to the Tang Dynasty? Send me back quickly."

They said "No, you have a power that we don't have. The power that can change the world. If you can't solve this problem, the world will become chaotic and it will end. There is no future for you without us. You can't go back to your world. You must stay here with us."
"Let me tell you about an old legend," continued Li Bai. "A long long time ago, Bai Di created The Yellow Mountains, which is as wonderful as a fairyland. Many different immortals are living up there on top in a small village among the clouds. They were responsible for creating the clouds, the animals and even the dinosaurs. Three great stones of power are hidden underneath the mountains and they are the source of life for this whole land. If someone collects these three magical stones, he will have the power to rule the world and become a god. Without its magical stones, The Yellow Mountains will lose the gods' protection, the land will become barren, humans will starve and all living things will become extinct. I hope you can help us to prevent An Lushan from getting to the magical stones."

I said "OK! I will help you."

We secretly recruited warriors to fight against An Lushan and communicated by hiding our messages in egg yolk pastries. In less than two months, 100,000 people had participated in our secret organization. An Lushan knew I wanted to stop him from getting the magical stones so he summoned me to see him in his palace.

I saw there were different collections around An Lushan's great house, such as roses presented by ambassadors, large pearls on the bookshelf and a thousand year old ginseng.

I thought, "An Lushan is a wealthy man. He even has some things that the Emperor hasn't got..."

An Lushan said to me "You are very capable, but you have chosen the wrong enemy. I think you would have won long ago if you hadn't. I have one of the magical stones. If you cooperate with me to get the other two magical stones and help me create my empire then I will make you my prime minister. Help me to find the magical stones and we can enjoy inexhaustible wealth and top social status. Hahaha..."

"Is it really good to rule an empty city?" I asked him. "Being a monarch will be just a hollow and meaningless honor without any responsibility" I said with disappointment in my voice.

At this, An Lushan suddenly became angry. "You'd better follow my orders while I am still being nice," he shouted. "Seize him, guards!"

I was grabbed by his soldiers. I was completely overpowered and I could not resist. I was locked in a secret room in his garden and surrounded by darkness.

When Li Bai and Du Fu realized that something was wrong, they pretended to be An Lushan's guards and sneaked into An Lushan's palace that night. They overheard the Captain of the guards say to the soldiers, "Remember to guard the southern room strictly. Go there now to take him some food."

Li Bai and Du Fu walked slowly as they followed the other soldiers. After the soldiers put down the meal and left, Li Bai and Du Fu broke down the door. They whispered, "Brother, come quickly."

In silence, we made our escape but suddenly, Li Bai rushed into one of An Lushan's rooms. He said, "Aaaahh. nice wine! I want to drink a cup of it before we go."

Du Fu and I stopped him but before we could, from the window of An Lushan's bedroom, we saw a person who had turned into a small figure. It was a tiny creature with two horns on its head and a tail on its body.

Then we heard a sound, "squeak, squeak…" We were surprised. Du Fu said, "Is this some kind of rat devil? "We knew that it was dangerous and we couldn't defeat this beast, so as not to be discovered by it, we crouched down and backed quietly away.

After returning to The Yellow Mountains, we discussed how to fight with An Lushan. We became more and more depressed because we all knew that humans are unable to confront humans who have been selfish and turned into such rat devils as the one we saw. This has been true since ancient times. Realizing that we were unable to confront An Lushan on our own, I climbed to the highest peak of The Yellow Mountains to ask Bai Di for help.

I called out to him from morning until evening for three days, "Bai Di, please help me to confront An Lushan." However, no one answered me.

As I finally turned away, a kind voice said to me "This is the destiny of humans. I can't help you. Unity is the only way you can change your destiny."

After that, I went back to Li Bai's and Du Fu's home. Du Fu said, “I found a magical book about how to deal with a rat devil. According to the book, we must capture the rat devil and take it to The Yellow Mountains. Then we need to draw a magical circle to open the entrance of the underworld. After that, we must lead the rat devil into the magic circle to purify his soul and send it back to where it belongs.”

To make this happen, I went to see An Lushan pretending that I’d changed my mind and because of his greedy desire, he believed me when I promised him I would go to The Yellow Mountains to help him search for the two remaining magical stones.
In the meantime, Du Fu and Li Bai summoned all the warriors to hide in The Yellow Mountains. After An Lushan arrived in the mountains, all the warriors immediately captured him and led him to the magic circle.

An Lushan said “Do you think I can be defeated so easily? Soldiers, go!” he commanded.

Suddenly, another blue army, a supernatural force, emerged from the forest. Our warriors were surprised and scared.

I implored them, “Don't you want to be reunited with your families and children?” At this, the warriors’ spirits seemed to lift.
“Go ahead!” I urged them. “You cannot fail. You can only succeed.”

I said it with all the power, my voice could command and with that, our warriors took heart, engaged in the battle and defeated the blue army. I pushed An Lushan into the magic circle and Du Fu and Li Bai began to cast their spells. However, to stop An Lushan from escaping from the magical circle, I had to go to the underworld with him.

Du Fu and Li Bai said anxiously, “Leave the magic circle quickly or you will die.”

I said to them “I'm glad I met you both. It was my honor to help save the world. Goodbye, my brothers.” And tears of great sadness were falling from my eyes as I spoke these final words to them.

After this fight we were victorious. Du Fu and Li Bai took the magical stones back to The Yellow Mountains and China regained its vitality. People had clean water again and enough food and no one would die from hunger. Li Bai and Du Fu set up schools in the capital to promote Confucianism, all was well and society was restored once again.

I opened my eyes and found myself lying on a hospital bed. My friends and family were there by my side and someone said to me, “Thank God! You’ve finally woken up.”

Soon after I was discharged from the hospital, I wrote a book about my experience in the Tang Dynasty called “A Tale from China's Magical Mountains.” On the cover of the book it says, “Thanks to the unity of the people, we can all now live in a prosperous and peaceful society.”

Tales from China's Magical Mountains

International College Hong Kong, Ottaviani, Kayla – 11

The wind whistled above the mountains. Green and bright as ever, the birds squawked and squeaked above the Yellow Mountains. A shimmer of light whispers over the old pine trees settled upon the craggy rocks of the mountains.

Two young boys were running down the mountain steps squealing. The youngest tripped over a misplaced step and smashed onto the ground.

"Ouch." He mumbled. He got to his feet and continued running after his brother, who was already ahead. Down the mountain they went, laughing and screaming like nothing had happened. A glitter of light, bright and as yellow as the sun, followed the two boys as they sprinted down.

The oldest stopped. He stood at the bottom of the mountain next to a shiny pool of water, little colorful fish were swimming among the waters. He giggled, and tossed a leaf into the water. The fish jumped up, and ate a leaf chunk. Laughing, he tossed another leaf.

By now, his younger brother had caught up with him and tossed a leaf in it too.They laughed together for a while, and then stopped. They stared at the fish that had just jumped up to grab the nearest leaf, but, after it jumped, it remained in the air. It had wings! Shiny, little red wings that kept the fish floating above the water. The brothers stared at it in awe. The little fish blinked and turned toward them. *Blinked?* Fish don't blink. The younger boy hid behind his brother as the fish rose higher into the air. The fish disappeared, in a blink of flying–fish eye. The younger brother cautiously stared down at the pool. All the other flying fish were gone too. They just disappeared into thin air. It was impossible, it didn't make sense, but it happened.

The two young brothers told their parents of this odd happening, but they didn't believe them. They laughed and said it was all their imagination. They pleaded and pleaded, but all they would do was laugh and chuckle. The two boys locked themselves in their room.

"It flew right? I could be wrong, but it flew!" The younger boy said. The older brother nodded his head. He sat down on his bed.

"I'm sure. It certainly was flying, unless it was a hallucination." said the older boy. They sat there in silence for a while.

"What is a hallee–coronation?" The younger boy asked.

"It's basically something you see, but others do not see." The older boy replied. He patted his younger brother on the head as he stared up at him.

"But you saw it too right? So it can't be a hallee–coronation." The younger brother said truthfully. The older boy nodded.

"That's right. So it's NOT a hallucination. It was real. It was… magic."

Magic indeed. It was stirring among the mountains. Wisps of light such as the one that had followed young Vincent Chang as he chased his older brother Tamen Chang were flowing through the trees like sunlight. The sun set at the edge of the mountain, glowing brightly shades of orange, pink and blue. Meanwhile, bright yellow fish flitted about, flapping their shiny ruby red wings.

Long, long ago lived an emperor. He had a castle, a beautiful one among these mountains. That was a time when fish still flew through the sky, and when birds roamed the sea. Bright and beautiful, it was the most magical human place. But the emperor secretly hated the magic. He wanted things to make sense, and in his perspective, it didn't make sense for magic to exist. So he banned all Magical Animals from the mountains. The fish fled into the sea to remain camouflaged among other fish, and the bird flapped into the sky to remain hidden among the clouds. The wisps of light ran to the sun, where they stayed for years and years. Now that the emperor was gone, they could

return, but it had been many decades, and humans now believed their kind as a legend, a myth. They could not return to the human world because they would get hunted, killed, interviewed (humans were so dumb at times, they expected an answer?). So they remained in their unnatural habitats.

But the emperor was dead. Nobody could free them from his ban, except for the emperor's descendants. But the emperor's descendants were unknown. Nobody knew who they were. They existed, but maybe on the other side of the world, not here in Eastern China. But the Chang brothers had a magical aura. The creatures hoped that they were the ones that they were looking for.

The next day, Tamen woke, startled. He had a nightmare about evil flying fish and finned birds pecking him to pieces. He then ran back to his parents, pecked and bruised, and told his parents what had happened, but they didn't believe him. They lectured him about "lying" and then he woke up for real.

His younger brother was having a similar nightmare. He had been chased down the steps of The Huangshan mountains by red wisps of light, black empty eyes glowing from them. He ran and ran, and suddenly, he tripped and fell down the craggy rocks of the mountain. He woke up sobbing. He ran to his brother's room, who seemed to understand immediately.

"Come here." And they both stayed there, on the bed, for a while after that.

The brothers were not thrilled to hear that they would be going to Huangshan Mountain for a hike yet again, a few days later. But they had to go. They had no choice.

Up the mountain they went. Vincent huddled next to his brother, who was equally scared. They both jumped at small noises. Soon, they were at the top, and their parents sat down on the ground to eat lunch. Vincent and Tamen walked to the cliff of the mountain. They fearfully stared up and saw finned birds in the sky. At that point, it wasn't even surprising anymore.

The birds noticed them and flew toward them. They squawked and pecked lightly at their arms, gently, ticklish but not painful. They both laughed. Suddenly, a piece of paper dropped from the bird's beak. Tamen picked it up and read it.

Dear Yellow Emperor great–grandchilds,

Please allow us come here. We need home.
Sky uncomfy. Fish say sea itchy.
Please say : Animals stay here.
Then we are invisible to other persons.

Sincerely, Fish and Birds.

The letter was odd. The bird nodded and left. Weird. Vincent looked at his older brother. "We aren't yellow, are we Tamen?" He asked. Tamen laughs.

"No, certainly not. But I think we need to do this. Hold this with me." Vincent touched the paper.

"Animals. Stay. Here."

Many years later, these magical animals remain among these mountains, invisible to most, but to the descendants of The Chang brothers, not so much. They have been told to keep these creatures a secret, from generation to generation the sight of the animals was passed on. The animals never forgot the brothers, as we have not forgotten them.

The Abyss of War: The Dawn of the Locket

International School of Beijing, Niu, Qiming – 11

Huangshan, Anhui, Yuan Dynasty, 1280 A.D.
The night was cool and very foggy.

"Thud, thud, thud!"

There was the sound of heavy footsteps outside of the central ger.

"Password?" came a loud voice from inside.

"Victory."

"Come in."

The flaps opened and the guard treaded over the threshold, pulled on a short chain, and dragged a ragged man in through after him. The guard stood to attention. "Horsethief, sir. Permission to execute him, sir?" he barked.

"Not yet, corporal," said a dwarf who sat cross–legged on a mat.

King Leo turned his attention to the prisoner. The man's clothes were dusty, but quite rich. "Your name?"

"Verraden," came the reply. He was a stiff old man, with dark, swollen eyes, a long, pointed nose, and large ears, which seemed to flap around and hear everything.

"I want you to tell me everything you know about the Locket of Reckonings."

Verraden shuddered. "Sorry, sir, the what?"

"The Locket of Reckonings."

"The L–Locket?"

"Yes, the Locket, tell me everything you know about it. Now."

Verraden pulled a piece of parchment out of his pocket. "Alright, sir," he said, still shivering, "here it goes…

The story of the Locket of Reckonings

The Locket was made by the evil, but great sorcerer Jayden Hurareous, pure gold and adorned with a ruby. Very dark and powerful magic were its specialties, but its legendary creation wasn't finished yet. After the historical defeat of Hurareous in 282 B.C., the Locket landed in the hands of yet another powerful wizard, the light wizard Justin Pillsbury. Pillsbury gave it abilities to summon light and dark magic, making it the most powerful and dangerous object ever made. Pillsbury realized what a fool he was right after the charm was completed. Since he could not destroy it, Pillsbury went to the mysterious mountains of Huangshan and hid the Locket somewhere within its magical dominions.

Hundreds have tried to find it, but none have succeeded… nor returned."

Verraden neatly folded the parchment and put it back into his pocket.

"So, you mean the Locket was not destroyed?" Leo concluded.

"Correct. But Pillsbury also left this prophecy – 1500 years later, a young man will find the locket… and destroy it." Verraden paused for a second. "The date was October 22nd, 220 B.C."

"Today is the eighteenth of October, so there are… four days until the date?"

"Yes, sir, and I have a reason to believe that the man is standing right next to us." Verraden pointed at the young corporal.

The young corporal gave a gasp of surprise and fainted.

"Get up!" came a gruff voice from behind.

The creature wore an ancient gray uniform, which must have been exquisite at some point, but was now in a tattered and almost unbearable form. It carried a huge axe, which was tarnished and chipped, and looked as if it had experienced hundreds of battles. But what truly drew his attention was the creature's skin. It was sallow and had a muddy, greenish color to it, covered here and there with dirt, small sticks, and even patches of moss. The creature wore an ancient metal helmet on its head, so that only the eyes were visible. The eyes were yellow, with thin vertical pupils like a cat. The creature smelled like something buried in a swamp for centuries and then dug up.

"Eat 'im? Maiby roast 'im in troll blood?"

"He's NOT for eat–"

Something made the creature turn.

There was the sound of fast, heavy footsteps, of something swinging through the vines. The creature saw it coming and tried to avoid it, but the thing came too fast. There was a soft *crunch* of shattered skull and the creature collapsed.

With fierce growls, its partner advanced on the object.

The object, which was a china ring, exploded, blasting the thing into smithereens.

"I think it's time, dear."

The young corporal, whose name was Allan, turned around. A white-haired man in an emerald cloak was standing next to him. He was clearly very old, but his movements were easy, with none of the usual creakiness of his age. He had piercing brown eyes that seemed to glow in the sunlight and his round-rimmed glasses were bent and sat slightly askew on his face, as if he had recently been in an accident.

"Saviely Augustus Ignatov at your service, but you can just call me Savvy," the old man said.

"T-those creatures…" Allan stuttered, pointing at a dark smear that was once his captor, "what are they?"

"Inmortuis. Undead warriors of Malum-"

"Malum?"

"The lord of evil and master of the Turrim Mortem."

"And?"

"And let's have a talk." Savvy took his hand; the floor disappeared beneath their feet.

They reappeared in a dusty room. The ceiling was curved, giving it a cave-like feel. On his left was a fireplace and two extremely worn hide chairs. Savvy was sitting on one of them.

"Sit down, sit down," he gestured at the other chair.

Allan hesitated, and then rested his bum on the seat.

"And now," Savvy announced proudly, "we summon the others."

The first to arrive were the warriors from the Order of Guardians, five dozen stern-faced, dark-haired men wearing full armor, who were sworn to protect the kingdoms with their lives. Their very presence filled the entire room with pride and confidence.

Then there were dwarves from Antarctica, whose beards were covered by a thin layer of ice, which now melted all over the floor; elves from Madagascar, who dressed in colorful armor; giants from Mawsynram, India, who wore rain ponchos instead of armor; human fighters from Atlantis...

At first, Allan was stunned by how there was just a flash of light, and then they simply appeared out of nowhere, but soon, he had gotten over the shock.

"Hey, who are these guys?"

"Our army."

Allan stood on the deck of the ship. There was no moon, which was a good thing, since being spotted wouldn't have been very nice.

The army had been split into two sectors. The brigade of dwarves and men were to attack the front gate and try to attract all of the enemy's attention while the elvish navy led by Savvy and, believe it or not, Allan would try to ambush the fortress's rear.

Then, Allan heard a sound as quiet as the footfall of a cat.

King Frederick of the elves had leapt down to the deck.

He said, "Something is coming."

"Retreat!"

More than a dozen soldiers were lying dead in the moat or before the feared walls.

"Coward!" King Leo skreiched at the battlement. He was met by another rain of poisoned arrows.

The attackers pulled out.

"Prepare the cannons!" Leo ordered. "We're gonna bomb them out."

Then they heard the blast.

Up there, on the battlement, were two very large medieval cannons, and even worse, they were pointed directly at them. There was a distinct *boom*.

Verraden pressed his palm on a slab of large gray granite. There was rumbling and scraping, and the stone began to shake. He lifted his hand. The granite disappeared, revealing a single staircase that corkscrewed down into the darkness.

He sauntered past dozens of traps and defenses. Soon, Verraden arrived at the vault. He murmured something under his breath, and the doors swung open.

The chamber inside was high-ceilinged and lit by crystals in the walls. It was almost empty, except for a small grubby package wrapped up in yellowed paper. He picked it up. Then, the room exploded.

It was a tornado. That was what Frederick had seen, a gray spiral in the distance, moving towards them at a completely unnatural speed. The stars along the horizon began to disappear, and it struck the front of the fleet. Allan watched, horrified, as all around, elves were being struck into the sea and bits of wood were blasted out of the ships.

"Any help," Frederick growled at the wizard, dodging a sharp piece of wood, "I'd appreciate it."

Savvy pulled out a wooden rod and pounded it once-twice-

There was a rude *honk*, and, next moment, the tornado was gone. Silence.

The peninsula of Turrim Mortem was not two thousand yards distant, the port lit by hundreds of fires. But between themselves and the fortress was a solid mass of ships, at least ten times as many as the attackers. Each one was bristling with inmortuis and trolls and who-knows-what. Their enemy had been waiting for them.

Then there was a blast that almost flipped the whole ship inside-out.

King Leo closed his eyes. He heard something whiz overhead.

Here comes the cannonball, he thought, goodbye, cruel world!

Something banged him on the head and his eyes snapped open. The Turrim Mortem was still there, but a huge chunk of wall was missing.

All around him, soldiers were pouring through the hole into the fortress.

Then, he followed their lead and charged towards victory.

At the Foot of the Yellow Mountain Lies a Village.

International School of Beijing, Pan, Anya – 13

It is perhaps similar to numerous other rural Chinese settlements; away from the pandemonium of cities lay old, disheveled buildings, with faded, dusty plastic litter and untamed thickets blooming between the cracks of the architecture. But most distinguishably for the girl, the village is a place she spent a significant amount of time her childhood at, her hometown. Summers were ankles deep in the clear water of the nearby river, wet hands batting away mosquitos on the muddy shore, and sneakers pattering against the smooth, moss–ridden stone tiles on the ground.

According to stories her parents would tell her, the ancestor of their family was once a valuable member of the imperial court, serving as a teacher to the emperor at the time. However majestic stories her parents would tell, a nagging sense of disbelief was always present in her mind. If the village was as impressive as the stories seemed to imply, how did the village degrade to the rural state it was in now? The only full–time inhabitants were old grandparents; almost all of the young adults had left to the allure of the bright cities, channeling their ambition and talent into the journey of being a part of something more important than being a farmer in an irrelevant part of the country.

In addition, the village was old. Dirty. Out of touch from the outside world. For her, it existed as am outside world, a time capsule of nature and culture, long lost from the bustle and lights she loved. There wasn't WIFI or high–tech devices that she had gotten accustomed to as a child, and the integration of the infrastructure with nature also led to the ever–present layer mud and grime that clung onto everything from the buildings, the soles of her shoes, and the sleeves of her cotton sweater, unappealing towards her city–girl sense of hygiene.

Hence, the dim feeling of disappointment would always settle into her stomach whenever her parents would inform her of a trip to visit her relatives in the village. As a city girl who had grown up in the bustle of an urban megalopolis, quaint villages did not appeal to her lifestyle, and with every return trip would the sensation of relief would accompany her home.

To her, the village was similar to a large tree; old and deep–rooted within the grounds of history, with long, sinewy branches extending over cities and countries, generations blossoming like a swathe of colour across its thick branches. However, for her, even the most beautiful tree could not compare with the glamour of a skyscraper. She preferred the clean, pristine, and orderly architecture of cities more, and so, with the feeling of disdain towards the village, would she only reluctantly agree to visit her relatives, longingly looking towards her friend's exotic vacations.

Over time, the trips to the village became more and more spaced out. Schoolwork became more intense, and her parents progressively became busier. The distance between the city and the village became a bigger and more obstructive variable.

A few summers ago, she visited the village again. With the same ill–bated breath, she peered out the glass windows as we tumbled past the same yellow fields and lakes, this time with a more cracks in the buildings and more murkiness in the water. However, as she settled back into the village over the course of the next few weeks, she also rediscovered the parts of the village. Even if she still found caked mud on her clothes and skin, the fresh scent of dewed grass and earthy dust lingering in the air, the vivid swathes of yellow fields rippling with the wind and the thickets of green adorning the sides of the houses – not pristinely, like the houses in the city were – but messily and organically, was refreshing and a fascinatingly different. She felt the fragile yet clear sense of tranquility that surrounded the village and its inhabitants.

One by one, the pieces of the puzzle would slowly reveal themselves, giving more complexity to a place she once easily dismissed. Even though the sound of the bird's chirping could not compare to the clamor of the city, she began to love it still. And even though the tree is different from the skyscraper, it still holds its own sense of beauty and meaning.

This time, when they departed from the village back towards the city, it was with reluctance, not relief.

At the foot of the Yellow Mountain lies a village. But for the girl, it is her hometown.

Tales from Huangshan's Magical Dimensions

International School of Beijing, Poh, Miranda – 11

••••••••BLACK•••••••

The jaded peaks jutted into the frail fabric of the azure sky, shot through with so many undertones you could not tell its original color—it was a smoothie blend, very much undecided. Clouds weaved in and out the seams of the sky like majestic dragons frolicking.

Judith panted heavily, too fatigued to glimpse the array of peculiarities along the trail. There were boulders and peaks that hoisted the sky up; there were pine trees with their outstretched clawed branches; the curling steam of hot springs. But she didn't see them…she wanted to get away from everything. The venue—Huangshan—was not important apart from it being isolated, and she could float above in the clouds. Yet it seemed like such a mistake now that she was facing it all—the reason behind it was so vague.

Yes, she is a countryside girl that just joined the bustling city–middle–school. She is a misfit. She knows. Flashbacks ran through her head—feelings more than happenings. The dreadful feeling when it came to presentations because everyone would be snickering at her accent; the inferior feeling when she doesn't have designer–clothes like her classmates; the yearning feeling to be part of the crowd. She is just like a square peg in a round hole desperately trying to cut its outstanding corners. Memories are painful. She couldn't forget the smirk on everyone's face when they found her eating home–lunch perched on the toilet bowl, trying to avoid the crowd. She wished she was dead at that moment.

Until she saw it, it was such a conundrum that nothing could make you tear your eyes away. The thing was PULSING…neither animal nor plant. Judith stared at it, wondering how things were still so wild.

She laughed bitterly. Everyone would be muttering about her by now. Wild tales of what happened would be circulating now.

Oblivious to her lamenting, the goo swelled rapidly, inflating and deflating. It jostled itself excitedly. Its excitement reached a climax and BOOM! The whole thing exploded. She cringed as goo pelted on her.

Darkness.

••••••••WHITE••••••••

Judith pried her eyes open, the sun filling her vision.

Figures draped in robes swarmed around her emotionlessly. Skin ashen, their garments seemed to be woven from dull stones. Who are these people? Her head spun. Where was she? The last thing she remembered was…goo? This was not the mountain …I'm in a hallucination, she thought, nothing could produce something like this. A tsunami of various speculations ran through her head.
Could she have entered into a different dimension?– the scene around her seemed like a sci–fi movie. Butterflies tingled in her stomach. Her curiosity awoke, demanding that she followed this trail before her eyes. As she neared a junction, something caught her eye — a centerpiece, labeled "Modern beauty—commissioned sculpture." Birthed from a stone, the edges smooth and almost shiny; its fullness was such a presence. The outline of the statue—a lady––seemed as if it were born to be there—not carefully chipped out.

Judith eyed the silhouette of the lady, its presence unsettling. "That is a mistake!?" The display of the lady's large body was shocking. WHO would commission such a thing—modern beauties are meant to be slim and curvy. She couldn't fathom why ANYONE thought this was a beauty—it was basically the opposite of everyone's definition back in the real world. Some dimension thing?

The sky grew dark—as if a massive pine tree was looming over her. Like her thoughts had grown a mind, shadows swept in everywhere, clamped over her. 'Uhm…can't–breathe'—they engulfed her.

••••••••VOID••••••••

Black. White. Black and white swirling together. Judith was within a void, darkness reigning. Cold sweat beaded around her forehead. She was in a cavernous, isolated space, —Judith could see some ovular contraption a few meters away. She bounded up to it, feeling like she was walking on clouds. Another dimension?

Her eyes squinted at the odd thing through the darkness—and a spark of recognition. It was––– The glop of goo? Residing very comfortably on its stump was the goo. It couldn't have just been some slimy membrane, could it?

This is the thing that tossed me into that town dimension and this one—not as simple as it seems! Judith was sure this time, it is some artifact.

Thousands of possibilities relayed through her. She lobbed the goo onto the ground.

"BAM!" the space reverberated with the impact as the goo hit the floor like a pane of glass. It 's shards—formed a silhouette––—the fat–lady?

Shocked laced her once again, as she met the fat–lady––or its twin because its inscription read:" Lotus Lady, Lady of the Lotus Peak." Thoughts ran through her head. What was the goo playing at? She didn't need to know about this—she needed to know how to get home!

Judith threw the goo again. She could see peaks furling around a central peak like petals, which turned into a massive block of stone which is the Lotus peak. Her way out.

One foot in front of the other, she began a mindless climb. Constantly having to remind herself of her goal, she felt like it was not just her energy depleting by the second, but also her spirit. Physical activities have never been her strength. She was panting heavily by the time she'd climbed quarter–way. Her desperation mounted as her altitude increased—why was she here again?

Why do you want to continue? Her inner voice asked drowsily. No one will miss you …"Stay"! Judith's vision blurred. Voices circled around. "Stay"! "Join Us"! "Be yourself"!…

Judith liked the monotonous thrum of the words. Her eyelids felt heavy. So heavy. She wanted to stay and be one of them. The darkness was closing in, cloaking her like a shadow. No more facing my classmates. …….Splat, the goo teleported onto her face, shaking her from her trance. She squinted through the goo…the fat–lady—again. This time, inscribed on its plaque was a sentence "The view is not just breathtaking, it is the struggle you have put in that makes it all the more worth it."

She sliced a rock across her palm. Blood welled on her palm, overcoming the thrumming. She thought about those figure's blank faces. She didn't want that. Reality was hard, but she'd rather face that then be blank. Escaping wasn't a choice. Deep breath. She carried on.

99991… She had climbed 100000 steps—she was famished, utterly exhausted, and ready to go back home. Success felt so good, and all her troubles were so distant.

"I don't know who I am" her voice cracked "Yet." Everything tumbled out, how she was so absorbed in her stories that she forgot about the story in front of her—her story. How maybe she wasn't writing it how she should, she could change—into a better her.

Judith felt revived. Determined. For the first time in a very long time, she didn't want to hide anymore. She wanted to be who she was. "Bring me back", she intoned, "I can do this, bring me back. I am going to change, I am going to be who I am. I will stand tall and strong like Huangshan".

As she uttered those words, her world fractured into pieces, as if the truth was too much. Judith was tossed round and round until she landed on a glop of goo, back in the mountain named Huangshan.

It was great to be back.

••••••••GREY••••••••

Judith would've seen the goo; she would've seen the voice's dwelling; she would've seen that rock midway on the hill that looked like a fat lady. Yet she didn't see anything as she was descending, she was too eager to get back to her old—yet new life.

A quiescent trickle flowed through her body, fragile yet strong—She felt her life—and the mountain's life, this scrawny but brave and powerful mountain, ebbing and flowing. The fact that she was connected to this mountain—this powerful mountain and the fat–lady that didn't care what others thought gave her the strength to go on. She had a fragment of the Mountain's birdsong in her heart––and it was up to her to choose how to sing it. She had the mountain inside her, and its unfathomable power was in her. She was special, in a normal way, and she could make this work.

And the fat–lady—perhaps she was still a little odd to Judith, but the perception of beauty was different for everyone, and she should accept that some people thought that way instead of thinking that those people were wrong.

Wonder filled Judith, she found that she had realized this all in one day, in a mountain called Huangshan, with a glop of goo. /this nature had taught her so many things.

This wasn't goodbye though, Judith was sure she'd be back here again someday; but for now, she was ready for her life to truly begin again.

Luna of Huangshan

Islamic Kasim Tuet Memorial College, Imama, Dawood – 13

"Ying Yue"," Ying Yue", a familiar screaming voice of my dear father woke me up from my intriguing yet breath–taking dream. I have been having this strange dream every night ever since I turned eighteen two months ago. Just as I was about to go back to my sleep, I heard heavy knocking sounds along with my name being called a thousand times. "Ying Yue", "Ying Yue", wake up and open the door" came my dear father's roaring voice. "Okay, okay, I'm awake now." I answered back. "Please stop with the knocking first." I pleaded with him as I rushed to get out of my bed, I heard the chuckling voice of my father as he replied, "okay, okay, sweet munchkin, I'll be waiting downstairs for you, hurry up!" Hearing my father call me by my nickname warmed my heart and brought a smile to my face. I just love my father so much, after all, he's the only family I have. As I touched the pendant on my neck, I looked at the beautiful picture of my mother, whose eyes are filled with so much warmth and love. My mother died when I was six years old, she was the best mother a child could ever have, and I'm thankful for the amount of time I get to spend with her. I know she will always be here for me and my father. Now, my father is my whole world, and I'm his.

"Ying Yue," called my father, breaking my train of thought. " Oh sugar, I'm late, I thought to myself while rushing to freshen up. "Coming out of my closet, I checked myself in the mirror before going to meet my father for breakfast. Staring back at me was a girl with long black hair, cascading like waterfall and skin as pale as snow, tainted with rosy cheeks. I got my eyes from my dad, big pools of hazel orbs and my heart shaped crimson lips from my mom. Rushing down the stairs, I saw my dad setting up the breakfast table, lost in his thoughts and humming a sweet tune. I surprised him by back hugging and screaming "Good Morning" in his ears. He almost dropped the plate of steamed buns before recovering from his shocked state, and scolding me light–heartedly. "Since you are late today, you will have to go to the market to buy groceries as your punishment" said my father, smiling like a Cheshire Cat. "Ba Ba, I groaned." "You know how much I hate grocery shopping", I said. "And that is why it is a punishment my sweet munchkin" replied my dear father. "Fine", I sighed feeling defeated. I love my father too much to argue back.

After stuffing my body with all the delicious food cooked by my dad, I helped him to clean the dishes and water his precious plants. My father then went to his study to get some of his pending work done while I embark on a painful journey to the market. It's always agonizing to be the subject of a million hushed whispers. My father is a herbalist and a homeopath, he is always researching one thing or another. My father is a very respected and loved man among the people of our small village, Xīn yuè. The name of our village means The Crescent Moon, and it represents feminine energy and spiritual connection between the moon and the earth. There is a legend that the ruler of this village was a powerful female, the first ever female to lead a village and she was known to possess powers and beauty beyond this world. Arriving at the market, I looked at the grocery list that my father gave me and sighed. "well it seems like I am going to carry a lot of bags." Without wasting a second, I started buying the things that were listed on the grocery list.

"Finally I am done, " I said happily . The sun was setting quickly, flashing magnificent colours, signifying the death of another day. Entering the house, the air is filled with a heavenly mix aroma of smoke and five–spice powder, signifying that my dad already cooked dinner. "Ba Ba, I'm back", I called my father to let him know of my arrival. Walking to our dining room, I see Szechuan eggplant, Stir–fry beef and photon soup along with freshly cooked rice laid beautifully on our dinner table. "Go freshen up, munchkin. We will be eating dinner soon," my father instructed which I merrily agreed.

We ate dinner near the small window, looking out the beautiful Huangshan mountain. I don't know why, but whenever I look at the crescent shaped Huangshan mountain, I feel like its calling on to me, especially when I vision it in my dreams every night. "How was your trip to the market?" Ba Ba suddenly asked me mischievously. "It was like a trip to heaven, Ba Ba" I replied sarcastically as I heard the hysterical chuckling of my precious father. After dinner, I helped my father clean up before calling it a night. On my way, I went to my dad, wrapping my arms around him and whispering "I love you, Ba Ba." "I love you too," he whispered softly and kissed the top of my head.

Gasping for air, my eyes flew open in panic. “The dream again” I thought to myself, though it was more of a nightmare this time. I felt like I was being transported to another realm in a never ending dark and hollow abyss. I shivered thinking how real it felt. Wanting to get rid of this spine−chilling dream, I spun to my left to turn on the bed lamp, but what I saw was terrorizing. I was no longer in my old bedroom, but rather in bedroom fit for a royal. My pink colored walls were replaced by golden walls. Everything in this room was red and gold colored. Frantically looking around, I saw a huge red coloured double door with two huge wolfs with crowns intricately designed on it. Assuming that it will lead me to freedom, I hastily got out of bed. My bare feet touched a warm, plush, red rug momentarily paralyzing me but once I gained my consciousness I rushed for the door. “The door will not open” came a deep voice from somewhere in the room. Swallowing the uncertain lump in my throat and suppressing the rapid beating of my heart, I looked back and saw the most beautiful man. “Is he even real” I thought to myself. His beauty was so delicate that one would be afraid to touch it so as to not damage it but at the same time his eyes are so feral that one would succumb in his presence. “Wh−o are you?” I fearfully asked him. He replied calmly, “I am Wang Long Yee, the king of my world”. “What do you mean your world, where am I?” I asked with an equal calm voice. “Ying Yue, I am the same man and this is the same world which you have been seeing in your dreams, this realm is Huangshan ,” he answered with tenderness. “How do you know my name, how do you know about my dreams, who are you?” I cried back to him. I can no longer think straight and I am terrified of the person in front of me. “Ba Ba , where are you?” I tearfully whispered to myself. The tears flowing like a river. “Ying Yue” came a whisper but I dare not look at the source of the voice. Suddenly, a large rough hand touched my shoulders and I stopped breathing at the warmth of his hand. “please calm down, and I will answer all of your questions but for that you will have to believe me,” he said softly. I timidly looked up, and got lost in his gloomy black eyes that have storms brewing within them. “I am listening” I sighed defeatedly. Without warning, everything went pitch black and once again I felt like I was being transported to through the same dark and hollow passage.

My eyes flew open in horror, but my heart was soon relieved to be back in my pink colored bedroom. “Gosh, this dream felt too real, I can still feel the warmth of that mysterious man” I murmured to myself. But, that sense of relief was short lived when I felt a strange weight on my right wrist. I lifted my dull white covers, and saw that a thick gold bracelet laid on my wrist with the same design of two wolfs that I saw on the door. There was something more, as I opened my fist, I saw a letter in red luxurious paper. Opening the letter it read:

Your mother is a moon goddess,
She lives in depths of blue sky,
Your father is a sun healer,
He lives in the depths of golden soil.

My father is a king of creatures,
He lives in the depths of green wilderness,
My mother is queen of spirits,
She lives in the depths of silver heaven

You are the lock to all the eternity,
I am the key to all the infinity,

We shall meet again very soon,
We shall infinitely be one heart.

Your other half,
Wang Long Yee

The Huangshan Mystery

Islamic Kasim Tuet Memorial College, Kasim Mohamed, Suhail – 13

Lee was screaming in agony. Fan Jing was worried whether his wife would survive this. At dawn, a healthy baby boy was born. His parents were relieved. The baby started squealing softly. "We'll name him Fu. He'll bring richness and abundance to our village", said Lee. Fan Jing put a pendant tied in a rope around his baby's neck. The pendant had a symbol of a blue phoenix in it. It was a family tradition which was passed on from the child's great great grandfather. The pendant is given to the first–born child of the family.

Tai Fook village is located beneath the Huang Shan Mountains, also known as the Yellow Mountains. For more than a century, the village had witnessed a scarcity of food. Farmers tried their best to increase the harvest, but in vain. The villagers had to depend on seafood most of the time. Lee's brother Wang Lei was the village leader and was a strong and powerful man. People had faith in him, that he would find a solution to the food shortage.

"Why don't we leave this village? Why can't we migrate to some other place? How long should we endure this?" questioned the villagers. "You can't run away from your home. This village has provided our ancestors with everything. There were wars fought in the past to conquer this place. You do not know the value of your motherland. I agree there is a scarcity of food. We must find ways to overcome this problem. And we will" said Wang Lei. He tried his best to encourage his people. But deep down, he knew that the problem was getting worse. The most often raised question among the villagers was "Why don't we go up the mountains and find food?" What lies there was a mystery to each one of them. Some curious and rebellious ones went out to unravel the mystery of the mountains. But never came back. One such person was Fu's father Fan Jing.

Some believe that there are strange creatures up there. No one goes there now. Why do people disappear there? What if there is enough food up there? Maybe the mountains could end the food crisis or maybe not. These were the questions running through young Fu's mind. After her husband's loss, Lee became an overprotective mother. She would not let Fu go anywhere near the mountains. "You are my only reason to live" she told her son.

Fu grew up to be a curious and a kindhearted boy. He had problem solving skills and he would not accept any denial without knowing the reason. He heard strange noises from the mountains. He would often beg his mother to let him go because he wanted to see the place so badly. But she did not let him.

It was a night of thunderstorms and it rained throughout the night. Fu couldn't sleep well as he had a strange vision. He saw a blue phoenix turning into a fire. He was petrified. He woke up and he couldn't figure out whether it was a dream. He had so many confused thoughts. "I have to solve this puzzle," he said to himself.

Fu decided to venture into the mountains without his mother's permission. He packed up some essentials and started his journey. He climbed through the trees and vines. After climbing for some time, he got tired and hungry. Then he came face to face with a strange creature. It was a huge cat with emerald eyes, and it was completely furry. It was twice the size of Fu. It wasn't as wild as he thought it was. It seemed as if the cat was trying to communicate with him. It pointed at a mountain with stairs which led above the clouds. Fu found a cave to rest for the night and wondered about what could be up the stairs.

The next morning, he reached the stairs and started climbing them. It took him hours until he found a tree full of fruits. He quickly grabbed some to eat. They tasted unbelievable. Suddenly, a huge lion popped out of nowhere, blocking the path. He needed to distract the lion somewhere else, but how? Lions are cats and cats like chasing lights. He quickly made a fire out of wood and waved it around. As he was moving the fire, the lion was mimicking and moved its head around. Then Fu threw the fire at a distance and the lion followed it and vanished in the bushes. Fu continued his journey. He stopped to look at a shining thing. It was a broken piece of armor with a symbol resembling that of the pendant he was wearing. That meant his great great grandfather had come there. He was a great warrior and his family admired him for his courage and endurance.

When Fu reached the top of the stairs, his pendant started glowing. He heard a loud growl, but he didn't know where it came from. He saw an old castle in ruins. As he went inside, he discovered that the entrance of the castle was the shape of his pendant. He walked through the ruins and what he saw made him flabbergasted. His heart pounded at the sight of a huge fire breathing dragon. He froze in astonishment. The dragon came closer to him and Fu saw a hollow on its forehead. Fu took out his pendant and placed it on the dragon's forehead. A gust of wind swept through and the dragon turned into a shimmering blue phoenix.

Things became clear to Fu. The great great grandfather whom he admired, had taken the pendant from the phoenix to show his bravery. Little did he know that it would turn the phoenix into a fire breathing dragon. The phoenix showed the vision that the warrior had become arrogant and he wanted to show his audacity to the world by taming a huge phoenix. As the warrior returned to his village, he took with him the curse of the phoenix which had turned into a hideous beast. The curse that did not allow the land to prosper. The curse which made his entire generation suffer the consequence of a deed which they weren't even aware of.

The dragon waited in the mountains for someone to return its power. It was filled with rage and it burnt the men who came to the mountains without the pendant. Fu fulfilled its destiny and saved his village. The phoenix blessed the young boy with a long life and richness. Its shimmering wings flapped, and it flew in liberty.

Fu returned home with contentment and relief. He did something that his father couldn't. If only his father had the pendant with him, he would have been alive. Fu's mother was furious to see him as she was searching for him everywhere. "Where have you been for the past two days? I thought I lost you too" she wept hugging him.

"Our sorrows are over. Our land is not cursed any more. We can grow as much food as we want here. Uncle Wang Lei was right. Tai Fook village is our precious motherland, and we will not leave our home. We can cultivate and harvest in this land and hail the glory of our village".Fu exclaimed with tears of joy.

Under the Hood

Islamic Kasim Tuet Memorial College, Khadeeja – 13

Alisson stopped to take a deep breath, “Where the shadows float like the ocean and where the azalea blooms, you will find me.” She whispered underneath her breath. “Oh mom, where have you gone?”

“We are hopefully on the right track. We'll find her. Come on, keep climbing” Lucas comforted.

“What if this is all wrong, what if the old lady was wrong, it's been months climbing up and down mountains of China, what makes you think this is any different?”Alisson complained.

After a few rocky and steep paths, they looked up to see an old hut. They paused walking and turned around to look at each other, a huge smile passed through their faces. “I guess the old woman from before was right after all.” Allison said cheerfully, pointing at the hut.

They started to catch a slow chase towards the hut, but stopped when they realized they had been climbing for so long that all their energy had been drained.

Before heading towards the hut, they turned around to gaze at the sunset, the golden ball went down with the birds singing, warmth and relief running over them. Allison smiled, “That was beautiful” Lucas looked up to the pink sky, “no wonder your mother wanted to come here.”

They started walking towards the hut, by the time they got there it was almost nightfall. Their stomachs were now rumbling.

Without thinking twice they knocked on the door. At first no one answered, so they banged on the door with a no reply again.

”Is anybody in there?” Lucas wondered out loud and that's when the door suddenly creaked and someone peeked through the small gap.

Earthlings come in, come in. I haven't seen your kind in a long time” the door opened wide, he was rather a young man, looking in his 40’s. “Take a seat, may I offer you something?”

“Yes, please, we are really hungry. We have been climbing for a long time” Alisson said, Lucas followed with a nod.

“You better eat something before you go to the temple.”Then the man went to the back of the hut which looked like a kitchen, questions started popping up in their heads, he came back with two plates of sandwiches and placed it next to them and took a seat.

They both grabbed a sandwich each and took a huge bite without hesitation. It was probably the best food they had in a long time.
Alisson suddenly remembered what the man said and felt very confused now, what temple was this man talking about and why does he sound like he has been living here for way longer than he looks?

“Would you kids like something to carry for your journey?”the man asked. There was a brief silence, except for the sound of Lucas munching loudly.

“Yeah, sure we would like something for the journey to the temple,” Alisson blurted, hoping to get back on that subject. Lucas looked at her confused.
The man just stood up and walked back to his kitchen once again.

”What is this temple he mentioned and why do we not know about it?” Alisson asked Lucas, extremely confused.

“I thought YOU knew!” Lucas replied.

“I'm just going with what he is saying.”

The man came back with two bags and handed it over to them,"I don't think your kids came here for the power. I'm sorry but I just happened to hear your conversation."

"Who are you?" Alisson stood up. "What is this power you're talking about and where is this temple?
Lucas added. "And where do you get food up here?"

The man reached out to the rocking chair, looked at them and said "Let me explain it to you all from the beginning.

"He sat down and sighed."This mountain, where you are now, is the yellow mountain. There are sacred guardians, who protect it. The mountain grants you wishes and curses at the same time."He paused to look at them."Are you following?"

They nodded, still very confused.

"High up in the mountain there is a temple,where a ritual takes place on every blue moon night and that's how people gain powers."

He paused to exhale.

"And once your wish is granted, the mountain locks you up here. Many people out there don't know about this mountain except the old lady who told me about this place. I came here searching for a certain power, and I'm locked up here now, totally regretting it."And he looked down, sadness took over his face.

"Well at least the old lady sounds familiar,"Lucas said to Alisson breaking the silence.

"I'm really sorry sir. It must be hard, staying alone," Alisson said to the man.

"Oh there is nothing to be sorry about. I'm the one to blame." He eyed them. "Anyways, why are you kids here?"

It was Alisson's turn to tell her story now."My mom went missing around 3 months ago and left us a note." She took out the note from her wallet and handed it to the man.
Where the shadow floats like the ocean and where the azalea blooms you'll find me. And ever since, we have been searching for her. We came across the old lady, and she told us that my mom might be here and that's why we got here"Alisson finished with a tear trickling down her face, she quickly wiped it off with her hand.

"Your mother was very specific about this place. She described it really well"the man spoke.

"Please, tell me we are in the right place," Lucas said, anticipating a good answer.

"You are, don't worry." The man looked towards Alisson "Your mother has described the peak of this mountain, close to the temple. I think you should start climbing towards it, there is a possibility your mother could still be there!"the man spoke, trying to show some positivity in his voice.

A smile spread over Lucas' face,"Thank you sir, for helping us and feeding us." Lucas bowed.

"Don't worry about it. But tonight, you kids need to take some rest, I'll get you some sleeping bags."The man stood up, walked back and disappeared.

Lucas turned to look at Alisson, who was now in tears of joy."We are going to find her!" Alisson smiled.

The next morning they woke up, stretched and got ready to leave. They thanked the man for his hospitality and started climbing up again.

"While you're climbing, you will come across many strange things, try keeping yourself away from them." The man warned them.

They came across many mysterious–looking flowers. “Could those be azaleas by any chance?” Lucas asked hopefully.

“Maybe they are!”Alisson reached out to them.

“Ally, no!” Lucas grabbed her away.

“Sorry, I totally forgot what the man said.”

They walked for many hours until their stomach started gurgling. They stopped and took shade under a tree and opened up their bags, took out the food the man gave them earlier that night.

When they got back on their feets, a shadow crossed above their heads. They looked up, but to their confusion, there was nothing there but a clear blue sky.

“What was that?” Alisson asked with a little uneasiness in her tone.

“We don't have time to investigate, look over there!” Lucas pointed his hand behind the tree they were resting on.

“That must be the temple!”Alisson said, staring.

“Are you sure? It wasn't there before..”

“We might have just missed it. Let’s check it out! It’s a sign!”

“In that case, it can’t be that far, we could reach it before nightfall.” Lucas said and started walking up the trail.

They kept climbing when they saw another shadow cross over their head again.

“This is freaking me out, but I'm going to ignore it.”Alisson shut her eyes.

“Yes. We are almost there.” Lucas gritted his teeth and kept pushing towards the old place.

Before they knew it, the sun had been sinking and they stood to see another beautiful view of the sun. Perhaps their last.

They saw the building get closer and closer. They stopped to take a few breaks,but couldn't stop for the day,knowing that they were almost there. It was starting to get really late, but they couldn’t stop.

As they got closer, it not only got colder and colder but there were more shadows circling their heads.

Alas, they reached the place.

And they were right, it really was the temple.

They walked slowly towards it, they could only see a silhouette of the temple. Something moved as they got even closer, but this time it was not on the sky, but on the ground.

“Who is there?”Lucas said, faking bravery.

“Go away.” A female voice said.

Alisson fell to the floor. “MOM? IS THAT YOU?”Alisson screamed.

”You won't find her. You will never find her she is gone”the female said.

“Where, where did she go?”Alisson said with mixed emotions, anger, frustration and sadness.

Lucas walked closer to the woman to see her face, Alisson got up and followed him. It was too dark that they still couldn't see her, but they noticed that she was wearing a long robe and hood covering half of her face.

“Are you a guardian?”Lucas couldn’t hide the shakiness in his voice now.

”You don't need to know who I am. Just leave.”

“We came here all the way, searching for one thing. I am not leaving without my mother.” Alisson stood firm.

“You cannot find anything here, your mother is gone.” The woman spoke, fiercely.

Anger filled Alisson. “Show me your face! SHOW ME WHO YOU ARE. NOW!” She yelled.

A lump was forming in the woman’s throat. Guilt started rising in her as she slowly lowered her hood. A tear trickled down her cheek.

“You don’t deserve a selfish mother like me, sweetheart. ”
…….

The Huang Shan Village

Islamic Kasim Tuet Memorial College, Qayyum, Fatima – 13

I am Yue, a female citizen of Huangshan Village. My job is to learn about the past and assist the men in war but *never* participate in it. I am lucky to know how to read, for it is forbidden for girls to leave home to study. My father disagrees with the rules forbidding girls to study, so he always gives me books he buys from the market and teaches my mother and me to read. My friend Yang isn't able to read, I met her at the day–carnival once. We do everything together.

Today, my father was teaching me about the traditions of our village.

'Your ancestors believed that the Sumerian–traditions are... *Yue, are you paying attention*?' asked my dad.

'Yes, dad.' I answered.

'So, what was I telling you about?'

'The origin of *our* traditions?'

'No. I am talking about the *Sumerian's traditions*'

'Okay...'

'Yes...I see you *haven't* been paying attention after all. Here is a book on their traditions, goodnight, and remember to read it first thing next morning!'

'Okay...so can I *sleep* now?'

'Yes...if you want to.'

'*Yay*! Bye Daddy!'

'Okay. Sleep tight.'

I went to my room, it was glowing silver. This was the fourth time this week my room's been glowing. I sighed, as I could not sleep well in a room that was shining like it's the day. I opened my book.

'We believe that killing kids is good and it brings prosperity.'

I shuddered and threw the blanket over myself and slept. The next morning, I went out to see the day–carnival. To my surprise, there was only one stall with a long line of boys. I rushed over, thinking it was some kind of a game. I stood for 10 minutes and was already near the booth. I heard a boy about my age moan. 'This is so hard.' Then, I was pushed from the back, the receptionist stared at me. 'Trying out for the moon warrior?' she asked.

'Y...yes.' I muttered, not knowing what that is.

'Oh my, that, What *is* that?' she asked pointing at my glowing arm, I whimpered.

'*That*'s none of your business!' I staggered and ran away.

I didn't run home, I went straight to our girl's pagoda, Luna, Yang, and Jing were all sitting there, looking at a poster.

'Oh, there you are! Look at this, it bans all "squads that only consist of girls". Really? How do they make *laws* nowadays?' Jing snapped, pointing at the poster.

'*Really.*' snorted Luna.

Yang was tearing a pile of the same posters, grunting, she said, *'Oops, there's no law banning girls to tear, is there? Bet they'll pass that law soon.*' They all laughed. I sat down and they saw my glowing arm.

'Oh!' said Jing gently.

Yang, however, snorted. She twisted my arm and revealed a tiny gadget tied to the back of my elbow.

'Who did this?' I asked.

'Your parents.' She answered bluntly.

'What? *No way*. Yang...your parents are horrible, but not mine, they're *nice*, well, my dad is, my mom, is...*cold*'

'So then, it's your mom, Don't trust her, Yue, she's...mad.'

I looked at Jing and Luna for answers, Jing shrugged, while Luna said, 'Uhm...Yang saw her parents doing it last night, putting glow gel and the glow arm device, everything. Someone...is doing this! The "sun and moon warrior" is fiction! All *fake*.' I looked at them, surprised.

A grown−up man came over and said,

'Oh, hello dears, I thought that law was passed...mm? The law about banning girls' squads?' Jing shuddered, looking vivid.

'Um, *we,* were doing our dishes' I said pointing to a few plates near Luna.

'*Oh*, I see.' the guy peered at the dishes, his eyes narrowed, and frowned. I quickly stood up and walked over to him, he said,

'These dishes are clean, I thought you were *washing* them?' I touched the dish, It was dry and clean, I panicked. Luna walked over to me and said.

'Oh, *finally*, the dishes are *dry*! Now we can go home. What do I have to cook today?' She said dramatically. I stared at her and after a few seconds, I finally understood what she was doing.

'Okay, whose dish is this…? This one is mine, Hey, Luna, where are your dishes?' I said, pretending that we are discussing *dishes*.

'It's right there.' Luna answered pointing vaguely at the fields. We all ran towards them, trying to escape the man, who seemed like he wanted to stop us.

The fields were filled with posters of the new law, I saw a poster on the ground which was slightly different from the others, I picked it up and saw something which would change my life forever.

There was a tunnel underneath the paper. I jumped in without hesitation, Luna, and Yang followed suit. The end was a hard stone floor, there was a glowing fire torch on my right, I picked it up and waved it in front of me. I saw a plate made of gold and filled with blood, there was a knife hanging with it. A deep and low voice suddenly said, 'Welcome, Moon Warrior!'

'The M...moon warrior?' I gasped. 'Jing? Jing! Where are you? Luna? Y...Yang?'

'Moon Warrior! Listen to me, sit in the bowl of blood in front of you, *Sit,* so I may sacrifice you.'

I rejected it immediately. 'No! No, I won't. Get me outta here.' I turned and tried to find the door.

'Huh.' Someone said. I waved the light in front of me and saw the guy who criticized our dishes.

'The sun and moon warrior tale is fake. *All* I want is *your blood*, *all* of your blood. *If* you and your little friend give me *all* of your blood, these two' the man pointed at Luna and Jing, who were tied up, 'Will be able to go free. *How's* my deal?'

'It's *not* a deal! It's a *threat*! You are threatening us!' screamed Yang. Yang kept on talking and criticizing him, while I looked around, I saw something that will help me: a door was on my right! I ran towards it and went outside, the guy saw me, Tap, tap tap...he was coming! I ran in the opposite direction for a long time. I stopped when I saw two doors, one was white while the other was black. I ran into one of them, I didn't know which one, all I know was to not look back and keep going. I ran and ran until my legs went numb, my eyes were sore, and all my bones ached. I was about to give up.

I fell! I had no more energy to run or even *walk*. Everything was stirring, I was about to blackout! A second before blacking out, I saw a beam of light, 'An exit?' I thought. I tried my best to stand up, crouching, I located the source of light, and crawled towards it.

The light was coming from the festival! 'Am I in a gutter?' I asked. I stuck my head out of the hole and saw Jing staring at me.

'Wha…! Jing! How did you get away?'

'Oh.' laughed Jing. 'I never jumped in the hole. So, it was only Dummy−Jing and Luna down there, I put a camera on Dummy−Jing so I saw everything, and so did the elders, they are gonna throw him outta the village. Cool, isn't it?.....'

Jing was still talking about rescuing Luna and Yang, I fell, and was already unconscious.

Three weeks later

I was laying in a hospital wrapped in bandages. Mum came in. 'I'm sorry.' she said. '*Victor* told me to prank you, the prank was that I make your arm and room glow, he's been doing pranks and killing children for years...*oh*, I'm so glad you're *okay*!'

'Wh..who's Victor? What do you mean prank...and kill?' I asked.

'Victor is a *Sumerian−believer*, and believes killing 2 children every 5 years will bring prosperity to our village and he's been doing the "Sun & Moon Warrior stalls" every 5 years for almost 5 decades! Every 5 years, a child whose mother or father is told to prank their children goes missing, *thank* goodness you're safe!' Mum was dramatic, something was wrong.

'What's wrong, mum?' I asked.

Mum looked surprised, her eyes widened a bit. 'No..nothing. M'dear.' she said. I raised my eyebrows and she burst into tears. 'I...well, it...Jing's been murdered, you *know*, um...victor *killed* her...'

I stared. 'What? *Why?*'

'It was Jing who told everyone about him...and so, that was his revenge...*really*'

I groaned, but a the same time, they *(the laws forbidding girls to do anything)*were removed and we were allowed to do *most* of the things others do. Huangshan is magical!

The Vermillion Bird

Kellett Senior School, Walters, Daniel – 12

Razor sharp, the stark white peaks pierce the lazy rolling
clouds floating across the azure blue above.
Dappled rays of wintry light reflect the sparkling river as
it runs through the lush landscape. Earth brown pebbles
and smooth grey stones hide in the deep watery crevices
as verdant, cultivated rice paddies are scattered like
loose change around the fertile earth at the foot of the
snow–capped summit.

An ancient town nestles in the shadow of the imposing
peaks, as the rippling river continues its leisurely
meander. Rickety, wooden bridges connect the two
distinct halves of the town, sun and snow, fire and ice,
shadow and light.

Snow and sun, ice and fire, light and shadow.
'He' watches, a silent silhouette keenly surveying the
plains below. Heat and warmth are natural to his
mythical presence but the glistening ice seductively
draws him in, as this winged creature of the air
attentively listens to the whispering secrets of the living
mountain.

Night falls deep and black, apart from scattered pinpricks
of light in the frigid sky. The town sleeps as the
mountain wakes from its slumber. A brisk wind rises,
sending flurries of light snow into a wild fiery tango. The
wind erupts, tempestuous and untamed, driving sheets
of jagged ice clattering down the rough terrain.

The bird rises, flaming scarlet against the
background of a pearl moon. Deep, compelling eyes
penetrate the unending night, the sunken orbs blazing into the
alabaster tidal wave of imminent disaster before him.
A majestic rustle of scarlet plumes, an expanse of
flaming feathers and the immense power of the
vermillion bird, explodes into flight.

A churning white froth rampages forward, flanked by the
blazing bird. His aqualine head dips as he picks up speed
and lands before the towering wall of ice. Echoing whispers, then
silence as the tsunami of snow and ice reduces to a ripple
and disappears before the winged mountain creature who
stands fearlessly in its path.

Dawn breaks, casting a light of soft pink and ocean blue
across the slanted angles of the mountain, until it
envelops the cyan bird in its warmth.
Its feathered robes become a sea of flames as it rises
higher and higher, before disappearing into the embrace
of the magical mountain, its home.

China's Magical Mountains

Kiangsu Chekiang College International Section, Jadhwani, Heer – 12

China is a country with many magical mountains and misty mountains. Amongst those mountains, there is a mountain called Huangshan in Eastern China. In that mountain there is a yellow emperor whose name is Huangshan. These mountains are breathtakingly beautiful, with their sharp edge. These mountains are huge and rich in thick mountain forests with cool climates. Amongst the Yellow Emperors, there are several pairs of poets named Ki bai and Du Fu. They lived there in the 8th century. People inside and outside the Yellow Emperor lead a happy life and are healthy. There are pine trees, which are very famous for pine and these pine trees lived around 1500 years. And there are tens of thousands of stone steps.

During the 8th century, the emperors became by riding the dragons. In those days, the dragon lived. The person who rode the dragon would become the emperor to the country. People also worship them as their Demi god's. People used to cultivate crops, grow fruits and vegetables. Those lands are very rich in minerals and metals. The dragons lived in secret mountain caves under a king's protection. The dragon is very famous in China. Poets used to love there only because the place is very pleasant and beautiful. The poets get poems easily by looking at the mountains and the climate. Owing to the huge height, it looks magical and wonderful. The people on that huge mountain feel otherworldly. They thought that they were living in clouds .

There are many villages around. People are called yellow citizens, and they live on the yellow mountain. They lived in tiny houses with very few people. But they do all types of work and grow plants . The emperor also satisfied people and solved all problems in a short time. They all lived very happily. The dragons also never harm them, and they used to play with dragons. They feed the dragon and everyone. They love their king because he is taking care of them and has no tax paying systems. Many years later, the dragon became extinct, and people in China still worship it. Later, all the king's emperors were down and governments were formed and many developments took place in China . Now, China is the world's largest populated country and most developed country with huge resources. Anyhow, there are still Huangshan Mountains, huge forests and stone steps. In those mountains and many mountains, scientists still found dragon bones and species. Many researches were undergoing. They think there are still dragons living in secret caves. In those mountains, many movies have been made and are still being made. These mountains are famous for his, her, their, etc. filmmaking and stunt performances. During the 8th century, the emperor protected all those areas and forests and now the people are using those resources and living happily.

The Search for the Elixir of life

Korean International School, Shum, Colin Jack Noah – 13

The Yellow Dynasty has become the largest and most successful kingdom in China thanks to the guidance and leadership of Huangdi, the Yellow Emperor. However, the years have reflected onto Huangdi's body and has made him weary. Huangdi looked at his many sons, all eagerly waiting for when he collapsed and they could take the throne. He realised that that day would be coming sooner than he once thought, his life flashed before his eyes, all the battles, women and glory that he had won. He decided to go on one last adventure, one that would make him immortal. Huangdi rose from his golden throne and the court when silent, he raised his arms and announced to the court, "I have heard that in the Yishan mountain, there is an elixir that grants the drinker immortality, I have decided that I will find the elixir. Tomorrow, I will embark on this journey with my two most trusted advisors, Li Bai and Du Fu"

Li Bai and Du Fu immediately snapped to attention, "Yes Emperor" they said with a salute. Huangdi stepped down from the dais and walked through the huge doors. As he walked, he heard people muttering that he had gone senile in his old age and that soon his sons would take over.

The next morning, the people bid farewell to Huangdi and his advisors. The sons wept in front of Huangdi but behind their tear soaked mask, they wore devious and scheming smiles. As soon as Huangdi's horse wasn't visible, the sons immediately started discussing who would take the throne. He shook his head in disappointment and marched on towards the looming Yishan mountain.

The group walked up the mountain for hours, as the sun began to fall, the sunlight shone all over the mountain and town, making the whole area glow a radiant gold. Li Bai and Du Fu stared at the breathtaking sight and immediately started writing poems. "Oi! Let's keep moving" barked Huangdi.

"Sorry, sorry" they muttered. They continued to trudge up the mountain until they found a cave and Huangdi ordered them to make camp there. As Li Bai and Du Fu led their horses into the cave, Huangdi stayed outside and looked at the path that they would continue on. He studied it more closely and realised it was too steep for the horses.

"We will have to travel on foot tomorrow" Huangdi said to Li Di and Du Fu, "The path is too steep for the horses"

Du Fu started to groan but Li Bai quickly punched him in the stomach "Understood Emperor" he said. The Emperor sat with his advisors and watched them cook a rabbit over the fire. Eventually, the rabbit finished cooking and the three ate in an awkward silence. Li Bai and Du Fu glanced at each other, "So, Emperor, do you really believe this elixir will grant you immortality?" asked Du Fu.

"I do," replied Huangdi and they left it at that.

The next morning, Li Bi and Du Fu woke to Huangdi waiting for them. They quickly scrambled out of their sleeping bag and packed up the campsite. Once they were ready, they stood at attention and Huangdi started walking up the path. The trio walked on and on and on until they reached a plateau that they could rest on. Li Bi and Du Fu sank gratefully onto the soft grass and Huangdi calmly sat down. While Du Fu was giving everyone food and water, Li Bi took out a scroll and started examining it. "What does that scroll say?" asked Du Fu.

"It talks about the elixir, apparently the elixir must be made with four things that are found on the mountain, the whisker of a dragon, a story from a monkey and the scale of qilin, in that order" Li Bi said.

"And where do I find a dragon, monkey and qilin?" Huangdi inquired.

"Says here you can find the dragon on a plateau" Li Bi said while squinting at the scroll and his eyes widened, "Uh oh"

"Wha– AHHHHH!" Du Fu started to ask but was cut off by the dragon erupteing from below their feet and came out roaring. They flew into the air and came crashing back down onto the path.

"I think I just peed my pants," Du Fu wept.

“Quick! Give me my sword” Huangdi ordered. Li Bi fumbled out the sword from his bag and handed it to Huangdi. Huangdi calmly drew it and raised it, the sunlight caught on the jade sword and Huangdi stood there, looking godlike. He screamed and charged the dragon, he swung his blade with everything he had, it hit the dragon’s body and Huangdi heard a shattering sound, The blade was in splinters and there wasn’t even a visible dent on the drago. Nothing had ever broken the sword before, he had killed so much and now it was broken. Rage consumed Huangdi, he leapt at the dragon and pulled at its whiskers. The dragon roared and spewed fire from its mouth, it started beating its wings and swinging its tail wildly. Li Bi and Du Fu had recovered and were going over to save Huangdi but Li Bi was struck by the dragon’s tail and Du Fu was blown away by the wings. The dragon soared into the sky and Huangdi held on for his life.

As they flew through the clouds, Huangdi looked at the horizon and the retreating sun, for some reason, he felt calm and peaceful. He let go of the dragon and apologised for hurting it. The dragon looked into his eyes and grunted. It turned and started flying back to the broken plateau. As the dragon landed, Li Bi and Du Fu were once again knocked back by the wind of the dragon. Huangdi jumped off the dragon and stroked its chin, the dragon closed its eyes and a single whisker fell into Huangdi’s hand. Huangdi nodded his thanks and the dragon flew off into the sun.

Huangdi turned to Li Bi and Du Fu who were massaging their backs.

“I have acquired the whisker, let’s go find that monkey now” Huangdi told them and he strode past them.

It took two more days for them to find the monkey. They emerged from behind a rock and saw what looked like a stone figure looking off into the distance. “That must be the monkey,” Li Bi whispered.

“But that’s just a stone sculpture” Du Fu hissed.

Huangdi ignored them and walked over to the stone figure. He sat down and waited. After a few minutes, the stone started cracking and a monkey sat there.

“I have come to hear your story, Great Monkey,” Huangdi said.

“Very well,” the monkey said, “Long ago, I fell in love with a girl named Zhangzu. She was like the moon, shining and beautiful but I knew she and her parents would not want her to marry a monkey so I transformed into a human and proposed, she said yes and there was a big party, however, I became careless and became drunk, my disguise fell and Zhangzu was so horrified she ran away. She never came back and I now sit here, watching her home, filled with regret”

“I’m sorry,” Huangdi said.

“Don’t live life filled with regret, let go of your past” the monkey instructed. Huangdi closed his eyes and looked at all of his enemies, the women and children he had killed and he let go of them. He acknowledged what he had done in his past was terrible and he let go of them.

“Well done” the monkey croaked, “Now leave, I would like to be left in peace from now on”

Huangdi rose and walked back to Li Bi and Du Fu who were gaping at him. They shouldered their bags and followed Huangdi as they continued walking up the mountain.

It took them another five days to reach the top of the Lotus Peak which was where the qilin waited according to Li Bi and his scroll. The trio climbed to the peak and sawa qilin waiting for them. Li Bi and Du Fu shuddered at its terrifying appearance.

“Come,” boomed the qilin. Huangdi started walking over, Li Bi and Du Fu gulped and followed. They sat down in front of the qilin and waited.

“I assume you have come for my scale for the elixir?” asked the qilin.

“That is correct,” answered Huangdi.

“And do you know what the elixir does?”

“It grants immortality”

The qilin laughed, "The legends are wrong, the elixir does not grant eternal life, it grants a painless death"

Huangdi, Li Bi and Du Fu were all shocked but Hiangdi's eyes suddenly became weary.

"My time has come," he said.

The qilin gave him the scale and Huangdi drank the elixir while Li Bi and Du Fu wept. The Yellow Emperor who fathered 25 sons and the creator of the first dynasty, died.

A Legend Lost to Time

Maryknoll Convent School (Secondary Section), Cheung, Tung Ching Athena – 13

Rough stone, sculpted by the hands of nature, stand tall and unmoving as they tower over mankind. At times shrouded in wispy clouds and silver threads of mist, at others gleaming golden and shining in the dawn, these peaks are a spectacular sight for the ages. These sights belong to none other than the ancient beauty that is the Yellow Mountains of China, better known as Huangshan to the locals.

Many gaze in awe at the wondrous sights of the monumental peaks, saying that they now understand why these mountains are so praised in artistic endeavours of old and new. However, few know the true story of Huangshan, and why it is so appealing to create beautiful renditions of it in stories, poems, and paintings.

"Mother, tell me another story, another one!" the child begged. "Tell me the one with the magic and the dragon— please!"

"Again?" the mother laughed, stroking her daughter's hair softly. "Alright, but it's bedtime for you after this one."

"Long before we were here, there once lived a dragon, soaring amongst the clouds..."

A mighty roar sounded from the heavens, marking the arrival of a mythical beast cloaked in scales that shone like the most luxurious gold and eyes that gleamed like the finest jade.

This dragon was a descendant of the Yellow Dragons, famed for their wisdom. He wished for nothing but peace to fall upon these lands, to watch the people prosper and usher in a new era of knowledge. And so, the dragon decided to bless the mountains they resided in with the gift of creativity.

He hoped it would serve them well, and wished to see the people produce stunning works of art and literature. For a while, the dragon was content. He watched in delight as they penned poems that would be passed down for generations to come, painted masterpieces that convey emotion in every brushstroke...

However, time quells far too much. As the years passed, the dragon faded from the people's memories, thought to be a mere myth, a part of the great works of fiction that had been produced by previous generations.

And what was an immortal being, if his people no longer knew of his existence? Day by day, the dragon felt his strength seep away, yet still he refused to show himself and force the people to bow in reverence or fear, for it was never his wish to impede on their freedom.

Slowly, the trickling of his power left him as a hollow shell of his former self, old, ancient, and far less impressive than before. His strength came from living on through the memories of man, twirling and gliding free in their imagination. Without them, he was weak and battered. Likewise, the gift of creativity he had given to them also started to fade, until slowly, its spirit was held only by a few who tried their best to keep it alive. Those became the best thinkers and poets of an era, famed and renowned. But even they had not imagined that a mythical beast lay in slumber underneath their feet in the very mountain they lived on, fading, fading, fading...

(Thirteen years later, in a village on Huangshan…)

"Mother, I'm going to the forest to pick some berries. Be back soon!"

A young girl, basket in hand, she skipped down the beaten path to the woods enthusiastically. It was no lie— she really *was* going to grab some sweet fruit from amongst the foliage, but the real reason she was so excited was that she finally had a chance to set her thoughts free.

Settling down, she whipped out her hidden treasures from inside the small basket: a worn notebook and a simple twig dipped in charcoal, both small and easily concealable.

Here in China and especially in this little village she lived in, a girl who knew how to read and write was practically unheard of, never mind one who aspired to become a poet. She had learned all she knew from eavesdropping on the teachings her brothers received. *Studying was better for the boys*, her parents had put it kindly when she asked. *All you need to do is take care of your looks, and learn how to do chores. You'll have a nice husband to take care of you one day, so there's no reason to fret.*

She tried to forget the matter, but her passion won out in the end. Every week, she'd find an excuse to sneak out to her secluded spot, and let her mind wander.

Looking around, she drew inspiration from her surroundings and put pen to paper.

Before she knew it, the page had been filled up with her scribbles. Half-formed thoughts, descriptions of forest creatures, her emotions at not being able to let her words see the light of day... all of them, and more, she kept tucked away in her scraggly notebook.

Soon, it came time for her to return home. This time though, she found herself straying from the beaten path she always took, her feet taking her deeper into the thicket instead.

There was a moment of hesitation, but her curiosity won out in the end. Following her heart's lead, eventually she stumbled across the yawning stone mouth of a cave, shrouded in thick vines that made it near impossible to spot.

As she stepped inside, a small spark lit up the darkness in front of her, beckoning with its warm glow. It hovered in the air, brightening the way ahead.

Venturing deeper in, she found rows upon rows of carvings and splotches of paint on the tunnel's walls, telling of civilisations long lost to the sands of time.

"What... is this place?" Her voice echoed out into the stillness, but there was only the deafening silence to answer her.

The flickering light ushered her deeper, until she finally saw it.

In a central cavern, a massive hunk of sculpted amber, carved into the shape of a mighty dragon, lay sparkling in the light of her guide.

Carefully, she walked along the thin strip of smooth stone hovering above the still water below, crystal-clear and unfathomably deep. It reflected the sharp, deadly stalactites dripping down from above, and if one were to fall in, she imagined that they would never make it to the surface again.

Reaching the middle, she gazed at the statue in all its magnificence. However, she couldn't help but notice that it looked rather worse for wear, with its chipped scales and dull eyes. Though it was but a work of unmoving art, it was as if she could sense the weariness and despair of the dragon through the lifelike, empty gaze.

All she could do was place a gentle hand on its forehead. It was an action that felt inherently right and somehow sorrowful, as if the hollowness of the heavenly creature's rendition had passed it on.

All of a sudden, she found herself surrounded by vivid memories of her childhood, her mind pinpointing the time her mother told her a story both beautiful and saddening.

...scales that shone like gold, eyes that gleamed like jade...

...blessed with creativity...

...faded from memory...

...powerless.

With a rumble that shook the very earth itself, the statue started to crack open in front of her very eyes. Scrambling backwards, she looked for a way out in case the cave collapsed- but then, she realised that she need not fear.

Around her body, a slender dome formed, thin as silk yet resilient as diamonds. Stunned, all she could do was shield her eyes from the blinding glare.

When the dust settled, she cracked an eye open, only to find the dragon's sculpture, faded but glorious still, had come alive.

"You know my story," came its rumbling voice. "You've saved me, at least for a second."

Gaping like a fish out of water, the girl was rendered speechless, falling to her knees.

"Alas, I cannot remain in the mortal world for long. I sense the desire to create hidden in you."

Tethered to the Earth only by the girl's consciousness, he continued.

"Please, tell my story for me, won't you? Keep my spirit alive, so that one day I may return to see the people flourish once again..."

The dragon could bear the strain no longer, and soon became a smattering of yellow dust, carried away by a sudden breeze from nowhere.

Still in shock, what could she do except honor the dragon's dying wish?

She returned to the village, and time flew by. Eventually, she became the storyteller of the village, enchanting adults and children alike with her tales of heroes and monsters– but most of all...

"Miss! Tell us the story of the dragon again!"

The young woman grinned.

"Listen closely now. Long before we were here, there once lived a dragon..."

Somewhere far off in the clouds, a shimmer of gold snaked through the sky, twirling in delight.

To Paint the Sky

Maryknoll Convent School (Secondary Section), Kwok, Sze Yat Vanessa – 14

Up top amongst the highest peaks, lives the artists who paint the skies.

Fairy tales sound stupid as soon as you grow out of your childhood. Or, well, when you're dumped out of your household and have nowhere to go. Han lets out a sigh, aware of his current situation. All he had was a rusty, dim oil lamp, and his ragged bag that carried a couple of his art supplies. Nothing else.

Slowly, the youth dragged himself up the uneven cobblestone steps carefully. He peers over his shoulders, and down onto the small village he has lived all his life. The lighting of the houses, which once gave him warmth, seemed as if making fun of his loneliness. Perhaps he could run back, and beg for his family to keep him. Perhaps he could give up his artistic dreams, and become a doctor, just as his father intended him to. Perhaps he would've done that if life was a fairytale, living happily ever after.

But as soon as his father shoved him out of the courtyard, he knew he could never turn back. Freedom, but at what cost?

Stop thinking of it, he tells himself. It's over now, you no longer belong.

The higher he goes, the darker the sky is. The darker the sky is, the brighter the stars are. How much he wished he could capture such a scene with his paint! Yet he had to move on. For one thing that he knew, he'd freeze to death if he had not found shelter before midnight arrives.

To where? He stops in his tracks, realizing. To his grandmother's favourite tales? Quite idiotic to believe, but he could only pursue himself to move on this way. He had always believed in her tales, no matter how fantasy–like they sounded, and sworn to never forget them even after her passing.

But the night was catching up. Darkness taunts the fragile flame, which now flickers weakly, about to go off. Han grips the lamp tighter. Please don't go off.

Ironically, it does.

The boy swears under his breath. He has to keep moving. Perhaps there may be an abandoned house near the top. Or even a cave would do good. The glacial winds kissed his cheeks continuously, and he felt his legs tremble like twigs. Squinting his eyes, he peers over his shoulders again. Right below him is the void. One slip, and it's the end of him. His heart beats louder than thunder, faster than a hummingbird's wings.

I can make it, he tells himself, but his legs say otherwise. They've been shaking non–stop, and now, they've lost all their energy. Han makes one last prayer.

He slips.

Something smashes against the back of his skull.

Pitch darkness clouded his vision before he knew it.

The first thing Han wakes up to is white. Must be the afterlife. Without much doubt, he pulled himself up, leaning against a wall behind him. Slowly coming to his senses, he realized. He seemed to be in a bed–room –– all the room had was just a bed, a couple of lights, and a door to his left. Confused, he trailed his fingers from his neck to the back of his head, to where it hurt the most when he fell. Strange enough, it felt of... nothing. As if there were no injuries at all. Brushed down to his calves. The lanceolate leaves on the hill should've at least scratched him slightly, but there were no injuries at all.

Maybe this is what heaven −− or hell, looks like.

“So, you’re up.” A soft but masculine voice interrupts. Shocked to hear a human voice, Han’s panicked to see who was there. His mind still hazy, Han was only able to register a bit of the other individual's features −− pale, lengthy hair, just like an elder’s. Yet his voice sounded as if they had a similar age to his.

His startled face most likely gave him away, as it earned him a chuckle from the stranger.

“Rest. And don’t worry, no one else is here to disturb you.”

Even more worrying. But Han’s dizziness forces him to shut his eyes and return to unconsciousness.
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The following days were as troublesome. The boy kept waking up and passing out continuously, and nevertheless, was quite embarrassed for the burden he had brought for Ling, whose name he had learnt through their small conversations when he was awake. Ling was rather ‘simple’ and disliked complexity. However, his drawings were something else.

Ever since Han told the older, he assumed the blonde was older, he had wanted to pursue his dreams of art, Ling was more than delighted to paint in front of him. “Perhaps you could tell me how to improve,” he often said. Nevertheless, it wasn’t necessary. Ling drew the sky. It seemed as if it was the only thing he painted. Every day, every moment, he seemed to be working on a piece. And each piece was spectacular. His usage of colours often amazed Han −− how he used so many variations of colours, but managed to make them look realistic, rather than excessive. Those slender fingers worked like magic on the paint board every single time. However, it was a pity that Han’s vision was still blurry, most likely due to the often passing outs.

“It’s alright, you’ll get used to living at such a height soon.” Ling’s kind words soothed the boy’s worry, as their relationship developed from their first conversation. Despite feeling as if the ice between them had melted, Han never dared to ask Ling specific questions. Where were they? Where are the others? Reason? Rather simple. He didn’t want to trigger Ling, and desired to leave as soon as he recovered, unwilling to be the elder’s burden.

That seemed impossible. Although Han had recovered from fainting, he hated to admit it, but he became reliant on Ling. Or rather, obsessed. His artworks often amused him, and his words of empathy, encouragement, sank deep into Han’s heart.

He seemed to be almost perfect.

But for Ling, he knew he wasn’t. He had lost his chance of leaving centuries ago, as soon as a sorcerer gave him what he wished for. To live on as a spirit. To paint the skies. And to be able to make the spirits that have come to him stay. Companions came, just the way Han did, and left as soon as Ling wasn’t able to hide the truth from them. It wasn’t his artwork, it wasn’t his personality, it was his greed that forced them to stay. And he knew he had to tell his ‘companion’ such. And Han, just like the others, would enrage from the truth. Dash to the balcony, dive into the scarlets and the tangerines, and fall into the sunset, into the underworld, gone. Forever. He trembles upon knowing Han’s reaction.

It’s a curse. Immortality only made it worse. Not to mention the pact he had signed with the sorcerer, was unbreakable.

Yet it was useless to say all this, as no one ever accepted his reasoning. And the never would.

Ling’s fists clenched till they were pale, as he looked down onto his crossed legs, knowing that he would not be able to catch the other from falling in time.

Han doesn’t move.

He soon will, Ling tells himself.

In spite of such, no one moves. Nothing moves. The entire world slows down just for them. A white, infinity space, painted with different shades of white.

And suddenly, thousands of neon shades seep into the space. Surprised, Ling attempts to take back his hand, but Han grabs it firmly.

“If you’ve ever thought of me as such a person, then you’re terribly incorrect.” Terrible in the best way.

Night falls. Han gazes down from the balcony, and onto where was once his home. People scurried around, carrying lights, and it was obvious it wasn’t a usual village night. They seem to be carrying a box, as crowds dressed in alabaster gather around it, followed closely by people carrying pearly white objects. He has never seen such a festival before. But it doesn’t matter to him anymore. Here he is, where he should be staying.

“Thinking of returning to them?” Ling’s dulcet voice comes from behind, joining his partner.

“Why would I ever?” the reply comes almost immediately, as the two lock eyes.

They can’t help but laugh in sync, as the paint of the night sky covers the universe.

Legend of A Flower

Maryknoll Convent School (Secondary Section), Sung, Abigale – 12

Once upon a time, there was a flower. And this flower was one of a kind and said to be the most beautiful flower in the world. It was not like a normal flower, for it created a special kind of nectar that purified every stream and pond in the Yellow Mountains and ran through the ground, making all kinds of plants bloom and grow. It made the mountains the perfect habitat for animals. It was the very heart of the mountains and if any harm ever came to it, the mountains would wilt and wither. Many looked for this flower, but they never found it, until one little girl who discovered the secret of the flower.

In one of the numerous forests that are still to this day rooted upon the earth, there was a small girl, her face covered by so much soot and dirt that it could hardly be told that she was a girl. She was dressed in thin rags that did not do very well against the cold. Her feet were bare and turning blue. Her eyes warily searched her surroundings. Her name was Lin, and she was searching for the legendary flower that was the only cure for her youngest brother's illness, if it was real. Lin had no doubt that it was and clung on to that tiny bit of hope as she wandered around, lost, and afraid, on the verge of freezing.

As Lin walked, she shivered and wrapped her threadbare coat around herself, half to protect her from the frosty cold of winter, half from the terrors she was sure would pop up any moment. The trees loomed ominously over her head, reminding her all the stories the children from her village loved to tell. Lin was sure some horrible creature would pop up and lunge at her, and she would be the meal of a hungry beast.

After trudging for a long time, Lin was forced to sit down and rest. Her feet were scraped and bleeding from the frozen ground, and she was so cold she could barely even turn around to look apprehensively at the rustling leaves behind her. Sitting down and laying her head against the tree, she let fatigue take over her and closed her sleepy eyes.

She dreamed fretfully. She dreamed of her dear grandfather, who had died a few years ago and was the one who told her legends and stories. Everyone else in the village thought him crazy, with the twinkle in his eye and his stories. Lin thought him wonderful. She was, after all, a strange person like her grandfather.

She had no friends, but she was fine with that. The stories were her source of comfort. Lin smiled in her sleep. Then she dreamed of more troubling things. Her stepmother and her siblings, who cared for her as much as they did the dirt that they made her clean every single day. They hated her and blamed her for her father's death. The final straw was when Lin's youngest brother got terribly sick. Lin had made the mistake of bringing up the legend of the flower.

"BE QUIET, YOU FOOL!" Lin's stepmother screamed. "YOUR BROTHER IS DYING AND ALL YOU CARE ABOUT IS YOUR SILLY LEGENDS? IF THIS FLOWER IS THE ONLY CURE, THEN WHY DON'T YOU GO FIND IT?"

Her voice boomed and her siblings gave her baleful glares. Then Lin was thrown out of the house, quite literally, while the sick child wailed and cried.

Lin woke to a wet, and freezing sensation on her body. With a start, she realized it was

snow. It was lying thickly upon her, covering almost half of her body. Everything was white and frosty and would have looked beautiful if Lin weren't on the verge of freezing to death. Then she realized why she was not dead yet. Near her fingers, which were only slightly tinged blue, when they should have been swollen, purple and black from frostbite, was a warmth that Lin remembered, sitting by the fire when she was young, listening to her grandfather tell another one of his stories.

Lin frowned. It was in the middle of winter. How could she still be alive? With great difficulty, she got up. She throbbed and ached, and her joints creaked like old, rusty hinges.

Looking to her left, where she felt the warmth, she gasped.

There was a path of tiny white flowers, untouched by the snow, almost glowing.

It was not much, but Lin felt certain that it would lead her to the flower she was looking for.

Getting up and wincing in pain, she walked along the path of flowers. She was so captivated by the beautiful flowers that she didn't realize that she was in a large, empty meadow. Well. Not empty. There was a… thing in the middle. But Lin didn't see it until it was too late– a blur whipped into her chest and Lin collapsed, gasping for air. All she could see was fur and teeth. Large, extremely sharp teeth bared itself at her and Lin nearly fainted from fear.

She looked up to see red eyes glaring at her, full of anger and hunger.

"W–what are you?" Lin chattered, shivering.

The beast simply growled, putting its paws on her chest.

Why wasn't it attacking yet?

Lin could feel how bony it was. A sudden rush of sympathy burst through the fear that was clouding her thoughts.

Putting one hand on the beast's chest, which caused it to growl louder, Lin breathed deeply.

"I know you need to eat, but I need to save my brother." Lin pleaded, closing her eyes.

Lin didn't put up a fight. Either way someone would die, the beast or her brother. There was no difference in which she gave a chance to live longer.

The beast curved its jaw, almost smiling, before it dissipated into the wind, turning into only memories.

Lin opened her eyes hesitantly. There was nothing that ever showed that the beast was ever there. Only the faint scent of something indescribable. Sitting up, Lin saw a small flower. The color of the petals were a deep, blood red.

Lin thought it was the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen– it would save her brother's life. She would have thought it beautiful even if it were ugly to all the other people.

Reaching out her hand for the flower, she hesitated.

In that moment, hundreds of doubts and selfish thoughts rushed into her head.

Then, she breathed deeply, and at once her head cleared. She reached out and plucked it, a terrible feeling in her stomach as she did.

Such a simple act that all the other village kids did all the time. Lin had never picked a flower before that day. She thought the flowers deserved a chance to live longer too.

Now she had killed everything on the mountain. For what?

Shudders ran through the ground, and instantly the grass around where the flower was turned duller.

"I'm sorry," she sobbed. "I'm so sorry." A tear dropped to the ground and crystallized, turning into ice. Lin didn't notice, but the tear sank into the ground and the shudders stopped.

She turned around and ran for what seemed like hours, running on adrenaline and sheer determination, and came to her village.

Still trembling, she walked back into her former house.

All was silent. Lin knew that she could not make herself known. All she had to do was feed the flower to her brother. Lin hoped that the flower was small enough that her brother would not choke on it.

She walked into the room that her brother slept in, finding her brother with a wet cloth on his forehead and a thick blanket lying on his tiny, thin frame. Lin's stepmother must have been out doing errands.

Lin woke her brother up, shaking him gently.

"Eat this," she whispered urgently. "You'll feel better."

The poor boy was so feverish he couldn't complain and simply opened his mouth.

Lin dropped the flower in and told her brother to chew before swallowing.

It felt like a long, long time before she saw his throat gulp.

Then his eyes opened wider, and he coughed a few times.

"Lin." he said dreamily.

Lin put my hand to his forehead and felt that the worst was over. His temperature was rapidly cooling and she sighed, looking at the little boy who had slipped back into unconsciousness.

"Sleep tight, little brother." she whispered.

Then Lin crept away.

She stepped out of the house and saw a trail of white flowers, untouched by the snow, almost glowing with warmth, and a tiny seed of hope bloomed in her chest, just like the tear that she had shed when she plucked the flower, shining, waiting for her at the end of the path, with petals the color of gold– the shade of Lin's eyes.

The Ever–Living Potion

Maryknoll Convent School (Secondary Section), Yu, Hin Wan Ava – 12

"I am getting old," remarked the Mayor of a small village in China "Life is so good! I wish I can live forever." The Mayor was wealthy and had always been enjoying his prestigious life. He was worried that he would die one day and lose all that he had. He sat on his splendid armchair for a long while contemplating his own final future. Suddenly, he came up with an excellent idea and possibly the brightest idea he had ever thought of.

"Ah!" the Mayor exclaimed. "I know there is ever–living potion high up in the mountains, but I am not sure which mountain to be exact. I must get it! I must get it by all means!" The Mayor wanted to find the mysterious ever–living potion very badly. He wanted it right away, but he knew it would be unbelievably hard to attain it, there was no way he could do it by himself. So, he decided to make use of the people of the village. He would reward the person who first attained the potion with a huge block of GOLD. He demanded his servants to spread the news to everyone in the village immediately.

When the villagers heard about this news, they were very excited even though they all knew it was tough and dangerous to get the potion. Motivated by the appeal of gold and the uncontrollable greed, many villagers got on their feet. They started the long, challenging journey without thinking much of the consequences. They believed this life–risking adventure would bring the winner a life–changing fortune.

Among these boisterous villagers was a young man named Hou. Hou came from a family that had been living in extreme poverty. Hou was hungry for the reward. He needed the money to feed his family's empty stomachs and build his family a house. Unlike the other ignorant villagers, he knew where the potion was hidden. Hou had once heard of the story of the ever–living potion from his great grandfather, although this poor starving family had never thought of any man would be brave enough to stay alive endlessly.

Hou headed to the magical mountains, where the potion was hidden. These mountains were covered by thick forests. Some said these mountains were sacred, some said they were cursed. People admired, and avoided, these magical mountains in fear. These magnificent mountains had been standing proudly at where they were in the far rural China for thousands of years. In the midst of these thick forests, there was an amazing place. The grass there was as green as the pharaoh's emerald, as soft as Chinese silk. The air was filled with the freshness of the nature. Flowers were glowing and blossoming. Birds were singing beautifully. It looked like a tranquil haven. But there was abruptly a very mysterious cave which did not belong to the peace and serenity surrounding. The cave was ugly and was pitch black inside.

Hou knew the potion was inside the cave. Even though his body was shaking involuntarily, he took a deep breath. He told himself that he was the most courageous man in the world. He entered the cave like a fearless warrior. Along the way in the dark and damp cave, he saw a lot of jewelry and treasures spreading all over the ground. He stared at them with his thirsty eyes and grasped many different precious stones and other valuables and squeezed them all in his shabby small bag. Appearing in his mind was the picture of him and his family wearing glamorous clothes, appreciating their glittering jewels happily together. It made his heart smile. .

The fearless warrior kept on walking until the end of the long passage when he heard a loud, horrible voice saying "You shall not pass this gate!"

"You think you can stop me now?" Hou replied bluntly to the voice. He laughed, and climbed above the gate agilely. All in a sudden, there came a loud big '*B... ANG!*', then it all went pitch black again. Hou's vision was blurred. He panted and fainted finally.

****

Hou slowly regained consciousness and found himself locked in an old iron cage. The iron cage was rusty and dirty. Outside of the iron cage, Hou saw many dead human bodies hanging on the tainted stone walls. "Where am I? Am I dead?" Hou was very puzzled and could not recall any of his memory. He looked around nervously and found a weak old man being locked up in another iron cage opposite to his. Hou tried to whisper to the old man and asked "Where am I, sir? What is this?" The old man whispered back "This castle belongs to a wicked grinch. The grinch is the king of this castle. He has a very bad temper and I am afraid we are all going to die." Hou then asked

“How did you get here?” The old man replied “I have been here for several months. I got locked up in here because I wanted to steal the ever–living potion like you. The potion belongs to the grinch. You and I are now at the grinch’s mercy.” Hearing this, Hou started shivering as if he was standing naked on a frozen lake in Siberia. His throbbing heart was going to explode. He banged and shook very hard the gate of the cage, hoping he could escape from the cage and get out of this dreadful place. But before he managed to escape, he woke up the grinch from his deep sleep.

Heavy footsteps echoed along the walls and the evil, furious grinch came. “What are you poor little fool doing?!” The grinch shouted at Hou in his deep, coarse voice. Hou quickly returned to his original position. The grinch stared at Hou opening his big stinky mouth showing his sharp yellow teeth, as if he was ready to eat Hou. Suddenly, Hou heard some noises coming from the other end of the chambers. Hou listened carefully, IT WAS HIS FAMILY! Hou tried to squeeze out of the cage to go to his parents. His body hurt a bit but it was worth a try. He really missed his parents.

“Mother, Father!” cried Hou. “How did you get here?”

“Hou!” Hou’s mother and father both screamed hard, “The grinch demanded two of his subordinates to kidnapped us from the village, and he brought us here. Why are you here Hou...”, before they could even finish their sentence, the angry grinch came and forcefully pulled Hou away.

“Mother, Father! Help me please!” Hou screamed. The grinch looked at Hou scornfully and spoke to him in a very low and creepy voice, “Let’s have a deal. If you want to get out of this cage and this castle, your family will have to die. If you want your family to be safe and leave here, you will have to die. You can think about this before I change my mind.”

Hou did not want to die, but at the same time he wanted his family to be safe. Hou sat alone and sobbed helplessly. He regretted. He regretted very much! He looked at the dead bodies outside of his cage. He did not want to be one of them. Neither did he want his father nor mother to be one of them. Hou was fighting with himself. He murmured to himself, “My parents would not be here if I did not come.” Hou popped his head out through the gap of the gate to check on his parents. Sadly, he failed. He did not see his parents.

An hour passed, the grinch was stomping through the hallway back to Hou. Hou stood up bravely and said “Let my parents go and I will stay here. You can kill me, but remember your promise. You have promised me to let my parents out of here if I give you my life. I will never let you hurt them.” Hou then shouted one last time to his beloved parents whom he believed were at the other far end, “Mother, Father. Quick! Please go home right now! Please stay safe. You won’t be caught by the grinch if I was with you at home. It’s all my fault. Goodbye Mother! Goodbye Father! I love you! ” Hou’s parents were shocked and deeply saddened. They tried to run towards Hou but they were tied by heavy chains. Tears came running down their cheeks and their beloved son’s cheeks.

The grinch was waiting for Hou by his long dining table. The wicked grinch opened his mouth greedily and made a big bite with his sharp teeth on Hou’s trunk. Hou screamed miserably and hopelessly. He was in great pain. He screamed until his last breath. Before he closed his eyes eternally, the ever–living potion eventually appeared in front of him, on the grinch’s dining table.

It was life risking… It was life changing…

Wonderland

Marymount Secondary School, Ng, Cherie – 12

I hadn't done enough homework to understand how hazardous the Celestial Capital Peak was. As a seasoned backpacker from the City that Never Sleeps, I didn't need a tour guide whose accented English I wouldn't understand anyway. But thanks to my severe lack of coordination, my blonde hair and blue eyes weren't the only thing separating me from the crowd – I felt like a fish out of water, and I hated standing out.

I stared enviously at the local tourists boarding the gondola lifts, wincing at my aching muscles. Soon I was holding an internal debate, with the motion being whether I should head back to the mountain base and rethink my route. I gritted my teeth and balled my hands into fists, determined to reach my final destination without help from aerial transportation. I believed firmly in the quote "dreams don't work unless you do", and my dream was only...1313 metres away.

I was a college student majoring in classical languages, and I'd spent hours in Literary Chinese class daydreaming about Huangshan. It was common knowledge that not even the most skilled photographer could encapsulate the mysticality of nature, but images taken of the Yellow Mountains at sunset were the definition of breathtaking. The sky would become a palette of rich and varied colours at 5 o'clock, blending together to create a serenely beautiful skyline.

Banishing all my fantasies of the resplendent horizon, I drew myself back to reality. The fog had turned Huangshan into a brilliant white page, obscuring my sight until I couldn't see my hand in front of my face. Suddenly, my foot was unable to locate solid ground and my surroundings blurred like a poorly shot action photograph. I braced myself for my head colliding hard rock, but no such impact occurred.

I was falling into eternal blackness, and the infinite depth of the hole made me feel small and insignificant. A strange sense of calamity dulled my senses, my "fight–or–flight" instinct abandoning me completely. I was going to die as a cliché – Alice falling down the rabbit hole. I blamed my mother for my sudden death, which could've been evitable if she'd enrolled me in ballet classes when I was a child.

One moment I was falling through a dark abyss, and then I was lying on a soft bed of autumn leaves as speckles of red, orange and yellow were delicately blown off tree branches, fluttering down to the ground like colourful rain.

My knuckles scraped the earthen floor as I cast my eyes forward. The silence was so deep I became conscious of every breath I took, and soon my own steady rhythm coming from within could be heard. The silence caressed my skin like a fall breeze, smoothening my soul, taking away my jagged edges. Huangshan was beautiful, but it lacked the quietude and repose I so desperately needed. The perspiring delivery men dressed in torn undershirts hauling food up the mountain ruined the "haven of tranquility" vibes.

I quietly surveyed my surroundings—the sunlight was cascading down a gap of clouds into a lake that could've been mistaken for a mirror. In reflective blues and greens, it brought its own artistic watercolour effect to the daytime. I wondered if all bodies of water were this pure before human pollution contaminated wildlife. I'd always wanted to bathe in cliffside pools, to feel the saline water rush over my skin and lashes.

I impulsively decided to make my way down to the lake, navigating past the boulders covered with moss and lichen. I expected my gracelessness to resurface any second, but there wasn't a single minor disturbance on the mountain path. No jagged rocks stood out and threatened to send me stumbling, no pinecones spontaneously detached themselves from the conifer trees to grant me a minor concussion. This alternate reality was as perfect as a fairytale.

Maybe I had more in common with Alice than I'd thought—we'd both discovered Wonderland.

I passed cave mouths leading into impenetrable tenebrosity I normally would have investigated, but the only one obsessive thought in my mind was diving into the tiny glass pieces that formed the crystal–clear lake. I barely noticed when nightfall came with a whisper of black accompanied by a comforting chorus of stars. I found the darkness strange—in New York City, light pollution ensured that there my bedroom was always illuminated by a billboard advertisement.
I approached the lake with the same mannerisms a child would have when approaching a candy store—completely blind and oblivious to the dangers and risks the uncommonly clear water brought. The stars that glistened and shone in the heavens were dull in comparison to the mother of the sky—because the moon in its deep silver was a phenomenon.

The lethally dark water had lost its turquoise to the night, but in the moonlight the ripples twisted. I stared at my own reflection; the edges of my face slightly ruffled where the wind blew on the water. Startled by the clarity of the image, I made a mistake gazing into the water for a second too long.

All of a sudden, my reflection dissolved into broken and irregular memories that began to materialize in the water. It was as if the lake had switched to the "home movie channel", and flashbacks rippled across the surface of nature's only projection screen. Echoes of those I'd loved, broken promises which used to haunt my sleepless nights...nostalgia came down on me like an avalanche as my most intimate feelings surfaced.

Words like ambition, longing, reminisce would be defined differently by every individual, but the lake seemed to know my demons inside out. I dipped my fingers into the water as I watched it caress my hand coolly, eddying in its wake. My fingertips dripped with the transparent and opaque water as the images intensified into high–resolution, 4D pictures.

Fate was the last page of everyone's story, and knowing your own was enough to make you a lunatic. With each fragment of my destiny disclosed to me, my subconscious craved for more information. The burning sensation the water produced numbed my hand, as if flames were licking my skin and scorching my flesh. But shards of my future only uncovered themselves to me when I made physical contact with the water, and I was so tempted…

I let myself drown.

Drowning, in movies, was a dramatic act and a vociferous dogfight where the main character fought tooth and nail to evade death. But my arms flailed against the icy water that stole heat from every inch of my skin, bringing me dangerously close to hypothermia. My body was begging for air, and I could feel my consciousness faltering as my vision began to blur. Clawing through the liquid that threatened to invade my lungs, my lack of oxygen sent jets of pain through my body.

Drowning was a silent battle, but I wasn't going to suffocate in my hopes and dreams before I had the chance to make them come true. But I could barely form a coherent thought when the crescent moon became visible to me one last time—mere seconds before I was enveloped by the indigo water once more.

A sense of weightlessness numbed all my senses instead, followed by the darkness that lures you into the depths of unconsciousness inevitable landing becomes. I was no neurosurgeon, but I did know that the brain could block traumatising memories in a process called dissociation. While I would be able to recite my encounter with the lake to my grandchildren decades later, I was spared the agony of staying conscious during the fall that drew me back to reality.

I was sitting on a boulder, and the fanny–pack wielding Russian tourists next to me confirmed that I was standing on the summit of present–day Huangshan. He strode forward with a brisk pace. Others stared at the strange man in his tattered brown cloak and straw hat as he strode down the stone path to the tram station. A wild unkempt mop of hair that vaguely resembles vines stretched down the length of his neck. His boots looked as if they were made of leather at first glance, but the sound that it gave as the material collided with the uneven stone slabs led most to believe otherwise, several objects of odd shapes and sizes have peeked out of the shaggy piece of clothing, among them what looks like parts of medieval weaponry.

An oddity.

The braver member of a group of rowdy teens pipes up "Sir, I'll give you 5 jiao if you do Kung Fu!" The group roared with laughter. "That is, if you know what a jiao is!" He added.

"Fools."

No one could locate the origin of the sound. It emerged, as quick as an arrow from a Mongol's bow, and was blown away by the chilling mountain breeze. Did they hear him speak? Or did he not speak at all?

When they turned their eyes back upon him, he had already disappeared, like the word he might not have muttered.

*****

Rain beat down in the small Pavilion, mother and son rushed up the steps on the final ascend to the sanctuary.

The mother's rapid breathing slows down, similar to how an eagle slows when he descends to it's perch.

"Ohh, my socks are drenched. I told daddy that this was a bad idea. How easy for him to say that we can just climb the mountain on such a day!"

"But mother" The younger of the two piped up. "The forecast said that it would be a sunny day."
"Well, the gods must be against us. Curse the weather. At least we have the pavilion to ourselves."

"Don't be so sure of that." A deep voice muttered.

Both mother and son jumped at the apparition of a third being.

"Oh, sorry, uh, sir. Didn't, eh, didn't spot you there."

A man in his dirty umber garment nodded slightly at the remark. "You wouldn't spot me if I didn't want you to."

"Uh, um. Yeah." There was an awkward pause. "So what are you doing in these parts?" The mother added cheerfully.

"Which part do you mean?" The man asked.

"Pardon?"

"Which part do you mean? Saying "these parts" makes your question vague and confusing."

The mother was taken aback by this response to her friendly question.

"Uh, I was just trying to, you know? Strike up conversation?"

The man reached under his hat, pulling down a blood red bandanna. WIth his other hand he retrieved a canteen.

"To answer your question, I'm resting from my travels. Has it occurred to you that one might not want to engage in conversation?"

The mother's face flushed with a shade of pink, reminding the man of the blossoming flowers in the world of Katharia.

"I'm sorry sir, but as a mother I would expect more respect coming from the members of society, and that was incredibly rude, I do not know how you expect anyone to tolerate you if you exercise such usage of tone. Which school did you go to, may I ask?"

"Click", a small flick of a finger sent the cap on a graceful arc that ended in the other hand. He paused to ponder.

"What if I told you I attended Zhan Ver Kanzirium?"
The mother was at a loss.

"I'm sorry, but I have never heard of such a place. And where might that be?"

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The man pointed to the east. “Look yonder, but I suggest you care about your child over the education of others.”

The mother turned toward the east, only to notice that his son was no longer behind him.

“Wha– How– Why–” She turned back in fright.

Another swig, and the cap was reunited with the bottle.

The man smirked. “Beware of the Shen.”

The mother turned back again. The next time she set eyes on the man, she only saw the caw of an eagle taking flight.

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The word “Xeno” is of a Greek origin often combined with other words, often meaning “Foreign”.

Also “Alien”

And that is precisely the word to describe such a creature.

Its scales dark as the night sky, it’s many eyes glowing with a ghostly white light, its Mandible clicking as it crawled towards the man with it’s eight squat legs.

The battle was fierce, the blade of the man not being able to pierce the thick hide of the alien creature, twice the man almost met his demise at the snapping pincers of the creature. At the end, a well shot arrow through the throat ended the miserable thing.

The creature turned over to face the sky, perhaps knowing that is where it will go. Embedded in the underside of the creature is the prize.

A glowing crystal the size of a sword hilt. Radiant yellow light flooded the room as soon as the man retrieved the crystal from the beast. So beautiful, yet as he turned it around in his hands, he felt the chipped sides cut into his hand.

Well, not everything is perfect.

With his prize, he made his way into the light.

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The figure in the red robe lifted his hood as soon as the first sign of light emerged from the gaping maw. The breeze ruffled his well–set dark beard. The edges of his eyelids creased as he squinted to take a glimpse at the figure he had long awaited.

He sipped from his bowl.

“You did not expect me.”

The man in the soiled cloak glanced up, the small yellow crystal flipped multiple times between his fingers.

“Ophiwayln”

Ophiwalyn nodded.

“Tamin.”

The 2 men stared at each other as if it would force the other to make themselves scarce.

“How long have you been here?” Tamin demanded.

“For as long as I have waited.”

“How did you know I was going to be here?”

Ophiwalyn smiled, he started pacing slowly towards Tamin.

“The fisherman I passed on the way claimed he saw a Eagle of enormous size, I knew that if one had to reach the temple he would have to fly.”

Tamin smirked. He moved his hand slowly towards his trusty weapon.

“I ask, dear friend. Do you know what you hold in your hands?”

“I don’t, and I do not intend to find out. No questions asked.”

“You have become quite the mercenary, haven't you?”

Ophiwalyn fixed his gaze on Tamin with the frightening ice blue eyes of his.

“You hold a shard of Etrum, when the ancient hero Hou Yi shot down the 9 rouge solar celestials who threatened to burn the world into ash, their hearts landed in various places on the planet.”

Tamin turned his back on Ophiwalyn.

“And why would I care?”

Ophiwalyn glanced into the distance.

“Though these crystals have reproduced and there are more than 9 of these in the mortal realm, they are still rare. These sentient minerals grant a place of their choosing eternal beauty, as long as it still lies in the area. If you take it away…”

“It will lose it’s magic.”

“Precisely. The one that drew all the ancients to this place.”

Tamin turned to look at Ophiwalyn

“And why would I care?”

“For beauty? For the world? For old times sake? I see that you no longer cast spells.”

His hands were scorched from the times his firebolts failed to launch. At this moment he glanced at his hands.

“I have seen… Horrors. Magic is a plague. If it was not developed by Franklin we would have spared millions of lives.”

“But it has been developed, and now we have to live with it. Do not regret.”

“That I cannot do. But I know I won’t regret this.”

Tamin thrust his hand towards Ophiwalyn, hoping to pierce him, ending the encounter.

But Ophiwalyn was not there.

“You have grown in power, and so have I. You cannot hope to defeat the hero who rescued Snakeskin valley.”

With a yell, Tamin threw himself onto Ophiwalyn, swinging with his word in backhand grasp, each blow Ophiwalny dodged.

Tamin grunted. “You might be right, I used to be able to beat you in hand to hand combat all the time. Maybe I have gone out of shape.”

Ophiwalyn smiled thinly at the comment

“But” Tamin added. “Rocks can still kill you.”

He shot an arrow at the boulders above Ophiwalyn, sending them hurtling down upon him.

Ophiwalyn threw his hands towards the sky, a green shield of interlocking lines sprung from them. The weight, however, was overwhelming, Ophiwalyn squinted at Tamin

“What is the purpose of the crystal, Tamin? Why kill your brother for it?”

Tamin looked back. “Magic is a plague, and I am the cure.”

With every step he took, the mountains started greying.

The one thing I'd been dreaming of had slipped through my fingers… My thoughts became a hurricane and adrenaline coursed through my veins, generating more panic than energy. My head was pounding and my heart was hammering in my chest. The panic attack was stealing every morsel of control I'd previously had over my own body, and I wasn't able to regulate my breathing until a single thought entered my mind.

Sometimes we are taken into troubled waters not to drown, but to be cleansed.

The familiar thirst for adventure and beauty made my skin tingle and the constellations, each secretly holding its own legend, drew my eyes to the heavens. Nobody on Facebook had mentioned how mesmerizing the Celestial Capital Peak was at night, but I soon became obsessed with its consistency—it would fade in dawn's first light with the promise to return twelve hours later.
And I could swear the moon was a slender crescent.

China's Magical Mountains

Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Chan, Tin Yan Ian – 14

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“Precisely. The one that drew all the ancients to this place.”

Tamin turned to look at Ophiwalyn

“And why would I care?”

“For beauty? For the world? For old times sake? I see that you no longer cast spells.”

His hands were scorched from the times his firebolts failed to launch. At this moment he glanced at his hands.

“I have seen… Horrors. Magic is a plague. If it was not developed by Franklin we would have spared millions of lives.”

“But it has been developed, and now we have to live with it. Do not regret.”

“That I cannot do. But I know I won’t regret this.”

Tamin thrust his hand towards Ophiwalyn, hoping to pierce him, ending the encounter.

But Ophiwalyn was not there.

“You have grown in power, and so have I. You cannot hope to defeat the hero who rescued Snakeskin valley.”

With a yell, Tamin threw himself onto Ophiwalyn, swinging with his word in backhand grasp, each blow Ophiwalny dodged.

Tamin grunted. “You might be right, I used to be able to beat you in hand to hand combat all the time. Maybe I have gone out of shape.”

Ophiwalyn smiled thinly at the comment

“But” Tamin added. “Rocks can still kill you.”

He shot an arrow at the boulders above Ophiwalyn, sending them hurtling down upon him.

Ophiwalyn threw his hands towards the sky, a green shield of interlocking lines sprung from them. The weight, however, was overwhelming, Ophiwalyn squinted at Tamin

“What is the purpose of the crystal, Tamin? Why kill your brother for it?”

Tamin looked back. “Magic is a plague, and I am the cure.”

With every step he took, the mountains started greying.

The Tale of the Yellow Mountains

Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Fong, Tsz Yan Anson – 12

The Yellow Mountains weren't always as spellbinding as they are now. Before, these mountains were merely hills covered in flourishing flowers in spring, lush leaves in summer, and a fine sheen of snow in the chilly winter. Beautiful scenery that made the Yellow Mountains a rare jewel to see, and the subject of almost every Chinese poet.

The Yellow Mountains' beauty back then didn't reach half of the magnificence that they radiate now.

Something changed the Yellow mountains forever – enhanced their beauty until the luxurious green landscape was covered with evergreen pines that stood strong, guarding the mountains; and mysterious and magical fog that twisted and twined around everything, shrouding the peak of the mountain in a cloak of mystery. Even now, every blade of grass, every colourful flower, and every creature that grows on the mountains have an otherworldly sheen to them, glowing with life and longing and love.

How did this happen?

It was said to have begun when the famous poet Li Bai had a daughter. She was born crying and kicking; with wide, soulful eyes that glowed with innocent curiosity. Her mother, Li Bai's wife, held her daughter with complete and utter adoration, the corners of her mouth tilting up in beautiful symmetry.

She didn't notice the small fox creeping beside where she lay, expression shaped in a surprisingly human–like smile as it closed its eyes and concentrated.

The child in her mother's arms slowly stopped crying. The innocent glow of her doe–like eyes was replaced with a hawk–like gaze of intelligence, her mouth curving in a smile that was eerily similar to the one of the fox's. Below her, the fox collapsed to the ground, dead.

The mother realized with horror what had happened immediately – her child was now a *huli jing*, an uncannily gorgeous female that carried the soul of a fox. *Huli jing* were known for seducing men and stirring up trouble, an absolute bad omen. Horrified and disgusted, Li Bai's wife raised her daughter – named Eris – as if she was a stranger to her and nothing else.

Eris's bewitching beauty grew by every passing year. She had turned out to be devastatingly gorgeous even by the standards of *huli jing*, with raven hair soft as silk, eyes sparkling and framed with long, thick lashes, lips delicate and red as rosebuds, with a smooth and musical voice that would bring any man to his knees. As soon as Eris was of marriageable age, her mother matched her hastily with a random suitor, who agreed to the marriage as soon as he set eyes on Eris. Eris' mother sent her away hurriedly, liking nothing more than to not see her daughter ever again.

Young Eris thought this was it for her – being married to a common man and living an uneventful and normal life. However, her beauty was so dazzling she managed to catch the eye of the Imperial Emperor of China as he paraded through the city. *What a beautiful woman*, the Emperor thought, and he ordered for Eris to be brought to his palace immediately. Eris' husband–to–be was left standing alone by himself, disappointed and dejected.

The Emperor grew smitten with the elegant and gorgeous Eris right away; and made her his queen within a day of meeting her. Eris gradually came to love the playful and charming Emperor. She was different from other *huli jing* – she had no intention of seducing the Emperor, and she loved the Emperor with all her heart.

However, as the Emperor proudly paraded Eris around China, his general An Lushan took notice of Eris' ethereal beauty. Eris noticed this and took advantage of this fact to charm An Lushan further, attempting to secure his loyalty to the Emperor. *If An Lushan supports me, he will support my husband the Emperor*, she thought.

As the days went by, Eris wore her *huli jing* charm like a crown, increasing the fluidity and elegance of her movements and transforming her voice to a regal and imposing tone. She wanted An Lushan to see her as a strong and proper queen, and support the Imperial family's rule. But her plan backfired. Eris' charm was so intense that An Lushan fell in love with Eris, sparking jealousy towards the Emperor.

The Emperor, of course, noticed this and attempted to lower An Lushan's position. An Lushan was a great general and the Emperor didn't want to lose him. He thought his decree would keep An Lushan away from Eris and let the general calm down. But An Lushan's hatred towards the Emperor had been festering for a long time. He was jealous of the Emperor's power and jealous that Eris belonged to the Emperor. He resented the Emperor for trying to lower his position. He would not sit there and let the Emperor take his power! Infuriated, he raised an army and started a rebellion. The Emperor, raging from betrayal, gathered the soldiers loyal to him and met An Lushan on the battlefield.

Bloody battles took place as the rebels clashed with the Emperor's soldiers. Men died, and their decapitated and broken bodies lay limp on the battlefield, their wide eyes unseeing, blood drenching the ground as rapidly as rain pouring down from the sky. It was utter and absolute chaos.

Meanwhile, the Jade Emperor – the supreme ruler of heaven – was watching the bloody battles on Earth unfold. He was furious that the people had let mayhem reign, all for something as inconsequential as a woman! Burning with rage, he blazed down to Earth like a comet from the sky.

As the Jade Emperor reached Earth, he demanded that Eris lose her human form and her spirit be banished forever to her birthplace – the Yellow Mountains. Eris' spirit would live there forever in isolation, unable to interact or affect anyone ever again. But the Emperor pleaded for his lover's life desperately, and finally, the Jade Emperor took pity on him. The Emperor's spirit was turned into a dragon – the symbol of an Emperor – upon his death, his spirit destined to roam the mountains forever together with his lover.

As the days passed on, the Yellow Mountains grew more spellbinding than ever, as *huli jing* Eris' essence soaked into the land and enhanced it with beauty as gorgeous as Eris herself. Poets wrote of the lush grass on the Yellow Mountains that is as silky as Eris' hair; the spring wind that is as soft and gentle as a lover's caress, the elegant pine trees standing tall and proud; the stone steps that lead up the mountain, holding lingering memories of people who once set foot on them. Storytellers wrote of the translucent spirit of the Dragon passing through undiscovered mountain caves breathing mist and clouds of smoke, shrouding the mountain in a veil of magical mystery, forever staying close to his one true love.

Since then generations and generations have passed, and the people who once witnessed the great Anshi battle and the exact events of what happened are no longer on the face of this earth, the story long since faded and forgotten. We gaze curiously at the Yellow Mountains shrouded in fog and mystery, and wonder how the ethereal beauty of the Yellow Mountains came to be. We wonder why so many Chinese stories and poems feature dragons living in secret mountain caves, and search for hints of the ancient secrets the Yellow Mountains hold. *Why do these mountains feel so magical and unearthly?* We wonder.

Now, in a place far, far away from the setting of this mysterious tale, a 6–year old boy clutched a wrinkled, yellowed piece of paper at his grandpa's funeral.

The Yellow Mountains weren't always as spellbinding as they are now…

He read, again and again, the words on the paper written in his grandpa's curving handwriting, and smiled softly every time he got to the end.

No one knows what really happened to this pair of lovers after their banishment… But after all, stories don't really need an exact ending, do they? Some things are better off left to flourish in our own imagination.

"You're right, Grandpa." Tipping his head up, the little boy gazed up at the setting sun, and proceeded to imagine the wonderful life his Grandpa was now living, in another, better, world.

Tales from China's Magical Mountains

Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Ng, Chi Ching Isabella – 11

In the morning, the sun winked in the sky. It was a beautiful day, with a light breeze that caressed your cheeks. In the skies above the Yellow Mountains, a place of tranquility, the Jade Emperor sat on his golden throne, his beloved dragon, Yi Hua, close by. Ne Zha was reciting strategies, trying to concentrate on his scrolls as the breeze wafted around him, bringing pictures of skies–as a sound like thunder blasted him out of his reverie— the horns of war. The skies rumbled and the clouds morphed into black. The skies turned dark, filling with thunder and blinding flashes. The wind whipped fiercely, howling and no longer blowing leisurely. Then the dragon came.

The dragon was called Hei Ye. He was black, like coal, yet somehow much darker. It was the colour of a black, dreary night, the ones that brought a sense of hopelessness. Hei Ye roared. It was a real one, the type of roar that struck despair in warriors, the ones that made the flowers wither, the birds drop down dead, and the grass shiver. His breath was the smell of rotten fruit, sickly sweet with the aura of death. On his spiked back, a similar black–clad warrior sat in a dark saddle. His face was covered by a black helmet and he carried a gleaming sword. Their entire look emitted power and signs of evil at its work.

Ne Zha sensed a feeling of uneasiness welling up inside him, his instincts confirmed as the black dragon slithered like a great, horrible serpent towards the Jade Emperor. Although Yi Hua was a formidable enemy, Ne Zha grabbed his sword and prepared himself to face whatever danger came–just in case. When he entered— and hid himself— the black–clad warrior took off his helmet, saying in a shivery voice, “I am Ye Hui, the rider of Hei Ye. Remember me, Emperor?” He slid down the dragon with ease, a stiff, chilling smile on his face, yet his eyes seemed blank. At his words, Yi Hua sniffed and growled uneasily. He continued without any emotion, “I am here, as you may know, to issue a proposal. What I want is just a small little favour— your power. Give it to me, and you shall live in peace, avoiding your destruction and downfall. As of tradition, it is a shame that I can only receive your throne if you allow it, and I really can’t take it by force–unless I win you in battle–so I’ll bring an army to your palace tomorrow, if there are any disagreements. After all, your enchantments are unbeatable. ” His grin now seemed like a predator waiting to pounce on its prey, knowing it couldn’t escape. The Jade Emperor’s face grew ashen, though he stood up and managed to speak in a powerful voice. “Never! You should have known better.” He said. His refusal seemed to vibrate in the room. “Your choice, Emperor, your choice.” replied Ye Hui, as he mounted his dragon somewhat awkwardly and flew away, becoming a tiny black speck in the distance.

As soon as Ye Hui and Hei Ye left, the Jade Emperor immediately sagged against his throne. Ne Zha, who had been watching the whole scene, slipped in front of the Emperor and helped him to his seat. “Thank you,” he said. “Ye Hui is not a person to be reckoned with. Once the kindest scholar in my palace, he became power–hungry when Hei Ye came into his service. We have to make arrangements for battle today.” The Jade Emperor’s voice was grim. “I’ll make the plans.” Ne Zha replied.

He set to work, quickly ordering the commanders to prepare for war. Soon, their men were geared up and ready for battle. Ne Zha stood on a platform, gazing down at the millions of soldiers below. He shouted in a ringing voice, “My brothers, let us go to war! We shall not fail our lord. We will win this battle, so take heart and let us be ready!” The warriors yelled in response.

Night fell, and the sky turned a wistful black. The soldiers were awaiting their orders on the peak of the Yellow Mountain when a tremendous gong blasted out loud. Ye Hui had come.
“Quick! Go to the battlements!”
“Prepare for war!”
A wave of panicked voices washed over Ne Zha.. Just then, the Emperor’s booming voice rang out. “My friends, the time has come for battle. Show your strength and courage, and when you fall in this bloody war I promise that the skies will remember you forever. To me!” The soldiers— some rushed down the mountain to fight, others protected

the Emperor— fought valiantly, although Ne Zha noticed that they were outnumbered. The five million soldiers they had brought were nearly no match for Ye Hei's soldiers, for he had twice the manpower. They were quickly losing heart as they were swamped by a seemingly infinite amount of enemies, and some surrendered. Blood mixed into the soil, running down in rivulets as swords clashed against each other. Men lay with their last breath on the reddened ground with horses trampling past their mangled bodies. Deadly wounds were inflicted, brothers and friends were lost, and lives were taken each passing minute. Ne Zha was growing more desperate as his comrades were lost, his side losing far more soldiers than the other. When he thought it couldn't get any more worse— this was by far his bloodiest battle— Ye Hei appeared right in front of him, bringing in Hei Ye with all his malevolent force.

Without warning, Hei Ye blew a flame of bright fire at him. He dodged right in time, letting the flame burn his spear into a pool of molten steel instead–he quickly let go. The black dragon looked satisfied at this. A white, pearly shape swooped down from the sky— it was Yi Hua! Ne Zha leaped onto her back as Ye Hei muttered a string of colourful words, clambering on Hei Ye as well. They took off into the sky. From above, the light–posts were gleaming like thousands of scattered stars. Just then, a blaze, blasted from behind, nearly missed him again. He commanded Yi Hua to turn around in circles, dazzling Hei Ye and blowing a burst of fire at him. Ne Zha was rewarded with a yelp of surprise as he singed the tail of the black dragon. Yi Hua flew underneath Hei Ye, scorching his underbelly as he ducked away and swiped at Yi Hua's hind leg. A trail of blood appeared. Enraged, Ne Zha took his shortsword hidden in his belt as Yi Hua swooped against Hei Ye, and slashed a gash across his side. Hei Ye howled and turned away. He scorched the hair on Ne Zha's head, but when Yi Hua flew under the black dragon again, Ye Hei swung his arm over the side and raked his sword on her belly just as Ne Zha drove his sword deep into Hei Ye's chest. A fountain of blood sprayed onto them, they spiraled lower and lower, and followed the now unconscious dragon that fell out of the sky.

They landed with an enormous crash, upsetting plants and flowers and creating a trench in the mud. Ye Hei dismounted with a befuddled expression. Ne Zha caught the dark warrior as he fell and asked, "Where am I?" Confused, Ne Zha lay him down on the grass. He yelled, "Look! Your mighty warrior has fallen, and he is dead along with his dragon. This is your sealed fate if you are still standing! My men, fight!" The other army took one look at Ye Hei's unmoving form and fled, leaving scattered swords and armour behind. The soldiers quickly cleared the battlefield with newfound courage, and Ne Zha found himself face–to–face with the Emperor. "Good work, my young warrior— but we must first take care of our problem–Ye Hei." They carried him and climbed onto Yi Hua, arriving at the place. The Emperor gave Ye Hei some healing herbs, and he soon woke up. Ye Hei's face was full of anguish–his face not devoid of emotion any longer. "What happened? I only remember a dream, where blood flooded the ground and there were many wounded. I feel like I just lost control…" He trailed off. "I think you may have been under a spell... possibly from Hei Ye, I'd wager." Ye Hei looked up. "My lord… I wish to take leave as I feel… unsettled, prickly for some reason. It's as if waking from a very long dream…" The Emperor smiled knowingly. "You may go down to the Yellow Mountains below." Ye Hei bowed and left, never to return.

It is said that when Ye Hei came down, he became good again, and his kindness and genius affected this place. He liked to visit people in their dreams, counseling them and giving peace. Thus, this place was said to have a magical sheen. For now, all was well.

Dream of a Warrior

Pui Kiu College, Ho, Wing Ga – 12

Shouts reverberated throughout the hallways of Spirit International Training Academy.

Two boys ran up to see what had caused the commotion. George heard a sharp intake of breath from Nick. "What is it?"

Nick grimaced. "I think I'd never forget what that…*thing* was."

It was lying on the floor. George slowly walked towards it, ignoring the warnings from others.

Upon closer inspection, George saw that the otherworldly creature had strands of blonde *hair*. Nick rushed over, snatching his hand as he was about to touch it. "What were you thinking?! You could've been attacked!"

The next thing they saw sent a chill down their spines. A circular iron mask with a smiley face. This could only mean one thing.

It was their friend Clayton.

George's eyes widened. He quickly told Nick, then the two hauled Clayton to the Hospital Wing. Upon arriving, Recoverers dashed forward, preparing diagnosis tools.

Minutes passed before they turned Clayton back to normal. A Recoverer approached them. "We have to talk to the Headmaster, so you three head back to class."

The boys nodded, walking back to their classroom.

Clayton groaned. "Man, what *was* that? I feel like I've been to hell."

Nick chuckled. "To put it simply, you turned into a semi–god." Clayton's head snapped towards him.

"Wait, seriously? Now *that's* concerning." George giggled as Clayton burst into laughter, making a noise like a boiling kettle. That is, until the Headmaster ran towards them, glaring daggers at a certain boy. "Anderson, tell me *everything* that happened. Explain why you've gone and became a demon?!"

Clayton stuttered. "S–sir, may I ask what you're talking about?"

He fumed. "Well, what else? You turned into an *anomaly*! You're a threat to us, and you'll spend the rest of your days…**somewhere else**."

Sometimes Clayton wishes their Headmaster wasn't so *powerful.* As he was dragged outside, his eyes drifted in and out of focus as he was injected with Wither, a potion of decaying. It **burned**.

He collapsed to the ground. George covered his mouth, shocked. Nick was silently crying. Guards took Clayton's limp body and threw him onto a Cloud. It floated away.

The Headmaster grinned malevolently, expression unhinged.

"***This world isn't for errors***."

Nick gasped as he heard that line.

A Hylios Insurgency sign off.

He immediately whispered to George. "I think I know what's going on. The Headmaster's from Hylios Insurgency, it's an evil organization which captures people and uses them for experiments, mutating them into Hybrids. They're sending Clayton to Huang Shan. It's a mountain in China, near their base in Anhui, and I heard there are *monsters* lurking there."

George's lip quivered as he saw Clayton, *hurt or even possibly dead*, in his mind's eye. He looked up at the sky as rain started to pour, grateful that no one could see his tears.

Clayton woke up shivering. His smiley mask was gone.

He stood up, adjusting to the unfamiliar surroundings. Then it occurred to him that he was on a *mountain.* Clayton panicked once he realized he was trapped until he could find a way out. Then he remembered that he could change forms. He concentrated.

Nothing happened.

He tried until he had to sit down and *breathe.* It was midday when he started to navigate his surroundings, gathering wood to craft a sword.

Time flew and soon, it was nighttime. Clayton was gathering coal when he heard rattling. *Skeletons.* He swiftly dodged behind a tree and waited for them to approach, then swinging his sword in a wide arc. But he noticed something: *the skeletons had bows and arrows.* An arrow shot into his leg, making Clayton scream. Despite the pain, he finished off the skeletons one by one. Clayton lowered his sword as his breathing evened out. It was then he knew he'd have to learn to *survive*.

This was going to be one hell of an adventure.

Clayton stumbled back to where he woke up, sitting down and placing some torches so monsters wouldn't approach. He fell asleep.

During daytime, he spent endless hours training and gathering resources. He had enough iron to make another mask, weapons and even a shield. Clayton used coal and made markings on trees, recording each day. Every night, he'd fight through hordes of monsters, putting torches to make a path. By the time he found a way out of Huang Shan, months had passed.

Clayton saw the trees, rock formations and clouds over his head, and he never realized the place that caused so much pain was so *beautiful.*

Then he heard *voices.* They grew nearer until—

"Clay!" Arms wrapped around his torso, and he realized that it was *George.* Another familiar face appeared, and once it came closer, he *saw.*

"George? Nick? Is it really you guys?" The boys nodded, tears streaming down their cheeks. Clayton broke, sobbing, but he had a smile on his face. Nick took a familiar object from his bag: Clayton's old mask. It had faded to a light grey, but the smile was still there.

"Clay, we know you love your mask, so we kept it safe." Clayton smiled, ripping the one he made in Huang Shan off. It'll never replace the one he made back home.

Suddenly, an unnerving laugh sounded. The boys turned around, only to find the Headmaster standing there, showing a maniacal grin.

"*And you really thought I wasn't going to find you. Pity. You were a bright student, Anderson. Well, you know who I am now.*"

"Why'd you hide your true identity? Was it to gain our trust so you could take over the world? *TELL US!*" George screamed, face contorted with rage. Nick stood beside him, fists and palm slammed together in the universal sign of "*fight me*". The Headmaster smiled sinisterly, morphing into a void-like creature with blood red slits as eyes.

"*You may know me as Nemesis.*"

Clayton had enough. His eyes turned white, wings protruding from his back, golden light seeping through the cracks of his mask, and instead of a hoodie, billowing black and gold robes now fluttered at his feet. George and Nick pulled out their swords, ready for a fight. The trio looked at each other, nodding, a fierce fire burning in their eyes. All was silent, as Clayton spoke.

" Justice, or death. If we get no revolution, then we want nothing. We would rather die than give in and be another subject of Hylios Insurgency."

Clayton let out a war cry, charging at Nemesis, a spear of light forming in his hands. Nemesis defended himself with a shield of darkness, then quickly realized Nick and George were charging at him. He immediately threw them off balance, then encased them in a sphere of energy, trapping them, leaving the two helpless. Clayton screamed, using all of his force to summon a giant wave of feathers as sharp as knives.

"THIS IS FOR MY FRIENDS!" And with all of his energy, he reared back and threw his hands forward, the feathers crashing down.

Then silence.

Clayton fell. The last thing he remembered were the wails of an ambulance.

He woke up in a hospital, remembering his fight with Nemesis. The television was on, quietly playing the news. Clayton could only catch a few phrases.

"...Students from...found injured...Insurgency spy captured…"

Clayton was too tired to care. On his right was George, peacefully sleeping on the bed. He'd never seen the smaller boy so calm. On his left was Nick, a nurse changing the bandages on his leg. He saw that Clayton was awake, giving him a tired grin. Clayton smiled.

George woke up, and Clayton spoke, voice strained. "Hey."

George smiled softly. "H−hey." The two boys chatted away, and Nick joined in soon after. They'd give anything to let this moment last forever.

Two months later, Clayton was invited to give a speech to the city about his fight. He fixed his mask, stepping onstage.

"Everyone here might have heard about my fight with Nemesis earlier. I have no idea how I made this far; guess I've been deemed an anomaly by our Headmaster, who was secretly the villain. I've felt desperation during my banishment to Huang Shan. Now that I've defeated him, I know that I had fought for a righteous cause: to take down the Hylios Insurgency."

"Look. Everything the light touches, is our home. A warrior's time as guardian rises and falls, like the sun. One day, when chaos reigns, he'll protect everyone, and now I've seen the dangers of the real world, I'd like to be that warrior."

"My teachers and friends may know me as Clayton Anderson. But from this day on, you'll know that this mask belongs...to *Dream.*"

He smiled at George and Nick among the crowd, cheering and hollering. With that, Dream transformed. As he soared away into the sky, he looked upon the city that he'd swore to defend, and he knew he'd never be happier with life than he did now.

The Tale of the Magical Fruit

Pui Kiu College, Lau, Tsun Sing – 12

Huang shan was one of a well-known mountain in China with lots of tales and legends. It attracted tons of tourists from around the world to visit. Some people might not know that there was a tourist guide who was as famous as the mountain. The guide was an old man with wrinkles on his face resembling a typical wise man. He wore traditional Chinese gown, a bit old fashioned, but suited him perfectly. He could tell endless interesting tales about Huang shan. Look! He is telling a story right now……

Approximately five thousand years ago, there was a great leader called Huang Di, he was smart and kind to his people. But same as other ordinary people, he would pass away one day. People liked him so much and wanted him to be immortal. A wise man said that there was a magical fruit hidden in the most sacred part of Huang shan and anyone who ate the fruit could live forever. However, nobody knew the exact location of the fruit tree. Thus, he proposed to form an elite team which consists of people with different talents in searching for the tree. As soon as the team was formed, they set-off to Huang shan with great vigor.

They climbed higher and higher into the mountain, crossed meandering rivers and went through dark caves. Then after countless days and nights, they eventually arrived the back of Huang shan and found a strange, unique tree that they had never seen before. The tree shaped like an upside-down pyramid and the leaves were translucent blue. Then they spotted a tiny fruit with a red dim glow hanging on the tree. They decided to camp and wait besides the tree for the fruit to ripe because they strongly believed that the fruit must be the magical fruit they were looking for so far.

During midnight, a little boy who was the grandson of the wise man and part of the team was too thirsty to fall asleep. While he was searching for water, he saw a glowing red fruit with good smell and it looked very juicy, too. The boy quickly ate the fruit in one bite. He felt different in an instance, he felt like he was a genius. In a flash, he realized that he made a huge mistake as the fruit he just ate was probably the mythical fruit for Huang Di. The boy thought that he might get into a big trouble but he didn't have time to worry. He must figure out something as the sun was rising. An idea flashed in his mind and he suddenly transformed into a dragon, a fierce enormous dragon. The people in the team were so frightened that they ran away and never dared to return. Thankfully, the secret about the legendary fruit was preserved. People were apparently very scared of dragons as the place was in peace for thousands of years.

However, good fortune didn't last long. When time goes by, people started to get curious and tried to search for the dragon despite it was fierce. So he decided to turn himself into a tiger as it was common but powerful as well. He successfully scared away people and other animals, but there was a problem now ------ he felt so lonely. Although there were other tigers in Huang shan, they lived so scattered in the big mountain, also they were too aggressive to hang out. Therefore, he thought he should change into tamed animals like rabbit or deer so that he could have companions to play with, even though sometimes, he might be chased by ferocious predators like tigers and wolves.

As the tigers and other dangerous animals went extinct, more and more tourists came to Huang shan for sight-seeing. He should find some ways to protect the secret tree or it would be found some day. He decided to transform back into a human, but not a little boy, it was a tourist guide so that he could safeguard the berry tree. Actually, it was extreme difficult to find the magical tree without a guide, the boy thought. As far as he kept on telling the story of the mysterious fruit, on the contrary, people would think that it was not real but just a story made up for attracting tourists.

After the tourist guide finished his story, a little girl asked him curiously," Are you the boy who transformed into a tourist guide?" The tourist guide denied while laughing awkwardly and shaking his head," Of course not."

While the tourists were leaving the mountain, the little girl felt a gust of wind behind her head. She turned her head around and was attracted by a strange translucent blue leaf on the floor. When she looked up, she vaguely saw a boy aged similar to her, dashing back towards the back side of Huang shan.

The Dragon of the Mountains

Pui Kiu College, Leung, Lok Hei Yui – 13

I woke up groggily, what was that noise? It better not be those noisy "Homo Sapiens" again. Oh brother, it was them. Oh, how I missed those days where no one was on these mountains…

I am a dragon. A dragon who has lived in these mountains for thousands or millions of years. I have been in these mountains for a prolonged period of time. These mountains always have a blanket of fog, and mysterious as Mona Lisa's smile. The Huang mountains have always been brumous, as it were millions of years ago.

Years ago, these mountains were silent. Not a single noise, absolute silence. Only me, and the mighty mountains. I used to fly through the air and frolic through the clouds in the sky. Only I was there, living in my own life.

One day, I looked down, through the fog, I saw shadows, tiny shadows. "What are those? "I thought to myself. So, I decided to see for myself. They had two little legs, two small arms and a toylike head. Later, I knew what they were called, they were humans. I thought they wouldn't last long, they were very small, predators could easily eat them.

Then I realized I was wrong. One day, I saw one of them holding a sharp piece of stone. A wild tiger cat suddenly appeared. Then, the human holding the sharp stone piece thrusted through the fierce cat. Through the mist, I saw red liquid flowing out of the tiger. From the terrible incident I saw, I learnt that the humans living beneath me were to be feared.

I once had an encounter with the humans on the mountain, to say, it was an awful experience. I was having a usual day, minding my own business, sitting on a rock. When all of a sudden, a scrawny human boy locked eyes with me. I froze, he froze, we both were staring at each other.

The boy screamed with a shrill voice, "AHHHH!"
I yelled in response,"AHHHH!"
"What the heck are you?!"
"I'm a dragon, a mountain dragon."
"You can talk?" He asked before yelling downwards,"Hey fellow villagers! A dragon! That talks!"
"What?! A dragon? I'll hunt it down!"
"I'm coming with you!"
"What will dragon meat taste like?"

Oh no... They were coming for me. I immediately flew straight up, above the clouds. I was horror-struck. These humans, hunting and killing everything they cross paths to, they are so gruesome. This was the first time I encountered human beings.

Years passed and the humans were still on Earth, and I was still on the same old mountain. I had learnt that they were tough beings. However, They do queer things. It seemed that they really liked to fight themselves. Up on the misty mountain, underneath the fog, I always saw them fighting against each other. Throwing spears, shooting arrows, sometimes beheading their own kind. It was a thing that I had never understood. Why would I kill my own kind? Why would I want to slay my own kind? Their murder of each other bothered me a lot.

Humans were always annoying me, they're still doing it now.

"Wow! Look at that view!"
"Mummy! Mummy! Look at the thick fog beneath me!"
"Look at that fig tree! Honey, let's take a picture!"
"Cheese!"

Look at them, their big mouths blabbering all the time, saliva droplets splashing out of their mouths, yelling with the long throats. Their noise bothered me a lot. They are constantly screaming, "look! Look!" I know they don't see the amazing misty view down there at where they live, but can they not focus on themselves? Squirrels, birds, monkeys, me! We get annoyed too!

Bonk!

Ow! What fell on my head? A cylinder? That hurted a lot.

Humans throwing rubbish and trash all over the place? I thought they had bins, to put stuff they don't need there. Metal cans, paper, plastic bags, they were all over the place. Through the fog, sometimes only rubbish was seen. Humans ruin the scenery with disgusting rubbish, they smell, they look displeasing. The mountains were no longer clean and tidy.

Crack!

What's that noise? I looked over to my left.

"Wahhhhhhhhhh!"
A small child was sitting on the floor, crying his eyes out. I looked above him. A broken branch, the pine tree had a branch missing. The child must have been dangling on the poor pine trees branch. Serves him right.

Pine trees were fragile, a lot of things could cause harm to them. My old friend, he is a 1,000 year old Greeting pine, he had been hurt a lot. From unwholesome children, to unruly adults. He had people scraping his skin, ripping of his limbs, and even tried to murder him by chopping against his waist. Poor, poor tree, distasteful humans.

Something went into my eye, it itched a lot. There's so much dust in the air, sand, pollen, "ack," it's really annoying. Cough, cough, sorry. See those cars down there? These cars made the air muggy and vile. I tried to take a deep breath, "huff," a gulp of dust flew in my mouth, I felt the cloud of pollutants hovering inside my dragon mouth. "Ewww," I spat the breath of dust out. I coughed my guts out. I couldn't even have a breath of fresh, clean air.

Thousands of broken trees, ruined nature were all "created" by humans. The cave I was born in and lived in for millions of years was destroyed by humans too. I lost a home because of them revolting people wanting to own land.

Beautiful mountains, misty air, the fresh smell of the fogs, and my dearest homeland mountains. All were destroyed by humans. I missed the Huang mountains millions years ago.

Tales from China's Magical Mountains

Pui Kiu College, Ng, Wing Lam Venus – 13

An old man named Augustus was laying on his bed in a small city apartment. His immediate family members at his bedside, as though he would drop dead at any moment. Gus was diagnosed with stage 4 cancer, and his survival rates were low.

Soon, Gus's family left him alone with his grandson Jerry, saying they had work to do. "Son, I don't have long, but I have somewhere that I wanted to visit just one more time." Gus said. Jerry, who was a mature boy and knew his grandpa was being serious, knew better than to reject. "Where?" He asked. "Home." Gus replied simply. Even though Jerry thought the answer was rather peculiar, he helped his grandpa pack their luggage and embark on a journey that they both didn't know would become a famous tale among residents there.

The next day, Augustus and Jerry were at the foot of Huang Shan, China's Magical Mountains. "Son, welcome home." Gus said. The old and the young walked along a narrow but sunlit path, they followed the sound of water, the rippling sound was flowing downstream while they were slowing going upstream. "Where are we going?" Jerry asked. "Past this mountain and at the bottom of the basin." Gus replied, panting.

So up they climbed and down they went. Augustus and Jerry followed the crystal–clear river as they went up, fish were trying their best to follow them upstream. They saw birds of different sizes and colours circling around them and the gnarled trees. Gus was so tired by the time they reached the top of the mountain that he had to take a few deep breaths. "Come on grandpa! We are so high up! Look!" Jerry exclaimed. The scenery was undoubtedly gorgeous, they were submerged in clouds of cotton candy, they were so high up that they can't even see the ground. With a few deep breaths of the freshest air on Earth, all of Gus's tiredness has disappeared, so Gus and Jerry set off again.

Augustus and Jerry now followed a rocky path downhill and entered a thick forest. "Grandpa, I am scared!" Jerry squeaked. The trees were so dense and thick that no sunlight went through to the ground. A distant rustle of leaves left them both shaken, expecting some sort of monster, they slowly looked up, but they only saw a flock of birds taking off.

It was almost evening when they finally arrived at the bottom of the basin, where a tiny village was sitting. Gus was not feeling well, his whole body hurt from all the walking. "Gus! Is that you?" A cry from an old lady brought Gus out of his pain. Gus half–ran towards the old woman, bursting with excitement. "Hazel! It's been so long!" Gus half–laughed, half–cried. "Hey everyone! Come meet my cousin, Augustus and…" Hazel cried to the whole village. "Jerry, my grandson." Gus supplied. All the villagers rushed to meet the men. They all had a lengthy conversation and went on a tour around the village.

The village consisted of cute little huts. "Grandpa, did u live in these huts when u were young? "Jerry asked curiously. "Yes son, in fact I lived in this very one." Gus pointed at the smallest one which seemed like it had been abandoned for a long time. "We used to build them ourselves, we had to collect the wood from the forest back there." Gus pointed to the direction they came from.

They walked around the tiny village for a bit, Gus submerged in his own thoughts, as though seeing the good old memories of his home replaying before his eyes. "We had to move to the city you know, because my dad had been given a job there, but I have always missed the mountains." Gus told Hazel. "What brought you here then?" Hazel asked, expecting good news. "Oh…Well I am diagnosed with cancer…I thought I would like to visit one last time…" Gus replied rather unceremoniously. Hazel dissolved in tears but tried hard to hide it. The village spent the night laughing, talking and eating.

The next day, Augustus and Jerry had to leave. They said their goodbyes with a heavy heart. They went the way they came, passed the thick forest and down the mountain. It was half–way there that Gus felt terrible, he was very sick. "Ah!" He let out a blood curdling scream which pierced through the air. Gus felt pain as though he has never felt it before, he felt his stomach burning. Jerry watched helplessly as his grandfather collapsed to the floor, writhing in pain. "Is there something I can get for you?" Jerry asked panickedly as he started stroking his grandpa's hair in the hopes that it would help. "Water." Gus croaked almost inaudibly.

Jerry opened his bag and found that there was no water left in his water bottle. He stared around hopelessly as his grandpa was shrieking in agony. Jerry tried to empty his head and think clearly, that's when he heard the stream flowing nearby. He ran like crazy towards the stream, plunge the water bottle in and quickly headed back.

"Here, drink up." Jerry handed Gus the water bottle. Augustus gulped down the water feverishly. Instantly, Augustus felt the most magical yet wonderful feeling. He felt warmth spread from his head to toes, he felt a glowing ring of light around him, like he was immune to everything. He felt better, in fact, he thought that he was completely cured.

Suddenly, there was a loud rumbling noise like an earthquake, a dozen people including Hazel rushed towards them. "What happened? We heard someone screaming" Hazel asked anxiously. "Oh that…" Augustus told all the villagers what had happened, everyone was amazed and laughed in relief. After that, the villagers walked Gus and Jerry back down the mountain, where they had to part again. "If I'm cured, I promise I will visit the village soon, remember to prepare a feast for us when we come back!" Gus joked. "Haha, sure!" Hazel promised.

Augustus and Jerry went back to the city where Gus was required to do a PET scan, he was miraculously declared NEC (No evidence of cancer). Meanwhile, the villagers in Huang Shan were recording the tales of the two and China's magical mountains.

The Quest of Nature

Pui Kiu College, Wang, Yan – 13

Deep in the famous mountains of Huangshan, there was a fifteen–year–old girl named Lanshi who lived with her father. They were friends with a little speaking dragon with fiery red scales named Fireball.

One afternoon, Lanshi and her father walked between the cracks of the mystical mountain and entered a dim cave to visit Fireball. The dragon was sleeping in the corner of the cave with its tail glowing mesmerizingly. Lanshi walked over and sat down beside it. Her father took out a dagger and some food from his bag. He sat down and tried to cut the food but his hand slipped and the dagger shot towards Fireball.

Before Lanshi could shout, a flash of blinding light shot out of Fireball's tail seconds before the dagger hit him. When Lanshi opened her eyes again, her father was locked in a box made of glass with holes, just like the ones used to hold animals nowadays. Just then, Fireball opened his eyes slowly and stared.

"Oh my… that's my potential magic reacting during life–dangering moments."

"Fireball– help me out please." Lanshi's father looked desperately at Fireball.

"I can't, Lan… I'm sorry. I'm too young to control my powers and the box is locked with magic."

"What are we gonna do? I can't let him sit in there and starve!"

Just then a gust of wind bursted through the cave entrance and an emerald dragon appeared. Lanshi thought the dragon looked almost identical with Fireball. The emerald dragon went over and hugged Fireball tightly.

"Mother! Where did you go! It's been so long!" Fireball shouted in joy.

"Honey I'm sorry... just got caught up with things. How's your magic doing? I felt it appearing in you which is why I came back. To train you."

The dragon turned towards Lanshi.

"These must be your human friends."

"Hi. I'm Lanshi and that's my father, Lan."

Lanshi stared at the green dragon in awe before starting again, "I'm sorry to have caused you any trouble, but my father is stuck in that cell and I was wondering if you could help him out with your magic."

The dragon hesitated a while before slowly nodding her head, "Call me Esmiranda. This cell can only be opened with one specific rock and I don't have it. However, you can collect them. It's a special hidden rock that glows at one's touch. It should be in the hot springs. You'll have to go alone."

"I'll go with her, mom." Fireball piped up.

"Alright then. Be safe." Esmiranda looked worried, almost scared while hugging Fireball again and letting him go unwillingly.

. . .

After about thirty minutes of Lanshi walking and Fireball flying behind her, they arrived at the hot springs. This was Lanshi's favourite place as a child. She used to chat with her dad there. The thought kept her walking faster.

"According to Esmiranda, the rock should be inside the springs so I'll try searching for it underwater."

Lanshi jumped into the spring, feeling around and praying to find an opening to something. After paddling around the spring for about 20 minutes, she felt something that seemed a lot like a handle about a foot underwater but she didn't have the strength to open it.

"Fireball! I found something!"

Lanshi ducked underwater again to check the handle while Fireball flew towards her. She saw a line of words beneath the handle that said "I shall only open for a worthy warrior". There was also a fire symbol carved at the end of the sentence. She told the dragon about it.

"I can open it with my fire… if only there isn't any water."

"You have to use your magic, Fire. I know you haven't learnt to control it yet but please try."

"Alright. I've seen my family do a similar spell before when I was younger. Give me your hand."

Lanshi smiled and held Fireball's hand.

"Put your hand in the water. Keep still. Release your hand immediately after I blow the fire."

Lanshi did as she was told. She heard Fireball mumbling something and her hands started to burn. She closed her eyes as the pain took over her and tried to hold on to the thought of her dad in hopes of staying strong. She heard Fireball yell something incoherent and she immediately released her hands. Then she ducked down just in time as the rock came flying towards them. She picked it up and held it in her hands, admiring it's soft glow under the dimming sunlight.

She turned around and looked at the edge of one of the spiky mountains opposite her. The sun was slowly going down and the sunset was the most picturesque thing she'd ever seen. The view from the hot spring was so fabulous that Lanshi couldn't help but sit down and enjoy it. The soft orange and yellow merged together was heavenly. The hot sun she once hated became insanely mesmerizing. It looked just like the painting her mom drew when she was younger. She wished she could be here forever, just admiring the view with nothing else on her mind.

. . .

Stars were twinkling in the night sky when Lanshi and Fireball finally set back the cave. Once they slipped through the cracks, Lanshi had this terrible feeling about the eerie silence in the cave. Then, she heard a huge crash. Someone started screaming barely 2 seconds after. Lanshi recognized the scream immediately.

"Dad!" She shouted as she ran as fast as she could into the cave.

What she saw made her stop right in her tracks. Esmiranda was hovering over her father's limp body. She heard Fireball gasp and before she even had time to think, she rushed forward in an attempt to shove Esmiranda out of the way. However, Esmiranda was faster. She used her magic on Lanshi and threw her on the wall. Lanshi was left crawling and panting desperately for air.

"Mom? What are you doing!"

"Oh you foolish dragon, I'm not your mother! I'm aunt Betti. Your mother died years ago."

"Why are you doing this?" Lanshi asked while Fireball fell back on the floor, shocked.

"You humans have been invading our breed for over thousands of years. How else did you expect to be treated like? None of you respected us. We were forced to move after your ancestors chased us away so they could have a quiet place for writing poems and drawing pictures."

"I'm so sorry y'all have to go through this," Lanshi said, "I truly am. I never knew about this. I promise I would make it up to you though, in whatever way possible."

"Yeah? Well plainly saying sorry isn't going to solve anything. They hunted us then and are still hunting us now. All our family and friends are gone, sacrificed for some useless fashion trends. Some of them were also locked up in a zoo or whatever you call it, and it feels like prison. None of them did anything wrong. Now your father deserves to be punished. What goes around comes around."

Lanshi felt absolutely miserable. She had no idea that humans were doing this to other animals, harming and endangering them. However, she knew she needed her dad back. She knew he didn't do anything wrong and didn't deserve to be stuck in a glass box. She looked over at her unconscious father and then at her pale friend who still seemed to be in shock.

"Betti, I apologize for my ancestor's and all the other humans destroying your habitat and killing everyone you're close to. I truly am. I'll try to make this better. I promise you. I'll help raise awareness and teach everyone else in the village downhills about this. I'll educate them about protecting the wildlife. And I'm not just saying this because my father's imprisoned. I mean it. I really do."

Betti's eyes seemed to soften a bit before turning hard again.

"Aunt Betti… I believe Lanshi," Fireball muttered quietly, "I know you didn't see this but they took care of me after mom left me ten years ago and has always been there for me. Always. Please help Lan…"

Betti looked at Fireball for a few seconds, as if trying to find a hint of doubt. When she couldn't, she turned to Lanshi and nodded slowly.

"My magic is the only way out of this cage and the only thing that can heal your father. Promise me that you will take care of both the environment and my little nephew. And if the promise breaks, both my magic and nature will come for you and your breed. After all, mistakes are costly and there will be consequences to pay for."

Lanshi nodded gratefully as Betti waved her tail, and a flash of soft, golden light slipped out, breaking the box open and waking Lanshi's father up.

The Magical Yellow Mountain

Pui Kiu College, Wong, Hei Tung Carridee – 12

'Come on Greg! We are late!' 'Okay, I'm coming!' The 2 young historians, Gregory Wright and Anthony Phoenix from The London History Association (LHA) were ready to set all the way from London Heliport to the Magical Yellow Mountain, also known as Huangshan, in Anhui. Their mission, this time, was to conquer all the steep mountains, and rescue an old immortal lady who had been trapped up on the Yellow Mountain for millennia, she knew and had seen everything, from the Old Stone Ages to modern times. She would have been the best source of all time for historians to study. Unfortunately, she was being controlled by her possessed father, and trapped on top of the Yellow Mountain. Until today, LHA was the first, and the only ever History Association that could ever find the exact location where the old lady was trapped. Therefore, LHA found it was an excellent opportunity to understand the past, from this wise old 'Primary Source'.

'How dare Dr. Big Belly give this challenging task to us? How dare him? We are only 17! What if we die? Huh?' Shouted Gregory angrily. 'Man, chill! Don't be pessimistic! Maybe it's a life–long unforgettable experience! The reason why Dr. Big Belly, well in fact, Dr. Benny gave us this nearly impossible mission to us is because he trusts us!' 'Well Ant, maybe you're right…' The helicopter landed, after a 10–hour long flight.

' Wow, never thought Anhui is a crowded city! ' said Gregory surprisingly. 'Well, no one knows, bloke! Maybe the yellow mountain is way more mysterious.' They had a bowl of Chinese noodles with dumplings, then set off towards the yellow mountain.

The sky was red and yellow, looking exactly the same as the Yellow Mountain. 'Wow, this place is beautiful!' Anthony looked surprised by this amusing place. 'Yeah, it is super stunning…Ant, selfie time!' 'Wait, no! It's time to start our journey up onto the mountain, not selfie!' 'I know, I know, but stop being that serious! We're here to have fun!' 'Who have ever told you we're here for fun? Come along, we are supposed to go!'

The 7 days was unexpectedly cruel for Gregory and Anthony. They figured out the mountain was fully made out of mud and covered by sand, which made them extremely hard to climb up the mountain. 'Ugh, how on earth a mountain is made out of mud!' 'Yeah, that's an unprecedented mountain, really unprecedented. Anyways, we're almost there, high five.' Anthony said calmly, as usual.

'Greg, we're here, up on the peak of the yellow mountain! We're the first ever human to step foot on!' Anthony was smiling and giggling for the first time since the boys started their journey. 'Yes! We are up here! Thanks mommy, thanks daddy, thanks mate!' 'Thanks too, mate! Okay, it's time to go find the wise old immortal lady…according to the map, she's 100 meters in front of us only!' 'Great! Let's go!'

'Umm… sorry, are you the immortal lady that has been living here for millenniums?' Anthony confirmed softly. 'Ah, human, HUMAN! I CAN FINALLY HAVE SOM
ONE TO TALK WITH! Yes, I am, lads. I believe I'm the lady that you guys are finding. He is Gregory, and you are Anthony, right?' 'Yes! But… how do you know our name?' Anthony was confused, why would she know their name?' 'Haha, I have a pair of special eyes and a special brain, so that I can see everything happening all around the world at the same time. I found out LHA was working on a project to save and interview me, so I took a look at the brave lads who are coming to save me.' Anthony and Gregory were totally amused, they murmured, 'How amazing!'

The lady continued,' You guys are the bravest and the most courageous human that I've ever seen, I really appreciate it… and by the way, aren't you two interviewing me? Feel free!'

Anthony took a deep breath, in a shaky voice, 'Okay, the first question, are there any other periods before the Old Stone Ages?' The lady giggled, 'Kids, really kids, hahahaha… I'm going to tell you a fact: The human history period called the Old Stone Age never existed, never!' Anthony and Gregory were completely stunned,' What? Do you mean the studies of the Old Stone Ages are only lies or wrong predictions?' 'Exactly, and as well as all the other periods of human history. Sit down, let me tell you young boys the story… okay, here we go. In fact, we should be

living in the year in 6780 AD, not 2020 AD. At that time, a gigantic Meteorite crashed and almost destroyed the Earth…'

'Woah, then why are we living in the year 2020 AD?' the boys' eyes widened, full of bewilderment and confusion.

'Yeah, that's a great question," sighed the lady,' At that time, my father was really concerned about human's survival, although human beings made quite a lot of damage to the environment, he still believe human beings are helpful and they, well in fact, you guys are the only hope to change the world, so he decided to try on his newly made product, the time machine.'

'Time machine? I thought it only appears in fairy tales!' Gregory said.

'Well, in 2020, of course it only appears in fairy tales! But who knows in 6780!'

'And wasn't your father possessed?'

'Not at all. There are stories spreading all around the world that my "possessed" father locked me up on the Yellow Mountain. In fact, he locked me here just to protect me and prevent me from messing around in the human's world. Well, I hated being trapped, therefore I tried super hard to escape from this Yellow Mountain, however, I failed walking a single step on this mountain, even though I have healthy wings and legs…maybe that's my father's trick and this Yellow Mountain's unpredictable power.'

'Oh I see, your father is smart! Then what happened to the human beings after your dad had decided to try on his brand new product?' Anthony asked.

'After that, my father figured out there were too many people to bring back to the 21st century, so he expanded the time machine. The expanded time machine's capacity was about 1 billion people…' The lady continued

'Wow, that's a lot!' Gregory yelled.

'Yes! There really was a lot! As my father was immortal too, his plan was to keep all the human's size, age, family and literally all the backgrounds the same after time travelling, but clear all their memories that they had in the 68th century. He also made up a whole new set of human history to cover up the truth, he didn't want people to be worried about things that would happen after 4000 years.'

'Your father is actually very caring! He is not possessed at all!'

'Thanks, ah, I suddenly remember a thing. My father said before that there would be some brave boys and girls that would come and save me. He told me to tell you guys something, something very important…'

'What is that?' The boys asked together.

The lady picked 2 jars of potion from her little bag, said in a formal way," These potions are yours, after you drink these potions, you won't ever die, like me. My father said the first braveries who came up on the Yellow Mountain to save me would be one of the members of our Savior Team.'

'Savior Team? What is that?'

'Savior Team is a team made by immortals on Earth, like you guys, after you drink the potions, and me. Our goal, is to protect the world and change the world, and most importantly, to prevent the Meteorite from destroying our world and human beings without them know our plan and mission. So, do you guys want to join the Savior Team?'

‘Of course we do!’ The boys nodded.

‘Great! And by the way can you 2 young lads help me down the mountain? I really want to try standing on the human’s world and the human’s point of view.’

‘Sure!’

The lady and the lads, no, the Savior Team, walked down the mountain, laughing and giggling, holding their hands tightly. Anthony and Gregory, the 2 young boys that won’t ever die, were ready to save and change the world, into a nice one, an undestroyable one. They are ready.

Tales from China's Magical Mountains

Pui Kiu College, Ye, Man Wa – 12

4000 years ago, the yellow emperor left a legendary sword, the Xuan Yuan sword in HuangShan. He forged it while participating in a sacrificial ceremony. The sword was extremely powerful because it was made of the scales of the dragon. Only a sage can use the sword. If not used properly, the person who used it would die immediately. His body would be cursed and his soul would suffer from the acid forever. Since ancient times, many curious adventurers have come to Huangshan. But when they came back, they all lost a finger. Some said there was no such sword, some said they saw Huangdi's ghost, some even said there were ghosts guarding the sword. No one knows why they lost their finger. After that, no one dared to go there anymore and the Xuan Yuan sword still remains a mystery.

The story was told by a mother to her son ten years ago, her son is still fascinated by the story now. His name is Kane. he is 21 years old now and he became an archaeologist.

One day, the media reported a shocking news. Mysterious power was found in HuangShan, and many scientists went there to investigate. But unfortunately, nothing was found. Some rumors said that it was because of the mythical sword. Once again, brave adventurers, travellers, even doctors went there and wanted to witness it. Kane was one of them.

He finally arrived there after ten hours of flight. With some tiredness, he was at the foot of the mountain. The story said the sword was hidden in the Bridge of Immortals, and therefore, his destination was the bridge. He started climbing the mountain, he walked on a bumpy road. After a few hours, Kane arrived at the Bridge of Immortals. But he was surprised that the bridge was as normal as usual, nothing special.

But suddenly, something attracted his attention. A dragon was carved on a pillar. He was confused that only one of the pillars had this mark. He walked towards it, and then he found that the pillar was loose. He rotated it.

"Boom!" A chamber under the bridge opened. On the wall of the chamber, a sentence said: "Only a wise person can control the sword." Kane was on the right track, it was related to the legend. He kept walking till he reached the end of the tunnel. A door opened and closed immediately after Kane walked into the door. He was in a room. A machine raised slowly from the centre of the room. There was a sentence on it, saying "Cut your finger and you will be awarded the sword."

There were two buttons and one said "cut the finger", another "keep your finger". Kane hesitated. Even though he was eager to get the sword, he didn't want to become a disabled person. At last, he pressed the button with "keep your finger".

The machine went down, another door opened.

Amazingly, he saw the XuanYuan sword behind the door, some words were written on the wall, saying "You kept your finger even under great temptation. You are the chosen wise man."

Kane took the sword with excitement, and went back to the Bridge of Immortals. Finally, he donated the sword to a museum. Now everyone knows about the famous sword. HuangShan has become more mysterious than ever.

The Clash of Time

Pui Kiu College, Yim, Long – 12

“Wake up Ben! Rise and shine!” Benjamin opened his eyes to a bucket of cold water and ice. Coldness washed over him like a tidal wave. His eyes shooting open, Benjamin fell out of his bed onto the hardwood floor beneath him. Laughter was heard and Benjamin saw his friend Timothy with a gray, rusty bucket in his hands. “Ben, today is the king's proclamation day! Did you forget?” said Timothy. “Yeah, it's the king's proclamation. Which means more taxes.” Benjamin said to himself.

“Welcome, fellow citizens of Central City! Today is the thirty–fifth national proclamation day!” said a booming voice. It was heard all across the stadium which held the citizens. A person was standing on top of a balcony facing the citizens, holding a microphone in his hand. He wore red robes lined with fur, a sparkling crown upon his head, which was tilted high. “I am your beloved king Titus, and after a discussion with the council, we have decided that the taxes will be added...” said the king. There were murmurs of dissent, but everyone was used to this.

Timothy could feel that something wasn't right. He could feel that Benjamin was emitting waves of anger. His face was steaming red like lava, and his fists were clenched together in anger, like a bomb that was going to explode in any second. “...the taxes will be raised by 70% because–” Suddenly, an arrow flew straight by Titus’ head, missing him by millimeters. Titus was knocked back onto the floor of the balcony, shocked by the attempted assassination on his precious life.

Timothy looked in shock at his friend, who had just been pushed over the breaking point. Benjamin's face was filled with contorted rage, and he had just shot an arrow that was meant to kill. The citizens next to the duo stepped apart, letting the king identify them quickly. “Get them!” shouted Titus in rage.

From all directions, guards started running towards them, weapons raised. Benjamin knew they had to make a run for it. He and Timothy sprinted forward, and ran full speed to the gate of the stadium. “Close the gates! Don't let them get away!” Just as they were about to reach the gates, Timothy was hit by an arrow in the leg. He screamed in agony, but continued to limp forward. As they ran out of the stadium gates, the king bellowed in rage. “I have checked the gate records, my king. The names of those two rebels are Benjamin and Timothy. What do we do now, my lord? We have a rebellion among us.” asked the king's advisor Karloff. “Tell General Minotaurus to search every single bit of the city for them and tell Drake to come to my room.” said the king. “Yes, my lord.” Karloff replied, and stepped out of the room to carry out his jobs. The king gleamed with evilness, an evil plan boiling up inside him.

Benjamin was taken aback by the things that had happened over the past hours. Just mere hours ago, he was only a normal citizen. Now, he was a fugitive of the city. As they trudged forward, Timothy suddenly jolted forward and fell backwards onto the leaf covered ground. Benjamin was shocked by this sudden action, and quickly pulled his friend up to his feet. “Are you okay? What's happening?” Benjamin asked. “I–it seems that I have been afflicted by an arrow coated with the deadly wither poison. The wounded area will shrivel, and over time, the entire body will blacken. And by then, the person would fade away into ashes…” Timothy coughed. “So is there a cure for this?” asked Benjamin frantically. “It has been rumored that a mysterious doctor named the Apothecary has the cure, and he was last seen in the Huangshan regions.” said Timothy. “Alright,” said Benjamin, “The next stop is Huangshan!” Benjamin cheered. And thus, they set off.

A week had passed since the two had begun their journey, and they had arrived at the mighty Huangshan. It was a region of majestic mountains, shrouded in fog. Benjamin started walking up a long set of stairs that extended up to the fog in the mountains, with Timothy following suit. As they continued up the mountains, Timothy grew more tired and his limbs felt more detached, but he bit his lip and continued to act like he was fine. Soon they had to sit down and rest. Just as they were about to settle down, a massive blade shot out of the fog, forcing them to jump to safety.

The man took out a potion, and cured Timothy’s wither poison immediately. And then, he introduced himself. “I am the Apothecary. I have heard that you two have been leading a rebellion against Titus. He banished me to this place a long time ago, and I'm willing to help anyone who is going to stop my old enemy,” said the Apothecary. “We have gotten a letter from someone named Steve, and he has been gathering up citizens that were willing to add

into the rebel army. We will go back and rendezvous with them, then head to the king's castle," said Benjamin. After packing up the Apothecary's potions, they started the long trek back home.

In an underground base in Central city, Steve sat on a chair thinking. "When were they going to come back?" he asked himself. Suddenly, there was a loud commotion on the lower level of the bunker. Steve looked down, and his face changed from boredom to excitement. Benjamin and Timothy were back! From all around them, the citizens were cheering for their leader, who had just returned from a long journey. Steve went downstairs to approach the leader he had been looking forward to meeting. " Benjamin, Timothy and…the Apothecary? I thought you were a legend!" Steve said in awe. "He banished me to Huangshan a decade ago. Are we going to head to the kings castle tomorrow? " he asked. "Yes." Steve replied. "I am now going to tell you who you will be in charge with. Benjamin, you will be in charge of taking out the king. Timothy, you will be tasked with taking out Karloff. Apothecary, you will act as the field medic. And I will be in charge of taking out their general, Minotaurus. All clear?" "CLEAR!" the citizens chanted in unison.

A day had passed, and the army was heading towards the king's castle. From his balcony, Titus could see the approaching army, but he was confident that his traps would crush the rebel army. As the army stepped into the stadium, Benjamin was surprised by how easy this was. Steve had told him last night that all the traps in the stadium had been disarmed, and that meant a lot less effort.

The king could feel that something was wrong...the traps were not working! He screamed frantically into his microphone. "DEFENSES HAVE BEEN BREACHED! Minotarus down! Karloff down! Guards down! I said down! Now go!" screamed the king in panic. As the army charged forward to fight the king's forces, Benjamin sprinted towards the stairs that led to the king's balcony. As he arrived at the top of the stairs, the king was waiting for him. Both of the king's swords were at his hips, ready to be used. "So you finally arrived," said the king, amused. Benjamin rams towards the king, sword drawn. But instead of attacking, he threw the sword at the king like a frisbee. The king quickly pulled his left sword and knocked the sword away, but was knocked back by an unexpected blow from Benjamin. The king blocked another of Benjamin's attacks, then engaged in a dangerous dance with Benjamin.

The king seemed to be toying with him, and not using his true power. A lucky blow from the king sent Benjamin's sword spiraling onto the ground. The king tripped him onto the ground, and pressed hard into him, trying to choke him. "You know what, Benjamin?" the king said "I don't really hate you. I just don't like people who rebel against me. People… that i don't want in my kingdom." the king said in disgust. Then, he kicked Benjamin across the balcony and sent him slamming into the wall. Just as he prepared to finish Benjamin off, he was knocked back by a potion bottle. The Apothecary appeared, and started throwing potion bottles at the king. He helped Benjamin get up and they engaged the king. The king managed to hold up at first, but was eventually worn out after the endless potion bottles and sword strikes. As he slumped on the castle walls, the war on the ground had ended too. Minotarus and Karloff were bested, and the king's forces were either dead or arrested.

As the king was bought away, Benjamin was elected as the first president of the city. Finally, peace was restored to the city, and he would lead the city to a bright future.

Chinese Magical Mountain [Huang Shan]

Pui Kiu College, Yuen, Ling Fung – 12

Back when humans still lived in caves and haven't quite developed culture yet , the Huangshan mountains were already as old as the earth itself . the mountains watched as centuries of Chinese emperors ruled at its base , for eons the mountain did not interfere with mortal matters but every once in a while it would punish the humans for polluting the earth by releasing ancient creatures that no longer roam the earth into the capitol of the cities. The monsters that were released were unstoppable and struck fear into the heart of the country , but despite the threats and dangers that humanity faced , the people were still taking no actions against the frequent attacks. a few chosen individuals were elected to venture into the heart of the mountain but none were ever heard from again. When all actions were proven ineffective against stopping the strikes , all the government could do was seal off the mountains and evacuate the locals inside. And as our young hero Cyrus Carter stared at his home as he was being carried away from the mountain , he had no idea that he was destined to save humanity and end the chaos caused.

As the sun slowly rose from the East , Cyrus squinted his eyes at the shining attraction and resumed to his usual daily schedule of cooking breakfast for himself and his crippled mother , Cyrus scowled at the fact that he was the one who was cooking and detested the fact that he was now as poor as the locals who inhabited the once–beautiful capitol of china which the monsters from the mountains had destroyed. Cyrus's fate wasn't always set to be poor though, once he was destined to rule over a stocks empire , but all that changed when the savages from the mountains came and destroyed the entire industry, sadly when the government had declared the mountain areas to be restricted his family had just invested most of their assets into the travel industry and had been left virtually penniless after that disaster. Cyrus's father had joined the military to continue providing for his family, but even then life was tough and when an military commander came to Cyrus's house with his head bowed solemnly Cyrus already knew what had happened. the news had devastated Cyrus's mother and almost drove her to the point of suicide. As Cyrus continued to struggle with cutting up cabbage that was soon fated to be stew, he swore that one day he would resume the Carter family to its full glory and bring honour back to his family, and every meal he ate would be so luxurious that people would drool and beg just to dine with him, but for now he had to settle with stew first.

While Cyrus wandered the long–abandoned streets of the forgotten capitol , his mind raced at the speed of light as he tried to think of possibilities to restore the once thriving economy that the city had possessed before the monsters laid waste to it. And as he pondered over issue that he faced , he stumbled on a broken section of the fence that had separated the rest of civilization from the Huangshan mountains , as he stood there paralyzed thinking about the possibilities that going inside the fence would lead to him , he also thought about his darling mother, who had taken care of him since birth and now relied on him for survival . But in the end Cyrus's hopes for success triumphed over his sympathy to his mother. While he tromped through the wildlife in the forest which had now reclaimed the buildings, Cyrus couldn't help but wonder what he was trying to accomplish by exploring the Huangshan mountains, and he also couldn't stop wondering what had happened to were chosen to venture into the mountains and where did the monsters come from. When he finally reached the summit of the mountain, he took a gaze inside the crater that was once a flowing stream and he gasped as he noticed what was inside, inside the crater was a massive hole that reached as far as to the earths core .

Climbing down the mountain , Cyrus could feel hate and pain radiating of the walls of the abyss , the walls reflected every single sinful feeling he had ever wished or even thought of . when he reached the bottom of the abyss , he felt around the darkness blindly , grouping the walls and trying to find a way that would lead him to the realm where the monsters emerged from . He ran in circles for what felt like eons , silently cursing himself for not bring down a flashlight , as he felt a difference in the texture of the walls his heart raced excitedly as he knew that he was getting closer to his final destination . he ran into the opening and saw a blinding flash of light . looking around the

enormous hole , he could understand why god was punishing the humans for ruining the beauty of the earth , the hole was filled with dying monsters , cries from the dying beasts filled the air as they choked on the black fog that humanity had caused . At that moment , cyrus realized that he could either expose the beasts and have them butchered when he ran back up to the surfaces of the earth or he could leave humanity to suffer and take sides with the beasts , and as quick as an instance Cyrus already made up his decision .

In about ten years , humanity was gone , all that remains of the civilization was ruins of their gleaming cities . looking down at the ruined citadel that once housed over millions of innocent civilians . He smiled and threw a flower down to honour the passing of the only person he truly cared for , before walking slowly back onto the the abyss , where he now lives in harmony with the beasts that were just like most people – simply misunderstood.

Fictio

Grou

The Journey Towards the Magic Within

Queen Elizabeth School Old Students' Association Secondary School, Lee, Sze Yuen Mars – 13

The walls were freshly painted and the windows were so shiny that you could see your reflection in them. Inside the building, the school bell rang and the students began descending the stairs into the canteen. Except for one extraordinary kid who stayed in the quiet classroom, all alone. He was examining a piece of paper, writings scribbled all over it. The silence was broken when three bullies barged into the classroom. They marched over to the table where the boy was sitting.

"Oh! Little idiot is reading fairy tales!" said one of the bullies, before roaring with laughter.

Extremely annoyed, the boy sitting at the table rose to his feet, stuffed the paper into his pocket, and stormed out of the classroom. The boy's name was Sam, an 11–year–old boy. He was extremely intelligent, and the youngest student in his high school. He also had a very good imagination.

We all believe in different things, some reality and some fantasy. Fairy tales are often considered childish, and make–believe. However, Sam believed that some fairy tales were real and that magic actually existed. He especially believed the tale about the Yellow Mountains, also known as China's Magical Mountains. Legend has it that deep in the mountains lived a wise wizard who understood the power of magic. Sam would often be teased for talking about his belief in the magic wizard, causing him to doubt himself. Finally, he couldn't stand the bullying any longer and decided to unravel the truth once and for all.

" I will prove that magic exists." Sam said.

The following day, he boarded a plane and flew to the home of the Yellow Mountains in Anhui Province, eastern China. His mission was to seek out the temple where the magical wizard was thought to have lived and find out whether magic really exists.

He arrived at the foot of the mountains where the wizard lived according to the fairy tale.

"To find the magic that you seek,

take the third road on the left,

follow the path forward no matter how steep,

on to the highest peak, you may be the wizard's guest."

Sam peered up at the majestic mountains that stood before him. The peaks were blanketed in a thick white morning mist. He then began his journey onto the faint path up the mountains.

The terrain of the mountain was rocky, it's surface was barren, with no trees. As Sam progressed up the mountain, he felt the air become thinner and with it he noticed the landscape become greener. Barren ground merged into thick trees. The sound of a stream could be heard as he continued along the narrowing, rocky path. He soon came to a crossroad. Unsure of the direction to take, Sam then recalled part of the tale he had read.

" Far left corner which you can see,

there's a waterfall in front of me,

my place lies behind,

which if you seek, you will find."

It was clear to him now that the only thing he had to do was continue left, following the sound of the trickling water. As he forged ahead, the sound of the water became louder, thundering down from above. Sam then realised he arrived at the famous Baizhang Waterfall, this marked the halfway point of his journey. The path became steep as he continued to climb. As he approached the end of the road along the cliff–side, a humongous rock blocked the narrowing path.

Sam decided that the only way to carry on his journey was to climb around the side of the cliff. Gripping the wall hard, he slowly edged sideways, there were small rock steps on the side of the cliff's wall which appeared in the shape of a dragon. He stepped onto the rocks to help him balance, when something strange happened.

Suddenly, the dragon–shaped rock became life–like shifting from left to right, then as sudden as it happened, it became still again. Sam was shocked, he shook his head so vigorously, that it caused him to slip and fall off the cliff. His scream echoed among the mountain ranges as Sam fell, landing on the ground below.

When he regained consciousness, Sam was soaking wet and realized that he was lying in a shallow pond, he looked around to find himself in a cave behind the Baizhang Waterfall.

Sam recited another part of the fairy tale aloud:

"You'll come upon a rock along the way,

Behind it, silver apple trees grow every day.

Pass the door that lies behind,

A hybrid statue is what you'll find."

He spun around and walked toward the triangular rock, it was so dark that Sam couldn't make out what lay beyond the dim light. His instincts told him that undoubtedly he was heading in the right direction. With his mind made up, he walked ahead.

He spread out his arms, feeling his way around. After bumping into a few rocks, he came across a doorway. Feeling curious, Sam kicked open the door, and a blinding flash of light illuminated out from the doorway. Sam squinted as he struggled to open his eyes. Then what he saw stunned him.

The path presenting him was golden, ahead stood a three–storey temple. The temple's roof was blood red and walls were shimmering silver. There were trees with silver–coloured apples bordering each side of the path. The place appeared to be inside the Yellow Mountain, shielded from sunlight, but the trees grew brightly. Sam's jaw dropped in shock. He pinched himself, and as he felt the pain, it confirmed that he was not dreaming.

For years he believed in the fairy tale, but he never ever believed that he would one day end up in the magical place of his dreams. He slowly walked through the garden, taking in the view. It felt like many days passed when he finally reached the door to the temple. Just as the fairy tale had described it, there stood the hybrid statue, part human, part dragon. It looked impressive but weird. At first, Sam did not know what to do, but then he turned his head and caught sight of a rusty sign with faded words on it:

Answer the question and you will be able to enter: The legendary beast of China, a fire breathing creature, also known to be the most magical creature. What is its name?

"A dragon." Sam answered.

Then the door opened and Sam stepped in without hesitation.

Suddenly, the room burst into brightness. An old man appeared in the centre of the room, he had long silver hair, and a short white beard, his blue eyes met Sam's, and for a moment they stared at each other.

Then Sam broke the silence, "Is this real, or is it just my imagination?"

"It is very real," the wizard said, "So, do you believe in magic? What is it you seek?"

"Is it real, then?" Sam asked eagerly.

The wizard smiled,

"If you truly believe, only then will you discover. If you never believed in magic, you would never have come. You will discover that it is more important to believe in the magic within yourself, than to prove its existence to others."

"So magic exists." Sam muttered to himself, getting excited.

"Yes." the old wizard said.

"The most complex magic is to believe that the impossible is possible. You are one of the few that have mastered it, during your journey here."

The old wizard took a long breath, and pulled out a long stick, most likely a wand.

"So, magic exists in you now, use it well." he said.

With a flick of the wizard's wand, Sam travelled back to the school that he left days ago.

Sam found himself at the gates of his school. His adventure was over, but the magic had just begun. The school bell rang, signalling the end of lunch. Sam entered the school and made his way back to class.

"I wonder if I really have magical powers," Sam whispered to himself.

Then, in front of him stood the bullies.

"Where have you been, idiot? We didn't see you during lunch!" the bullies aggressively yelled at Sam.

Sam became anxious and his hungry stomach began to make loud, rumbling noises. The bullies burst into laughter. Then, the most amazing thing happened. Sam placed his hand into his apparently empty pocket and felt a tingle in the tips of his fingers. Something squishy materialized into his hand. He pulled it out, and to his astonishment, it was an egg and luncheon meat sandwich, his favourite.

"Thanks to China's Magical Mountains, I've learnt the precious lesson of the importance of self–confidence and courage." he whispered thoughtfully.

Ignoring the bullies, Sam grinned to himself, slumped into his seat, and began to munch on his sandwich while reminiscing about his magical adventures to the Yellow Mountains of China.

The Destiny That Lies Within

Shanghai American School – Pudong Campus, Ali, Raahim – 12

Part 1: Biyu

A sudden creaking noise diminished the solace of my wooden room. Then another. And another. I started to realize that the disturbing sounds were getting closer. I knew what this meant as the final creaking sound was a stomp on the floor next to me. My eyes shot open as I looked toward my window and saw the sun glaring in my face, taunting me as it knew what kind of hell would be brought upon me today.

"Biyu you lazy girl! Get up!" The monster before me bellowed. I sat up from my bed with my short and messy black hair. I looked up to see her evil face. She had pale skin and pitch–black hair like a demon. No part of her showed any kindness or love. Just pure hatred. Especially toward me.

"Biyu! Go to the market and buy a bag of rice. You forgot to buy it yesterday so you will make up for it today. If you don't, no dinner tonight at all!" Chenguang exclaimed while heating water fresh from a river. I knew if I sighed, I would get scolded as Chenguang does not tolerate disrespect. So I put on my small brown boots and put my little bag over my shoulder. I opened the door, and the sunlight shot me down with its apathetic power which almost made me fall over. I mustered all my strength The market was packed with people buying weapons for hunting or seeds for growing. I slipped my way through the crowd of people to get to one specific shop that I always got rice from Bojing's shop.

"Ah, Biyu! I was wondering when you would show up!" He said excitedly. Bojing was a large man with not much hair but made up for it with a vast, grotesque mustache. His shop was a little wooden shack that was filled with vegetables, rice, and other food.

"Hello, Bojing. Just the usual for today." I replied with a monotone voice

"What's the matter? Was it Chenguang again?" Bojing asks

"Who else could it possibly be?"

"I'm sorry Biyu, but remember to hold out hope. Your father will come back one day!"

"I might have believed you when I first came here, but not anymore. My father has been gone for so long. Now, just a bag of rice please." Bojing sighed. He grabbed a bag of rice off of a wooden shelf, which revealed a wide white book.

"Bojing, what's that?" I asked pointing to the book

"Ah, that's a tale of the Pills of Immortality." He said to me.

"The Pills of Immortality?"

"Yes, it is said that long ago, the emperor Huang Di refined Pills of Immortality in the mountains. Pills that could grant you the power of living forever! He named the mountains on which he made the Pills of Immortality, Yellow Mountain."

"Huangshan? The mountain right next to Xidi Village? We live in Xidi! Why haven't——"

"The people of Xidi and alchemists before have looked for these pills, but the search had no results. So for now, it's just a myth."

Just a myth

Just a myth

The words echoed through my mind as I looked out my bedroom window.

"Pills of Immortality?" I thought

“If I had those, I wouldn’t need Chenguang. I wouldn’t need chores in my life. I wouldn’t need this awful life! But Bojing said it was a myth…” I looked out the window and saw the sunset behind Huangshan.

“My destiny lies there, in Huangshan.”

Part 2: Chenguang

I heard a strange ruckus upstairs. Wood clattered and made the ceiling rumble. I raced upstairs with my cloak sliding on the wooden stairs.

“Biyu?!” I shouted.

“What has this stupid girl done now?” I thought to myself. I opened her door and suddenly saw the wooden window opened. Biyu’s entire room was empty. Her closet of clothes, the leather sack she carries when going out to do chores. All of it was gone. I ran to the window and looked out. She was nowhere to be seen. The first person I thought of was Bojing, the only person with who Biyu was friends. I ran out of the house and dashed toward his shop.

“Biyu has most likely escaped to Huangshan. She learned about the Pills of Immortality hidden deep within Huangshan.” Bojing said with a concerned look.

“But that’s just a myth?”

“That’s what I told her but—”

“YOU told her?”

“She learned it by herself when she saw a book on my shelf.” I put my hand on my forehead in anxiety. Could she have gone to Huangshan? When the sun is setting? I raced for the exit. Bojing suddenly stopped me.

“I do have one question Ms. Chenguang,” He said with a serious face

“What?” I said with a face of worry and confusion

“Why?”

I raced past the exit of Xidi village as I ran towards Huangshan. I went for the stony path up the mountain It was getting dark and my heart was filling up with fear as I worried for her safety. I reached the stony platform, out of breath, and fearing the worst. Suddenly, I saw Biyu sobbing in the mist. A wave of relief swept over me. She hadn’t been able to make it far after all in the unfamiliar Huangshan mountain. I wanted to scold her. But I couldn’t.

“Why?” Bojing had asked me back at his shop with a serious face.

“Why, what?” I replied with a confused face.

“Biyu tells me about you. Making her do such harsh things for no reason. She left for Huangshan because of you.” I sighed and sat back down.

“Biyu may not remember, but I remember as clear as day,” I whispered with a tinge of regret.

“Many years ago, I used to live with my father, mother, and sister Jing in Hongcun village. We all lived happily together in a big home. I loved my sister with all my heart. One fine day, Jing, suddenly broke the news that she loves a man named Gang. Our parents didn’t approve as Gang didn’t have a good reputation. But Jing was in Love. She married Gang against our wishes and left the house for good with no trace. I missed my sister and was Angry, angry that I might never be able to see her again. Years passed and we made peace with Jing not being a part of our lives anymore. But one day, we suddenly received a message from Gang that my sister has passed away and he needs our help in Xidi village where he lived. I was shocked by the news and blamed Gang but was also eager to find answers so I left for Xidi.”

“I arrived at Gang’s home and knocked on their door. Gang opened the door. I wanted to confront Gang but he dropped another bombshell, they had had a daughter together, Biyu, and there was no one to look after her. I decided to stay the night to think things over. The next day I discovered that Gang had disappeared in the dark of the night just like he did the last time with Jing. I will never know the full story behind what happened to my sister. But now I was stuck with this little girl Biyu. My parents were angry at Gang and also never accepted Biyu. They passed away not long after. I felt a responsibility toward Biyu but she also repulsed me because she had the eyes and face of Gang and constantly reminded me of him and what he might have done to my sister”

“Chenguang, maybe you wanted to hate Biyu because of everything that had happened to you. You lost your sister, but all Biyu has ever needed is someone to care for her. All she needs is a mother.” Bojing softly told me.

I don’t know what I did after I saw her, but I ended up finding myself hugging her with all my might while sobbing with her.

“Why are you hugging me? You hate me. You’ve hated me all my life.” Biyu said between tears

“And I’m sorry. I blamed everything on you for no reason. Your father left me here in this village with no friends and family. I blamed everything on a young girl who wanted nothing but a life where people would care for her. I’m sorry Biyu, I failed you.” I said with a heavy heart.

I don’t know how long we sat upon the mountain, but as I stood up the sun rises and washed over Biyu and me. I don’t know what will happen after this, I don’t. But I smile to myself and I confidently extend my hand to Biyu like I had never done before.

Planes

Shanghai American School – Pudong Campus, Cheng, Jai-An Zoe – 12

March 5th, 1943
Menri Snow Mountains
Yunnan

"Gyatso, look! A plane!"

My younger brother tugs on my arm, pointing towards the sky. A plane. We've been seeing a lot of them lately. The first one came over fifty days ago. Sometimes they fly off to the east. Sometimes they fly to the west. Sometimes they go either way but suddenly begin to descend, disappearing behind the mountains as the sun does when it sets. After all this time, my brother Norbu is still amazed by them, shouting whenever he sees one. I am not as easily excited, but I still have one question.

"Norbu, why do all the planes look the same?" I ask my brother.

Norbu looks at me, an indecipherable expression on his face. "I mean, don't all the trees look the same to you? Why wouldn't planes?"

"If I really try, I can tell the differences between them," I say. "But the *planes* are *identical."*

"Maybe they're just too far to see," Norbu suggests. "I bet if we went up higher, we could get a better look at them!"

I nod. No one has ever tried to go to the peak of the mountain we live on. It's dangerous and cold, with altitudes that would handicap even the best of climbers. But I don't have the heart to remind Norbu of this. *Maybe there's a place where we can see the planes in detail without going to the peaks,* I think. *The mountains are tall, after all. "Higher up" doesn't mean all the way.*

Norbu interrupts my train of thought with another shout. "Gyatso… look!"

I don't look up. "Is there another plane?"

Norbu shakes his head furiously. "No, just look!"

I direct my gaze upward. The plane is getting closer and closer, in the same sudden descent I've seen so many times. It's wobbling arbitrarily, and I can't tell where it will land. But as it gets closer, I think one thing — *we're standing within the blast radius.*

I grab Norbu's hand and jerk him to the side as the plane plummets to the ground. It lands in a spot where it wouldn't have hit us to begin with. None of the newly formed debris would have even touched us. But I had to be safe. I open my mouth to speak, not knowing what to say. "Norbu…"

He screams, a high-pitched sound that almost seems to pierce the air. It echoes through the valley. Smoke billows from the crashed plane in similar intensity. I try to look through the smoke, my mind racing. *There's probably someone in there. I don't think planes just fly themselves.* "Norbu, be quiet."

"It's on *fire,*" he cries.

Indeed it is. It's warming the frozen ground around it. I focus on the small window in the metal. "Is there water nearby?" I ask my brother, trying to stay calm.

I watch as he dashes to and fro. "I... think there's a river somewhere near here," he says. "Come with me or give me your bucket."

We had been on a trip to get water from the river. I toss my bucket to Norbu, and he takes off running. Then I turn to the plane and holler, "Is anyone there!?"

I think I see a slight movement from within the haze. I call out again as Norbu comes up behind me with two full buckets of water. He moves to douse the plane in the icy liquid when I take one of the buckets. "Norbu, I'll do it. Stay here."

Norbu doesn't object, knowing I wouldn't let him try. I quickly throw the water over the plane. The blaze doesn't go out completely, but I can get closer now. There is clearly a person in the cockpit. I get closer and extend my hand, hoping the person is alright. He takes my hand and I pull him out of the smoke. I know immediately he isn't Tibetan or Chinese. His sleeve is burning. He bats at it and somehow manages to put out the flames. "Are you alright?" I ask, although he definitely isn't. I just pulled him from a fire.

The man raises an eyebrow and says something in response, something I don't understand. I know my confusion is showing on my face. Seeing this, he pauses a moment, then asks something. I recognize one word.

"English?" I turn around. "Norbu, I think this man is American."

Americans have been visiting our village and our mountains since I learned to pull a weed. Some of the villagers have learned English, the language they usually speak. Norbu nods and runs forward, gesturing to himself, the man, and the direction our village is in. The man understands, and I help him walk as we follow Norbu. We turn our backs on the fire. The smoke continues to rise uninterrupted.

We get home within ten minutes. My mother and my sister, Dorji, are sitting and eating. They both stop as soon as they see the man. My mother asks, "Who is this?"

"Mom, we found this man in a crashed plane," I explained. "He's burnt and injured, and we can't talk to him because he only speaks English. Help?"

My mother nods and stands up. "Norbu, take care of Dorji," she instructs.

"But I want to talk to him," he protests. Despite that, he sits down and starts eating his food, keeping an eye on Dorji. I leave my food to get cold on the table.

His name is David. He flew in from India as part of a mission to supply American troops with supplies. He planned to land further out in Yunnan. He says the mission is part of a large operation they call the India–China Ferry. All the planes that passed over before were allegedly part of this operation. He is indeed American, and as we speak amongst ourselves, a look of confusion appears on his face. When our translator asks why, he says he's never heard our language spoken, and that it's incredibly different from English. I laugh at that. English is the language that's different to me. It sounds and looks nothing like Tibetan or Mandarin. In fact, I almost can't believe it has meaning at all. Only by the intent look on the translator's face as he listens to the words being spoken do I know for sure that it isn't just drivel.

The translator says we'll help him recover, and then he'll need to return to India. My mother orders me to go home.

March 12th, 1943
Menri Snow Mountains
Yunnan

It's been seven days since the crash.

David is nowhere near fully recovered, but he insists on returning to India now. The same man who translated for us will be going with him to make sure he gets there safely, and to see India along the way. A crowd has gathered at the edge of the village to bid them farewell. Norbu, Dorji, and I are in it. My mother is giving them supplies to make the trip when David pulls a small stack of papers from his coat pocket. The translator says, "Gyatso, Norbu, he wants to give those to you."

I take the paper stack. *Photographs.* And depicted in the photographs are planes. Norbu's eyes light up. "Gyatso! We can see them now! The planes, I mean."

I remember the sight of the plane the last time I saw it. It had been fairly large, a light shade of gray. The dark gray plane in the grainy photo at the top of the stack is compact, with only room for one person, no cargo. I move the photo to the back of the pile. The plane depicted in the photo I see now is akin to the one David crashed in, but a long string of numbers is painted on the side. I don't remember the numbers on David's plane, but I know they didn't look like this.

"See?" Norbu says excitedly. "The planes are even more different than the trees! You can actually see it, right from the start!"

I laugh and ruffle his hair. "You were right. Up close they look nothing alike." I look at the next photo. Another dark gray plane, but now it's a different shape. So strikingly different from the others. I'm amazed I ever thought they could be the same.

It's almost magic.

December 27th, 1952
Dukezong
Yunnan

My wife holds our baby, born just yesterday, in her arms. She looks up at me with weary eyes. Neither of us can remember how it feels to have the energy to smile. "What are we naming him?" she asks.

I stare at the baby's face. "David," I say with startling conviction.

"David?" my wife asks. "What does that mean?"

What does David mean? I turn my head towards the sky. It means war. It means differences. It means Norbu, my dear brother Norbu who I will never get to see again.

"Planes," I answer.

Up Above the Sky

Shanghai American School – Pudong Campus, Li, Shily – 13

The midnight blue sea of a thousand twinkling eyes shone upon us as we continued our journey towards the top of Mount Emei. Us, is me, Bai, and Luo. Luo is my grandpa's mule and Bai is my beloved mountain goat. Me, well, I'm Ling. The three of us are embarking on a journey to find the Great Celestial Dragon. Myth in my village is said that the Great Celestial Dragon guards the heavenly palace of the gods. The dragon will pass by Mt. Emei once every year during the Lunar New Year, when the mountain is fully covered with fog. But I don't think it's simply a myth; there's more to that, I know it, and I want to see it. I felt Luo tugging on the reins as he bobbed his head up and down signaling to me that he wishes to rest now. I pulled on the rusty reins tenderly to tell Luo to stop. Sliding off the saddle, I led Luo over to a spot between two close resting trees. I got out a piece of stale bread and an apple from the saddlebag on Luo's back. Finishing my own dinner, I split the apple in two, and fed Luo and Bai. I sat with my back pressed against the rough trunk of a tree and closed my eyes. I heard a soft thump and felt Bai curling up beside me. Weaving my fingers in Bai's knotted coat, I took a deep breath and fell into the black reviving void that is sleep.

I yawned while placing my knuckles against my eyes, trying to rub the sleep away. The barely breaking–through sunray shined upon Bai's more cream yellow than white fur as she stood on sleepy legs and balanced herself. Luo was standing by the other tree picking at the wet grass. The fog was getting thicker and thicker every day. "Come on, let's go, we don't have much time." I hurried to Luo and lifted myself to the saddle. Taking the reins, I gave a soft kick on the side of Luo's belly, and abruptly he responded with a swift, steady trot. Bai then came up beside us with a faster trot to make up the difference in leg lengths. As we continued going up the mountain, the murky feeling began to settle in. It seems as if the obscurity feeling got more intense the further we went. I know it's not just me because I had felt the hesitating steps Luo was taking when we got to parts where there were thicker mists. And how Bai was eyeing the indistinct shapes accompanying us. A screeching bird's call, the crack of a branch, or the flutter of wings, whatever it was, it had caused a sudden stop in the clipping and clopping of hooves. I saw that Luo's ears shifted into a more erect position, and Bai clustered closer to us, her furry legs looked rigid as stone. I could feel the coldness seeping into the bare skin underneath the layers of clothing, sending shivers dancing along my arms. The eerily silence was getting to all of us, especially with the additional heavy mist and fog. I looked around in trepidation, I wasn't sure if we should keep going. *What if something bad actually happens?* All of a sudden, I felt hot and cold at the same time. My hands and arms were shivering while I felt the beads of sweat cling to my neck and forehead. I was breathing a little too fast; one breath in, two breaths out. I looked from left to right vigilantly, finding nothing but more fog. I clenched the reins until my knuckles were white with anxiety. The precipitated rustle of something sent me shaking and trembling with terror. There was a constant beat pounding in my ears, getting faster and louder. I tried not to think about where I am right now and who I am headed to see. I felt Luo skittering in place, effected by me and my doubts. If I don't want to lose control right now, I must get myself together. Taking a deep breath and closing my eyes, I thought of other things. *What would it be like to see the Great Celestial Dragon? But what if there was no dragon at all?* I pushed that thought further into my mind and tried not to dwell on it. Unwrapping the tense arms around my chest that I didn't remember being there, I exhaled slowly, letting all the doubts flow away. After I collected myself, I clucked my tongue gently, sending Luo into a brisk trot. The clipping and clopping broke the silence once again. Bai kept close to us, and I sensed the uneasiness radiating off of her. The dread of the truth crept up on me gradually and unwavering. Unexpectedly, Luo stopped right in his tracks, causing me to fall on his thick mane. I straightened myself up and noticed why. The fog was too thick here, you couldn't even see beyond one meter. "It's okay, nothing to be afraid of. Go on, it'll be fine." I urged Luo while putting pressure in my stirrups, using my heels to close in on the belly's flesh. But he was too stubborn, still refusing to go on. I sighed as I heaved myself down the saddle and tried to pull him forward. It wasn't working, I furrowed my brows. Something must be really wrong, or else Luo wouldn't be like this. "Stay here," I told both of them and walked on carefully. Bai made a frantic sound as if to tell me to stop. Stretching my arms with my hand up in front, and taking slow measured steps, I went on cautiously. All of a sudden, I felt nothing under my right foot, like my foot was hanging on thin air. I withdrew my foot and scrambled back. Landing on all fours, I felt the tiny pebbles indenting my palms and knees. Trying to feel the earth with my outstretched hands, it hit me. This was the edge of Mount Emei. We were here.

Now that we reached our destination, I wasn't sure if I should accomplish my mission. As I was thinking about my choices, a dark form appeared out of the blue, swishing above me. Moving at whirlwind speed, I thought it had a snake–like figure. The blur kept on circling deep in the clouds. The more I look at it, the more terror spread from my heart. I tasted the raw, metallic sweetness of blood in my mouth as I continued to bite the insides of my cheek. *This was it. It's now or never.* I knew that if I didn't find the truth now, I may not be brave enough to endure the journey and go this far again. *It's a once in a lifetime kind of opportunity, Ling. Don't you want to know the truth? But what if it's not there? What if I was wrong about everything? You might as well try while you're here. This is where you wished to be, go now and see.* I could almost imagine the devil and the angel bickering about on my shoulders. I shoved the thoughts aside and breathed in the moisty air, "I will do this. I will try." I summoned all my courage and felt the adrenaline rushing through me, from my curling toes to the tips of my hair, filling me with anticipation. I extended my left hand up through the thin sheet of cloud coating the sky. The dense mist made the lost strands of black hair curl around my pale cheeks. My breath caught as I felt something as smooth as the finest silks in China, and as sharp as the best blade, slither past my trembling hand. I looked up in awe at the indescribable mix of green and blue with the perpetual hazy red and orange of colors blurring past. Suddenly, a glaring crimson orb swished by, and for a moment, everything faded away to just me and the dragon. I could see the desiring eye of this fearsome, powerful, and beautiful creature. The blazing eye with metallic golden streaks shooting out from the obsidian pupil consumed me, burning my body with exhilaration. The crimson orb blinked and there was an imperceptible nod. And just as suddenly as it came, it disappeared again, in the mass of the slithering body.

Long after the Great Celestial Dragon had left, I still stood unmoving. The fog lessened, the clouds parted, and the wind picked up. The breeze caught my hair and played with it, swirling about my face. I was so struck, the only thing reminding me that the dragon was actually real were my fingertips that still tingled from the memory of the lingering touch. There was nothing to say or think as I tilted my head backwards and looked up above the sky.

The Patience of Trees

Shanghai American School – Pudong Campus, Mei, Michelle – 12

The tree stands dragon like, the silent observer of the rocky mountains buried by the sea of clouds. The wind calls, howling through the branches of harp pine, brushing a blanket of snow to the ground. The clouds swim amongst the steep ridges and peaks, as the radiant light covers Huangshan with many coats of colour. Mountains peek above the rosy clouds, appearing like islands before the cottony layers float away as the sun reclaims the sky.

The young girl climbs towards home, exhausted by the effort of carrying bamboo for the villagers. She was so tired. Tired of living with her grandfather. Tired of mountains and trees. The snow crunched beneath Qin's straw shoes as she hurried back in the icy cold to retrieve more bamboo.

Her grandfather was bent almost double from a life of carrying baskets on poles up and down the mountains —his hands were rough and cracked— not like the not at all like the gentle hands Qin remembers from her mother's touch. Although she dearly loved her grandfather, who did his best to raise Qin, she often dreamed of her mother's touch. She dearly missed her mother who had gone to look for work in Hefei five years ago. Even though Qin was only 8 at that time, her mother gone felt like what you could call a sense of hollowness emanating from her chest. The sadness drained through Qin rather than skating over her skin. It travelled through every cell to reach the ground. And yet strangly enough, it was her crumbled soul she had to bear.

The village of Xidi was on a barren hill in a range of many barren hills near the Black Tiger Pine. Throughout winter, it was waist deep in snow and blasted by bitter winds. In the summer, the temperature was so hot it was like breathing in flames. Qin's grandfather Xi would often times tell her stories of how his father had built small round homes into the ground in this faraway village so that others would see how vast the mountains were. Unfortunately, because it was so far from civilization, few people ever saw it. Yet it was all Qin ever saw. It was her whole world.

Qin wore trousers that were patched at the knees and too long for her, and a baggy faded jacket she had mended many times. Although this was not her only jacket, it was her most prized possession. It had also been her mother's favorite, one of the few things she left behind for Qin. Every birthday, when her grandfather asked her for her wish for the upcoming year, she stated that she only wished to see her mother. Seeing her mother's empty seat at the dinner table left Qin desperate.

As heavy snow began to fall, Qin clutched the freshly cut bamboo sticks and hurried home. She knew Grandfather would be worried sick if she were still out in the cold. She could see him through the window of their small house, rubbing his sore back.

Walking inside, she tried to look away from her Grandfather, knowing that if she looked at him, he would be able to read her mind.

The handwritten card Qin had left on her mother's seat was still there from yesterday, untouched. Qin had often left something on her mother's seat ever since she could remember.

"*Yeye*, when is mother coming back?" Qin blurted out.

Grandfather sighed. He stared out at the falling snow, seeking the right words. He opened his mouth, but then hesitantly closed it.

"Qin, you know this. We have gone over this countless times. Your mother went to the city to find work."

"But it has been more than five years," Qin grumbled. She reached into the worn leather pouch that hung from her waist, suspended from a length of braided rope. Along with the rusty blade Grandfather gave her when she first started helping in the forest, the pouch contained only a piece of weathered wood carved into the shape of a bird – the only other thing she had that had been her mother's.

"Patience, little one. The trees on the mountains live for thousands of years. The dragons have been here for even longer. Five years is not a very long time. Be like the trees. Be patient."

Grandfather paused, then spoke softly. "You sometimes remind me of your mother, so determined to get things done and also very stubborn," he chuckled. "You see that knife I gave you? Before I could use this blade to carve the bird, I had to sharpen it. You are like that blade. You are growing up, but you are not yet grown. It will take time and patience to sharpen you, but until a blade is sharp, it is foolish to try to carve anything with it."

"Don't you even miss mother? Don't you want to see her?" She tried to convince herself that she was not the only one who missed her mother; otherwise, she couldn't shake the feeling that she was being too childish. Grandfather never mentioned mother or showed that he missed her.

"Of course, I do. But our life is here, on the mountain. You have a role, a purpose in the village. And your mother has her role. Don't worry, little one. I am sure one day she will come back to us."

Tears filled Qin's eyes as she gazed out at the darkness. "That's what you say every time. But mother is still not back!"

"Remember last year, when Unity Pine was struck by lightning? The tree's bark was burnt and one of its limbs became a dead branch. But hidden under that skeleton was a force that sent a single shot of green out into the world. The rest of the tree stayed together. It didn't send out one limb to look for the lost one. When they stayed together, they were able to accomplish more. And we need to stay strong and together too." Grandfather stood up. Clutching the wall, he slowly shuffled towards Qin.

Patting her back, Grandfather smiled, "You think I don't know what it feels like to live without someone I love? You know, before you were born your grandmother fell really ill and passed away. It felt like my soul was a piece of paper that had been crumbled and would never again be smoothed out. Those years, your mother and I were both dejected. But we stayed strong and more importantly had each other as support."

Qin restrained herself, but inside she was boiling. Qin had enough of her grandfather's talks. They were just words, ancient folk tales of dragons and magic. They were not what she missed the most – her mother's voice, her mother's touch.

That night, after Grandfather went to sleep, buried under the warmth of a blanket, Qin quietly got dressed in the darkness. She put the blade and the bird in her pouch, put on her mother's old jacket and a pair of sturdy boots. She forced the door open, pushing against the biting wind that was trying to keep it shut.

The night was dark. No stars penetrated the heavy snow clouds.

Qin knew the path well from all her trips through the bamboo forest. Wrapping her jacket around her, tucking her hands inside the pockets, she trudged slowly down the mountain. After an hour or so, Qin was no longer so sure of the way, and the heavy snow made it difficult to see the path. Suddenly, her foot slipped out from under her, and she began falling, sliding and banging down into a deep ravine. Her consciousness faded as she lay at the bottom. The heavy snow covered her.

When she awoke, she tried to brush the snow off of her face, but only one arm was able to respond. Her heart raced, blood pounding in her temples. She knew she had to move, to get up and try to find a way back to the path. She struggled to roll over, but she felt buried by the snow. She shivered.

Just when she felt her tears freezing her eyelids, she heard a voice calling her name.

"Qin, my darling little bird. Be calm. I am here."

It was her mother's voice. Qin blinked hard to clear her eyes. Where was this voice coming from? In the blinding snow fall, Qin saw two red dots, and as the dots came closer, she saw what appeared to be a head of a large dragon. As it opened its mouth, Qin again heard her mother's voice.

"Qin, do not be afraid. I am here, and we will always be together. Nothing can ever separate us again."

The dragon's breath was like a warm caress, and Qin felt herself relax into memories of summer and flowers and her mother's gentle touch.

She felt her crumpled soul finally returning to its original form.

The Journey Near Heaven's Peak

Shanghai Community International School, Ng, Kai-Ying - 12

I need to get out of my world. I mean, think of all the places that explorers can go. The places that are waiting for you. Exploring the explorable and the unknown that will be found by you. Won't that be wonderful? I would rather go do all of that but instead I was stuck in my room to finish a pile of some dumb paper homework. Not just any ordinary homework, it was a gigantic mountain-sized pile of homework that was piled into many stacks and each stack was ten feet high. I was chained to that pile of dumb homework until I am finished with it. The homework was like a burden. Exactly like a boulder on top of my shoulders. This felt exactly like being behind bars when you are innocent. This was the last thing that I needed in my whole entire life. I needed to get out of there. But the problem was that the room with no exists so how could I escape?

I closed my tired eyes. I wished I could get out of here, but I know I won't. But even a little peace will do me good. I smelled cherry blossoms and moist air. I felt cool and something tingly that was like paper but not exactly like it. It was a little stiffer and harder. I heard birds chirping and the rushing of ——— something. Wait! Rushing? My paper homework must be collapsing! It might bury me alive! AHHHHH! I open my eyes. Instead of my room a mountain paradise took place. Rushing waterfalls and moist green trees was everywhere. I looked around. I was on a mountain! Misty fog surrounded me. But something was a bit different about them. They look like those breath-taking and beautiful spirts that float and move in such a graceful way. They also reminded me of those fluffy cotton candy and beautiful white clouds. It must be a dream. I must have over worked myself. I pinched my skin hard. I can feel it. I must have died from exhaustion. I must be in Heaven.

"You are here." A voice boomed. I spun around looking for that voice. But all I saw was mist and mountains. I turned around violently. I saw nothing. I hear nothing. Nothing but the wind itself. A flash of yellow appeared. It zoomed around me like crazy. Then it stopped. I looked closely at it. It was a paper dragon! I was too stun to speak. Was I dreaming? No, it's Imposable.

"Hop on." It said. I dumbly obeyed. Dumbfounded. Then a gust of strong breeze brushed my skin and flapped my hair to make it prickle my unbelievable eyes. That's when I notice. We were flying.

"Where are we flying to?" I finally managed to find my tongue.

"Everywhere in the yellow mountains." I looked all around and above me. Colors as bright as fireworks flew past me. They were paper cranes. They flew in packs. Then more paper dragons came. The world was almost alive with colors. It was much better than my old little prison cell. Then we landed. My eyes were open so wide because of the sight before me. It was even more beautiful, breath-taking than the sight before. Even the word "beautiful" and "breath-taking" aren't the words for describing the sight before me. Origami, paper homes with mystical spirts living within. They looked beautiful. So beautiful that not even beautiful can describe it. It was also calm and busy both at the same time. I was speechless. I was really dumbfounded. I was sure that it was heaven.

"Welcome to Near Heaven's Peak!" The dragon exclaimed. I looked around. I get why it has the word heaven in the name and peak because it is on the mountain and it is breathtaking. But why 'Near'?

"This isn't heaven, but it is near it. It is like an image of heaven that only mortals and mystical living beings can come in times of need." The paper dragon sighed. But why am I here?

"We are all made of stories. If no one tells our story, one day we will disappear. If we are gone, so will you. Ella, we need you. We need you to write our story. Our magic is slowly fading. Look at it." I turned to see the magical spirits. Some of them were fading away and turning into dust. Some of them were losing color and evaporating into thin air. Some of them were crumbling and unbending their origami bodies into what they were like in the first place. The paper dragon itself was fading away fast.

I was shocked. I stepped backward. Then I lost my footing. The next thing I knew was that I was falling. Falling in the sky. Down the mountains. Trying to grasp the air as if there were a rod to hold on so I would stop falling. '*We need you. We need you to tell our story.*' The dragon's voice came into my head. The whole world was spinning. Everything was turning dark. Everything from the beautiful scenery was getting wiped away like a heart-

lifting poem getting erased from a white board. Heaven was shattered. I was falling into what was like an endless pit. At last I hit the ground. My bed, actually. I sat up. I was somehow dreaming, all this time. I took a gasp of breath. I looked around me. I was in my room again. No homework in stacks. No dragons. No mountains.

'*We need you. We need you to tell our story.*' The dragon's voice came into my head once more.

I smiled. I opened my computer and typed: *I need to get out of my world. I mean, think of the places explorers that can go. The places that are waiting for you. Exploring the explorable and the unknown that will be found by you…*

And that is my story.

Whether you believe it or not.

The Barrier

Shanghai Community International School, Tu, Elsa – 12

Mountains buried in layers of hazy clouds, peaks peering out from drowsy fog. Rivers of mist, seeping through gaps between cliffs as they drift off into the distance. Dark green trees bathing in sunlight as the sun gazes beyond the clouds that covered cliffs. I've seen them in my dreams, over and over again. But today, it seems so realistic that I can barely keep my eyes from staring at the cliffs.

I can see the mist receding as sunlight pools over the atmosphere, the orange sky turning pristine blue, lush green trees revealed behind the curtains of smoke as afternoon comes near. But I know something. This can't be real. Eventually, I will wake up, find myself dressed in pajamas, hair tangled like crazy. I glance down at my hands and flex my fingers. It feels physically real. So physical that it seems unnatural in a dream.

Something is wrong. My gaze flits across the horizon. *Very wrong.*

I pinch myself, gasping painfully. In a few moments, I will wake up.

But no.

It never comes.

Panic shoots from the bottom of my spine.

Why won't I wake up?! I dig my fingernails into my skin again, but it is futile. I can't wake up. And I realize it. I am really here. No, not in a dream, but in the Yellow Mountains, standing on one of the cliffs above the clouds. It isn't my imagination, it is REAL

But how did I end up *here*? My eyes dart around the area for a brief second as my hands curl into fists in vex. I try to think of the last thing I saw before bedtime. I draw in a large breath and hold it, hoping to remember the most recent thing that occurred before I discovered myself in the Yellow Mountains. The faint memories remain in my head, but I cannot recall them.

Lights. I abruptly remember. Suddenly, an roar from above makes me lose my balance. Fear tingles in my veins. The cold earth beneath my bare feet vanishes into thin air.

30 seconds pass. I am plummeting into a bottomless pit. I can already feel my oxygen deprived lungs screaming in despair, begging me to breathe again.

The lights flickering off, I recall. *Lights flickering off after bedtime passed, my mother nagging at me for going to bed late.*

The memories swoop into my mind one by one. *My brother screaming at me for destroying his Lego house, my sister arguing with my brother over the last block of Lego—*

Something hard knocks the back of my head. A tingling sensation of pain takes over my consciousness, and for a few heartbeats, I can feel nothing but the pain eating its way down my spine. I feel my head instantly bruise as my body crashes through fragile branches of a tree, like a marble being shaken in a jar. My body tumbles down a cliff, drawing red lines full of blood over my exposed skin

I am in danger.

Suddenly, layers of white whish past my vision, and the cliffs vanish.

My fingers claw at the air, hoping to find a solid surface to cling to. But I can't find anything. Mist seeps through the gaps of my desperate fingers as my hope wanes.

My luck today is clearly far below par. I was first transported to the Yellow Mountains, then fell off of a cliff, now blinded by fog and falling to death. What do I do? My head jerks to the left. The mist is starting to clear up, and I can see the ground drawing nearer as seconds pass. Anxiety burns at the bottom of my throat, and my heart bursts. My mouth is dry. My mind spinning with thoughts. Yet I can't do anything to help myself not to get killed.

Think, Kylie, think! I tell myself. I have to come up with a solution before I make contact with the ground. I glance down once again. Jagged lines along the rocky earth welcome me with wide open arms and a crooked smile. An ominous feeling creeps upon me and one thought cancels out of the rest.

I am going to die.

I shudder at the thought but tense myself as something cold and flat knocks the air out of me. My body skids across it, and gradually halts.

Black dots swarm into my vision from the corner of my eyesight. My vision blurs, and all I can hear is the soft inhale and exhale of my breaths for a few heartbeats. Then, the sky starts to fade into a world of white.

For a moment, I fear that I will slowly drift off into a peaceful sleep. A sleep that lasts forever.

Death.

I fear a death that is slow, painless, malignant. A death that is akin to a tiny flame kindling in the darkness, diminishing and fading as a breeze recedes it to nothing. As I fight the urge to fall unconscious, I suddenly become aware of the cool surface touching my skin. It does not feel like the rocky earth I had feared to hit. It feels slippery and freezing to touch.

It makes me shiver and pull my arm away, or at least attempt to. My bruised arms lift in the air for a few seconds, then drop limply back to my sides as a hot searing pain claws into them. But the pain does not stop my determination, nor my curiosity about the magical changing ground that saved my life.

A centimeter at a time, I sit up and gaze at the surface. There are rooms beneath a transparent barrier: a living room, a dining room, a kitchen, a bedroom— wait a second, IS THAT MY BED?!

I scramble to the middle and press my face closer to the flat earth. It is! A wave of relief washes over me, and for brief moment I can do nothing but feel joy shimmering inside me. I am almost home! Excitement makes me bang my fists against the clear surface, wanting it to crack open.

But contrary to my hopes, nothing happens. I punch it again, once again a futile effort. It does not crack or leave a mark. I feel frantic. I have to get back home before… before what? Before I wake up in the morning? Before mom realizes that I disappeared in the middle of the night and freaks out? Before I cease to exist in this nonexistent world?

It is too overwhelming to take in all at once. Desperation drives me to slam my knuckles onto the barrier until my hands are bloody and broken. When I realize that nothing happens and nothing will happen, I curl into a small ball and begin to cry. My tears fall freely onto the ground, and a shattering sound breaks my muffled gasps. I glance down with my tired eyes. There is a crack on the floor. Have my tears created the crack? Are they magical?

I rub my tears from my eyes onto my hands, then wipe my palm onto the ground. Another crack appears. Then another. And another.

Soon, the surface looks like a piece of shattered glass ready crash unexpectedly. If I move, the whole thing will collapse. I don't know what to do. Huh, funny enough. I don't even know what I'm *supposed* to do. All I can do is sit here, dumbfounded, listening to the slight shifting sound beneath me.

Uh–oh.

This is bad.

I am going to fall *again*.

With an earsplitting screech, the surface bursts and the floor I rest on is gone. But I am not scared. Instead, excitement tingles inside me.

This may be the path back home! As I fall, I close my eyes and imagine how my cat Fluff will react when I tell him what an experience I had in this world! My hands grip together tightly. I can already feel warmth flooding my head, my hair whipping in the wind, and see a dim light. My dark vision is replaced by a world of brightness, and I suddenly feel lighter. As I feel the conscious feeling of the blankets touching my hand, my eyes flutter open.

It is all… grey? Grey? Grey? This is weird. Excluding the fact that I have grey vision, my vision is shockingly sharper. I lift my hand up. Wait, no, paw?! Since when do I have paws?

My jaw hangs open. I can see a unique fluff of fur in the bottom of my vision. My tail swishes. My claws slide in and out of my paws.

Jaws. Fur. Tail. Paws. Claws.

A new thought is highlighted in bright red in my mind.

Did I transport into my cat's body?!

To be continued…

Exiled To The Yellow Mountains

Shanghai Singapore International School, Koh, Tian Ci Matthew Ian – 14

As day collapsed and gave way to night, a dense fog hung in the cold air. Its pointed tendrils reached out, snuffling the liveliness the day once held. Endless hours of torture followed. Winds raced across the jagged mountains, cackling and howling. Trees shivered in fright as darkness finally took over. The scent of death approached and the moon light, barely visible, flickered on the ground. A howl from afar signaled death. As the first leaf fell, strong, yet soft – footsteps were audible… just barely but still there. A pair of piercing, red irises glared through the darkness.

Wolves.

One stepped closer. A snarl adorned a scarred face, reflecting pain and death. The alpha circled; its jagged teeth visible, ready to rip you to shreds. As you back away, you stumble over a branch. You bolt up but a horrifying howl echoes behind and fear takes hold, freezing you. The wolf stares, analyzing your every move. The pack approaches, staring ravenously. You tremble nervously, desperately praying. The wolves encircle, ready for the kill. Their blood– thirsty eyes bore into yours. You stare back, eyes unflinching. You read this somewhere, long ago. The tension generates electricity. You remain unyielding. The wolf flinches. Then it bows before you. The pack soon follow – they recognize their new master. You nod curtly at the wolves before picking yourself up. They retreat into the woods where they can recover their pride. You watch their silhouettes disappear into the darkness.

You trudge back up the steep mountains. Reaching your hut, you set a fire and cook the squirrel hunted this afternoon. You unbutton your worn–out fur coat. You stare into the fire.

It's been 20 years now…

Exiled, wrongly accused of treason. Traitor.

You let out a feral scream, one full of pain and of anger. You were blindfolded, handcuffed, beaten, and dumped here. Away from civilization. You stare into the fire, absentmindedly, lost in your memories.

"They should have killed me", you think glumly.

Your joints creak as you stand. You peer outside and witness the crack of dawn as dusk recedes. A flaming, golden ball appears through the split of the mountains – the beauty of the Yellow Mountains is restored. Now – a beautiful breeze bounces through the soft air; the lush land partied with the abundance of flora and fauna; life reignites as animals and people flock home to prepare for the day ahead.

Another day had come.

Guardians of Nature

Shanghai Singapore International School, Lim, Ming Kang Ethan – 14

The Yellow Mountains project a dominating demeanor, a looming presence and a myriad of beauty. Towering cliffs and an ocean of green, blankets its surface. This is one of the greatest landmarks in China!

The barky sea is home to an array of creatures. The towering trees advocate skillful craftmanship of Mother Nature. Each organism adds to the ecosystem creating a perfect equilibrium of plants and animals. The life cycle present at every turn, each stage can be seen – birth, aging, death – repeated. A place untouched by human pollution, free from the chains of smoke and steel that hinders the growth of life. Wildlife here finds refuge amongst the sheltering trees and hide from the greed of man, their killing and destruction. From the Red–billed Leiothrix: a small pudgy bird with warm colored feathers, to the stump–tailed macaque, a monkey–like creature with a minute tail and a red fur that plastered its face: variety of critters and creatures live here.

Safe.

At HOME.

A Stone Age resides around this garden where rock golems walk. Cliffs reflect the golden yellow of the Sun. The Yellow Mountains receive their name from the Emperor Huang Di who once ruled over this land. The monument is in honor of the legendary Emperor, the first ruler of China, a majestic god in their folklore. These mountains are kingly and godlike, imposing and overwhelming. They are the 'Guardians of Nature' – giants that rise high showing off the wonder of the world we reside in. These unyielding mountains demonstrate the work of HIS HAND.

Protectors.

An exalted landmark.
A gift from the heavens.

HOME.

Shrouded In Mists of Mystery

Shanghai Singapore International School, Phoon, Yu Ying Gretel – 15

Eastwards, resided an emperor who was shrouded in mists of mystery. His arms were caressing, comforting, reassuring. Whispers as soft as a lullaby, light as a feather, filled the air while a gentle wave of serenity, soothed the loneliness.

The emperor stood tall and imposing: a massive, towering giant looming over his fellow subjects, equally majestic and ethereal. Faded–wood brown adorned with spots of shamrock green dotted here and there, thickening into a tide as it went down his back. Fluffy, ivory cotton candy floated peacefully in the sky, occasionally obscured from the hazy mist. The soft, mournful howls of the winds raced past the emperor, filling up the unwanted silence.

It was a pity; such a magical place… forgotten, abandoned.

~ 5000 years ago ~

The sky was a warm blanket of the beautiful, sparkling hue of an ocean. A kaleidoscope of colours exploded like a shower of fireworks in the sky after a moment of rain, igniting the sky. The invigorating winds ran around energetically like children playing tag, exuberantly and jokingly chiding each other.

Swollen, orange–red, juicy persimmons dangled off the outstretched arms of trees. They hung heavily, weighing the tired arms down, turning from apple green to tomato red. The juicy, honey sweet syrup of the fruit dripped onto the ground, feeding the busy ants, under the dazzling sun. The aromatic scent of the fruit hypnotised multi–coloured birds like baited fish, taunting them. The sweet–smelling fragrance intoxicated them causing them to tweet in excitement; and the fruit glowed invitingly in the radiant light. An array of birds fluttered eagerly to the fruits, freeing the exhausted arms of the trees from the heavy, mouth–watering burden.

The emperor stood tall and mighty. He wore a cloak of yellow–brown, glinting in the dazzling gold of the sun, god–like. The sun god. Smooth rock with streaks of different hues of brown; some light and some dark blended into each other perfectly like the blue does with the green of the ocean. His peaks rose and fell like the tips of a crown, glinting blindingly as if made from gold. Emeralds, jades, peridots and apatite adorned his cloak, glistening in the sunlight as if glowing. Full of pride and joy, commanding and protecting the land.

But nothing lasts forever. Not even the greatest.

~ 1000 years later ~

The sky was an empty void. Soupy and unwelcoming, bringing no warmth to the land below. All the warmth and colours had bled out. Left behind was sense of loneliness and sadness. There was no point in anything anymore. There was no sign of day nor night. It was always stormy with a wild wind that pummelled everything in its path with no mercy.

A sinister silence dominated.
Except for the wind.
Except for the wind and the storm.

The howls of the wind were like cries – painful, full of torment and anguish, whimpering and wailing as if in eternal agony, begging and pleading. The tornadoes ripped everything to shreds, flooding, destroying. Then spitting everything out. Loud and thunderous, bellowing at everything. The roar of the thunder beat out every sound possible. The zap of the lightning lit the night sky. The storms were destructive, ripping chunks of rock, uprooting trees, flooding the land until it was a murky pool with debris floating in it. It was worse than a war zone!

No fruits or birds lingered. Everything left and never returned. The forest once a map of green – now dull and bland. Everything was plain. The forest was plain, too plain! Even the emperor was plain.

The emperor, who once burned bright and mighty, now hunched over in shame and solitude. All traces of his former glory gone, replaced with a bitter shell of his former self. Once so grand, mighty and welcoming, reduced to nothing more than shadows.

The mountains were a slab of cement–grey, scarred like scratched wood that had been left to rot. Chunks of rock had eroded to haphazard shapes and sizes. Dark greenish plants and trees crept their way up the mountain's body like moss and lichen on an abandoned building, unwanted and invasive. Soon, not a single part of the mountain would be seen. It was like a war, with the emperor on the losing side. It was like an old house, unloved and forgotten.

Until one day…

~ Present ~

The clouds were white again – snowy, ivory white. They floated lightly, resembling cotton balls. The plants and trees were greener and livelier. The emperor and his subjects yielded to mother nature, slowly embracing the land – standing tall and mighty once again, though not as mighty as before. The same sadness and loneliness prevailed.

But the emperor had changed. Still a slab of grey granite but the scars had slowly faded. The rock was smooth, the rough edges moulded by the wind and the water. Yet nothing could heal the hole in his heart. It was a barren land. Forgotten. The absence of the sweet singing angels, who would feed on the overly ripen fruits stabbed at his heart. The air was once filled with the choir of heavenly voices, singing a sweet melody, serenading the emperor.

Now…
all that was left was the melancholic wail of the winds…
all that was left was a ghost of what once was.

The emperor sat on his lush, leafy throne, longing for the day a wandering soul would visit. Trees wound their long emerald and coffee coloured arms upwards, covering the bare back of the emperor like a blanket to comfort him. He sat alone, shrouded in mists of mystery.

Forgotten Treasure

Shanghai Singapore International School, Roslee, Aina Sofia Binti – 14

Stone–cold, ancient rock – once royalty. Foot massages of silky–smooth water and minerals, fresh air from green, royal guards and gifts of offerings by tiny ants. Once loved for but now forgotten. Hidden like a princess taken hostage.

Waiting,

Waiting.

Slowly turning

Into

D

U

S

T.

The cracked skin of the earthly monsters burned under the glaring light from the ball of fire. Infected moss and fungus over power the brown. The sickly mountain, faded yellow with worms and slugs infesting its body. The white, dreamy mist from the skies; unfortunately, wasn't enough to cure the mountains. Soon the parasitic vegetation took over like a giant virus. Their sickness dominated. Their body changed from yellow to a dirty brown. The strong winds bellowed through the mountains, making them shiver as the rocks slowly erode. They were worthless and a burden.

Crushed by the heavy weight of the giants, the once king–like throne disappears. It was the most treasured piece of crafted art; with twisting branches that intertwined with random speckles of green – the softest, silkiest, smoothest of leaves that created a cushion for the giant. Then man spoke. It was too costly; it took too much space. There were too many giants. The blueprints were burned and thrown away like shards of glass. The only remains were the broken branches and lost leaves at the base of each sickly mountain. Fragments of time, never to be uncovered– slowly decomposing and vanishing into thin air.

The yellow emperor; a tall intimidating stature, radiated gold light, blinding all. Some celebrated their emperor's success while others scurried away like whining rats. His rule was once peaceful but all good comes to end. He saw the giants' scars, he put ointment on their wounds, he talked with each mountain, giving solutions. Sadly, as he aged, he got sickly and couldn't take care of the mountains anymore. It was time for him to take care of himself. Soon after, he was called to the sky, disappearing like a mist.

The giants mourned

And waited

For help

But it never came…

The icy, frost penetrated their souls. The tiny, parasites infected their bodies. Trash was dumped in their homes. Fumes so toxic invaded the air. Water that once brought life and rejuvenation to the mountain was now contaminated. Thousands of tourists eroded the history and beauty of their native soil. The mountains were sick and slowly rotting.

A house was hidden in the mountain. It was made of dark wood and consumed by giant trees. Broad, wooden staircases led to a small balcony where a lonely rocking chair swayed in the breeze. A pink–faced boy strolled to the living room with tired eyes. A tall man sat in an oak chair waiting. They had started their life in this giant.

As the seasons changed, so did the people. Tourists came, took photos and then forgot. Its hidden beauty in a camera roll, buried by endless selfies.

Alone, once again. Still sick. The ancient, stone rock is covered by the blanket of the night. The wind, sky and leaves try to comfort these sleeping giants.

The clock strikes twelve.
It's the start of a new day, a new possibility, new hope.

Not Alone

Singapore International School, Lam, Celine Hay – 12

"Oh god."

Rain splattered onto me as I desperately trudged through the narrow trails of Huangshan, hoping to find a shelter from the rain. As I murmured upon my cruddy luck, a weak light flashed upon me. I blinked my droopy eyes. The light flashed again.

The rain got heavier and heavier as I pondered on whether I should follow the weak signal. But there was simply no choice.

I had to.

Dragging my drained body through the downpour was no easy task, I was drenched, I was starving, I was shaking. Unfortunately, the distant flash of light was my last and only hope. I knew I couldn't give up.

Without a map nor a compass, I could only trek towards the light according to my instincts, which can sometimes be inaccurate. To add fuel to fire, the light constantly died out, so it was difficult to locate the hut precisely.

Before long came nighttime, the sky slowly dimmed to a pitch black, with the moon high above the thick layers of clouds. There was simply nothing luminous. Desperate for light, I rummaged through my soaking backpack for some matches. The matches were wet.

Darn it.

Pat pat.

It's the feeling of hope, familiar, yet distant.

Alarmed, I turned around, only to see a man holding a cane. His long, white beard nearly touching the ground. He… didn't have an umbrella of any sort.

Help? Maybe not.

Murder? Maybe.

"*Ni hai hao ma*?" he questioned.

Not knowing any Chinese whatsoever, I shrugged, then turned to run for dear life.

Maybe luck isn't on my side today.

But life wasn't about luck.

I returned to the helpless, puzzled self. Not only did I have to find my way to the flashing light, I also had to run away from that menacing–looking man – which happened to be in the opposite directions.

If the man I met just now was perilous, will the anonymous man at the hut be any nicer? I might as well give up.

Where will I go now?

It was all at this moment that my entire life flashed behind me.

I was an orphan all my years till I was 18. I got married 2 years later, when I was 20, but was swiftly divorced. Not long after, I lost my job. But no, I knew I couldn't sleep on the streets for the rest of my life. Using my remaining $1934 in my bank, I bought a ticket to the Amazon, which started my meaninglessly interesting exploration days.

For all these years, where have I been going?

More crucially, where will I go now?

Pat pat.

I shrieked in shock, my voice echoing through the mountains and trailing off into nowhere.

I turned around, only to see the same man I saw minutes ago, or was it hours?

"Are you ok?" the man questioned.

I recoiled, surprised.

The man knows English.

"I'm ok, just lost." I replied with uncertainty.

He chuckled, "getting lost in Huangshan is not ok at all, follow me!"

For a moment, he seemed nice.

Having nowhere else to go, I decided to follow the mysterious man. As we trailed through the thick trees, he picked up some branches along the way, examining here and there.

I took a moment to notice where he was bringing me – the hut.

The walk was suspiciously quiet, all I could hear was the silent crunch and rustle of my footsteps and the occasional sound of the man collecting twigs.

Before long, we arrived at the hut – a place where I longed to arrive. Though, at this very moment I wasn't as thrilled as I thought I would be. Instead, I feel ashamed. I needed help. This local man had to rescue me. I am weak.

Or am I?

Nervous giggles surrounded me as I stepped into the dim hut, the old man swiftly brought up a warm cup of Chinese tea. I shyly thanked him and gulped down the warm tea. I have neither eaten nor drunk for the past… 4 hours? Yet I have been trekking the whole time. To me, the tea was hope sent from heaven.

After settling down the kids, the old man sat on the stiff chair next to me. I offered him the cofty sofa I was sitting on, but he refused.

"What are you at Huangshan for?" he asked, curious.

"Nothing much, just trekking all the significant mountains over the world." I answered, then turned my head to stare into the already empty teacup in my hand.

"Do you want another cup of tea?" he offered.

"It's ok, don't worry about me, I'm alri–"

He stopped me mid–sentence, shoving another cup of tea in my hand.

"I hope I don't offend you, but do you really have that many kids?" I delicately asked.

He turned silent, gestured me towards the back of the house, behind the curtains.

He never said a word to me again, or at least I think he didn't.

Although he didn't know much English, nor did I know any Chinese, it seemed that we communicated seamlessly. We used awkward, cocky hand signs to deliver our messages. The kids often scanned me from head to toe, peculiar about this strange foreign man. The old man would give them the death stare,

"*mei li mao* (impolite)!" he would bark.

The kid would turn towards me, bow 180 degrees, then walk away with shame.

I never knew that Chinese kids were that courteous.

I must have lost track of time, because once I got to settle down in the cozy guest room, I saw the weak sunlight, shining through the antique windows of my bedroom. I wrestled myself up, and looked through the window.

I was breathless.

The view was almost heaven–like, the light fog accompanying the golden sun, simmering above the distinctive Huangshan.

"Huacha cha–cha!" The sound of wooden sticks clashing together interrupted the peaceful sunrise. I yawned groggily, then stepped out of the room and into the backyard. There was where all the kids were, with the old man standing in the middle, monitoring and correcting each and every movement they made.

I was astonished. The level of discipline in them was indescribable.

Now this is what discipline means.

Knowing that I shouldn't stay at the hut any longer, I packed my bags and said farewell to the old man. The old man even commanded one of the kids to guide my way out! Once again, I refused, but he insisted.

On the way out of the thick trees and back to common tourist areas, I discovered something shocking – all these children were orphans! Their parents have unluckily passed away in various accidents or illnesses. The old man was actually the leader of their tribe there and was scavenging for wooden and bamboo sticks for them to practise their Kung Fu skills. In the tribe, the orphans build a strong bond and are raised to become masters of these vulnerable Chinese martial arts.

Both orphans, yet different paths.

One strong, one weak.

I was not the only one.

I was not alone.

The Jade Cup

Singapore International School, Lim, Warren – 12

He glanced around.

He was irrevocably lost.

John sighed. Why did misfortune always choose to befall him? And especially now, in a place where he had never traversed before.

A young and impressionable foreign exchange student, John was hiking the Huangshan mountains on his own. He had read a lot about the place – and there was, indeed, plenty for him to learn. Throughout the ages, countless poems and stories had been written extolling Huangshan's breathtaking scenery and less–than–earthly spirituality. Scientists regularly found new species of animals and dinosaur bones on its vast grounds, and many stories featuring dragons living in secret mountain caves obtained their inspiration from Huangshan. Legends even had it that living animals took on human form and supernatural beings came alive here! There was no doubt that beautiful Huangshan was a place of mystery – and he wanted to explore the place for himself.

John had taken the less travelled path and soon found himself in places that were not on the tourist trek. The Huangshan expedition was going well until his phone left his grasp and crashed into the rocky ground. He ran over and picked it up, desperately ramming the home button in vain, hoping to see a flicker of light appear on the screen. It had been his only source of direction. Without the map installed in his phone, it would be nearly impossible to find his way back.

At least the scenery was good, John wryly remarked. Sun–soaked mossy vegetation hung off the rocky mountains while lush green leaves adorned the branches of trees. White, mystical fog coated the area, penetrating into even the deepest valleys. The azure blue sky rested above, watching the rustle of the leaves below. If heaven ever was a place on earth, this must be it.

For a moment, John forgot he had lost his way. What was unfolding in front of him was unspeakable beauty and he wanted to capture its majesty in his pictures. Thrusting his hand into his blue backpack, he pulled out a camera, held it up to eye level and centred the frame on a picturesque rock. John frowned. Somehow, the view from the camera didn't match up to his expectations. Perhaps he could shift a little to the left.

Suddenly, his foot slipped. John flailed his hands around, trying to regain balance.

His efforts were in vain, and he felt himself lose his footing, falling down the stone steps. It was a long way down, and John kept tumbling, tumbling and tumbling. Until he landed at the foot of the steps, motionless.

How long he stayed on the ground, he didn't know. What woke him was a nudge on his shoulder. He opened his eyes and, staring at him, was another pair of eyes. A panda's eyes.

Now, John knew enough about China to know that pandas did not live in this region. They lived in...Sichuan, he recalled. The panda was out of place in the mountainous slopes of Huangshan. But that was the least of John's worries. The animal in front of him was not behind a fence. Would this two hundred pound piece–of–art by Mother Nature turn violent on him?

Suddenly, the panda stood up. He was expecting the worst when the mammal sprinted past him. Confused, John turned around. It was running towards a steep mountainside. But that was not all. For some unexplained reason, John could feel that the panda was beckoning him to follow. So he picked himself up and started to limp, which soon turned into a fast–paced walk, in the panda's direction. The bear was heading towards the pines not too far away.

Dense was the vegetation, and varied were the plants – and John could not see a beaten track through the thick undergrowth. But lo and behold! The earth rumbled with a thunderous noise, and the greenery started to part to each side to reveal a path. John rubbed his eyes in disbelief. Even the theme park in Disneyland couldn't produce such special effects!

As they trekked through the greenery, John could not help but glance into the cloudy sky. The peaks of Huangshan loomed in mist, as if they were illusionary. Sunlight gleamed off the lush leaves, giving the vegetation a golden appearance. Wispy clouds hung above, dragged along by the cool breeze. Such tranquillity, such beauty! If they were not in such a hurry, John would have stopped to take another picture for keepsake. But he could not, for another sight soon unfolded before him.

They arrived at an open space. Hundreds of villagers were on their knees, toasting to the sky. A robed man – clearly a Taoist priest – was standing on an elevated platform in the middle, and what he said made little sense to John: "The Dionysian Spirit has descended upon us. Let us make a joyful sound to the Immortal Exiled from Heaven,"

With this, the villagers began chanting:

"Thousands of feet high towers the Yellow Mountains
With its thirty–two magnificent peaks,
Blooming like golden lotus flowers
Amidst red crags and rock columns
Once I was on its lofty summit,
Admiring Tianmu Pine below.
The place is still traceable where the immortals
Before ascending to heaven made elixir out of jade."

John immediately recognised those words. Were they not the inspirational writings of Li Bai, the poet who lived in the Tang dynasty and whose poems were recited by school children even till today? Li Bai indulged in drinking all his life. In "The Song of Xiangyang," he wrote that there were thirty–six thousand days in a century, and that one should drink three hundred cups one day. From his poems and thoughts, it could be known that Li Bai had a special fondness of wine. However, instead of saying that Li Bai had a heartfelt love for liquor, it seemed to be that drinking was his negation to the tragedy of life. The "Dionysian state" which these villagers were worshipping allowed their "fallen fairy" to forget his existence, giving him courage to live.

The panda dashed towards the platform and, as it leapt into the air, the animal turned into a human! White flowing robes held in place by a black belt, a folding fan in one hand, and a scholar hat on the head. John could hardly believe his eyes. These were not hologram images. The characters were too three–dimensional for modern technology to mimic. Was he hallucinating? Maybe the vision was caused by the food he had consumed earlier. Possibly. But John was sure that he was not inebriated. He had not touched a single drop of alcohol recently.

"So you have brought a friend today, Master Li Bai?" the Taoist priest asked the apparition. Then, looking at John, he said, "Come join us, drink, and we shall celebrate the presence of the God of Poems."

As soon as John reached the top of the platform, he was given a cup – an unblemished jade container with delicate carvings of dragon on the sides. Having seen such artefact in books and museums, John instantly knew he was holding a priceless ornament in his hands.

"Can I keep this as a memento?" John asked.

"Of course you can! You are our guest," replied the Taoist priest, with a smile of a proud host. John promptly put the cup into his pocket.

By the time Li Bai finished his third recital, the sun had started to send out the last rays of the day, transforming the erstwhile blue skies into a canvas of orange, purple and red. Set against the mountainous terrain and the streaming clouds, the whole place was a brightly–colored Van Gogh painting hanging in the air.

"I shall never see a more beautiful scenery than this in my life," John told his hosts, awestruck.

"You should descend the mountains before it gets dark. I am afraid nobody would fetch me at this location," Li Bai said to John.

"Yes, indeed he should," said the priest, before breaking into another smile...

Ring!

What was that sound? It was coming out from his pouch. Strenuously moving his limbs, John reached out to feel the object. It was his phone ringing – and it seemed like it was working again. But everything else in John's vision was abject darkness. Then it dawned upon him that he had not opened his eyes. While he finally – and painfully – did so, he found himself lying on the ground where he had tried to take a photo hours earlier. Where were the panda, Li Bai and the Taoist priest? Was the whole experience a dream?

As John picked himself up, he felt something hard in his pocket. He put his hand in and took the object out. It was the jade cup.

Huangshan Legend – The Instrumental Fray

SKH Lam Woo Memorial Secondary School, Or, Esther – 13

There are many famous tales from China's magical mountains –– Huangshan. However, why are these magical mountains named as Huangshan? It is all related to the Huang Brothers. This is the story of one of the most momentous instrumental frays in the world.

Many moons ago, there existed the Huang Brothers –– HuaXia and YanDi Huang, they lived together in a beautiful old house with a thatched roof in a village on the mountains. HuaXia was the elder brother, he studied the ancient arts of Dizi, while YanDi was the younger brother, he was highly intelligent, and he studied the antediluvian mastery of Erhu. They didn't have a peaceful life as the Mongols often create nuisances to the villages on the mountains.

One day, when YanDi was practicing Erhu, HuaXia decided to play some tricks on him, and he kept on poking YanDi's back with his Dizi.

"Stop," YanDi said, with his voice filled with agitation, and he turned and faced HuaXia.

The moment YanDi faced HuaXia, YanDi shouted, "Ware danger, brother!". HuaXia looked backwards and saw that the Mongols were beginning to run towards them, the Mongols had naked scimitars in their hands.

"Kill these two Chinese young men," the Mongol Master said to his men, "it's time for us to tell these Chinese that we're the owner of these mountains! We have to dominate China!"

YanDi saw a horse, immediately flung himself and HuaXia astride the horse who turned and galloped away. They changed the direction thrice as soon as they were out of sight of the Mongols.

"Whither are we going?" Huaxia asked, without slackening their pace.

"Let's cross that stream first," YanDi suggested, "then we can discuss our plans." Then, they crossed the stream and stopped.

"Hold tight, brother," YanDi said, and both of them slid off the horse's back and faced each other.

"Seriously, these Mongols are very disturbing," YanDi complained, "they're always irritating us innocent Chinese villagers!"

"Yes, and they even want to dominate China!" HuaXia exclaimed, "How evil!"

"For the sake of our country, let's work together to prevent the invasion of the Mongols," YanDi said and they had a talk about their plans.

The next day, they wound their way through the woods and headed to the jungle next to the garrison of the Mongols.

"Look!" YanDi said and pointed. Not many yards away, there are some battlements, and after walking for more than a minute, they came out in an open grassy space. A stream ran across it and over the stream, not as near as the battlements were to the garrison of the Mongols, there stood a short, square tower with a few windows and a silver door that faced them.

YanDi looked sharply to make sure no Mongols were in sight, they trod up as lightly and carefully as they could along the stairs, for fear of tripping over the uneven cobblestones. The tower was rather dark, there was a room in it, and a wooden staircase in the corner which led up to a door which you could get out to the battlements.

Huaxia looked at the narrow windows and gasped, "Ah!", then he covered his mouth and pointed below, and whispered, "There are two Mongols at the entrance of the tower!"

There weren't any good places to conceal so they quickly flung themselves into one of the bunks to hide. And just as HuaXia took his place, from somewhere on his left, three figures appeared. Never had HuaXia felt so nervous in his life, he kept on sweating and he could not stop himself from farting. PFFT! PFFT! PPPFFFT!

"RiHan, what... What was that sound?" KangLie, one of the Mongols, asked, feeling scared.

Then they started to stare at each other and one of them shouted, "This tower smells very damp, let's get out!" and the three Mongols walked out of the tower to the battlements.

"Phew…" HuaXia panted, "that was so close!"

"HuaXia, get ready," YanDi said, and the two of them went out to the open grassy space. YanDi hid in the bushes, while HuaXia stood on the grassy space.

"Mongol Master, here are some gifts for you!" HuaXia shouted, held a box, and waved towards the Mongols.

The Mongol Master went out of his room, without a second thought, he answered, "Give me the presents!"

HuaXia threw the box to the Mongol Master, and yelled, "Master, there're a lot of gifts inside the box."

The Mongol Master grinned and told the Mongols to come out to the battements to open the gift. But little did they know the box had nothing inside it, and when the Mongol Master opened the box, his face morphed into a furious glare and led out a howl of anger, "Argh! THERE's NOTHING INSIDE THE BOX! GET'EM!"

The Mongols bowed and replied, in the most pompous Mongolian way, "Our most sapient master, we will." And they walked towards HuaXia with their scimitars pointing towards him.

Then, YanDi emerged from the bushes, and shouted, "Start the symphony!" YanDi took out his Erhu and his bow stick and started playing it with a pathetic tone.

"How silly, trying to defeat us with such puny tones," the Mongol Master chuckled.

"Oh, but not this time," YanDi said with a cheeky voice and he played the Erhu raucously, making loud squeaky sounds. The sounds were so unpleasant that some of the Mongols fainted.

"Time for me to join in!" HuaXia shouted in a cocky manner, and he lifted his Dizi to his mouth and joined in, providing an ear–piercing accompaniment. Sound vibrations acted through the Mongols' nervous system and gave shocks to their hearts and muscles, causing the Mongols to collapse.

Undaunted by their actions, the Mongol Master spoke a nightmarish curse in Mongolian, "Burkhan tedniig khurana tikkanshan kashlan…", vowed to defeat them and unleashed Mongolian forces.

Suddenly in the midst of the symphony, the Mongol Master jumped off of the battlement and pointed his scimitar towards HuaXia. Fortunately, HuaXia was as quick as lighting and slid off and dug his fingers into the Mongol Master's scalps.

"AHHHH!" the Mongol Master screamed in pain, blood was coming out from his face.

Then, the Mongol Master kicked HuaXia, took a step back, steadied himself, and yanked HuaXia again, then pushed him away. This paralysed HuaXia's diaphragm, he gasped heavily and lied on the floor.

HuaXia stood up again and raised his left forearm, snapping the Mongol Master's neck. Then, HuaXia turned ninety degrees to the side and curled his hand into a fist and aimed at the Mongol Master's nose. His fist hit the bridge of his nose, the Mongol Master's blood dripped all over the ground.

"YanDi, start the final part of the symphony!" HuaXia shouted, "Power is draining from him!"

Using all his might, YanDi moved his bow quickly, and started making deafening and extremely irritating sounds with his Erhu, affecting both Mongol Master's mental and physical stability, which got on his nerves and drove him crazy. The Mongol Master covered his ears and kept shrieking, "Halt! Halt!"

After that, HuaXia started making nerve-wrecking and high-pitched sounds with his Dizi, physically and mentally torturing the Mongol Master, causing the Mongol Master's heart to beat amazingly fast.

"UGGHHH! I can't do it anymore!" the Mongol Master cried.

In his ultimate act, the Mongol Master smiled one last time, led out all his power towards the Huang Brothers, and before stabbing HuaXia's chest with his scimitar, the Mongol Master collapsed.

The next day, the Huang brothers brought the villagers to the garrison of the Mongols, the villagers couldn't believe their eyes when they saw the dead bodies of the Mongols and the Mongol Master. They cheered in triumph and joy that the Mongols were finally defeated, and they regarded the Huang brothers as heroes, and named the mountains where they lived after the brothers' family name -- Huang, and called it, "Huangshan". And the villagers living in Huangshan had a peaceful life afterwards. This is the greatest story of all time.

Chinese Wedding Gown

St Clare's Girls' School, Kwok, Angie – 12

In the 1880s, there was a mountain in China; there were shops and a half–built school. The mountain seemed to be different from others, but why was this mountain different from others?

The reason was that some urbanities wanted to build the mountain into a city. The people in the mountain strongly disagreed.

Some urbanities rushed to the mountain and shouted, "you can't disagree! Now we are going to burn down the whole mountain!"

"No you can't!" replied the villagers. "You cannot hurt nature!"

However, some urbanities still insisted on damaging the mountain and building it into a city. The urbanities asked their servants to burn down the whole mountain. Before long, the whole mountain was on fire.

Carmen was a common citizen in city. She was a fire–fighter and decided to save the mountain and take the sufferers to the next mountain. However, it is not easy as you might think, because the fire was too big. A half–built school fell down suddenly, so she got trapped. She told the sufferers to go away and ignore her.

The god of the mountain was moved by Carmen because in his memory, the urbanities were all bad. He decided to use his superpower to save Carmen. He decided to use his superpower to create a heavy rain and save Carmen.

Unfortunately, he was too late. Carmen cuddled her daughter Cindy in her arms and said, "I had made a Chinese wedding gown for you before. Remember, you must wear it one day." Cindy promised her mother and burst into tears.

She called her mum softly several times but there was no response – only a deadly silence. But Cindy kept saying, "Mum, I will stay with you all day. Mum, you must be tired, sleep for a more while." She knew Carmen was not asleep, so she did not let the others attempt to wake her. Perhaps if no one tried to wake up her mother, she could stay asleep. Maybe Carmen would not leave; maybe she would accompany Cindy forever.

The god of the mountain was really angry about Carmen's death so he decided to retaliate. He used his superpower to make a natural disaster. There was flooding and an earthquake. The urbanities realized their mistake and promised they would never damage the nature again.

Many years later, Cindy found a boyfriend. She put on the Chinese wedding gown that made by her mother. She was as beautiful as an immortal. The rain finally stopped; the sky became blue and a rainbow appeared. The mountain had already been restored. Cindy looked upon the sky. She seemed to think of her mother. She showed a sweet smile. Perhaps Carmen saw Cindy wearing this Chinese wedding gown from heaven.

The Journey to the North−East

St Clare's Girls' School, Kwok, Gloria − 12

It was late in the afternoon, as I walked back from the market. I saw a poster nailed on a tree. It was the poster that hung on every single year, the poster where many lives were lost, the poster where my father passed away……

Far away, in Northern−east, the Mountain of Huang, to be exact, lived a gruesome monster, "The Undefeatable". Not one single soul had lived to tell the tale for they either got killed or had fallen down in the deep dark chasm below the mountain. The way up to the Mountain of Huang wasn't as easy as you might think. Upon the steep rocky path that leads up to the top of the mountain, one misstep and you would already be caught dead. Not to mention, even after you made it to the highest of the highest of the mountain, you would still have to kill the monstrous beast. From what I heard, it had claws and fangs that were so sharp that could kill you almost at once, blood even more poisonous than then the most venomous creature on earth.

Ever since I was a little child, I already had a wild soul of wanting to slay monsters and now wanted to follow in my father's footsteps more than ever. I planned to set foot on the most dangerous journey: The Mountain of Huang.

"Mother, I plan to take a journey to the Mountain of Huang and defeat 'The Undefeatable'," I told my mother, who had been ill since father passed away.

"My child, defeating 'The Undefeatable' isn't as easy as you think…" sighed Mother. "Remember what it did to your dear poor father...? It was the most dreadful moment of my life…"

"Mother, I promise you, I will not make the same mistakes father did on his journey. I will slay the monster for the kingdom and you," I said with a proud look on my face.

"If you insist on going, I can't stop you…but please, do be careful, I can't bear losing another of my loved ones…" said Mother with a worried expression on her face.

The journey began early in the morning as I grabbed my trusty bow & arrow and walked out of my home, my village, and then my kingdom. I took a deep breath and started walking to the north−east. I crossed rivers, walked over bridges, strolled through a forest. Everything seemed normal, but as I came closer to the Mountain of Huang, the air seemed to have shifted and densified. The smell of danger was coming nearer and nearer. Although I knew danger was coming, I couldn't help but glance at the view of the mountain. It started off with reddish−brown from the bottom, then greyish black in the middle and snowy−white at the tip of the mountain. With clouds obscuring the top, it seemed so spiritual. As the sun was sinking to the horizon, I arrived at the base of the mountain where I laid down on the moist grass and fell asleep moments later.

Opening my eyes, I found another pair of eyes staring at me, a man. I started and asked who he was, and he told me that he was a man who lived upon the ranges of the mountains and had seen many soldiers try and fail to kill "The Undefeatable." But he said that there was something in me that made me the one. He gave me a towel and told me, "Pain is just an illusionary sensation." I was puzzled but I thanked him, grabbed my bag and started the hiking upon the steepest path I have ever set foot on. Every once and a while I would hear rocks trundling down and falling down in the dark pit. Every step I took should be considered twice −− one careless step and I would fall straight down the pit, never to be seen again. One of my hand suddenly slipped off a rock. I fretted, lost my balance and for a moment started to fall backwards. But in that glimpse of a second, I managed to quickly grab another rock and pulled myself upwards again. My heart was beating so fast that it seemed as if it was going to pop out. I assured myself that everything was all right now and reminded myself to also not fret but stay calm at all circumstances.

Within a few more steps I would reach the top of the Mountain, I sensed that the suspense was getting larger. There was fog everywhere and I could hear the beating of my heart growing louder and louder. I was trembling, my hands shaking, not because of the cold but of the terror inside of me. I put myself together and continued to walk conscientiously……

"The Undefeatable" was even more terrifying then had ever been described. It had fur as white as snow, four eyes, two horns, scales all over itself, and a snake as a tail. Even before I could react, it ran towards me and tried to pounce on me. I tried to stab its eyes but I missed, I shot an arrow and hit its neck. it started bleeding; it raged and howled, possibly in pain. I shot another arrow. This time it hit one of the beast's eyes. It began to growl, at first I thought that it was so in pain, it was going to drop dead anytime. But no, its wound started to heal. My mouth dropped. It looked as if it was grinning and charged at me with his horns. It knocked right my ribcage and I gave out a cry. It then used its tail to flick at me, where it hit my head. I instantly fell unconscious.

"Pain is just an illusory sensation" this phrase, said by the wise man, came to my mind, and I suddenly became conscious. I finally understood what he meant. I got out the large towel he had given me, and when I said, "Mountain of Huang, the Undefeatable, it immediately turned into an invisible cape. "Woah" I exclaimed, but before I could say anything again, the beast was already ready for round two, I put on the cape, and instantly became invisible. The beast looked puzzled. I shot the last arrow that I had, hoping that it would directly hit its heart. " Thunk! " . It was like slow motion, as I watched the arrow hit the beast's heart, blood was dripping out from its heart, it howled so loudly that the range of noise surely traveled miles away.

After making sure "The Undefeatable" was finally defeated, I cut off one of its horns and went back to my kingdom, I presented the horn to the Emperor. He was delighted, he asked me what I wanted,

"Congratulations on killing 'The Undefeatable'! As promised, you will be rewarded with anything you want: Gold? Money? Horses?" asked the Emperor.

"The best doctor in the kingdom will do," I said.

"Are you sure? You could have wealth or fame but you choose to have a doctor?" exclaimed the Emperor.

"My King, my mother is in a state of melancholy, and only with the help of the best doctor in the kingdom can she be cured. She won't be sad for the rest of her life," I said.

"Very well, young man, your request shall be granted, I will ask for the best doctor in the kingdom," said the Emperor.

And so, the Emperor indeed did find the best doctor in the kingdom and helped recover the state of my mother. From now on, no more men would have to risk themselves to go up to the Mountain of Huang.

The Immortal Rock

St Clare's Girls' School, Leung, Katie – 12

“Go with your friend Ang to the mountains far above and find the ‘immortal pointing the way rock’. It'll be able to provide you with the help you need.” a faint female voice echoed.

~

A whimper left her mouth, a cry for help before her head was severed off. Watching as her head fell onto the floor with a ‘thump’, he opened his mouth to scream, to grieve for his mother and took a step forward but was stopped by steady hands covering his mouth, causing him to stumble a bit. He turned his head expecting the person to stop him to be a soldier, ready for him to meet the same fates as his mother, only to lock eyes with his best friend Ang.

Chaos endured around them, flames destroyed huts that were once safe havens for people, now becoming nothing but piles of ash. Shrieks and screams fill the air, smoke fogged the air, making the place look like a battlefield. Perhaps it is one, a battlefield to fight against freedom. One look back at what used to be his mother, a soft streak of blood trailing down the floor, he ran.

His friend dashed after him, running to the rocky mountains because their lives depended on it. As they closed in on the mountains a soldier noticed them and began chasing and cursing at them. Through the corner of his eye, he saw Ang being captured by the soldier. A sword raised up high into the sky and sliced through his head.

“No!” He cried out, watching the life drain out of those pair of eyes. He fell on his knees, sobs wrecking him. “No...”

~

Li woke up, gasping and panting while sweat beaded his forehead. He sat up in the darkness, trying to regain his rigged breathing. His eyes started to focus on the dark cave he was staying in, the drawings and shapes carved into the stone walls slowing taking their shape. As he began to calm down himself from his nightmare, he noticed a figure sitting outside the cave, curled up into a ball. He got up from his bed, which was only a piece of fabric that they managed to steal from the camp before taking refuge in the mountains, to the shadows side, overlooking the midnight sky.

“That nightmare again?” Ang whispered.

Li nodded, unsure of how to respond properly. The same nightmare haunted him every night, all beginning with his mother's death, ending in his friend’s imaginary death, and leaving him in a cold sweat in the morning. ‘Survivor's guilt’, as people call it. Even the land of reality was better than the imaginary world, where nightmares always taunted him about his mother’s death.

“Have you ever thought of what could happen, if we weren't captured into that camp?” Ang asked, after a while, still gazing at the snow–covered mountain. “We wouldn’t be here like this, trying to find your ‘immortal rock’, we would be at home safe and asleep. We would be free, able to do what we want.” His voice seemed like miles away, dreaming of a place where maybe they wouldn't be so messed up.

“I'm sorry Ang, for dragging you into my mess.” Li breathed out after a while, guilty for involving Ang in his plot of seeking revenge on everything life has tossed him.

“It’s fine really. As long as I'm able to be with you, it’s fine.”

They sat together in comfortable silence, the full moon in the velvet sky casting a silver glow onto the two boys. Hundreds and thousands of glittering stars fill the violet canvas of the sky, painting a picture right in front of their eyes. Waves and tides of clouds swam over the small mountains, covering the terrors below and hovering above them. Looking down onto the fluffy mass of mist, it looked like a dream. Once they fall, the rolling clouds would wrap them in their mighty arms. Perhaps that was part of its plan, luring people in enough to fall into the hell of horrors where Li and Ang came from, a direct contrast they would say, the difference between heaven and hell. White snow decorated the tip of the rocky mountains, giving the scene an elegant and artistic flair.

Those who ever visited the mountains always complimented the scenery, always saying that they were breathtaking, saying that they felt like they were somewhere in heaven, with the misty sea clouds and surrounded by ancient trees. And indeed, they weren't exaggerating. Living in the clouds, every burden dulled, every problem seemed to be solved. It gave Li a sense of confirmation. Confirmation that everything was going to be alright, that someday, he was going to be freed from all the sorrow, freed from the baggage on his shoulder, freed from all the guilty thoughts on abandoning everything in his camp, his mother, and his responsibility.

As time passed on, the sky was not an exception to changing. Violet shifted into a light orange, the moon making way for the glorious sun to shine. Yellow rays spiled their paint onto the sky, casting a pinkish glow onto the clouds below. Slowly, the ball of the sun emerged from the mountains, creeping out from its deep slumber.

That's when they spotted it. An oddly shaped dot perched on one of the rocks from miles away. They could barely see the full image, but even still, they were quite certain about it. After almost a month of scouting on the mountains, searching for revenge for murdering his mother, they finally found it, 'immortal pointing the way' as his mother had said. His help has finally arrived.

Legends say that this rock would show the guidance that you needed, and Li was ready to do anything in his power to avenge his mother's death, and his childhood being robbed by those soldiers.

Li's and Ang's families were captured by soldiers along with other villagers when he and Ang were around the age of five. Ever since then, they have been locked up and trapped in a camp with soldier's eyes monitoring everyone and everywhere. It's been five years since this happened, and everyone was sick and tired of this. Li's mother hatched a plan to rebel against the soldiers, however, during the time of the rebellion, someone had snitched on them and betrayed them by telling the authorities who overpowered them. As the head of the rebellion, Li's mother was executed, leaving Li broken. Li only managed to escape the soldier's wrath because of Ang.

Haunted by his mother's request to find the rock, Li wanted to seek revenge on the soldiers. Blinded by his own ambition, he began to hunt for this rock. There was no stopping Li now that he found it.

Ang stood up, understanding Li's wish, brushed away dirt, and locked eyes with Li.

"Let's go." Li answered Ang with a smirk, his eyes glittered with determination. "Let's go and destroy those soldiers."

The Four Mountains

St Clare's Girls' School, Luk, Janice – 12

Each mountain in China is different.

There is the Mountain of Faith, the Mountain of Hope, the Mountain of Trust and the key mountain… the Mountain of Love.

These four mountains are used to let people remember that faith, hope, trust and love exist. The names of the mountains were named by four people: Lucy, her bodyguards, Dex, and Jelly, and Lucy's daughter Hope.

The Mountain of Faith was named after Lucy. Lucy was once a queen of a mysterious island named "Uvan" and she had a daughter named Hope.

One day they got raided by a heartless man named Artic. Artic and his men came to Uvan and started attacking the villagers that lived there, robbing them. As the queen of Uvan, Lucy sent her best soldiers to attack Artic, while the weaker soldiers remained to protect the villagers while they escaped.

Lucy knew that even her strongest soldiers couldn't hold Artic and his men back, so she decided to fight Artic herself. She gave Hope her cape and said her last goodbye to her daughter, asked her bodyguards to keep the girl safe no matter what happened and told them they must sacrifice their lives to protect Hope.

At that time Hope was still just a 10 year old girl. She refused to leave her mother, but there was no choice; she had to. Her mother never returned.

After some time, when Hope was 18 years old, following years of studying about Artic, she decided to fight him herself, being brave like her mother.

However, Dex, Lucy's bodyguard who had once sworn to protect Hope, said "Your highness, your mother sacrificed her life to protect you" –– he thought for a while – "to protect us from Artic. Even the strongest and best soldiers can't hold him back. I advise you not to."

"Why didn't you go and protect mom?" Hope interrupted him. "You're her bodyguard so why didn't you protect her?! It was your job!!" A tear dripped down her face, and then Hope started crying. Dex comforted her and agreed to go and fight Artic with her.

At the same time, Dex was in a relationship with Jelly, Hope's other bodyguard. Jelly was confused about why Hope wanted to attack Artic. "It's been 8 years since Artic ever kill anyone, why are you doing this now?"

But Hope replied: "I want revenge and if you want you can come" Jelly was Hope's best friend as well as being Dex's lover. In all these years she had never seen Hope so serious. She though that maybe it was a prank, as Hope often played pranks on them, so she decided to play along.

After a long walk and much climbing, they finally reached to Artic's palace. It was comprised of four huge mountains! They found Artic wearing gigantic armour and sitting alone there. They were confused but brave. They went down and fought him. They fought Artic until he died.

And so Hope named one of the mountains as Faith and one as Hope. Hope decided to let Dex and Jelly to name the other two mountains. Jelly named hers Trust as she trusted Hope so much that she ended up fighting Artic. Dex named "his" mountain Love, as he loved his job and loved Jelly, and that is the tale of China's mountains.

The Mountain of New Beginnings

St Clare's Girls' School, Ng, Elly – 12

The moment I opened my eyes, I looked around and realised a few things: I was not in the orphanage anymore. I was wearing a blue shirt that had a red and black symbol shaped like a blade, and some black jeans. I also noticed that the wound that I had on my leg was all bandaged up.

I looked around and tried to get out of bed but yelped in pain as soon as I moved my leg. I then proceeded to take a look at my leg and saw my ankle wrapped with bandages and was set with a piece of bamboo.

An old man came into the room said, "glad to see that you're finally awake, given the state you were in when we found you, Marie."

Looking at me was an old man who was wearing a Hawaiian shirt with some floral patterns on it. He wore some blue shorts and had short hair. He had a kind smile and hazel brown eyes.

"Huh, how do you know my name? Where am I and who are you?"

A bunch of questions filled my mind as I rambled on.

"Slow down now, little girl. You are exhausting yourself. Now let me introduce myself. My name is Master Chi, and I am the master and the protector of the magical mountain otherwise known as Huangshan. You and your friend Sam were unconscious when my people found you both in the forest, so we brought you here."

I was filled with worries the moment he said the word 'Sam'. If anything had happened to her, I would never forgive myself. She was my only friend in the orphanage. I had met her when I was 8 and that was the best thing that ever happened to me. She has been with me through thick and thin, and now we were 16.

Master Chi saw me tremble and tearing up and said "Don't worry your friend is doing fine –– and explained everything that happened to us. Now lie still, I need to remove your bandages so I can preform the incantation.'

As soon as he said that he pressed his hand against my head as he muttered something, I felt a power surging through my body, and a tingling in the process. It felt sensational, my leg no longer felt like a burden to me, it felt good.

When the incantation was finished, Master Chi told me to try and walk, I slowly got of the bed and started walking around.

"Well, are you feeling better now?" asked Master Chi.

"Better? I'm feeling amazing! I can run a whole marathon! How did you do that?" I asked, with a big smile on my face.

"Well, have you heard of the myth of the magical mountain?" asked Master Chi.

"Uhh I heard some things about it. If I remember correctly, centuries ago the the gods made a promise that no immortal being and mortal could have children or any love affairs, so that no mortal would die because of their selfish reasons. Despite all that, there was a goddess and a man named Glen who fell in love and soon had twins, more specifically demigods. The gods were furious, and as punishment to the four – turned the man into the sun, the goddess into the moon and banished the children to this mountain, so that they could not step a foot off the mountain," I replied.

Master Chi nodded in response and said, "There's more though, even if the parents were transformed into different forms, they still cared for their children from a distance. The father not only gave the mountain warmth and light, but the entire world, while the mother used the last of her powers as a goddess to protect the mountain. Some of the gods pitied the children so they combined a part of their powers and created the 'pathway'. The pathway searches for those in need or those who have lost their families, then leads them here where they can begin a new life, a new start."

I immediately knew what he was talking about and simply nodded in return: a new life, a new start…….

Even though I had only met Master Chi for a short period of time, this felt like home. This could be a new chance at life. I sat in silence trying to process what he had said.

Suddenly the doors opened and Sam burst through the door. Sam had tanned skin, curly dark brown hair, a pair of brown eyes, black glasses and she was wearing an orange shirt and blue jeans. She has the nicest personality and is always curious about everything. She has been dreaming about being a singer since forever, and she has an amazing singing voice. I could not agree more when she said that. I could never ask for another best friend.

She glared at me with her famous death stare that scared the living hell out of me, then pulled me into a hug and started bawling her eyes out.

"You scared the hell out of me girl! You were unconscious for three days. DON'T YOU EVER SCARE ME LIKE THAT AGAIN!! Do you hear me?"

I sarcastically grinned and said, "yes mother, I will never do that again."

We then left the room to get lunch and it was freakishly good. They had magical plates and cups that could magically make food from thin air. All you had to do was say what you wanted. I got a beef taco with a glass of apple juice, while Sam got a club sandwich with a glass of avocado smoothie.

After lunch, I got to explore the place. I first met up with Sam and saw her talking to a boy. She then introduced me to Carson. He had blue eyes and brown hair and was wearing a grey polo shirt and blue shorts. He had a lot interest in the music department and was really nice. I stayed for a while and realised that Sam and Carson were blushing hard. So I decided to leave them alone for a while and headed out to explore the mountain myself.

I saw a small path near the temple and started following it. It was like a maze and I ended up getting lost and walked for hours not knowing what direction to take until I accidentally bumped into someone, I looked up and started apologising, until I heard a laugh.

The boy helped me up and said, "It's fine you don't have to apologise, my name is Damian and you are..?"

"Oh, my name is Marie. Sorry I'm new here, I got lost and… yeah."

Damian had sea green eyes that you could get lost in, messy blonde hair, tanned skin, he wore a black T−shirt, and blue jeans.

"Don't worry, I got lost here a lot when I first got here. It's not a big deal, just takes some time to get used to the path. Not many people come here though, so you're lucky that you bumped into me. Otherwise, you might be lost for days," he said with a small smile on his face.

“That’s bad… anyway can you show me around since you seem to know this place like the back of your hand?

“Sure, but I want to show you something first, if you don’t mind of course.”

I laughed and he asked me to close my eyes, he then led me somewhere and told me to open them. I did as he said and saw the the most beautiful view of the mountains. The beauty was all perfect. The way that the light reflected on the water felt so magical. The plants seemed to dance in the wind, like water.

“Beautiful isn’t it… just like you.”, said a voice from behind me.

I turned around and smiled at him as I finally knew my choice.

We had a wonderful conversation as we talked all about the scenery. It was so pleasant. The air felt fresh; the plants and flowers smelled amazing. It just seemed perfect. After hours of talking, Damian led the way back to the temple.

As soon as we got back, I ran to Sam and told her all about my conversation with Master Chi. She smiled and we both went to find Master Chi.

The next day, they welcomed us with open arms as we joined them – the mountain of new beginnings.

Who Lives in the Tiny Village above the Clouds

St Francis Xavier's College, Lau, Marcus – 13

Huang Shan mountain is a beautiful but mysterious place. Clouds isolate the top from the bottom, strange trees and rocks and even mysterious fogs at valleys.

A secret village above the clouds, and something or someone lives there. Many people followed the legend and tried to find it, not many succeeded. When I was a boy, my uncle told me the stories about the mysterious village, he always said I would be the one to find it. Years later, I became an expert hiker where I forgot my uncle's stories.

One day, my uncle suddenly felt sick. I rushed to the hospital and saw him lying on the bed. He made me promise that I would go to the secret village. He said he went there before, and there was a tool that could heal the earth from global warming. I had more questions, but he already died.

One day I received a call that my uncle was on his death bed. Worried, I rushed to the hospital and his last dying wish was for me to finish what he started – go to the secret village of Huang Shan and save the world, there is a secret tool. As I asked him how there was no response, he died. ⋆

In the weeks to come I planned my adventure. Of course, no one should go on a quest without companions. I called Tim and Martha, telling them that we were going on a quest. Luckily, they agreed. We packed our gear and met up at the airport.

We arrived at the Huangshan hotel 12 hours later. Exhausted, we all hit the hay to rest for our epic adventure, which begins tomorrow.

The next morning, I rendezvoused with my friends at the hotel lobby and we immediately started our hike since our return flight leaves in 3 days.

After 6 hours, we arrived at the 'Welcoming Pine'. A strange tree which looked like a person who stretches out one arm to welcome guests from afar, the other hand is elegantly inserted in the pocket of his trousers.

However, something strange happened. The 'Welcoming Pine' moved, its arm pointed at me and the leaves did a come–over–here pose.

'Did you see the tree move?' I asked my friends.

'Not at all.' replied Tim.

'I saw nothing either, it's just a tree.' said Martha.

How could this be possible? A tree that moves? I tried several times to prove I wasn't seeing things. I walked towards the tree.

'Hello, traveler.' it said. 'What can I do for you?' I asked about the secret village and my uncle's dying wish. The tree said it never heard of such a tool. However, it whispered to me that the village has many secrets. It conjured up a map. Then it froze in place.

I walked back to my friends. 'What's that in your hand?' asked Martha. I showed the map to them. They gasped. 'So, the tree did move, and it called for you?' asked Martha. 'Yep.' I replied.

For the next hour, we followed the path on the map. Although the first hour was easy, the following weren't.

'What's this?' asked Tim. 'What's troll town?' I took a look at the map, my face covered with shock. It definitely said troll town.

'What do we do?' asked Martha. 'We split up. There are two paths, right?' I said, still trembling. 'Me and Martha take the path on the right. Tim, you take the left.'

‘Grrrr! I am so hungry; I hate eating trees! All that rabbit food! I miss those tasty humans! Haven’t eaten them for ages!’

‘A troll?’ asked Martha. ‘Yeah definitely. And above us too.’ I replied. And then I saw one. The trolls were huge and tall, they had hair all over their body, not to mention rotten teeth and clothes. We walked quietly against the wall. Suddenly, I heard Tim scream. The trolls must have captured him.

We ran quickly. Hoping not to be found. Luckily, I snatched the map from Tim earlier. So, I didn’t have to worry about getting lost.

‘We’re running?’ screamed Martha. ‘Your best friend just got captured!’

‘There’s nothing we can do, Martha.’ I replied.

‘Nothing we can do? We could just sneak in and RESCUE him!’

‘HOW?’ I could no longer control my temper. ‘There are at least a thousand trolls up there! 2 humans against an army of trolls? Are you crazy?’ ‘I said sneak in and rescue them, not fight!’ sighed Martha.

‘I know! But what are the odds of being killed? Sometimes you’ve got to think before you act, Martha!’

However, Martha didn’t listen to me and sped off.

I shouted Martha’s name but no one answered. It was getting dark. She was missing for an hour.

I sat down on a rock with an enormous guilt. I talked to the map once again. Suddenly something magical happened. A golden arrow appeared on the map, it pointed at troll town. ‘I know, but how do I get in?’ I asked the map. The map now enlarged itself, revealing a direct route into the heart of troll town.

I acted immediately and looked for the secret passage. Within15 minutes I arrived at the entrance, there was a wooden door on the rocky wall. I quietly pushed the door open and found myself at the heart of troll town.

Martha and Tim were there and both tied up next to a large pot of soup.

Despite feeling guilt for my weakness, I was happy seeing them. It was not the time to celebrate. I untied them instantly. ‘Took you long enough.’ said Tim. ‘How did you get here?’ asked Martha.

‘I’ll explain later, long story.’

We ran as fast as we could and hid in the cave until we were assured that it was safe to leave.

We started our hike again the next morning and arrived at our destination, the entrance of the secret village. It was an enormous rock wall with a door symmetrically placed in the middle. I walked through the door with ease. However, my friends couldn’t, it was like an invisible barrier blocked them.

‘No use! We can’t get through!’ ‘Good luck’ they shouted.

The map led to ‘*The Path of Frozen Shivers’.* It looked as an impossibly steep stone staircase, just looking at it made me shiver!

After climbing for hours, I finally arrived at *‘Golden gate’* per the map. As I opened it a flash of light blinded me! I found myself standing on the clouds.

‘Hello traveler.’

Fear coursing through my veins I turn around.

‘So, you have arrived.’ said an old man wearing a long robe and ancient hat with a bow. ‘We’ve been expecting you.’

‘Who’s we?’ I asked.

Before he could reply more people came out of the houses clapping and cheering.

‘Follow me.’ said the old man. I followed him into this oddly shaped shrine. We entered a magical elevator and exited on the top floor. The huge pillar lined room was lined with 9 wooden chairs each with someone. The old man walked slowly and took the center seat.

The old man introduced himself as Lao−zhi, the chairman of the Ancient Wizard Council. I was thrilled to meet real wizards. They asked me about my journey and I told them everything.

‘Well,’ said the wizard. ‘It seems like you’ve passed the tests. Do you mind telling us why you’re here?’

I told them about my uncle’s dying wish.

‘Yes,’ said the wizard. ‘There was a visitor a few decades ago name Li. I assume he was your uncle?’

‘Yes.’

Unfortunately, Lao−zhi said there was no such tool. He said my uncle could be referring to the *‘Earth tree’*, but it has been hibernating for 20 years and only the chosen one would be able to wake it up.

I asked Lao−zhi to take me to the ‘Earth tree’.

We arrived at the Earth tree, which was grey in color stood lifeless. As I peered through the roots, I could see the people of the world.

‘Hope is what revives the tree,’ I said.

‘However, greedy people from developed countries erode the hope of the rest.”

‘I see,’ smiled the wizard. ‘Now, touch the tree.’

As I touched the tree is color changed to a rich brown, it spread its leaves as they grew green.

The tree, happy to be woken, offered me a chance to fulfil my deepest desire. Without hesitation, I said it.

Suddenly, as a huge jet of blue light shot out of the tree and lit the entire atmosphere, I knew at that moment the greenhouse gases were destroyed.

‘The world is saved,’ said the Lao−zhi. ‘Thanks to you. Humanity owes you, but you can never speak of this.

Lao−zhi said goodbye, and seconds later I was with Tim & Martha at the hotel.

The Legends of the Village of Dreams

St Joseph's College, Lam, Wai Yue – 13

Have you ever had dreams? Good dreams? Or nightmares? These are controlled by the residents of the Village of Dreams way up high, hidden on Yellow Mountain, where dragons roam, magic is used and practiced, and dreams will always come true.

Lee had heard of this place and made it his destiny to find out once and for all if it existed. Joined by his friends, Wong and Chan, they set off for the mythical mountain without a doubt in their minds. All three of them knew about how two famous poets, Li Bai and Du Fu, lived on this mountain and never returned. Countless others underwent the same fate and mysteriously disappeared. Lee had the feeling that they were walking into the throat of a large beast. He shuddered, goosebumps forming on his skin.

Four months later, they had explored the entire mountain, without any discoveries. Lee was devastated. His childhood dreams were crushed, but his ego would not let him give up. He tried again and again. Despite being penniless and jobless, he ignored all warnings of his family, his friends and his advisors. Wong and Chan visited Lee, trying to persuade him to get a job and settle down. Instead, they let Lee convince them to join him on one last climb up Yellow Mountain.

They set off the next day, heading up the north side, forcing their way up step by step. Soon, they came across a ravine that they had discovered on their second climb, which they named, the Ravine of Death. A good name too, since there were countless carcasses and bones lying everywhere, with crows and vultures pecking at them.
Edging their way along, they slowly crossed the ravine. Lee was impatient and sped up the pace. This was when disaster struck: a boulder, barely hanging onto the cliff face, fell. It tumbled towards the trio, knocking Lee and Wong into the ravine, with Chan falling opposite to them. The last thing Lee remembered was the sound of his bones breaking.

Lee slowly opened his eyes. His body felt stiff. A blurry figure was looking at him. As his vision cleared, his heart swelled, for it was Du Fu, the legendary poet himself, who was looking after him. Beside him stood Li Bai, a huge smile on his face.

'Where am I?' Lee asked, although he already knew the answer.

'You are in the Village of Dreams, my young friend,' Du Fu replied. 'I feared you would never wake up.'

Lee suddenly sat up, 'Where is Wong?' he asked desperately, fearing the worst.

'Do not fear. Your friend is alive and well. He survived, thanks to you. You broke his fall,' replied Li Bai, with obvious happiness.

'Lee!' A concerned voice drifted in. Lee perked up, all his tiredness and stiffness gone. He literally jumped from his bed and ran outside to see his best friend.

What he saw beat the time he scored full marks on the hardest test of the year. He saw the legends of the past: every emperor and leader who pleased their subjects and protected their people; every general who made a difference in the tide of war; every scholar who used their knowledge to make life better for others. Everyone who pleased this heavenly village, through five thousand years of history, was present.

Lee and Wong spent months living in this heavenly village, never aging nor dying, but things were about to change.

One day, a blast of concentrated magical energy smashed onto the village, sending shrapnel flying everywhere. Lee and Wong ran out of their houses, desperate to see what was causing the commotion. What they saw made their jaws drop: people were fighting using magic, elements, illusions, and killer beams, like something out of a Marvel movie. Dragons were flying through the air – it was a free–for–all. Li Bai came rocketing past and yelled 'Quick! Do something! Try whatever idea you have, we are losing!'

Lee quickly reacted, copying what the others were doing. He held out his hands in front of his body, imagining a blast of energy coming right out of them, and with a whoosh, a concentrated ball of energy came flying out, on a collision course with a figure dressed in black. He sensed the incoming danger, turned around, and the ball of energy hit him right in the face. The figure froze, his movements becoming static, and soon, his body began to dissolve away.

Upon seeing this, the other figures in black panicked and retreated, while two more intruders were destroyed by the residents of the Village of Dreams.

After the battle, Li Bai and Du Fu led Lee and Wong to a small building labelled The Coming of Evil. Inside was a stone block with words chiseled into it. The words ran:

Death is upon us, pain has arrived.
Darkness has grown, evil has thrived.
The fate of our village resides in a child,
But teach him quickly, his powers are mild.

He will have to push aside,
The fear that he conceals inside.
One of the Three that came will go,
The fate of our village depends on so.

Satan is ready, his dark army raised,
His intentions are simple, our village will blaze.
Gather your forces and follow the young,
His glory will be praised, his glory will be sung.

This is the day, fate decides all,
The dead are quiet, the wounded will call.
Until the demise of Satan, we must not rest,
So pray that the child will be at his best.

'What does it mean?' Lee asked.

'That you are the chosen one. You shall lead us through this war with the Village of Nightmares,' Li Bai replied.

Lee did not answer. He was too distracted by the line that depicted his death, or the death of Wong or Chan.

For days afterwards, Lee and Wong trained under Li Bai and Du Fu, learning how to harness energy from the mountain itself. As expected, Lee learned faster than Wong, although the whereabouts of Chan was still a mystery.

Finally, they were ready for the invasion of the Village of Nightmares. Using their new powers, they flew towards their target.

What they saw amazed them: the village, like a castle of nightmares, was heavily defended by flying troops, with an army ready to attack.

‘They have been busy,’ Li Bai said, concerned.

‘Yes, but we cannot turn back now,’ said Du Fu gravely.

Lee was scared out of his wits, but he had to try. They fought through the ranks of the enemy, with Lee and Wong fighting side by side, defending each other, when a particularly powerful foe appeared. Lee and Wong were ready to fight, but instead of attacking them, their foe pulled off his mask, to reveal the face of…

‘Chan,’ said Lee, with tears in his eyes.

‘Quick! If you want to win, follow me, Satan is this way!’ Chan said urgently. Lee and Wong followed without hesitation, only to walk into a trap.

‘Chan! Why?’ Lee called out. ‘We used to be friends!’

‘I am sorry,’ Chan replied,’ I am forced to do so.’

Satan appeared, and let out an evil laugh.

‘MWAHAHA! I knew you would fall for this! You trusted your friend, but he betrayed you,’ Satan bellowed with merriment,’ and now you will DIE!’

‘No, you don’t! Chan cried. ‘Lee, Wong, quick! Here’s the key!’ Chan tossed a large, red, rusty key, enchanted with magic, into the cell.

‘Why you little...,’Satan roared. ‘I will destroy you all!’

The three attacked, circling and blasting Satan, but Satan swatted them away like flies.

‘You are no match for me!’ Satan laughed. ‘I am SATAN!’ Satan let loose a deadly blast, which would surely kill them.

Chan pushed Lee and Wong out of the way and let the beam envelope him.
‘No!’ Lee cried.

Satan merely laughed, ‘Worthless sacrifice! You are still no match for me!’

‘No, but we are!’

Lee turned around and saw the entire army of the Village of Dreams standing behind him.

Satan roared. He could only watch as together, the army of the Village of Dreams released a massive blast, destroying Satan in one hit.

‘It is over,’ Li Bai sighed. ‘But we have lost many.’

Without a word, they left, never to return.

But something was still alive…

The Dragon's Pearl

St Joseph's College, Leung, Ka Chai Louie – 12

I was starting to regret bringing my son here.

He had insisted on coming because he said he was 'as strong as the Hulk' and he wouldn't stop whining about going to Huangshan after seeing several videos of it on YouTube. I couldn't blame him. The place was stunning.

What we had failed to realize, though, was there were *excruciatingly long* sets of stairs and a long, barren road that lay between us and Guangming Ding. Timmy was already wheezing and hugging his chest after the first two hours of our hike and demanded to be picked up before he recovered enough to walk again. I tried to pick him up and wondered how long it had been since I had last done this. God, he had gotten heavy for a 7–year–old. Despite this, I gritted my teeth and kept going.

This began a maddening cycle of being picked up, demanding to be put down and whining to be picked up again, for literally 5 hours. After dawn, I just couldn't stand it. I set Timmy down and breathlessly tried to point at the tent in my backpack, hoping he would get the message.

He nodded and searched for a safe spot to camp.

We could technically have rented tent space at a checkpoint with actual human facilities, but we wanted to do the outdoors thing. After a while, I found a cave, lit a lantern, set up the tent and collapsed on my mattress. Timmy insisted on exploring the cave. I didn't even know where he got the energy, but as it was, he went off with our only light source, leaving me in the dark.
Several minutes later, I heard an excited shriek and quick footsteps coming my way. I got up groggily from my sleep and peered at Timmy's excited face, illuminated by the flickering light of the gas lamp. 'You gotta see this!' he cried enthusiastically. I got up slowly and followed his silhouette as he skipped away.

After a while, my son gestured at something shiny. I rubbed my eyes. The world came into focus. We were looking at a yellow–white orb, as large as my palm. I doubted I could hold it with one hand. What was a pearl doing in a cave where the only seas were made of mist and vapor? I looked closer and noticed something strange. The orb was semi–transparent. There were cloudlike patterns in it, moving to and fro inside. There were shapes that resembled mountains, and the clouds were moving like – oh! They resembled the 'cloud seas' that appeared during the sunrise and sunset of Huangshan. The whole orb was glowing. Perhaps it was my innate instinct or gut, but I knew this orb was no natural formation. I thought about the Chinese stories of old, and the spheres of enchanted jade Chinese dragons that could grant you any wish.

'Oh my god,' I couldn't help whispering. 'If I'm correct, this could be the most valuable thing in the world.'

Timmy stared at me with wide eyes. 'What?'

I looked at him seriously. 'This is a dragon's jade.'

I'd told him about these stories before, so he knew exactly what it was and what it could do. He tackled it and held it in both his arms, muttering something I could hardly make out..

Nothing happened for a good few seconds.

If you don't know, Chinese dragons are quite different from the ones you see in those Western fairy tales. They are wingless, yet they can fly; they look fiery, yet they control water; they are creatures of good, yet they can be unexplainably angry if you do something they don't like.
I knew the first two facts. The third was from personal experience.

Where do you find a primordial Chinese celestial dragon, you ask? It's easy. Just mess around with its pearl for a while and it'll show up.

That's exactly what happened to us.

The dragon rose from the earth, glaring at us with brilliant blue eyes that shone through the storm. It moved soundlessly and ruthlessly; it made not so much as a growl as it flew majestically and purposefully towards us which made the mountains groan with pressure. Several mountains fell, and ours was shaking so much and dropping so much debris you could hardly make out what was going on. Nevertheless, the dragon stared at Timmy with its dazzling blue eyes. Suddenly, all the rocks froze. The dragon didn't speak, but its voice reverbed through my mind, load and clear: ***Quit your foolish meddling, mortal child. Humans are not worthy of using a dragon's pearl.***

Timmy shouted back through the storm, wind, debris and crushing rocks, 'Never! It's mine now! I'll use it for whatever I want.' He shook the jade violently. 'Kill the dragon! I command you!'

Nothing happened for a moment. Then the dragon sneered. ***A dragon's pearl is not able to harm its master even if it is snatched by other hands.***

'Timmy,' I cried. 'Please stop. It's not yours. Give it back before the dragon destroys us.'

My son looked at me. 'Why should I do that? I have infinite power in my hands. Do you think I will be stopped by a flying snake with legs?'

That offended the dragon. It narrowed its eyes and lunged for the pearl in Timmy's hands. Timmy dodged and weaved, barely dodging the dragon. The pearl seemed to tug towards the dragon's front talon ever so slightly, but Timmy held it back.

'Timmy, please! You shouldn't misuse power just because you have it. Nor should you take other's possessions. Please, please stop,' I yelled in desperation.

Timmy hesitated for a second. Just like that, the dragon snatched its pearl out of Timmy's hands. With a triumphant smirk, it said, ***Watch, foolish mortal, as I use the very thing you stole to destroy you once and for all.***

Timmy whimpered and fell to his knees, which was hard because the ground was pretty much collapsing under itself. I cried, 'He's just a child! Please forgive him. He doesn't know what he's doing.'

The dragon considered this for a moment. Then its eyes softened. It muttered something under its breath, and everything stabilized. I sighed with relief. Huangshan was safe. The dragon looked at us, with caution in its eyes. As normal, it did not speak, but I could feel it was sending me a message.

Suddenly, the dragon disappeared. Everything began reassembling itself in reverse. Mountains formed from crushed rock. Large stones began flying back to where they belonged. The debris, pebbles and dust in our cave began rising back to their original positions.

I looked at Timmy and was glad to see guilt and relief written over his face. He looked at me and let loose a broken giggle. I returned a smile and we just sat there, grinning nonsensically to ourselves even though we had almost caused a major natural disaster.

The Dragon's Lair in the Yellow Mountains

St Joseph's College, Lim, Jason – 12

"Boom!" Thunder roared as I scanned my surroundings.

"Where am I? Why am I wearing these clothes?" I was wearing a silk robe and a pleated skirt. All the while, rain drenched me and my newfound ensemble.

The rain pelted down as I ran to the nearest shelter: a small cave. A mysterious aura surrounded me when I stepped into the dark, spooky cave. I lay on the ground, wondering what to do next. "Why am I here?" I tried to recall my day at school, but I couldn't. Was this a dream? I pinched myself. "Ouch!" No, this was not a dream. I thought my memory had been wiped.

Suddenly, I heard voices coming from inside the cave and I jumped to my feet.

"Hey! How's the plan going?"

Another man replied, "It's impossible! It will never work! We will never find the Dragon's Lair. It's said to be in the Yellow Mountains but how can we find it? There are thousands of mountains here!"

The man was furious. "Didn't you read the clue? It says, 'Deep in the mountains of China hides an invincible dragon. There the clouds spread as the springs breathe out vapour. Up you go and you shall find the Dragon's Lair. But, beware of the heat there.'"

Why would they want a dragon, if it even existed? Then, I heard something that perturbed me: the men were planning to kill the emperor! It sounded surreal: they were planning to kill the Han emperor, one of the most powerful people on the planet at that time!

I followed them out of the cave, to a nearby village. They were met by a gang who seemed to know their plan. They got on their horses and rode off.

A man came out of a little cottage and saw me. I was frightened and ran for my dear soul. Thoughts raced through my mind as I ran and ran. Eventually, I stopped but the man was still running after me! He picked me up and took me to his cottage. I felt hopeless. I prayed until the man came back. He wiped my tears and said, "Are you alright, little boy? You should be with your mother right now. Ever since the bandits came, life has not been the same…"

I asked, "Why are you doing this? Are you one of the people planning to kill the emperor?" Thousands of questions burst out of my mouth. Moreover, I explained that I was a boy who came from the 21st century.

The man muttered under his breath, "So the legend is real: when the empire is going to perish, there shall be a savior who will change the world." He explained that he was a secret agent from the 22nd century, and what would happen if we failed to stop the murderers: no one in modern China will exist. China would be covered with the eternal flames of the mighty dragon, making it impossible for anyone to live there.

We immediately took action; the man took me to a car. "Umm… won't it be too obvious to take a car from thousands of years in the future?" I sarcastically clamoured. Suddenly, the car became invisible.

"Never mind," I quipped.

I hopped into the car and we went after the horses. Vroom! We were flying! The car had many tricks up its sleeve. It could become invisible, fly, shoot tracking darts and even had a super turbo button which would help you travel at 500 miles per hour. We followed them to the mountains high above, then scanned the surroundings and saw something very peculiar…

One mountain had smoke rising from its summit. I thought it was a hidden volcano at first but realized that steam was coming from small puddles on the ground. Could this be…? Ah! It was mentioned in the clue! "There the clouds spread as the springs breathe out the vapour." It must be the mountain before us. I signaled to the agent and we swooped down, landing on the ground with a thud. We set up camp near the cliff, waiting for the gang to appear. I was nearly asleep when they arrived; the agent woke me, and we started following them.

They approached the mountain. To our surprise, they walked into a waterfall! The agent gave me a pair of goggles. "These can help you detect danger or living species with thermal technology. It also has stun darts but use them wisely." I snuck in the waterfall and sensed the area with my goggles. I wondered why there were no signs of any dragons, not even a snake.

We ventured further and we saw a beautiful old palace. There were magnificent dragon sculptures all around. "Hey, is there someone following us? I hear footsteps," said one of the gang members. We ran to a nearby dragon sculpture and I leaned against the portrait of a particularly lively dragon.

Creak!

I began falling downwards into a trapdoor, but I was too scared to scream.

Plop!

I rubbed my back, and the agent jumped down too.

Roar!

Was that the dragon? It got hotter and hotter as we walked into the basement. The space was abnormally large and there were thousands of doors. What was the purpose of these doors? Curious, I walked to one of the doors and pulled it open, wondering if the dragon was inside.

The agent pushed me out of the way, just as arrows shot out. I should have known: why would the dragon not be guarded by traps?

But how could we find out which room the dragon was hiding in? We would be dead before reaching the tenth door!

Footsteps followed us; it was the murderers. The agent took out a laser gun and shot the gang one by one. I took my stun darts and joined the battle.

"No, run!" the agent shouted.

"I'm not leaving you behind!"

We were shocked as the thugs surrounded us. "You didn't expect that, did you? It has been a long time, Agent 993."

The agent looked surprised. "Why are you here? You've already done so much harm to the modern world." We were sprayed by bullets and retreated.

As we were thinking of surrender, a dragon flew out. It was red with golden eyes that creeped me out. It breathed out mighty flames. Yes! We were saved!

We used the distraction to flee the basement. We ran out panting, while the people battled inside. Suddenly, jets flew above us – it was our support team! Armed agents rushed into the basement and caught the band of criminals out.

"You will pay for this," said one.

The agents poured water into the basement and locked the trapdoor. The dragon roared in fury and anger as it drowned.

The fire was put out and we had won. Or… had we?

There was another dragon! This one was much bigger. It flew in the air, hissing at us.

"I think we just killed his child…," I stammered.

The jets took off at once and sprayed the dragon with hydro cannons. The dragon snickered hysterically, as if it was being tickled. It countered by using his fiery tail to flick us away.

I ran to the palace for cover when I saw a mirror.

"I've been expecting you," it whispered mysteriously.

I stared into the mirror and questioned how it knew me. The mirror didn't reply. Once again, I looked in the mirror and saw myself fighting the dragon with something…a sword?

I felt my hands grab hold of something, looked down and to my surprise, I had a sword in my hands. It was big and strangely watery.

"Go, my child. Free the palace!"

I grasped the sword and knew what to do. I was full of determination, though the odds were against me.

I leapt in the air, slashing the dragon. The sword hit its mark, and the dragon moaned in pain. The jets dropped water bombs on the dragon.

After a few heavy hits, my sword was suddenly surrounded by a shield of water. I swung it as hard as I could into the dragon's belly.

It was a critical hit! Lava poured out of its skin. The dragon cried in agony as it shrunk into thin air. We had gotten the last laugh.

The agent explained that the people who wanted to murder the emperor were in a terrorist organization from the modern age.

My journey was over. It was time to go home.

Agent 993 took the terrorists to ultra-high security jails, bringing me home on the way. Agent 993 gave me one of his rare smiles and said, "Well done, kid." Then, they left in the blink of an eye.

I thought of the dragon's lair. Were there other dragons? Why did the mirror help me? Will the dragons come back? I fell asleep.

What I didn't see were the red eyes staring at me through the window…

Monkey Rock in Huangshan

St Joseph's College, Yam, Lok Yin Andre – 12

Huangshan (also known as Yellow Mountains) is a breathtaking mountain with a long history, some of which not many people know about. Take the Monkey Rock, for example. Its presence is mysterious, and few archaeologists know about its origins. Many have tried to guess, but below is one of the many theories.

A long time ago, more than a hundred monkeys roamed the Yellow Mountains. No, not normal monkeys, but creatures with unnatural red hair, a pair of bloodshot eyes, bared teeth, and a curled-up tail. They were monsters who slept in freezing cold mountain caves during the day, and terrorized other animals at night. Every day, as the daylight began to dim, the moods of the animals did too, because they knew that the monkeys would soon awaken. As the sun slowly disappeared from view, the mountain animals would hear a chilling sound, a sound so ghastly that even the devil would be petrified. It was the cry of the monkeys, and they were not afraid to let the whole world hear it.

The monkeys were fast creatures, and this ability was used to their advantage while fulfilling their nightly ritual: snatching newborns. No one knew where the newborns were taken, or why the monkeys took them, but they knew one thing: The newborns were never to be seen again. Animals would go to sleep at night, and find their offspring gone the next day. The only piece of evidence that proved they were stolen was an occasional strand of unnatural red hair.

One day, the mountain animals decided that they had had enough, so they decided to form a plan to get rid of the monkeys once and for all. However, this proved to be harder than expected. The monkeys were quick on their feet, so they could not be caught easily. Also, they had sharp teeth, so the animals could not avoid the possibility of being bitten. Just as everyone was desperately thinking of a way, an old goat stepped out and shared his idea: The animals could collect buckets of lava from the active volcanoes nearby, and the eagles could drop them down on the monkeys' living habitats, burning them until they begged for mercy. Many animals nodded in agreement, and it was then decided that this would be the plan.

Suddenly, a voice called out, "If we do this, won't we be as cruel as the monkeys? Won't burning them be even more cold-blooded than their stealing our newborns?"

The animals realized this was true, and they turned to look at the goat doubtfully. The goat thought for a while, stroking his beard in the process, and he replied confidently, "Well, instead of burning them, why not just scare them? Either way, they'll be gotten rid of." The animals thought this was a good compromise, and they resolved to only spilling molten lava around their homes without harming them.

The animals then elected three eagles to do the perilous job, including Ning, who was fast at flying but quite clumsy; Hong, who was sharp-eyed but slow; and Feng, who was the cleverest of all, but lacked the ability to stay calm in exciting situations. Feng grinned from ear to ear as his name was announced. His chest swelled up like a balloon, and he flapped his wings excitedly. Ning and Hong were also quite pleased to have this honor, and they rubbed their talons in enthusiasm. After a few days, the trio received detailed instructions for the assault. Feng quickly read through their entirety, and memorized them in a flash, being the cleverest in the pack. He explained the whole procedure to the others patiently and kindly, even demonstrating the process. With such a good leader, Ning thought, what could possibly go wrong?

Meanwhile, in the icy caves of Huangshan, the monkeys slowly stirred, their eyes gradually adjusting to their surroundings. They started the night by raising a terrible cry once again and began bounding across the mountain, towards the other animals' habitats. However, their leader, an old monkey called Yuan, stopped them mid-step. He hobbled onto a large slab of rock outside the cave and bellowed with a voice so deep that it sounded as if he were using a bullhorn. "Fellow monkeys, I have an announcement to make. Today, we won't be randomly snatching newborns; instead, we have a specific target."

The monkeys stared at their superior, cocking their head sideways. Yuan ignored this and continued, "As you might have noticed, my age is getting the best of me, and I haven't been able to walk properly. That's why I have been collecting newborns for as long as I can remember: to prepare an Elixir of Youth."

Now, the monkeys were confused. What was an Elixir of Youth? What properties did it have?

"I understand you have many questions, but for now, just focus on one goal: Snatch a pheasant's tail and bring it back to me before dawn."

The monkeys could not disobey his orders, out of respect to their leader, so they immediately sprang into action. They snuck up to the pheasants' territory while walking on their tiptoes, and targeted a pheasant, which was away from all its companions. The pheasant was walking slowly, completely unaware of the danger that lurked behind it. Suddenly, the monkeys lunged forward and grabbed hold of the pheasant's tail. There were so many monkeys that the pheasant could not resist at all. Then, a monkey opened its jaws to its full capacity, and bit off the poor pheasant's tail with a sickening crunch. After that, the ruthless monkeys tossed away the limp pheasant, grabbed hold of the tail, and scurried back to their home as fast as they could.

"It's time." Hong was observing the monkey habitation from afar, and he had just seen the monkeys return to the inside of the cave. He, along with Ning and Feng each took hold of a large container filled to the brim with hot lava. The heat was unbearable, but the eagles knew that the whole forest depended on them. They flew with all their might, and finally reached the monkeys. Remembering not to harm the creatures, the eagles carefully circled the air just above them, staying hidden at all times. However, when Feng hovered more closely, he saw something that chilled his blood. Hundreds and thousands of animal newborns were laid in the caves where the monkeys lived, and he saw a familiar shape amongst them. It was his younger brother, who was previously snatched by the creatures!

"No!" Feng completely panicked, and as he tried to fly down to save his lost sibling, he lost control of his container, and the lava poured down like it had a life of its own. Shaken by Feng's cry, Ning himself lost his balance too, and his container fell.

Their position was already known, so there was no point in hiding. The trio flew down to see the damage that they had done and were stunned to see that the lava was melting everything in sight! The monkeys tried hard to escape, but the cave entrance was blocked with magma-covered rocks. Only Yuan was still safe, as he was still standing on the slab of stone.

He glared at the eagles hatefully, then immediately left his spot and went to rescue his companions by pulling the large lava-molten rocks out, even if that meant his hands would burn. He cried out in pain as one of the rocks landed on his leg, but he still continued. After a while, he realized it was no use, and crouched down on the slab of stone in frustration and anger. Tears running from his eyes, he cried, "I will get revenge for you, my fellow monkeys!" Then, still crouching on the stone, he closed his eyes, never opening them again…

Afterwards, Feng, Ning and Hong could only return to their homes and tell their fellow animals about their mistake. Although nobody liked the monkeys, the animals were still shaken by their death. They also learnt a lesson: No matter how evil or malicious one may be, they still don't deserve to be hurt. The terror in the eyes of Yuan would forever haunt Feng, Ning and Hong, the trio who was supposed to scare away the so-called "evil" monkeys.

Now, you can still see Yuan crouching on a slab of stone, gazing at the sea of clouds in Huangshan. He is still plotting revenge on the other animals, and waiting for the day his companions will return...

A New Season of Harvest

St. Margaret's Co–Educational English Secondary & Primary School, Del Mundon, Giuliana – 13

"This is it, team!" Rong exclaims. "It's our first time competing in the Huangshan Harvest Festival Rush. We can finally bring honour to our village! Are you with me?"

His plump little brother, Bao, claps in glee. Next to him is their neighbour, Grandpa An, who smiles serenely.

A gong rings. Two figures appear, one with a flowing gold robe and another wearing blue.

"Greetings, competitors!" the man in blue says. "I am Li Bai, the Poet of Spring, creator of the Festival Rush trials. Your goal is to reach the top of the mountain and grab the golden wheat. Whoever wins will be granted a wish by our Emperor Huang.

"There are three rules. Firstly, there must be three people in a team. Secondly, only men can join. Lastly, you cannot make a wish that harms other villages."

Rong looks at the other three teams, all of who have emerged victorious before: Chengkan, Nanjing, and Xidi.

Bishan, Rong's home, has lost this ruthless contest repeatedly, missing countless wishes for a full harvest: famine wreaking havoc in their home for seventy years.

"Your first trial is the Trial of Strategy, the elimination round. You must reach Purple Cloud Peak through these slopes." He points to the side of the mountain.

"You may use any equipment to climb to Purple Cloud Peak. May the Huangshan Harvest Festival Rush…" he pauses, creating tension in the air.

"Begin!"

Trial of Strategy

All the teams do not miss a beat in climbing the slope using their equipment.

Rong begins climbing with his stick—the only equipment each of Rong's teammates have.

Despite Bao's circular size, the vibrant boy climbs with ease.

Rong hastens and hears the bickering of the nearby Xidi team. Midway through, Rong turns in realisation and sees Grandpa An blissfully watching them.

Rong groans, descending. "Grandpa, we have to go!"

The old man points at his feeble legs. Grandpa An wouldn't be his first choice if it weren't for everyone else in Bishan refusing to participate. They had lost hope for seventy years, after all.

"Get on my back!" The man obeys before Rong resumes climbing.

He sees how distant he is from everyone, despite hearing Chengkan's snickering. It only fuels Rong's might to climb swiftly, undeterred by the weight on his back.

He reaches the top and puts Grandpa An down safely. The first sight he sees is Bao waving at him without a trace of fatigue. He smiles but falters as he notices everyone already at the top, sneering at him.

Li Bai appears. "The team eliminated is—"

Rong squeezes his eyes shut, knowing his fate.

“Nanping!”

All teams gasp collectively.

“What?” Ru’s, the Nanping leader, face becomes beet red.

“You have broken the second rule,” he says sternly. With a wave of his brush, Ru's bun is untied. “Only men can participate.”

Ru sobs. “I wanted to join, even just once.” Her team comforts her.

“Unfortunately, you have to go back.” Li Bai flicks his brush and the team vanishes in a blink.

Even though it was dumb luck, Rong couldn't help but pity her. However, he has to use this opportunity to accomplish what he came here for.

Trial of Strength

“The next trial is the Trial of Strength,” Li Bai says. “You must tame the Emperor's enchanted beasts.”

Li Bai paints in mid−air, forming three glowing, colossal creatures, resembling a leopard, a tiger, and a panda. Rong would've found them ethereal if it weren't for their snarls.

“When you tame the animal, you will move onto the next trial.”

Once Li Bai fades away, the leopard runs after Chengkan, while the tiger chases after Xidi. Yin, Chengkan's leader, throws meat on the ground. Wu, Xidi's leader, has a more forceful approach by grappling the tiger.

The panda charges at Bao.

“Easy!” Rong jumps in front of his brother. “We're not going to hurt you.”

The panda stops, and Rong drops his stick. The beast approaches and sniffs, its growls becoming less aggressive.

Bao leans towards the panda with outstretched arms while the panda reciprocates the gesture. Grandpa An joins in and strokes its dazzling fur.

Suddenly, Rong hears a shout and sees Wu chase away Yin’s leopard with his tiger as Yin clutches his leg on the ground.

Wu snickers, commanding his tiger to run, leaving his teammates to chase after him.

Rong rushes over to Yin's side. “Are you okay?”

“Leave me be.”

“Let me help, please.” Rong rips some cloth from his shirt and wraps it around Yin's wound, who cynically gapes at the gesture. He finishes and gets ready to leave.

“Wait!” Yin whispers to his team. They shuffle to get equipment out of his bag and attach it to the panda. “This is a glider for your panda to cross long gaps. We've used this before to beat Xidi.”

“Thank you!” Rong beams and gets on the panda with Bao and Grandpa An.

“Win for Chengkan,” Yin mutters as they leave.

Trial of Speed

As the trio rides through the granite peaks and countless pine trees, even passing by Wu's panting teammates, Li Bai hovers above them.

"Congratulations. You have moved over to the Trial of Speed, the final trial. You must now take the path to Lotus Peak." Li Bai points to a gleaming string forming a route to the top. "Emperor Huang awaits."

Having ridden the panda for a long time, Rong's eyes finally land on a familiar tiger on a suspended bridge, which fuels his determination.

Without warning, Wu takes out his sickle and slashes the rope of the bridge.

"No!" Rong watches in despair as the bridge falls and Wu vanishes from his sight.

He looks around, desperate. His eyes land on the glider strapped on the panda, then looks up at the peak above him.

"We're taking a detour," he announces.

With a new resolve, he turns the panda then it runs like the wind to the mountain top.

When they arrive, he sees Lotus Peak across a deep chasm.

"It's now or never!"

The panda launches itself off the peak. Rong extends the glider.

"We're flying!" Rong sees birds flying and peaks of different heights emerging from the clouds.

They approach Lotus Peak and get ready to land. Wu watches in alarm as he sees the group soar above him.

Once the group lands, Rong shouts, "We're a hair behind him! Keep going!"

The panda roars and beelines toward the golden wheat that stands on a stone pedestal, mere metres away from them.

"It's mine!" Wu reaches his hand out to grab the wheat but Grandpa An swipes it away from the pedestal with his stick.

Wu jumps off of the tiger and sprints. Rong intercepts and tackles him to the ground.

"Get off!" Wu spits.

"Bao, now!"

Bao leaps from the panda, slamming onto the ground, reaching his stubby arms to hug the golden wheat. A flash of light appears, the emperor and poet suddenly standing before them.

"Bishan wins!" Li Bai declares. The emperor clears the fog below them. Birds dance above and plants below bloom around their feet.

"Young villager," Emperor Huang starts. "What you have done today has been a feat. Your village will be proud."

"Thank you, Emperor." Rong bows, and so does Grandpa An and Bao, who trips.

"Now, you may receive your wish."

Finally, Rong's village can have full bellies.

He opens his mouth but stops. He glances at Wu, crying as he kneels on the ground. Surely, his village will not be kind to him after his defeat.

His mind then thinks of Yin, who kindly offered him equipment that helped him win, and Ru, who has a love for the festival that he relates to, but is unable to participate for a rule she cannot control.

"Emperor," Rong starts. "I wish that all villages have a harvest this year."

"You cannot make a wish that harms—" The emperor pauses. "What?"

Even Wu looks baffled.

He exchanges looks with the poet. "You want to *help* the other villages?"

"For seventy years, my village has lost and starved. None of us should feel this way."

The emperor nods. "Very well. I will grant your wish. Perhaps, next year, we will have a slight change in the trials."

The poet raises his brows. "Emperor Huang, whatever do you mean?"

"I announce a new trial: The Trial of Benevolence. For this boy has shown us that there is something valuable in one's heart. Let the villages know about your kindness and rejoice!"

In a flash, Rong and his team return home. The people erupt in cheers, embracing them.

"Cheers to Rong, Bao, and Grandpa An for bringing us a fruitful harvest!"

They throw the liveliest feast they have had in seventy years as they gather around a bonfire, where Rong tells the story of their victory.

The next morning, he gazes at the villagers happily getting the fresh soil ready for the new harvest.

The History Behind the Surname Zhuge

St. Margaret's Co-Educational English Secondary & Primary School, Woon, Jia Wen Mirabelle – 14

Do you know the myth of how the Chinese surname 'Zhuge' came about? Let us travel back to the time of 48000 BC…

A dense layer of fog covered the peak of Huangshan, home to two tribal groups—the Neanderthals, who called themselves the Zhu's, and Homo sapiens, who called themselves the Ge's. Sapphire-coloured blue jays and fiery red cardinals soared from above, and some laid their nests on the mountains for their serenity. Magnificent waterfalls poured down, and pristine streams gurgled through pebble stones. Amidst the beautiful scenery, however, there was much animosity between the Zhu and Ge tribes. The latter, who had evolved from the former to be more intelligent albeit less tough, were always looking down on the Zhu's, whom they regarded as slow-witted, rough creatures.

One night, Fei, a young Neanderthal teenager, was sitting outside his mud hut while gazing at the night sky. *Today was a terrible day,* he thought. He could not forget the humiliating scene when the Ge tribesmen mocked and threw stones at him when he asked if he could join in their game of catch. "The Ge's aren't that different from us anyway—why do they have the right to disregard the Zhu tribe? They always treat us as if we were wild animals. Someone ought to teach them a lesson!" he grumbled while throwing stones to the ground furiously.

Suddenly, a black shadow swooshed past the forest just before Fei. *Things have been strange recently,* he thought. There had been villagers disappearing and cattle bones left behind in the fields. Occasionally, he would see a dark shadow haunting the village. "Perhaps I was just imagining things," he murmured to himself. Yet all of a sudden, an enormous serpent-like animal with massive wings ascended to the night sky from below, and his jaw dropped instantly. The creature was dazzlingly radiant and perfectly matched the description of the fire-breathing dragon Nong from Chinese mythology. Fei froze in astonishment. "Thundering turtles! I...I must tell everyone about this!" he exclaimed. According to the myth, Nong, who dwelled in the mysterious, murky cave Longmen (Chinese for 'Dragon's Gate'), was notorious for devouring villagers and their livestock on the mountain. It was said that the dragon grew in power day by day, and there was only one way to secure everlasting peace —to kill Nong.

Rapidly, the news of the dragon's appearance spread throughout town and even reached the Ge clan. Both tribes immediately took action to fight the dragon. Over the next few months, the Zhu clan sent some of their strongest men to battle the dragon. The stocky Zhu's were close to killing Nong, but the dragon slyly escaped before they could destroy it. On the other hand, the dexterous Ge people succeeded in using snares to trap Nong, but the dragon bit off the string used to make the snare and could not be brought down by the puny Ge people, who had difficulty chasing down a buffalo, much less slaughtering a dragon.

After the failed attempts in killing Nong, the Zhu tribe leader, Wei, discussed with his tribe's elders on what they should do next. A wise and aged tribesman suggested an alliance with the Ge tribe. "The Ge's are wily creatures and can provide combat strategies, while our men are tough enough to battle the dragon." he claimed. Wei was doubtful whether this idea would work. *We have a chance of defeating the dragon with the Ge's help, but what if the Ge's are too proud to work alongside us? Will they abandon us halfway throughout the battle?* Despite these arising concerns, Wei gave in to the idea. "I will do what's best for my tribe," he proclaimed with determination.

The very next day, Wei headed to meet Feng—the leader of the Ge tribe—and tried to convince him to agree on an alliance between both tribes to combat Nong. Feng responded with a conceited laugh, "We don't need to cooperate with you Zhu's! Another elder had already suggested this idea, but of course, I rejected him. Although we are physically weaker than you, we have enough intelligence and wit to defeat the dragon alone. Fighting alongside the Zhu's would be a disgrace to us."

Upon hearing this, Wei stormed out of the room in rage. Part of his anger was due to the humiliation from Feng, but another reason was the fact that destruction was certain, as no alliance was made. As days pass by, Nong will become increasingly powerful, but what can we do?" Wei asked himself in frustration.

However, Wei's distress did not last long. Just a few days after the two leaders' meeting, Nong launched a vicious attack on the Ge village and ruthlessly massacred half of the Ge tribe's population. Seeing the drastic situation, Feng was filled with bitter remorse for his attitude to Wei and sent word to him that he now agreed on an alliance.

After the alliance was created, the Zhu's and Ge's worked together in preparation for the battle against Nong. The Ge's taught the Zhu's battle strategies and how to make snares, while the Zhu's impressed the Ge's with their accuracy and strength in throwing projectiles. The Zhu's were also great coaches when it came to physical training and helped knock many Ge men in shape. Apart from that, the Zhu's realised that their counterparts were much more simple creatures. They never had any malicious intent in their hearts and were always sharing whatever hunt they had captured. Soon, the Ge's realised that no tribe was superior over another and that there was much to learn from each other. They humbled themselves and became close friends with the Zhu's.

After months of preparation, the Zhu's and Ge's finally marched towards cave Longmen to fight an all-out battle with Nong. Advancing to the battlefield gave chills down every man's spine—it was a dark, misty night, and eerie sounds could be heard from the cave. When they arrived, Nong was already outside the cave, snarling and exposing his razor-like teeth, as if he already knew that both tribes would come to fight him that night. The hearts of all fighters skipped a beat when they saw the ferocious dragon, but they knew they still had hope of winning with the present alliance. Taught by the Ge's that encircling the enemy was advantageous, everyone surrounded Nong from all sides. After a fierce battle cry, spears were thrown like quickly-whizzing rockets onto the dragon. The throws were both powerful and accurate, as both tribes had improved their physical strength through joint training. Unfortunately, Nong was not defeated by these weapons. He breathed a long stream of fire at the men and declared smugly to them, "Foolish idiots! How dare you challenge me? Now you shall all die and perish!"

Cautious of the fire, the men quickly retreated to a nearby forest. Being clever creatures, some Ge's threw sticks and large rocks to a nearby clearing in order to divert Nong's attention. True enough, the dragon fell for the trap and charged towards the sound. Seizing this opportunity when the dragon had his back turned towards him, a Zhu tribesman aimed at Nong's tail, which was foretold in the myth to be Nong's weakness, and Nong roared in pain. He fell to his side in anguish, and with one more spear thrown into his neck, the dragon took his last breath.

A Zhu tribesman laid a pitchfork on the dragon while announcing triumphantly, "Three cheers for both tribes! Together, we've successfully defeated Nong. For this, we shall feast together on raw and juicy dragon meat!" The Zhu people raised their spears in enthusiasm, whereas the Ge people were not so keen on the idea of having raw meat, fearing that diarrhoea would come next. Nevertheless, both tribes agreed that a joint celebration must be held.

The party began, and everyone danced with animal feathers stuck in their hair around a bonfire. After the party had ended, Feng formally declared to everyone, "I represent all Ge people to apologise for our previous hostility and ill-treatment to the Zhu's." He bowed down to seek forgiveness and continued, "The battle against Nong has allowed us Ge's to realise the Zhu people's strengths. Because of this, we have swallowed our pride, and both tribes are bonded by friendship and love. After a discussion with Wei, I happily announce that from tomorrow onwards, both tribes are merged into one! There shall be no more discrimination amongst us, and everyone will be called the Zhuge people!" The Ge's cheered with high spirits, and the Zhu's beat their chests loudly to show approval, which the Ge's frowned upon and saw as barbarism, but they still smiled with good grace. Seeing this joyful party atmosphere, Wei thought contentedly in his heart, *May peace continue to prevail on the mountains!*

And that, my dear readers, is the story behind the Chinese surname 'Zhuge'.

Memories

St. Margaret's Co-Educational English Secondary & Primary School, Yan, Andrew – 13

11 May, 2013

Dear Diary, today I had the same old nightmare again. Since my psychologist recommended me to write it down somewhere, here I go:

"Help! The ground is shaking and the village is burning!" I'm stuck amongst hordes of panicking people, in what seems to be a village atop some mountains.

"The earth devils are back!"

"Quick, pass me the water bucket before it's too late!"

"...We don't have water! The well's completely dry!"

"There are cracks appearing on the ground!"

"Evacuate the women and children now!"

"It's the end of the world! Run for your lives!"

"We're losing control of the fire! We need to leave before it's too late!" A woman next to me is pleading with another stranger, who I swear I've met before, but it's probably just deja vu.

"I was born in this village, and I will die in it!"

"Please! Just go with us! One day we can come back and rebuild it!"

"...It won't be the same village I know and love."

"Very well then. May the gods spare you from the demons' wrath." The woman who was pleading with the stranger leaves.

My new psychologist means well, but I doubt this will help. I've had this nightmare every night for three years now: what makes him think that I can be cured?

I hope that one day I won't have to dream of that cursed village on fire again.

12 May, 2013

Dear Diary, today the CGTN aired a special program about the 5th anniversary of the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake.

I can vaguely remember experiencing the earthquake in the Chengdu metropolis during our badly timed family trip to Sichuan that year, and seeing people literally panic in the streets. Apart from that, I can't recall anything else. But every time I think of the broken windows, crumbling houses and fallen trees in footage of damaged villages closer to the epicenter, I feel nauseous. It's hard to fathom how this earthquake reduced entire towns to rubble in less than a minute.

Right now, I feel like this is the hypothesis that best explains the cause of my recurring nightmares. Therefore, I've decided to educate myself on the matter in order to understand the plight of people affected by the earthquake and try to find a silver lining in this horrible disaster. I hope that my nightmares will stop if I turn this bad memory into something more positive.

According to the program, infrastructure and healthcare in the areas affected by the earthquake still aren't up to standard. I hope I can find a means to help people living in those places.

24 June 2013

Dear Diary, great news! I won an art competition in my district and the grand prize was four round-trip plane tickets. I can use this opportunity to revisit Sichuan and perhaps stay in a local village affected by their earthquake. I'm sure my parents will agree to this since they've always wanted to see Sichuan's biodiversity up close, and last time we weren't able to see Sichuan's endangered red pandas due to the earthquake. I can't wait to tell them about this!

18 July 2013

Dear Diary, we're off to Sichuan tomorrow! Almost everything's been planned out and I've even managed to book a two-night stay in a traditional 'Danba' village. Unfortunately, the village was damaged by the 2008 earthquake and still isn't fully repaired, but I don't mind at all. The hostels are cheaper anyway.

Not sure why, but my parents seem a little uneasy whenever I discuss the trip. Oh well, grownups are grownups. They never talk to me proactively anyway. I'll bring you along so that I can write down my travel experiences.

19 July 2013

Dear diary,

Whew! We just reached our hotel in Chengdu even though it's already evening. Our flight got delayed until the afternoon and that messed up our travel plans. We were planning to do some sightseeing, but there isn't even time now.

C'est la vie, I suppose. We'll just have to increase our sightseeing pace tomorrow.

20 July 2013

Dear diary,

Today was another tiring day. We took a tour of the city, passing through the ancient Wuhou Shrine, the picture-perfect Wanjiang Park, and ended the day in the famous Panda Breeding Center not far from the city. The mighty terracotta statues inside the Wuhou Shrine were fascinating and the beauty of the riverside Wangjiang Park was unmatched, but I liked the Panda Breeding Center the most as I could finally see pandas in a habitat less enclosed than that of Ocean Park! I think I understand why Chengdu is considered a hidden gem of China.

Yesterday night, I wasn't able to sleep very well due to my nightmare. Strangely, my parents could not do so either. I'm beginning to suspect that we have a connection with Sichuan…

21 July 2013

Dear diary,

After six hours on a mountain road seemingly to nowhere, we finally arrived at the 'Danba' villages near the border with Tibet. This was well worth it! It feels like I'm actually stepping into Ancient China, and the Tibetan-style houses are a marvel to behold.

What's interesting about this village is how traditional the way of life is. It's a world apart from the hustle and bustle of the 'Concrete Jungle'. People travel around the villages by horse and cart and grow crops in the surrounding plains. Another funny thing is, they still believe in a myth of 'the earth dragon and the great shaking'. It sounds suspiciously like the events in my nightmare.

Apparently this village was rebuilt from the ruins of an older, destroyed village. The locals say that this is the sacred place where 'truth comes to light'. I wonder what that means.

22 July 2013

Dear Diary, I'm ready to embark on the hike. We're a bit late because I slept badly, but it doesn't really matter.

I saw my parents talking amongst themselves last night. I couldn't hear what they were muttering but they looked distraught. Something's wrong.

23 July 2013

Dear Diary, today I learnt something new about my parents – something I wish I had known earlier. I really shouldn't have judged them for being silent in front of me.

After we reached the ruins of the abandoned village after a one-hour trek, we saw a strange piece of paper encased in a glass case.

Our tour guide explained the significance of this shred of yellowed paper to us. Legend says that it was written in a strange language only known by the original residents of the village. They had lived in perfect harmony for centuries until a great earthquake struck the village and caused a fire which burnt it down. After some of the survivors returned decades later to start anew, a woman allegedly broke down in tears when she saw the charred remains of her dead boyfriend, who stayed behind to fight the fire.

But that's not the end of the story…

24 Jul 2013

Continuing on from where I let off-

After the tour guide explained this my parents burst into tears.

Now I know that my mom, who moved to Tangshan as a toddler, witnessed the 1976 earthquake first-hand. She was asleep when the earthquake struck, but woke up to a scene of total devastation. Although her family managed to move to a temporary shelter, her father volunteered to help rescue trapped survivors.

When he was tasked with rescuing people trapped within a crumbling building, she and her mother pleaded with him to stay behind. But he took the risk anyway, and rushed to help a group of starving survivors buried under the rubble. That was the last thing he knew before the building collapsed before my mother's eyes.

My dad also had a similar experience. Before meeting my mother, he was an aspiring firefighter. He thought of the profession as a honourable duty that would bring him a sense of pride and accomplishment. His ambitions were crushed when he saw his childhood friend burn to death during his first mission. After the incident, he refused to socialise with other people and generally attempted to avoid any human interaction.

They ended up meeting during a trekking tour into China's famous Wuyishan mountains. My mom was looking to broaden her horizons after taking a biology course, and my dad was disillusioned with urban life. After the month–long trek, they took a liking to each other, decided to exchange numbers, and the rest is history.

Both of them promised to get help and be more open with me. To be honest that doesn't matter much to me. I'm just glad that my true parents are 'back'. None of this would've been possible had I skipped this village for something else– China's mountains truly are magical.

Yesterday, I slept like a baby. No bad dreams, no waking up in the dead of night sweating all over my bed.

Fate really is a funny thing, isn't it?

I Believe in Dragons

St. Mark's School, Leung, Yin Tung Andrea – 14

When I was younger, my aunt used to tell me stories.

"Once upon a time, there were Eight Immortals," she'd say in a soft, mysterious voice. "They lived on the island Penglai, where it was never winter, and had trees that bore enchanted fruit healing every ailment."

Auntie was obsessed with the mythology and folklore of our Asian heritage.

She'd tell me tales of the Dragon King, the Ten Suns, how Pangu created the universe.

And I'd listen with shining eyes, gasping at all these mysterious moments.

"Sister!" It was my mum. "Are you done telling her those ridiculous tales?"

"Just a moment, *Jie Jie*!"

I winced. My mum wasn't exactly the biggest fan of fantasy, which was unsurprising, given her lack of imagination.

She had always somewhat disapproved of my aunt, who was dreamy and whimsical, her polar opposite.

My aunt was the most wonderful storyteller. She'd tell me about the story of Longnu and Han Xiangzi like she'd been there herself, and talk about dragons as if they were real.

"Their scales glittered like polished jade, their eyes orbs of gold, claws sharp as a hawk's," she said, her eyes animated, bright as though they were orbs of gold themselves.

She loved the myths of the Yellow Mountains the most.

"Legend says, our ancestor Yellow Emperor descended from Huangshan, and that dragons lived on its cloudy peaks."

The Emperor must've looked ridiculous in all–yellow attire.

"Li Bai himself visited the Yellow Mountains," Auntie said, smiling wistfully. "He got tons of inspiration for his poems. If only I could get the same amount of inspiration he'd found in dreary Wyoming."

She was an aspiring writer, talented, who had only one tiny problem—she couldn't finish a single book. I knew she tried, but it was never enough.

Things got even harder when Uncle left.

I could still see the stacks of half–written drafts piled up in the corners of her tiny apartment, gathering dust. Stories that would never be discovered, characters that would never come to life.

She held on to her book of Chinese mythology, held on to the legends of shimmering dragons and towering mountains from which yellow emperors originated.

"One day," she said. "One day I'll go to Huangshan like all the great poets did, and find out what on that mountain gives them their knowledge and inspiration."

She always wore a pearl pendant that seemed to glint like it was aflame. Her eyes reflected its light, so it seemed like she had twin stars in her pupils.

"And I'll write a bestselling series, and we'll be rich and move to California!" She lifted me up in her arms, and I giggled, grinning at the happiness on her face.

"Auntie," I would say, after she'd put me down, "is it real? Everything you said?"

And she would reply—

"Yes." Her eyes were faraway, like she was looking at something miles and miles away.

"But—" I avoided her gaze. My voice was timid. "Aren't they just stories?"

And she would reply—

"They're real, Fei Xiang. Never stop believing that." She stroked my hair. "They thrive on belief. If you stop believing, they will no longer exist."

"Oh! Does that mean I can see a dragon when I'm older?"

"Yes," she whispered. "I'll show you one day."

And we talked, laughed, and dreamed.

The cold hard truth would come later, but at that moment, it was real.

I was a kid then. Now, I was fifteen, and we were standing at the foot of the Yellow Mountains, having been offered the chance of a lifetime—a free tour to Huangshan.

Even after my childhood had come and gone, Auntie kept telling me her tales.

I'd long stopped believing her.

My mum's voice echoed in my ears. *"There is no such thing! Stop holding your head up in the clouds!"*

"Your aunt was a fool, and if you believe in her absurdity, then so are you. The world has no place for dreamers.

I knew what she said was true. But yet some part, deep inside of me, still held onto these stories. They soothed me, made me feel like Auntie was right beside me.

Something about Auntie made me *want* to believe her, no matter how ludicrous it all seemed.

The awe of finally seeing the majestic mountains took away my breath; it was as stunning as my aunt described it—the rolling ocean of clouds that seemed to stretch on endlessly, the sculpted peaks reaching beyond the sky.

Auntie stood there, quiet, taking in the magnificent view. "How beautiful," she murmured.

The pearl she wore seemed to glow in the mist. Like it was lit with a golden flame.

We hiked up the stone steps that were carved into the mountainside.
The higher we got, the more we saw, from misshapen trees that covered the rock like an emerald silk cloak to the lakes set deep in the valleys like jades adorning a crown. Clusters of villages were nestled in the mountains.

"Legend says," Auntie started. "This was where Huangdi ascended into heaven."

I smiled half–heartedly. "Sure." I was tired, sweaty, and not in the mood for her stories. But she seemed undeterred. Her smile was as wide as ever.

She didn't seem like someone who had just climbed up the Lotus Peak, the highest summit in the mountains.

The view was spectacular, but my knees were buckling a little, because just *maybe*, I had a tiny fear of heights.

Still, I felt like an eagle soaring above Huangshan, seeing the mountains from all the way up here.

The clouds were beneath us, obscuring the base, but we could see the other peaks stretching up to the sky, their unique silhouettes clear from this vantage point.

With their tips clawing towards heaven, rising above the clouds, they seemed like islands floating amongst a sea of billowing mist.

I turned away when my knees started to wobble a bit too much for my liking.

In front of us was a pool of water, as clear as a mirror.

"The Moon Pool," my Aunt said, stepping forward dazedly.

Before I could stop her, she reached her hand into the pool.

"Auntie—" I was trying to find a polite way to say 'are you crazy?' when she lifted a single gleaming object from the water. It was pill-like, and glowing faintly.

She walked towards the edge in a trance. My heart plummeted down a peak almost as tall as the one we stood on as I grabbed her arm. "Ah-Yi?"

She was looking up. I followed her gaze and I saw—

The shimmering forms of dragons swimming through the clouds. The sky was cracked open, like an egg, and the yolk was a radiant ball of light.

My jaw dropped.

"It is true," she breathed, her eyes fixed on the sky. "See?"

I pinched myself just to make sure I wasn't dreaming.

I wasn't dreaming.

My aunt faced me. Her eyes were orbs of fiery gold. "My time has come. Please, keep our memory alive. Do not forget."

Her skin rippled with jade-green scales. She smiled. "You are a remarkable girl. And you will grow into a remarkable woman. Thank you."

My eyes widened. "What?"

"Remember," she whispered. Before I could comprehend her words, she popped the pill into her mouth and stepped off the edge of the cliff.

Moments later, a coil of emerald green shot to the clouds above, joining the other dragons.

I thought I heard a cry of joy, reverberating through the mountains, echoing in my ears.

Then the hole started to knit itself back together, and the streaks of colors melted into the ball of light.

The crack in the sky closed up seamlessly, like it was never even there.

I blinked. Auntie had disappeared along with it.

On the ground was a necklace with a gleaming pearl pendant.

I picked it up and clasped it around my neck. It was an ember of warmth against my skin.

When I went down the mountain that day, the people in the tour would deny ever meeting a woman named Fei

Lung. Everyone back home would carry on as if she had never existed at all.

Auntie had vanished into thin air, every proof of her existence gone from the face of the earth.

"Aunt?" Mum said, an eyebrow cocked. "Ah–yi disappeared a year ago, remember? I understand you miss her, but you have to face reality."

Reality.

Her eyes darkened. "She's gone."

Reality.

The only thing left was her necklace.

But I remember more.

I've kept her book of mythology, and remember her stories.

I remember her smile and her eyes.

Her memory lives on in me, and the stories my ancestors had told, they all continue to live on in me.

I will never forget.

Some people believe in aliens. Others believe in Bigfoot, or even the Loch Ness Monster.

I believe in dragons. Do you?

Crystal Disaster

St. Mary's Canossian College, Fu, Jaime – 14

A shining crystal appeared next to me in the middle of the market floor. The eyes of the surrounding shoppers lit up as if they'd spotted an oasis in the desert. Without hesitation, mothers dropped their children on the ground, farmers abandoned their cart of hard-grown crops, teenagers left behind their heated game of volleyball in hopes of obtaining the shining crystal.

A tall man with broad shoulders who was previously grazing his cattle got hold of the crystal. All hell broke loose. Villagers jumped on top of each other in a ferocious cat fight, clawing and biting the person in front. I rolled my eyes as I grabbed some rice from the empty stalls and left.

The deep grumble of a dragon's stomach came from below. Debris on the ground was bouncing and moving suspiciously fast considering there was no wind. Another crystal fell from the sky, not far from the first. The scene of people rushing towards it reminded me of when I fed the ravenous fish in the pond with some bread. Not only were crystals falling, so were rocks, mud, and... oh no!

The ground melted and sank deep into the enormous hollow inside the earth beneath me, like a pottery creation being destroyed by its creator. Cracks creeped along the magnificent stone paths, razing our mountain village. The cracks were not new, however. They have been here since last month when Yan took the last clouds for weaving her famous cloud robes, after which the drought quickly followed. Villagers around me were frantically gathered their children, cattle and, of course, crystals, and dashed towards the central courthouse. I felt my mother's hand tightly grasping mine as we ran for our lives amidst the chaos. We didn't even glance at the crystals. My mom didn't believe in them. She said it was pure gluttony.

"Five crystals please!" the young lady demanded. She was wearing a delicate white cloud robe, with fifty-eight giant crystals dangling around her tiny neck—a sign of power and affluence. Her face was pale and ghastly and her eyes seemed lifeless as her frail body was almost blown away by the breeze. She snatched the crystals greedily after handing over a sack of rice enough to feed a family for a month. Everyone these days would rather starve than have fewer crystals on their neck than their neighbour. With less demand and depreciated value, we got by frankly because of the abundance of food.

It was common knowledge that the more crystals you own, the more power you have over others. Tim, with fifty crystals, raped my cousin Kate who only owned twenty crystals last month and no one dared to say anything about it. Alas, they even found him attractive! He drowned to death in the river shortly after as his crystals weighed him down. It was so ridiculous that everyone's life goal is to get more crystals, only to be trapped and suffocated by those very pebbles which brought them superiority.

"Villagers with fifty crystals or more shall receive immediate medical care and food. Others, line up according to your crystal status!" The chief, with a whopping eighty-six crystals on his neck commanded in the middle of the courthouse. The far corner to the left was crushed by a rock, turning about a quarter of the courthouse to rubble. It was the only intact structure after the horrific episode. I could sense the panic in the air as I hugged my mother and father on the cold hard floor. I could smell the obnoxious smoke and hear the occasional explosions in the background. Villagers around us clenched their crystals tightly. A group of teenage boys sitting behind us were contemplating a way to steal more crystals when no one was guarding them despite that the world was literally about to end.

"I told them this would happen... those stubborn pricks refused to listen!" Mother uttered under her breath.
"What, mother?" I asked. I loved it whenever mother called the chiefs "stubborn pricks".

Mother was in a heated argument with the village weaver, Yan. She barked, "Stop taking the clouds from the sky for your pathetic robes! We have been experiencing less and less rain these years! Crops are dying!"

Yan, wearing her cloud robe and sixty-nine crystals, smirked, "Peasant! What do you know about artistry? Who needs rain anyways?" Just when she was shoved out of Yan's shop mother spotted another crowd of crystals merchants. Enraged, she screamed, "I am telling you, for the fiftieth time, stop digging the contents out of the earth! I've seen the mine, it's eroding our mountain to the core! The mountain will collapse and everyone will perish!" Of course, the merchants ignored the "village lunatic".

From the right of the courthouse, the bare hollow inside the mountain was visible. Crystals and some rocks were piercing out, revealing a weirdly familiar temple.

Mother carried me, like a two-year-old, into the cavern beneath the village and into the dark, mystic temple. She laid me down on a nearby rock and chanted a prayer. The golden candlelight from the altar in front shone on her olive skin. The walls of the temple were made of rocks, flourishing with flowers despite the absence of sunlight. "Mother Earth, I have resided in this village for long. The gluttony of these villagers, depriving your body of nutrients are despicable actions. I shall convert them back to nature, so they can nourish you," Mother prayed and picked me up again. "Here, mother, this is your granddaughter. I shall teach her your values and she shall serve you." Mother set a bag of crystals on the altar which she had stolen from the merchants, which was quickly engulfed.

"Argh!" Mother shrieked. There was a massive landslide. The rocks originally on the top of the mountain, along with the marble altar from the temple, crumbled on us. Apparently, the one before was just the introduction to mother earth's destruction. The woman in front of us tried to grab her children and flee but to no avail. I watched in horror as the world turned black in front of me.

Mother Earth sent me a vision. I was standing on top of the landslide, overlooking the ruins that used to be my home. The village, once located on top of the mountain, now sat at the bottom, the part of the mountain still standing caved over us. Irregularly shaped rocks, moss, and crystals were protruding out of the wall, some of which were loose and about to fall out. The village was completely demolished. The once magnificent stone courthouse was buried in the soil, along with the villagers' precious crystals, only the tip of the grey roof could be seen. Mother! Father! Were they still alive? I tried to sprint towards them but couldn't. I glanced down at my feet. Where were my feet?

Out of nowhere, a whirlpool of dirt, sand, and fallen leaves appeared in front of me which slowly grew in height and formed a female figure. She had only one crystal eye which glared into my soul, and wilting leaves as her dress. She seemed powerful, yet, incomplete. There were holes in her body, missing fingers and dry, cracking skin. Her mysterious, deep voice did not come from her mouth, but inside my head, "Mortal! What have you done to my body fawning over those pathetic crystals of yours?"

I realised she wasn't glaring at me, but through me. The whole village was kneeling and shaking behind me and dared not look at the woman. She continued, "Once you get out of the dirt, which I shall lend you a hand in, return the crystals to the Earth. Set free the clouds you have captured and let rain nourish my body. Plant pine trees on the land to strengthen this mountain. You shall rebuild your village and suffer the consequences of your actions. Be grateful you're still alive!"

Next thing I knew, villagers were cleaning up and obediently returned their once treasured crystals at the foot of the mountain where the minerals were absorbed instantly. Yan pulled apart her cloud robes and released them back to the sky. The village, rightfully so, suffered years of drought, storms and illnesses. It wasn't until everyone paid their monthly tributes to Mother Earth at the renewed temple that we experienced rainfall. The soil became fertile enough for the pine trees to be planted shortly after. Mother, now known as the daughter of Mother Earth, became the chief of the village. Father was pronounced the head of agriculture and he transformed our village into a prosperous export centre for quality rice and vegetables.

From then on, there was no more nonsense of crystals or cloud robes as status symbols. The pine trees sheltered and protected generations of villagers for centuries, acting as a reminder of the catastrophe. The beautiful crystals were hidden from men lest there shall be another disaster.

World of Wonders

St. Mary's Canossian College, Lam, Jamese – 13

A group of adventurous scientists went on a scientific trip to the Mountains of the Yellow Emperor in eastern China. Out of their surprise, they discovered that the concept of magical places in stories ranging from The Lord of the Rings to the Avatar movie came from the place they are visiting.

They couldn't believe their eyes when they first saw the panoramic and spectacular view. The mountains were breathtakingly beautiful, with their sharp peaks, raised villages and floating clouds. Some of the pine trees were about 1500 years old, and tens of thousands of stone steps might be as ancient. Plus, according to the movie, a pair of poets, Li Bai and Du Fu, lived on the mountains in the 8th century, and influenced Jack Kerouac and other "beat poets".

The scientists started exploring and hunting through the place. They found new species of animals there, and dinosaur bones. Dinosaur bones found in these and other Chinese mountains are the reason that so many stories feature dragons living in secret mountain caves. They went up to the second hill, and didn't expect to find poets still living there. The poets revealed the secrets about the place, unlike animals living in the other places of Earth, animals living there had different body types and structures and some were even combined with different animals. What the scientists didn't anticipate was that the animals knew how to communicate and talk with human being. The talking animals and the poets brought the scientists to a completely different world, The Peaceful Cave, which was built by ancients living there and with the help of magic in the past. In this beautiful world, dinosaurs hadn't extinct and they were being tamed thousand years ago. There were some poets in the cave and they helped the scientists settle down.

The poets and the animals started sharing their experiences. Originally, people died but these smart animals invented a new potion that ensured you to live forever without dying, hence one of the people living there was an ancient. The place was fabulous and tranquil 1000 years ago, so is the present. The reason why poets loved living on the Mountains of the Yellow Emperor was the place was filled with inspiration and these magical inspirations had a strong power to arouse them to create a wonderful poem. In fact, the entire place was made out of magic so it always felt so magical and unearthly.

High up in the clouds, was a tiny village. The poets led the scientists to the village by jumping onto clouds, where about 100 posterities had been living there for their entire lifetime. The scientists were all astonished by the structures of the houses and how unique they were. They started to learn more about the people living in the Mountains of the Yellow Emperor and learnt their daily habits and their traditions.

Time flew, and eventually, the scientists together with the poets returned back to the Science laboratory. They informed the internet about this really overwhelming and unexpected experience and on the following day, people started discovering about the Mountains of the Yellow Emperor and more and more scientists went there to do more research and investigation. People were amazed by its magic and more and more people started going on vacations to the Mountains of the Yellow Emperor. The animals initially living there went to meet people that visited and shared the history about the Mountains of the Yellow Emperor. More and more people started understanding the place and it is now listed as one of the best places in the world.

Above the Clouds

St. Mary's Canossian College, Schuerz, Cris – 12

Yun stared up at the mountains near his village. They looked so tall and majestic. 'Yun' means 'cloud' in Chinese, and he had always wanted to go to the top of the mountains. As a naturally curious person, seeing the mountains every day and not being able to explore them because of his young age made him want to go up there even more. Yun could only see the bottom part of the mountains, as the top was always cloaked in mist. He wondered what was hiding beyond the clouds. He felt like something was calling out to him from the mountains, an adventure awaiting him at their peaks.

His teacher had once told him, "Believe in yourself and go for it," So he when he finally turned old enough to explore on his own, he did. Bidding his family farewell, he set out on his mountain journey. He had packed some provisions including sweet cakes, fruits, and tea, making sure there would be enough for his journey. As he approached the base of the mountains, he looked up at them, and said, "I'm ready, here I come!" and off he went.

Yun was young, fit, and strong, but the climb was a struggle even for him. He hadn't even walked for a couple of hours and he was already exhausted. As he advanced, he came across a listless body. He bent down to take a closer look and realized it was an old man. Yun asked, "Why are you here all alone? Are you alright? Would you like some food or drink?" The man waved his hand at Yun, signaling that he was alright and was happy to have some of the food offered. "Thank you for stopping. You are very kind. If you need any help, just call out my name, 'Tikki', and I will be there!" The old man then hobbled off, leaving Yun behind. He watched the man leave and disappear into the mist. Yun stared at the spot where the man had been just a moment before, shaking his head in amazement before resuming his journey.

Walking up the mountain, he enjoyed the scenery, resting every so often to admire the stunning view. After crisscrossing up the mountain for quite a while he stopped to get some rest again. To his surprise, a wolf appeared from the mist, and Yun jumped up in fear. He realized that the wolf was very skinny and was limping as if it had no strength. He took pity on the wolf and offered it some food. The hungry wolf quickly gulped it down and instantly looked refreshed and energized. "Thank you, kind boy," the wolf said. "If you need any help, just call out my name, 'Rikki', and I will be there." Yun smiled and thanked it, but thought to himself, "Do I look helpless? Why is everyone offering me help?" But his thoughts were soon forgotten when he looked up. "Wow!" He hadn't realized how far he had gone, and how close he was to the top now.

He got a rush of adrenaline as he continued at a faster pace with great anticipation of what was ahead. Stopping one last time before reaching the top, Yun heard the birds chirping in the trees. Yun couldn't help but notice how hungry they looked. So, he crumbled up some of his cake and threw it on the ground for them to eat. While the birds pecked on it, the largest one said, "If you ever need any help, call out 'My birds, come to me!' and we will be there." He now started to think that everyone on his journey knew something he didn't comprehend.

He walked for just a while longer and finally reached the summit. "Ahhhhh!" Yun breathed out, looking around him in amazement. He could see the layer of clouds below and felt as if he was on top of the world. All of a sudden, he felt someone cover his mouth with a cloth and smelled a strange odor. He felt dizzy, his sight blurred, and then passed out. The man lifted him up, placing him over his shoulder and walked off.

When Yun woke up, he found himself in a dark cave, with someone sitting on a log opposite him. The man raised an eyebrow and asked "Are you awake?" Yun rubbed his eyes and mumbled, "Where am I? Who are you? What do you want?" Yun looked around and tried to get up, only to realize he was tied to a post. The man replied, "You can call me Shan. I'll give you a task every day for three days, and if you complete them all, I won't do you any harm and set you free. Do you understand?" Yun nodded and gulped. He had a feeling this wasn't going to be good…

His first task was to go to the meadow and guess which special cow was the one Shan wanted to roast for dinner. Yun was very scared. A special cow? How was he supposed to know which one? Then he remembered the wolf's

words. He said," Rikki!" and, sure enough, the wolf appeared in front of him. "You have called me. What do you need?" Yun explained the situation, and the wolf ran around quickly and inspected the cows. Finally, he circled around the one special cow. When Yun went up to the cow, studying it closely, he found a hole in its ear. He knew it was special. Just as Yun turned back about to thank the wolf, it ran off into the mist. Yun tied a rope around the cow's neck and took it to Shan. So astonished and amazed was Shan that he stuttered, "You didn't do that by yourself, but I must keep my word and I won't harm you."

The next day, Shan gave him another task. "I want you to carve steps from the bottom of the mountain to the top." Yun was perplexed. Build steps? How long was that going to take? How could he do this on his own? Then he remembered the old man. He called out," Tikki!" and the old man appeared in front of him. "You have called me. What do you need?" Yun again told him everything and the Tikki nodded. "It will be so." As soon as he finished speaking, what had been a rocky and rough path slowly turned into wonderful stone steps extending from the base to the summit. Yun let out a sign of relief as he walked back to the cave. The mysterious man was nowhere to be seen. That night, when Shan came back, he nodded. "I saw the steps, very impressive. You didn't do that by yourself, but I must keep my word and I won't harm you."

On the last day, Shan gave him another seemingly impossible task. "You must scatter seeds over all the mountains." Yun knew he wouldn't be able to do that on his own, so he called out, "My birds, come to me!" and he heard a cacophony of beating wings as the birds landed at the mouth of the cave. The largest one said, "You have called us. How can we help?" Yun told them what was needed. As a flock of birds flew off, Yun wondered where Shan had been the whole day. How would he have known that Yun hadn't completed the task all by himself?

Shan returned that night, smiling, and said, "Yun, you have a heart of gold and have your head screwed on right. I've been waiting for someone like you to take the challenge of climbing the mountains." Yun looked into the sparkling eyes of Shan and exclaimed, "Rikki and Tikki and all the birds were just you testing me?" "Yes, it was all me," Shan replied with a soft chuckle. "People do not care about the mountains anymore, and I need someone like you to guard them and shelther them from harm of all sorts. I asked you to find the special cow so that you know how to feed yourself. I asked you to build the steps so that it made it easy for you to roam the mountains. I asked you to plant seeds so that life continues to flourish. Yun, will you take care of the mountains for me?" Yun nodded in delight, his eyes brimmed with happy tears. Shan closed his eyes in contentment and off he went in a blue wisp of smoke. Yun stared into the distance at the mountains again, feeling a sense of mission swelling in him.

The Story of Humans and Animals

St. Mary's Canossian College, Shen, Bella – 13

"Right there!"

"Yes! Catch them!"

A bunch of kids ran through the backyard of a mansion, chasing their lions. The lions were scared, running away for their life. When the children caught them, they stood around the lion and sang the "Lion Song"

" One of the lions doesn't have a tail,

Two of them don't have eyes

And the rest don't have ears,

That's so strange, that's so strange."

The lions looked scared. They were trembling. When the song had finished, the children rushed to the lions. They pulled their tails and ears off, leaving blood all over the floor. Poor lions.

Joe bade farewell to his friends after the game and went back home. It was a steel hemisphere landed on a steel platform, which was floating in the air. Mom was cooking dinner. He told his parents about the game, " Today we played a really interesting game. My friends pulled the ears and tails of the lions off! It's really fun!"

Mom replied unhappily, "Joe, lions are precious animals. We shouldn't do that."

Joe seemed to realize that he had got into some trouble, so he apologized," Sorry, mom.z"

Mom sighed, "Well… It's good for you to know about your own faults. But now, would you also like to go and apologise to the poor lions and….. take them to the doctor living in the Bao Yi mountain?"

Joe thought, "The Bao Yi mountain? There are snakes and fierce animals hiding in the dark at night. It is also misty and mysterious. A number of hikers have got lost recently. How can I go? But…… if I refuse mom's request, I will probably be punished… I wouldn't like that."

And so, Joe agreed. He went to take the lions and slowly walked up the mountain. The lions he was taking care of looked really fragile. It didn't seem to be lions at all.

Then, he located a hut built by woods and bricks, which looked really different from those in the city. He opened the unlocked door. Then, he saw a young girl, the doctor's daughter. The girl smiled friendlily at him and took the lions to the medical room.

Joe told her what happened, and the girl seemed to be unpleased with what he had done.

" All animals are alive. They have feelings…… just like we do," The girl said, taking out a small animal from a paper box. "This is Vida. Take this, take care of it well. I hope it can teach you a lesson."

Joe didn't understand what the girl was saying, but he was happy that he could own a pet. He agreed that he would take good care of the Vida.

Back home, Mom was surprised to see the Vida in Joe's hands. Joe told Mom everything about what the girl said. Mom was happy about that. She gave Joe a small cage and some food. Joe treated the Vida well.

Mom was pleased as well. She was very happy that someone had educated his son and made hm change a lot.

One day, at school, Joe told his classmates about his new Vida. The classmates wanted to see his pet so much and so Joe brought her back to school. His classmates rushed to the Vida, which made it very scared. Joe didn't realize that this would hurt the Vida. He just felt proud of himself and his pet.

When he got home and took the Vida out of his bag, the Vida looked dizzy and tired. So, Joe brought her back to the mountain.

It was raining torrentially, making the road misty and damp. The large trees shrouded the shadow of Joe. There was no sunshine. There is no light on the mountain. Walking aimlessly, Joe finally saw a mansion. He knocked on the door. A man's voice was projected from he mansion, "Well, I know it would end up like this, but I cannot help. Because you neglected its well−being, it is now sick. How irresponsible you are! Take her back home. I cannot save her."

Joe was depressed. He sat on the floor and cried. The Vida suddenly said, "Free me, Joe."

Joe looked at her and asked, "How can I free you? You are my pet."

The Vida laughed bitterly, "You see, humans keep repeating their faults again and again. They do it over and over. They never understand their faults, and they do it again and again."

Joe didn't understand. The Vida continued, "Let me tell you a story. A thousand years ago, the humans mistreated their pets. They beat them, starved them and even ate them as food, just like what you did to us. As the technology was getting more and more advanced, some scientists started to teach the pets to speak, think and write. They learnt about freedom, and they finally realized that they were mistreated. Then, some of them started a war with humans. Of course, they didn't win for the first time. But they tried twice, three times, four times and they finally succeeded. Most humans were killed by your ancestors, and the rest of them were forced to serve the animals. The animals started to call themselves 'human'. And…… you are an animal, not a human."

The Vida's voice got softer and softer, then disappeared. She held her last breath and sighed. Joe cried because of the death of his pet.

Joe walked down the mountain, going back home. On his way back, the puddle reflected his red eyes and despair face. What the Vida had said was so impressive that he could never forget it. He was both depressed and regretful. As he buried the dead body of the Vida into the damp soil, his heart of arrogance was also forever buried underground.

Beyond the Legends

St. Mary's Canossian College, Wong, Julia – 13

Huangshan, located in China, is one of the most world–famous mountains. It's constantly surrounded by mists and fog. Therefore, many myths were passed on from generations to generations.

There are numerous fascinating scenes on Huangshan, you can view wild spring flowers blossoming in spring; listen and hum to the spectacular waterfalls in summer; enjoy the colourful fall in autumn and touch the falling, translucent snowflakes during winter. The diversity of sceneries of this place at different seasons makes its beauty unique.

There are many legends about this place, one of which is that some ancient Chinese Emperors had ascended to heaven through the "Huangshan entrance gate" while some other Emperors had successfully refined the "pills of immortality" in Huangshan and had risen to the sky from its mountain top. All these placed mystery to Huangshan, which stands towering out majestically in the vicinity.

Local people have a strong belief that Huangshan holds the Earth and heaven apart; it is a gateway through which people can assess their afterlife. The sacred and spiritual mountain has a paradise awaiting them...

Hence, many elderly people, around their age of sixty (before they're too old and lose their walking ability), will embark their journey in search of their new world. They are optimistic to find their destination as no elderly people had ever returned once they headed up the heavenly path.

Mok was a villager living at the foot of Huangshan. As time went by, he found his mobility was impaired because of his constantly aching legs. So, he decided to start his journey up Huangshan before his physical mobility was totally impaired. Mok's grandson named Fai, who is a clingy ten–year old boy, tiptoed and followed Mok out of curiosity, without making a single noise so that his grandfather wouldn't notice him. Mok was especially indispensable to him, since Fai grew up under the meticulous love of Mok.

With the aid of his walking stick, Mok started walking up the mountain. After two hours' walking, Mok arrived at a little stream. The water flowed endlessly from a little slope, and flowed swiftly along the rocks. Everything sounded like a harmonic piece. It was probably Fai's hallucination, but that stream seemed to shimmer. Mok stopped by it and took a generous gulp of the stream water. The gulp of water was amazing, it tasted like nothing else he had ever drunken before, it energised him and his legs didn't seem to ache anymore. Fai felt amazed but he dared not to drink.

Mok then moved on at a quicker speed and arrived at a magnificent "palace". It was built of red and brown bricks, just like the temples in the village, but the palace was even bigger, and it was extended by several blocks. His grandson followed tightly, making sure that he wouldn't miss out a single sight. Mok was astonished when he saw the security guards of the palace — some weird creatures he had never seen before. Mok had regarded himself as an experienced animal expert for his whole life, but this time, he couldn't even name the two creatures. They were unbelievable. One looked like a lion, but it had pointy horns like rhinos and a hissing tongue like snakes. The other one had slippery skin like salamanders, but it had a pair of snowy–white wings.

Although the creatures didn't look friendly, they didn't stop Mok from the outset. Instead, they beckoned him to come nearer to them. Mok did what they signalled him to do, and then he vaguely heard a voice welcoming him, "Welcome to your new home, my friend…" He gazed in wonder, and slowly, he got attracted by the fountain standing in the middle of the palace. When he looked into the water, the liquid started bubbling, but quickly settled. He then realised that his reflection was completely different. He looked as if he was back in his young thirties, with his wrinkles smoothened, his hair thickened and blackened and his eyes brightened. He thought he might be too tired to get these illusions, so he rubbed his eyes. He then felt the urge of sipping the fountain water, and he irresistibly did so.

What an eye–dropping change! The wrinkles on Mok's face disappeared completely, he felt he was lively and what's more — he started to diminish into the size of a baby in no time. A sudden beam of blue light shed from the sky and raised baby Mok far up into the sky. His grandson, witnessing his grandfather's sudden changes and ascending to the sky, was totally astonished. He gasped slightly in fear "Oh no, grandpa, come back..."; however, that gasp was loud enough to alarm the guards. The salamander–like security guard sprang to action, and promptly grabbed hold of him. Fai screamed, yelled and struggled vigorously, hoping that the creature would let go of him. Fai then started pulling its wings, and surprisingly, the creature vanished, so did the palace, the fountain and the blue light, all have gone in a sudden. Fai, by leaps and bounds, escaped, trying to convince himself that everything he had just seen was not real. He had never wanted to go back home so badly. Fai didn't know how long he had been running, he only felt like centuries. When he finally reached the bottom of the mountain, he fainted out of exhaustion and tiredness.

Hours later, Fai opened his eyes slowly.
He was back in the village, lying on his own cosy bed, with several adults and elders panicking around him.
He rubbed his eyes puzzledly, and whispered in a scary and soft voice: "Where am I?"
"You're safely at home," his mom replied gently, "you fainted somewhere near the mountainside..."
Fai was too eager to solve the mysteries in his head, he stopped his mother, "Mom, where is grandpa? I want to see him now. I followed him up onto the mountain and saw him shrink into a baby and there were some odd creatures, one brought baby grandpa high up to the sky and another even tried catching me, I..."
"Fai, it's just a dream. Now go back to sleep. You must be really tired," his father confronted.
But was it really a dream only? If Fai hadn't gone back to sleep at that time, he would have noticed his mother, silently slipping out the glittering white feather which he didn't even realise he was clutching in his arms. His mom continued whispering and singing a lullaby,
"Sleep my child,
Let it remain,
Forget the wild,
It's just a dream..."

Meanwhile, deep inside the adults, they were astounded as Mok passed away two weeks ago.
And more importantly, it was a taboo not to mention any legends of Huangshan to children before they reached their age of sixteen.
So, did Mok find his afterlife? Also, did Mok purposely look for Fai and lead him towards Huangshan so as to convey special messages to them? Or else how could Fai know about the heavenly place and describe so vividly as to what had happened up in the mountain if nobody has ever mentioned the legends to him?

No matter you believe Fai or not, this is how the myth is passed on even among children nowadays.

Tiger of the Mountains

St. Paul's Co-educational College, Chow, Cheuk Lam – 12

Granny tells me to open the door of our little hut. She says that it must be Daddy who has come, but I don't think so. Daddy never comes, he just calls Granny once in a while and sends us envelopes with money inside. Granny usually says the money is useless and throws it away.

But outside the door is a fat man wearing dark sunglasses. He has several big men beside him, but they don't move. I think they are just for carrying stuff. But I recognize the short man's voice from when Daddy calls back home. It's Daddy!

Granny hobbles out and scowls when she sees him. She yells at him in Chinese. I don't know that much Chinese, but I think Granny is saying rude words and telling him off. Granny never says rude words. Daddy must have been really naughty.

Daddy's smile disappears and he spits on our floor. He says in English that he is taking me out now to see a beautiful place where he will build a house for us to live in together. I say that Granny's house is beautiful already, but he yells at me. I don't want to go with him.

But Daddy grabs me by the hand and tugs me out the door. He tells Granny that we will be back by nightfall.

"Where are we going?" I ask.

He has a smile on his face but it's not real. I think he's angry. "We're going to see a nice place in Huangshan, where I will build a big house for you and me, Tommy. It will be better than your precious Granny's house."

"What about Granny?" I ask.

He doesn't answer me and tells me to walk faster. If not, the big men that follow him around will carry me. Except I'm not a baby, I'm seven years old, so I won't be carried that way. I walk faster.

We reach the place that Daddy keeps talking about. My feet are tired but I can keep up because Granny and I walk up the mountain trails every day for exercise. It's a platform on the peaks surrounded by pine trees, their branches twisting into the clouds. It is beautiful like Daddy said. But here is the land of deer and rocks and nature. I don't want to live here. They own this land.

Daddy scowls when I tell him that. He says I have to be more of a man, because "the world is my oyster". But I don't know what oysters are, so I don't understand. And Granny says that I'm a boy, not a man.

He points to the super-tall glass buildings in the city centre. He says that he'll build those buildings here, with a big shopping mall. All with glass, he says, so that everyone can look at the pretty trees. He says that there might be a zoo, and we can catch the animals here to put in cages.

"No!" I blurt, then I remember Daddy doesn't like me saying no. I thought he would be building a bigger type of Granny's wood hut, not a glass monster that's going to crush the trees and the animals. I imagine old trees falling, rabbits and deer jumping through the wood to escape, boulders getting scraped and breaking… I tell Daddy that, but he laughs in my face.

"Now Tommy, it's just a small part of the mountains. The animals can go somewhere else."

I think, *why should the animals go away to make room for us? It's their home.* But I don't say it, because Daddy seems mad.

We eat lunch on the platform which Daddy keeps calling "our property", then Daddy takes me by the hand and we walk around "our property".

I keep telling Daddy that we shouldn't build our house there. Granny's house is big enough for all of us. Then he says the big men always following him around have to live in the same house as we do, to protect us. But I don't like having them around.

Then Daddy says it's time to go. The big men gather up everything and march us down. It starts out okay. But after a while, even I can see that we're not going the same way as we did coming up.

"I remember a twisty pine tree," I say to Daddy. "Right beside the rushing waterfall. We haven't been here before."

Daddy frowns and pulls my arm hard. That's how I know that I've said something wrong. He talks to the big men who are leading us, but they point at the map and say we're going in the right way.

I pull on Daddy's sleeve. "Daddy, I remember that rock. It has a star–shaped hole in it. We've seen it a lot of times before."

Daddy turns to whisper to the tall men again. Then a man slashes the rock with a knife. I'm not fast enough to stop him. I look at the ugly wound in the middle of the rock and I want to cry, but then Daddy glares at me.

We keep walking.

The big men make marks into every tree or rock that they pass, and I can't help but watch the scars disappear behind us. But then we pass the marks again.

And again.

And again once more.

But the men still keep putting marks into everything they pass. Soon the first tree they slashed through has five huge splits in it, marking the five times that we've passed that tree.

I sit down because Daddy's not listening. "Daddy, you made the mountains angry. They won't forgive you this time, that's why they're leading us around in circles. "

Daddy scowls at me and one of the big men scoops me up like a baby. But I know that the mountains will punish them.

Then we finally go down into a rocky valley that we haven't gone down before. Daddy's looks hopeful that we'll finally get out, but I know it is a trap.

The valley is a dead end. It leads to a dark cave that nobody wants to go into. Daddy turns back with a sigh and starts shouting at the big men who have been leading us.

I see the orange shadow first. It is a tiger, half–hidden by the bushes around the cave. Then it leaps out and fastens its jaws around the biggest of the men.

The man holding me drops me and I run to the tiger. It's impossible! There are no tigers here and no healthy tiger would eat humans — it must be the mountains. The mountains are enraged. I don't know what I'm doing, but I know that I can help.

The big man yells and falls, but I can see that there is no blood. The tiger has not hurt him. I touch the tiger's head, and it turns and looks at me with those burning green eyes. I'm terrified, but I keep stroking its fur and looking at the tiger. "I know you are peaceful," I whisper to it, "I know you were sent by the mountains. We have learnt our lesson, we will go."

The tiger's stare doesn't waver. I am scared for a second, and then it blinks and turns, prowling back into the cave. It turns back and roars as a farewell, and then disappears.

The big man stares at his arm. It is not bleeding, not even bruised. I knew the tiger did not want to hurt us.

Daddy goes over to me. I hope he knows that the mountains wanted to punish him, but they forgave us instead of killing us here.

"Let's leave —" Daddy says, out of breath. "Let's leave this horrible place, right now."

We somehow make our way out of the mountains. It's nighttime already. We go to Granny's house, and Daddy stays there. He mentions nothing of our trip into the mountains for a few days.

In those few days, life returns to normal. I help Granny harvest our fields, and Daddy sometimes helps out. I play with the other children, who are also from the outskirts of the city. I think Daddy is happier here.

Then one day I come home from helping in the fields and Daddy is gone, replaced by a note in his handwriting.

Dear Tommy,

I have decided to cancel the house that I was going to build on Huangshan. I won't build the shopping mall as well. I have decided to sell my business and retire with you and Granny. If Granny allows, I want to live in your house to retire.

Thank you for teaching me about nature.

Love, daddy.

I show Granny the letter. She says that Daddy has learnt his lesson. We decide to eat a celebratory dinner tonight.

Before I go inside for dinner, I see a glimpse of orange fur and green eyes, prowling back to the mountains of its home.

The Emperor's Word

St. Paul's Convent School, Au, Cheuk Kiu Agnes – 13

"Does anyone know why 'Yishan' became 'Huangshan'?"

No one responded to Miss Chan. Most students were half asleep, some were secretly on their iPads, and a small fraction was doing unrelated homework.

"Fine, then, I'll tell this story. I expect all of you to listen closely!"

With that, Miss Chan started telling her story. I wasn't sure what she said – by the time she'd started droning on, my eyelids slowly shut, and I felt drowsiness sweep through me...

"Yishan...is this really the right place, Fuchu Gong?"

"Of course, my emperor. Look at this wonderous view!"

People's muddy voices echoed around me. As I opened my eyes, I found myself in a deep, dark cave. It felt freezing in my thin uniform. I huddled up and looked around for light. I saw some blurry figures move towards me. The leading man approached me and spoke.

"Are you okay, child?"

"Where am I? Ugh, it's so cold..." I bit my icy lip and tried to huddle tighter as I shivered helplessly.

"Men, help this poor child. He must have hit his head." Under his order, his men hurried over and wrapped robes around me.

As they fussed over me, the man crouched down with pitiful eyes and explained, "We're looking for a land of alchemy to make the elixir of life. Once you take it, you will never grow old. Would you like to join us?"

It took me a few seconds to process what he just said. Laughing, I blurted, "Sir, I'm pretty sure immortality is a myth. 'Elixir of life'? What caveman thinking...I must've been transported to the past."

One of the leader's men gave me a sharp glare. "Don't you dare speak to our emperor Huang Di like that!"

Emperor? Shocked, I looked back to the leader. I knew I was somehow in ancient China, but coming face to face with the emperor was an even greater surprise.

"You must've hit your head pretty hard! It's okay, Rong Chengzi. I understand if you don't want to join us. You can stay in this cave. We'll keep going."

During the few minutes I've been in this darned cave, I've developed nothing but disdain for it. Besides, the thought of being left alone was scary. "I...I'll go with you."

The emperor smiled kindly. As everyone helped me up, I felt a sweetness in my heart – I haven't been smiled to like this in such a long time.

As we left the cave, I stopped to gaze at this wonderland – the hills seemed to go on and on forever, the clouds moved aimlessly across the sky, the trees and grass were the greenest green I'd ever seen...what a strange and spectacular sight!

Wandering at the foot of the Yishan, we didn't go far before we stopped in front of a lake. Its alluring atmosphere drew us closer. I scooped up a handful of water – it felt warm to my cold hands. "This must be the heavenly lake!" Someone exclaimed. "If you say so, Fuchu Gong, then it must be true!" Everyone grew excited and suggested Huang Di to take a dip, so he took off his clothes and jumped into the lake. "My muscles and bones feel relaxed already!" Hearing this, everyone else joined him. Fuelled by curiosity, I joined them as well.

After that short break, we left refreshed and motivated. As we walked further, Huang Di sniffed the air. "What a strong and mellow fragrance! It must be good wine!" The men scurried around, seeking eagerly. Moments later, someone found the wine in a stone trough. Rong Chengzi took a sip and cried, "Immortal wine!" Everyone immediately took turns drinking. "Would you like some?" Rong Chengzi's eyes were less ferocious as he looked at me this time. "No thanks, I'm underage..." Rong Chengzi's frowned, but shrugged and continued drinking. The scent of wine wafting through the air was truly tempting, but the thought of getting drunk held me back.

After what seemed like forever, we finally found the land of alchemy to make the elixir of life. "Hurray! We can become immortal now!" I exclaimed enthusiastically. I didn't believe the myth earlier, but the mystical ambience enveloping us changed my beliefs. Besides, we'd trekked Yishan for so long, something in return was to be expected.

"We still have to build the platform and furnace. We also need wood and ingredients for the elixir."

Everyone groaned and grumbled. After some discussion, Fuchu Gong and Rong Chengzi took responsibility of the alchemical platform and furnace. Most others chopped wood. The rest of us, including me, were led by Huang Di to find the ingredients of the elixir.

It felt like another 10 years had passed as we hiked across Yishan, cluelessly looking for ingredients, so Huang Di started a conversation.

"How old are you, child?"

"I'm 12...so, and I say this respectfully...emperor, could you not call me 'child'?"

I realised how rude I sounded. Instead of breaking a fuse, though, Huang Di only chuckled.

"12 is still very young! You still have your entire life ahead of you!"

"It doesn't matter! Life is so stressful, I don't think I'll survive these tough, unbearable years..."

"We all have our toughest moments. It's getting through them that makes us stronger! And it's getting stronger that allows us to keep moving forward."

I clicked my tongue as he lectured me. I found it irritating for a man born with a golden spoon in his mouth from thousands of years ago to be teaching me how to live my life.

Soon, we ran out of food. People began leaving, not wanting to continue this pointless search. Eventually, I was the only one left with him...and I wanted to leave, too.

As I dragged my feet forward, I suddenly felt a sharp prickle in my foot. "Ouch!"

"Are you okay?" Huang Di crouched down and examined my foot. There was unwavering determination in his eyes...and the same pity that was present when we first met. His expression annoyed me. *He* made me struggle and suffer for *himself*.

"I'm done!" I yelled. He shrank away from me in shock. "You've caused me so much pain and trouble. I don't want to help you anymore!"

His determination became sadness. "But...once we take the elixir, we'll become immortal! We can work through our toughest times together. We—"

"Enough! Stop talking!" I clasped my hands over my ears and squeezed my eyes shut. "My whole body hurts, and it's all thanks to you. I don't want you here! Leave me alone!"

For a moment, there was only silence. Then, I heard Huang Di's feet as he rose, turned, and continued on, alone.

With heavy steps and a heavy heart, I limped to a nearby cave and tended my wound. I was clothed and only a bit hungry, but I felt colder and more defeated than I ever had. As I huddled up again, our memories of the journey across Yishan ran through my mind. I remembered his kind smile, the cozy bath in the lake, the laughter we shared as we drank the wine...and I couldn't get what Huang Di said out of my head. That I could get through tough moments and become stronger. That he would do it alongside me.

I started crying unstoppably. Crying tears of regret, guilt and shame.

I must return to his side, I thought. *He's done so much for me. I've been so ungrateful.*

With newfound strength, I left the cave, making my way back to the land of alchemy. To my dismay, a large group was already surrounding Huang Di, Fuchu Gong and Rong Chengzi. They took the elixir together and rose from the ground, departing for the heavens.

"Wait! Don't leave me!" I barrelled my way through the crowd, reaching where Huang Di once stood. With a charged leap, I latched onto his leg, sighing in relief as I rose with him. "I'm sorry, Huang Di! I—"

Huang Di violently shook his leg. "Let go of me!" I looked up into his harsh, unforgiving eyes. "You didn't earn this. Go live with those disgusting, greedy scoundrels!"

My hand slipped and I fell. *Let me die,* I thought depressingly, unable to swallow the tight knot in my throat. *I deserve every bit of this.*

As I hit the ground, immense pain spread through my body. My limbs slowly froze, turning to stone. Suddenly, I felt a hard hit on my head.

I opened my eyes to see Miss Chan, her eyes as piercing as daggers. "Sleeping in my class? How dare you!"

I felt dampness around my eyes. My classmates snickered under their breath at my tears, but my heart wasn't in the classroom.

From that day on, I swore to never abandon the people I have the privilege of working hard with. We all have our toughest moments, but getting through them together makes us stronger, and getting stronger allows us to keep moving forward.

The Old Lady by the Moon

St. Paul's Convent School, Chan–Combrink, Tjie Lam Isabella – 14

It is well–known that hand–in–hand with ancient places come the ancient legends interwoven within them. Surely enough, there is no older legend than the one surrounding the mountains of the Yellow Emperor, a place that transcends the time of gods, seemingly almost as old as time itself. Every time I return to my roots, I am transfixed by its breathtaking scenery; misty skies I can never quite manage to capture with a paintbrush, a sunrise that cracks the heavens open as if enticing me to go beyond just to see how impossibly wondrous it must look on the other side, sun–soaked cliffs and lush forest greens and plunging cliffs at dizzying heights that knock the air out of my lungs.

Each time, I drown in the wave of nostalgia that overwhelms me, saltwater washing into my bleeding wounds and reminding me how time never healed them. Like the waves to the shore, I always return here no matter how often I am sent away, my persistence an infinite well. The legend is subdued, now, nothing more than a near–forgotten folktale mothers hiss to their children to threaten them into behaving. 'If you don't stop misbehaving, the old lady living on the mountains will come and steal you away,' I hear an exhausted mother snap to her child. I've heard countless versions of the tale, and I'm not surprised it's morphed into this; from a woman selling herbs to a goddess of the mountains to an old lady who will steal naughty children away if they dare disobey their parents.

The child quiets down. 'I'm sorry,' I ask the mother, who turns to me, harried and frenzied with fever–bright eyes. 'I'm new here.' The lie slips past my tongue as smoothly as running water. 'I'm studying the folklore of this village. Do you mind telling me more about this old lady?'

The mother bites her lip. I realize too late that I've put her in an uncomfortable situation of having to expose her threat as nothing but a myth in front of her child. She eventually settles on clamping the child's ears before speaking to me. 'There have been many variations of this myth,' she tells me, 'but they all share some similarities, which happen to be an old, immortal lady living in the Huangshan mountain range. The legend stems from the old emperor, Huangdi, who used the herbs from the mountain to make an elixir that would render himself immortal as long as he kept drinking it every few years. People say that's what the old lady did. The way everyone interprets her purpose is different– we parents use her as a last resort to get our kids to behave, but I know some old men who claim to know the true legends about her. They live just down that street, if you want to see them.'

There's no need. I only want to know how the legend has evolved over time. Still, I thank her, and continue on my way after purchasing a basket of fruit so ripe my mouth waters at the sight.

The legend has died down over time, as most things tend to do. The old lady has not been sighted in decades. However, the tradition of passing terrific myths and astonishing stories through lullabies sung gently, bedtime stories whispered lovingly and folk tales narrated grandly beside a roaring fire is one as old as time, and I know the old lady will not be forgotten. Her presence is etched bone–deep into the history of the mountains, with no torrential rain or unforgiving storm or crackling thunder able to erode it away.

With every step I take, with every breath I inhale, the memories come rushing back to me dizzyingly quickly, making me lightheaded with giddiness. There is no feeling like coming back home, no feeling remotely comparable to the adrenaline rush that is setting reverent foot in a place you know better than yourself. Despite the fact that I haven't been here for centuries, the winding paths are as familiar as breathing, the rocks as cragged as ever, the wind stinging my face like whips and the cold air burning my lungs stirring memories buried deep within the marrow of my bones. My joints are old, have been old longer than I can recall, but I'm still able to climb up jagged rock and balance on dark, smooth stones. You don't forget where to place your feet.

The fact that I've been gone for so long does not seem to stop the mountains from existing. I half–expected them to hold their breath for my return, stop time until I came home with a basket of overripe fruit and a souvenir from

across the world. But the mountains have continued to exist without me, uncaring. They do not stop to flinch at my pain, mourn for my departure. The world turns on its axis, the sun rises and sets, and the fog continues to roll into the Huangshan mountains, serene and beautiful and unsympathetic. It's sunset now, and the sky is smeared with violent hues of crimson red and fiery orange in some parts, streaked with delicate gold in others. The sun itself looks ripe and overflowing, like the tomato in my basket, as if it's about to split itself in half. Finally, it does, and the reds bleed across the horizon like a river of blood running across the outlines of the mountains that stand starkly upwards, a firm grey obscuring the bleeding sunset, acting as my last protection against the temptation to go further and see what lies beyond the sun.

However, it's not my time yet. I've stolen and borrowed and begged for so much more time on this earth, and I know to let that go to waste would be to let my life's aspirations spiral down the drain. I've travelled nearly everywhere on earth, have been able to witness the rise of empires and the downfall of entire civilizations. Foreign languages haven't felt strange on my tongue for a long time.

Still, I've yet to find a place that can surpass the beauty of the mountains of the Yellow Emperor. Perhaps I'm biased. Perhaps it's because this is my home, and a slum to a peasant would evoke more fondness and nostalgia than a palace would. But I can say for certain that this is no slum. It is nightfall, and the moonbeams fall with such an easy grace over the mountains with edges so sharp and dramatic that it doesn't take one with a vivid imagination to envision that they seem to have clawed their way up violently from the depths of the earth itself, pushing through no matter what hardships they faced along the way, the struggles shaping their surfaces into the kind of exquisitely beautiful things poets would devote their entire lives to putting into words.

Not for the first time, the sudden understanding of how people can spend their whole lives admiring just one thing grips my heart like a vice. I'm perched precariously upon a rock, eating a tangerine, and never have I felt more at peace than right this moment, while the iridescent moon is shining through the overhead tree branches and the air is heavy with solitude and quiet. I've never understood what it means to worship something more than I do when I'm staring out across the Huangshan mountains.

Slowly, I rise to my feet, feeling like one misstep on a broken branch could dispel the quiet blanket that has settled over the mountains. I feel as if I am in a temple, and stay carefully silent so as not to disturb the prayers whispered by the rustling leaves to the moon. My feet tread feather–light across the winding path until I reach the top of the mountain, where an ancient hut stands. It looks like it could be blown away at any moment, but appearances can be deceiving. It's stayed sturdy for centuries, now.

I enter the house and empty my basket of fruit out on the table. I cannot stay for long. There are new places to see, new countries to explore, new cultures to experience. The cage of nostalgia is comforting, but it is still a cage.

Taking the empty basket outside, I bend down to pluck the herbs from the ground, herbs that only grow on the tallest tips of the Huangshan mountain range. I will need to make my elixir tomorrow, as I have already delayed this trip for far too long– I can feel my bones threatening to give out on me. For now, the villagers can look skyward, and see if they can spot a little old lady backlit by the moonlight, plucking herbs to brew her elixir of immortality. Maybe that will restore their faith in folktales.

For now, I watch the moon shine over the Huangshan mountains, and feel contentment settle within my bones.

Tales From China's Magical Mountains

St. Paul's Convent School, Cheung, Wing Ning – 13

Thin layers of murky clouds masked the full moon, stars have become remote pinpricks. Adverting my gaze to the faraway misty mountains, haze floated surrounding it like smoke from a doused fire. Conversely to the heavenly appearance of the mystical mountains, the uncertainty terminated the thoughts of people investigating this mystery. The dim moonlight seems to cast a metallic–silver veil over the Jade amulet worn around my neck. The amulet was exquisitely carved with China's divine guardians of the dragon and the phoenix, it was the only object mother bequeathed to me before she vanished. Tears shimmered in my eyes while I gently whispered "Mother, it has been five years since you left. Is seeking the unrevealed secret of the mountains worth it for you to risk your life?"

Ever since the departure of Mother, the empire has transformed into a complete catastrophe. The decisive leader converted into a tyrant, prosperity and peace were broken by cataclysmic battles and disastrous natural hazards. Exceptionally, the mountains appeared to be vibrating more vigorously than ever. An uncanny sensation instantly filled my mind: May this chaos be associated with the truth hidden behind the magical mountains? After all these years of abstaining from the nightmare of losing her, is this fate informing me to accomplish her desire? I lowered my head, clenched my fists, beneath the dark solemn eyes of a thirteen–year–old girl, hides the determination of extricating China from danger.

Without hesitation, I swiftly shoved my belongings and acupuncture tools into a dusty bag and advanced to the mountains. After trekking an arduous route for the whole day, exhaustion persuaded me to search for an inn. Adjacent to the inn, there was an unlighted passageway. Amid the alley, There lied a person in rags and tatters, shivering with blood oozing out of his head. As an acupuncturist, I sterilized his skin and inserted needles into his acupoints to treat both manifestation and the root cause of disease. Eventually, he rubbed his eyes open.

"Are you awake? How do you feel?" I articulated.

His face was as white as a piece of blank paper, contrasting the bruises beneath his eyelids. His seducing ivory black eyes revealed his alertness and franticness towards me. Still, he pursed his lips, refusing to respond in disdain. He was observing the room until his gaze fixed, contemplating at the glittering and translucent jade amulet around my neck. His eyes sparkled with enthusiasm and hope, breaking the silence, he parted his lips and muttered in a hoarse voice:

"Did you rescue me?" He enunciated unhurriedly.

"Practically yes." I plastered a beam on my face.

"May I introduce myself, I'm Yang." His dark eyes radiated a fierce, uncompromising intelligence while he voiced out.

"Yue," I responded calmly.

"Are you the guardian goddess of the mystic mountains, Yue?" He queried, lifting an eyebrow to show his curiosity."

"Guardian goddess? What do you mean by it, Yang?" My face contorted with perplexity.

He looked at me with a strangled expression, his vision narrowed to a pinprick, he shook his head helplessly with a forced grin and deeply exhaled "Legend has that the existence of China's divine guardians, the devoted couple of Dragon and Phoenix had been recognized there. The Phoenix fancies tranquility and a harmonious life. Contradictory, Dragon's ambition was to conquer the universe. To halt the occurrence of this, Phoenix allied the

divines and pixies to clash the thunderous dragon. They managed to trounce Dragon, however, combatants endured terrible sacrifices, none survived except the guardian goddess and Phoenix. The guardian goddess was the captain and commander, whilst she didn't die, she was apprehended by the dragon. Before her dissipation, she accorded her destructive powers in the jade amulet which you are wearing, declaring to Phoenix that the one possessing the amulet becomes the succeeding guardian goddess. Yue, you're the chosen one, there's no survival chance of this impracticable mission."

"Then I'm going to make the impossible possible!" My eyes flared with persistence and resoluteness.

"Since you've saved my life, I'm coming with you!" He gradually stood up. Grinning like a Cheshire cat, he embraced me with his warm hands. My cheeks flushed, I could hear my furious heart thudding and pound intensively for no reason. Posterior to that cuddle, we would vacate the day after and resume on the expedition.

Sun was sinking toward the horizon, casting a slight canary yellow light through. In all of a sudden, the crisp climate modified into a blistering wave of torridity. I squeezed my eyes shut with my brows knitted, it was extraordinarily flaming that exhaling had become strenuous. Surprisingly, Yang's hands tightened into fists, the gleam from his crow-black eyes faded until his eyes transformed dark and vacant. When the hundred-degree heat, flaming sun, and parching salt was reduced, I fluttered my lashes and cleared my vision, an extensive bird with brilliant scarlet and gold plumage stood in front of us: It was Phoenix.

Egotistically, the phoenix flapped his wings and proclaimed "Speak, what brings you here to the mystical mountains?"

"Your highness, I'm Yue this is Yang, I believe you recognize this amulet." I demonstrated the gleaming jade amulet facing her.

"My, salutations to our Guardian Goddess, the magical mountains are in agony!" She impatiently exclaimed.

"Millions of years ago, the Guardian Goddess positioned boundaries to imprison the dragon. Despite the sedateness and peacefulness for years, the boundaries appear to lose effectiveness, consequently causing the mountains to tremble aggressively due to the revival of our worst horror: the undefeatable dragon." She gave a mirthless laugh, then portentously apprised me "The dragon has grown more uncontrollable by devouring human's affectionate side of their souls, remaining the immoral and iniquitous side of your species, explaining why China is in chaos. Yue, you're our only and final hope to prevent the destruction of the universe, you must succeed even the price to be paid must be expensive."

"What's the price paid behind? And how exactly do I activate the amulet's power, your highness?" I was on tenterhooks to take into consideration, Phoenix was just about to pronounce her words when Yang interrupted in his exasperate but doting tone "It is an unknown, don't be vexatious though, I'm sure you'll succeed." He shrugged and gave me a crooked smile that melted my heart like ice-cream. We gazed deeply into each other's eyes until Phoenix awkwardly broke the moment and projected her voice "Ahem! Time flies Yue, you better get equipped and prepared as the dragon would probably emerge soon."

Instantaneously, there was a teeny crack on the surface of the mountains, the crevice merged greater and greater. The mountain was shuddering and palpitating as an influential volcanic eruption. The sky was quick with sudden glares with a distant flash of lightning, gloominess enveloped the skies instantly. I grasped on the sword Phoenix gave me tightly, while my eyes glinted with volitional perseveration. A fearsome creature with glittering saffron scales, phenomenal fiery breath with sharpened claws and razor-sharp teeth arose from the bottom of the mountains.

With an imperious countenance, a cunning smirk, and manipulative eyes. Dragon rampantly hollered "Phoenix, you won the previous battle, but this time……" He glanced ponderingly at me and Yang respectively "My faithful apprentice and I will govern the whole China and defeat you betrayer!" He continued his claim unhurriedly with a villainous grin "What do you say my faithful apprentice, or should I say, Yang?"

I shook my head in disbelief, breathing has become like hyperventilating, I opened my mouth slightly but found no words to say, there was only dispiritedness and disappointment in my eyes. Yang gazed at me sincerely "I'm sorry, it was I who led you here." He paused for seconds "Master, you've once said phoenix betrayed you, how about counting another betrayal from me?" His glance towards me, as conspiratorial as a wink, signaled the start of this protracted war.

Sweat stung my eyes like venom, dripping down like a waterfall, stimulating my injuries. Pain from numerous wounds barely register, fresh blood was exuding from the scratches on my face. I gritted my teeth and shook my head ferociously, the dragon seemed to be invincible, each assault would only arouse his temptation to kill us, without a vital attack, there's wasn't any chance of winning. I stared thoughtfully at my amulet and puffed "Would the destructive power trapped inside help? Should we try activating it, Yang?" He suspired harshly "This is the only choice left then, farewell my beloved Yue. The only way of activating the jade amulet is straightforward, and that is by sacrifice!" Unexpectedly, he gripped onto my sword with his bloody, bare hands, the blade of the sword headed towards Yang bit by bit. I cried my eyes out, howling desperately "NOOOO!" I sued all might to pull the sword away from him, but it emphatically went in his direction. With all his strength, he showed me his alluring smile and stabbed himself brutally in the center of his heart. Flames of wrath raged furiously in my pupils, inflaming the detestation of the death of Yang and the vanish of Mother. The jade amulet released its devastating destruction power, it was so intense that the dragon was ignited into ashes.

After the tough battle, the strength of my limbs faded, I hopelessly crawled towards his body. Tears uncontrollably fell from my swollen eyes. I hid my face beneath my blood-soaked hands. Yes, I would be crowned the heroine, who was capable of defeating the treacherous enemy, restoring tranquility to the kingdom by freeing the captured souls, and rescuing her own mother.

"It seems like I owned everything, including fame, wealth, reputation." I sighed with bitterness. However, genuinely none knew behind the success of this thirteen-year-old warrior, she has lost her "only one" forever…….

Tales From China's Magical Mountains

St. Paul's Convent School, Chiu, Ellie – 13

As Li Bai raised his gaze towards the magnificent Huangshan that emerged from the Heavenly River like nine beautiful lotus flowers, his two wing–like flaps that flanked his black hat fluttered in the breeze. In a perpetual state of curiosity and wonder, his gleaming eyes marvelled at each masterpiece — extraordinary rock pillars that shot up to kiss the heavens above.

"Why, it is as if a lake of empyrean lilies were flourishing amid a sea of gold," he murmured under his breath.

Stroking his impeccably kept whiskers that sprouted from below his bulbous nose, he stared down at his ration of liquor in his gourd that was meant to last him the long and arduous journey ahead of himself. "Nevermind," he sighed, realizing he only had a few remaining sips left, "I have the scenic wonders around me to keep me company."

After all, he had promised himself to locate the mythical jade caves in the heart of the granite mountains that were rumoured to have been fashioned by the hand of the mythical Yellow Emperor himself. He yearned to gaze upon the glittering and glistening emerald stone to further inspire his poetry.

As Li Bai scaled the narrow, meandering pathways, he marvelled at the sight of the swirling mists that resembled the back of a dragon, gradually thickening into a heavenly river of pillowy white.

"How do the pine trees flourish in this harsh terrain of beige and walnut brown?" he mused before reclining in the soothing, serene shades of one verdant umbrella that sprouted from the side of a cliff face.

Unexpectedly, the wind greeted Li Bai, and its powerful breath caused his loose–fitting garments to billow like white and blue sails. From the corner of Li Bai's eyes, a precious stone glimmered and protruded from under his foot. The tips of Li Bai's thick eyebrows rose upwards as he examined the precious gem. "Finally…," Li Bai exhaled with disbelief.

Following the trail of light blueish green mineral rock embedded in the granite ground, Li Bai soon found himself standing before a cavernous mouth of the splendid jade cave concealed in the heart of the Lotus Mountain.

Li Bai was so transfixed by his discovery that he took no notice of the darkening sky and a lurking shadow that had been trailing him for miles. Li Bai was being surreptitiously followed by a blood–thirsty spy, ToFu, who had been sent at the behest of the avaricious consort of Emperor Xuanzong, Yang Gui Fei and the corrupt Li Linfu family. Having caught wind of Li Bai's endeavours, they had him followed to see if he knew of the whereabouts of the coveted treasure trove.

The air suddenly grew damp and chilly, and silver arrows began to fall from the inky sky, prompting Li Bai to take shelter in the heavenly cave before him. As he descended into the jade heaven, the pitter–pattering of rainfall gradually dissipated.

Magically, the walls of the cave illuminated in the darkness, emitting an ethereal glow of gentle jade green. Li Bai was so arrested by majestic splendour that it was only until he felt ToFu's hot breath against the nape of his neck that it dawned on him, he realized that his life was in jeopardy.

Slowly, Li Bai turned around to face a trained assassin. Tofu's eyes narrowed as his mouth upturned mischievously.

"Ha!" Tofu licked his leering lips. "Now that you've led me here, you have served your purpose!" His dagger was poised to plunge into Li Bai's rapidly beating heart.

Li Bai's face blanched. "Please…good sir, I mean you no harm."

"Give me one good reason why I shouldn't slit your throat!"

"My friend..." Li Bai protested with his hands raised, "I do not wish to take any of this jade… It's yours if that is what you want – "

"Yes! And I'll have it after I cut out your heart!" Tofu hissed, his eyes wild and glinting as he took a step closer towards his target.

As ToFu thrust his glinting dagger forward, Li Bai's cloth shoes slipped on the satin–smooth ground, causing him to stumble backwards.

Narrowly missing the maniac's knifing, Li Bai hastily scrambled towards the mouth of the cave and out into the slicing rain, desperate to escape the clutches of death. The heavens were weeping with greater ferocity, and the surface run–off water caused Li Bai to slip and slide along the slick ground – all the way to the edge of the sheer precipice.

Lightning wriggled through the skies like a rip in a stormy blanket of grey, hiding the clouds in its blinding radiance. The loud noise reverberated and echoed throughout the Huangshan mountains.

As Li Bai peered anxiously down the steep drop before him, drenched sods began to flake and chunks of rocks crumbled from under his toes. Blood roared in his ears as adrenaline raced through his veins like a frightened carp, navigating perilous channels of brackish water. Behind him, the dreaded killing machine encroached, and it was only a matter of time before he would sink his fatal dagger into Li Bai's back.

Falling to his knees and tears streaking down his cheeks, Li Bai flung his arms upwards towards the heavens and pleaded, "Oh Almighty Gods, please have mercy on my soul!".

"Ah–ha!" the lecherous voice of his nemesis rang in the air ominously.

Without looking back, Li Bai leaned forward and allowed the weight of his body to plunge into the bottomless void, the abyss of doom, and as he fell from the precipice of Jade Mountain, he cried, "Evil shall not prevail!"

Taken aback by Li Bai's unexpected actions, the villain stood in the incessant rain. Churlish clouds spat great gouts of water, falling in chaotic drops as if it was to flush away relentless Tofu. The wind hit his face, clinging his long hair towards it.

At that precise moment, the menacing clouds began to retreat, and shards of brilliant sunlight swept across the majestic summit. Unbeknownst to all, from the swirling mists, a mythical beast with scarlet horns and clad in shimmering gold scales emerged — its fierce eyes burning like red–hot coals, seething at the injustice committed against an innocent. Swish. Swish. The serpent's tremendous fiery tail propelled the legendary creature forward. Its undulating ridged spines scintillating in the strengthening sunlight, as it glided effortlessly across the Huangshan peaks with its amber whiskers pointed in direction of the assailed.

A split second before Li Bai's body smashed into the rocky ground below, the dragon swooped down and caught Li Bai on its back, gracefully breaking his fatal fall. Feeling that his lips were stretching wider into a gaping grin, he peeked over the horizons and carefully stroked the dragon's scales as it rushed up the steep precipice.

As it approached nefarious Tofu, the fiery dragon unsheathed its hawk–like claws and snapped open its jaw to bare its fangs. At once, a torrent of flames came bursting from its gaping mouth, reducing Tofu to a heap of ash.

As the last clouds parted to reveal the brilliant and glow of the sun, the majestic beast gracefully landed at the mouth of the majestic jade cave, allowing Li Bai to disembark. Dropping to his hands and knees and bowing deeply until his forehead kissed the ground, Li Bai graciously thanked the ancient king for saving his life and wrote a short poem and recited in praise of the yellow emperor,

"I talk about heavenly Huangshan Mountains,
Admiring its varying deeps of cloud.
Pines lure me, rocks ease me.
Dragons, tempestuous on the mountains and clad in rainbow garments
Darken clouds with the darkness of rain,
And paint it white again.
It saves me from the clutches of evil,
Breaking my fatal fall towards the bottomless pit
And carrying me to the heavens.
My soul goes flying,
Are the lost clouds I was in.
Swiftly, I shall take my leave of you, not knowing for how long.
But let me ride on you, great dragon, when I have need of you. "

The reputation of the poet Li Bai has spread all over the world, but it is still a mystery whether the dragon has existed.

Find Your Home

St. Paul's Convent School, Chow, Hiu Hang Kaitlyn – 14

There is a legend that has started thousands of years ago in a village, Castrum, that anybody who successfully climbed the Mountain would be able to obtain the deepest desire of the seeker. There was only one mountain in Castrum, and at night the Mountain seemed to rattle with horrors and treasures alike. The legend has existed for so long, so long…

Long ago, there was a young man who climbed the Mountain. His name was Blaine Sherman Yancheng Victor which was a rather long name for such a short man in his early thirties. Since Blaine was young, he had never blended in with the children in Castrum. When the fighting lessons were held, children fought among themselves.'You kids are future warriors. Find your home, Castrum! Our nation!' The teacher would declare, throwing his hands up to the sky. But Blaine didn't really care about fighting with other village tribes. He didn't understand what the teacher said.

Find your home.

He didn't want to be in Castrum. He should've been born somewhere else, somewhere he could be accepted as who he was. He thought of the mountains, high above the clouds. There, he could be free.

The mountain would give him what he wanted.

Months later, he packed everything he needed to stay alive on the mountain. He planned to finish climbing it in a day, and claim his victory.

The hike was mostly flat for the first minute, so flat that Blaine didn't realise he was walking up at all. Then, in front of him rose a steep cliff. He stepped onto the first foothold he could see and grabbed onto whatever climbing plant was growing above him. He pulled himself up, up, up, until there was a small ledge that he could rest on for a while. He leaned on it, his feet on a blunt stone that jutted out, feeling exhausted. He'd brought water with him, but he didn't want to risk drinking all of it.

Snap.

A branch of the climbing plant snapped. He was now fully aware of the danger that lay under him. He couldn't die now, not that he had to climb up to the top. The thought of death propelled him. He let go of the climbing plant, and instead held onto the many crevices of the cliff that had caused him fright mere hours ago. He climbed up, and up. Suddenly, he found that the cliff was caving in like a door that opened on the top.

He found himself falling down into complete darkness as he held on to the cliff. Who would even build so many traps here?

Blaine's hands were sweating as he stared into the darkness, fearing that there were more to come. He didn't want an adventure, he wanted the reward. With a thundering *thud*, the cliff fell into the large cavern. Half dead with fear, Blaine stood up and continued to venture deeper into the mountain.

Blaine kicked a stone along as he walked deeper. He didn't want to waste his firewood and his matches— he couldn't. He had walked for so long that even the large opening, in which sunlight had streamed through, became too far to see. He didn't know whether it was night or day.

He stuck out his foot to kick the stone again. The stone fell, and Blaine heard it hit against the other side of the hole before falling. This time, Blaine knew he had to light a torch to see what was happening. He struck his match against the matchbox, then lit a dry twig. Holding it as far away from his face as possible, he held it towards the floor.

The depth of the hole stunned him. One more step and he would've fallen into the dark hole that seemed to have no end. It was too big for his stone to fly over to the other side to hit it. The sound he heard must've been the sound of his stone hitting the bottom. Where was the bottom?

Gingerly, he lowered himself into the hole using a rope. His fingers were already bloody and raw from the climb: now it was smeared on his rope, too. He grimaced. He wouldn't be able to fix it before going back to Castrum. This was when he realised that his knuckles ached and his knees hurt, too.

He let himself fall. His hands hurt too much to hold anything, and the rope dangled and swung from side to side as he let go. He hit the floor, managing to stay conscious enough to see what was happening. A man with exceedingly long hair with a straight beard wearing a long robe approached Blaine. Blaine sat up quickly, trying to move away from the madman as quickly as he could. But he couldn't move. His feet had multiple scratches and cuts on them, and his left knee had split open. He looked at his hands. They were bloodier than he last remembered them.

Holding a white feather fan that he fanned himself using his left hand, the madman approached him and poked his back a couple of times. 'Stop it! You're killing me!' Blaine wanted to yell, but instead, he felt like he was under a spell that froze him so he couldn't talk. He couldn't even move. His eyeballs, fixated on the madman's every move, observed his surroundings. Jars of pickled lizards sat on a shelf. A heart of a tiger, with it veins still connected, pumped blood in and out in Blaine's imagination. A snake hanging on the ceiling stared at him with its beady eyes. Its' jaws were open, and its fangs were there for anybody who wanted to see it.

The madman took a bowl and drew a knife–like object from behind him. *I am going to die,* thought Blaine. *I don't want to die at the hands of a killer. Will I be part of a historical site thousands of years later?* The madman took some herbs, seeds, and grated some– was that some snake scales?–and crushed them using the knife–like object in a bowl.

As the madman applied the substance to Blaine's wounds, Blaine looked up, anticipating the worst: death. The madman poked him in the back a few times again, and Blaine realised that he wasn't frozen anymore. He moved his fingers, and stretched, standing up. Was he supposed to thank him? Blaine looked at his hands. Instead of blood, he saw his hands healed perfectly. His wounds seemed to have disappeared into thin air. He wanted to question the wise man in the peculiar cavern *how* he worked his magic, but the wise man simply wrapped his hand around his fist and bowed to Blaine lightly. Blaine did the same.

The wise man seemed to know the mountain better than Blaine did. He walked with confidence, his robes sweeping behind him. Blaine struggled to keep up with his pace. A large weeping willow lined the bank of a river that ran across the clearing. On the bank, there was a small wooden port that jutted out, and beside it was a bamboo raft floating on the rushing water. A small breeze blew from the opposite side of which the water was going. The wise man gestured in the direction of the raft, as if to say, 'Go onto the raft. I will bring you to where you belong.' Blaine stepped tentatively onto the raft. The wise man followed, and stood in front of Blaine. Holding a wooden oar, he undid the knot that tied the raft to the port. At once, the wise man began to steer the boat in the direction of the wind which was getting stronger and stronger. White, foamy water thrashed around the raft.

A fog surrounded them as they went further upwards. Blaine thought he saw shadows in the misty air, but the wise man rowed too quickly for him to see the shapes of the shadows before they moved on. The wind roared in their ears, the water was nearly as deafening. Blaine thought he heard laughter in the mist, but he wasn't sure if it really was somebody laughing or if it was just the sound of water around them. In the distance, Blaine could make out a port with a man who looked like the wise man, but who looked a bit younger. The wise man stopped the raft at the port, and Blaine wrapped his fist with his palm, and bowed lightly to the wise man. The other man waved him off the raft and onto the ground. The fog cleared as quickly as it was formed. Blaine stepped onto solid ground, holding his knapsack with his sweaty fingers. Staring at the rows and rows of houses, he felt like he belonged among the laughter and the bustling village. Children were running around the streets, playing joyously. A piece of paper fell out of his pocket.

He unfolded the piece of paper.

Welcome home.

The King's Journey

St. Paul's Convent School, Chung, Chi Yuet Chianne – 13

A long time ago, in the Jian Guo period, there was a king. The King had done many good things for his state and he was loved. However, as time passed by, he was spoiled by his people, he forgot it was hard work that led to success, and so he grew selfish and oblivious to his responsibilities.

A few months later, the King was watching a dance performance when he stood up and declared that he was sick of it. The King had been pampered for almost three months. His lavish lifestyle was boring him. No one was invading his state, the soldiers were training well, the economy was going up, he had nothing to attend to.

So, he requested one of his men to post notices around the city, stating whoever could entertain the King would receive a prize — twenty gold pieces. Citizens desperately in need of money flocked to the King's residence. One after another, the King waved off villagers doing comical skits, self–proclaimed wizards and witches pulling off conjuring tricks and professional actors performing hair–raising renditions of traditional dramas.

At the end of the day, he was convinced that no one could provide him solace. He was viewing the final performances when an old man trudged in. The man's gaze coated over the King and his men. He was observing them with a pensive furrow over bushy black eyebrows that met in the middle. His spotted skin draped over his face like a curtain, he looked like he could barely stand up. His limbs were short and barely functioning. He was carrying a colossal backpack made of bamboo, along with a sling pouch which bore a cream coloured bottle. The visitor was wearing tattered clothes, a greenish–blue one piece with a navy–blue belt tied around the middle, constraining his stomach. He was hunched over from the weight of his rucksack.

There was an odd stalwart gleam in the man's eyes, contrasting to his attire. 'I am here to entertain you, my King.' he spoke. His voice was even and placid, unlike the men who usually spoke with admiration to the King. 'You could go on an adventure.' The King looked at him, curious. The man's brown orbs bore back into him. 'There's a mountain, Huang Shan. One of the tallest mountains in China. There's a rumour that there is a temple there, where the spirit of the Grandfather of the Sun visits from time to time, to offer a tablet of youth to the worshippers who provide offerings for him. If you agree, I could lead you and your men to the top of the mountain where he appears.' Now this was something that he hadn't experienced. In a heartbeat, he said yes.

And so the project commenced. The King refused to walk the gruelling roads of Huang Shan on his own, and asked for his men to arrange citizens to dig and pave a road which went up Huang Shan. Millions of citizens were involved. After a month, the road was built. The journey went on for days. One day, a messenger came, and handed a bamboo parchment to the King. His eyes scanned over the words. His state was being invaded by a neighbouring state! He fell into deep contemplation. His state needed him, but he was already halfway up the mountain! He clenched his teeth and mumbled, 'Tell my best men to deal with it.' 'But they have no experience leading a whole army! It has to be you!' The messenger pleaded. Deep inside, a part of the King that still held the tiniest bit of righteousness, agreed. But his ambition had taken over him, and he replied, 'It's my final decision.' He closed the window of his carriage, and the horses marched on.

After a week, the King finally arrived at the top of the mountain. White wisps of fog covered the ground, but tufts of lush grass peeked out from the mist. He spotted a blazing orb at the edge of the horizon. Nothing should be able to survive at such high grounds, but flowers and trees adorned the top of the mountain. Worms slithered in the grass, hares hunted for prey, birds chirped melodies in the trees. It was deathly cold everywhere else, but the frost didn't seem to reach Huang Shan. Through the fog, the King could see the caps of various mountains peeking through the thick fog. They looked pocket–sized when he looked at them from such height, topped with sheens of glass–like ice, like a frozen stone path.

The Old Man's shout broke the King's reverie. 'I've found the temple, your Majesty!' The King was rapturous. He had not met his goal yet, but he was so, so close. A temple that the King did not remember seeing loomed before him. The walls were a shade of white purer than snow, thousands of lanterns hung below sloping roofs which led to

meticulously carved statues of dragons. There were two identical watchtowers on the sides, arrayed with various engravings of ancient Chinese myths coloured with wonderful greens and blues and golds. On the roof of the temple, a statue of the sun sat, carved from gold and marble, its rays stretching out like waves.

The Old Man waddled in, and the King and his men followed suit. Soon, they arrived at a shrine. A statue of the Grandfather of the Sun sat in the middle of two gold pillars engraved with dragons and horses. The statue's face was grave and solemn. The Old Man bowed, a low one, and gestured the King to do so too. After they all bowed, the Old Man told the men to provide the offering. They start laying down the items they carried in giant rucksacks. When a meal that was fit to feed ten hungry men was laid across the floor, the King kneeled. The Old Man began to recite a prayer, and he followed. After thirty minutes, and the King was beginning to get tired, his mouth was going slack.

Just then, a light appeared before him. It was the Grandfather of the Sun. He had bronze, healthy skin and a muscular physique, almost like a statue. Blazing robes flowed with grace behind him, and his eyes were hardened and stern. He sat down, and began feasting, barely acknowledging anyone in the room. The King gaped at him in disbelief. He tried to speak up, but the Old Man held up a hand, warning him to wait for the god to speak first.

It was five hours before the Grandfather of the Sun spoke to the King. By this time, the King's legs were numb and he expected an explanation. 'Your state has been defeated, King.' He had been too wrapped up in this whole ordeal, and had forgotten about his state. 'Tell me, King, even if you did live forever, what will you do? You were unsatisfied before you went on this journey, and after you take the tablet, you are going to return to your castle, and it's going the same cycle, over and over again.' The god said nonchalantly, and it angered the King. 'You don't know anything about me! After I take it, I'll be —' He couldn't find the words. 'I'll be,' That was when he realised the god was correct. 'What I'm trying to say here, young man, is that life isn't worth a thing if it isn't so short. It's meant to be experienced, to be consumed, to be felt in a short period of time, to cram it with the most meaningful experiences you can get, to love, to laugh, to cry, to sing and to dance, and that's it. It ends, and as you lie on your deathbed — you'll be grateful for all those experiences you had. To be immortal, is not living.' The King couldn't bring his mouth to move. He had only realised now that he had abandoned his state for his own selfish desires. 'Tell you what, I'll turn back time, back to the day before you met my acquaintance here.' He gestures to the Old Man, and he transforms. Now, had flowing robes, longer hair, his back was no longer hunched, and he looked poised and confident. 'Now go, and be the great king you are meant to be.' With a poof, the Grandfather of the Sun and the Old Man disappear into thin air. The days begin turning, the sky alternates between night and day until it stops at a sunny afternoon. The King dashes out into the sunlight. As he sprints towards his horse to save his state, the temple dissipates and the mountain returns to what it's supposed to look like: dull, freezing and lifeless. But the landscape doesn't reflect the King's emotions at all; the mountain is glum, yet he is brimming with youth, ready to live and to die and to fight for his people and his state.

The Orphan's Key

St. Paul's Convent School, Kaur, Puneet – 14

I was out of breath. I decided to take a rest. Panting loudly with my hands on my knees, I looked back. He was catching up. I couldn't stop. Not yet. My thin cotton shirt was all wet, but I couldn't feel a drop of water on my head. I started running again, not minding the shirt sticking to my back, making me feel disgusting. After all, this was just a small matter compared to why I was running.

The Emperor made an announcement last Friday, about a competition. A competition that could change my life. He declared to the sea of people, "There shall be a track competition on one of our most magical places, the Yellow Mountain. The one to reach the summit first would be the most robust, fearless and wise man. He shall have the honour to join our military service and be awarded with the Pill of Immortality". It sounded like a pleasant offer, but was there really a pill to turn immortal in the 20th century? Regardless, I didn't participate to win the mystical pill.

Being an adopted 13–year old of a Chinese family is not gratifying. Even though my new 'parents' loved me with all their heart, I was often overlooked by the society, not only because I was once an unwanted child, but also because I was a girl. Girls were known to be weak, while boys were courageous. This century's old lie was engraved in the Hong Village, chanted as if it were a fact. I joined this competition to change people's backward mindset. And to bring honour to my 'family'. This competition would decide my fate.

I could see the uneven ground below me slowing down. I halted and leaned against a peculiarly–shaped rock. The hard material scratched my drenched back, but it was still relaxing. The other competitors were still catching up. Some were crawling, some were making allies and some were resting. I took this once in a lifetime opportunity to let my eyes roam around this supposedly other–worldly mountain. As high as I could see, the granite peaks reached to meet the white clouds shining because of the piercing July sun. Lush green plants which looked like pine trees trailed down the golden brown peaks. The astounding scenery enthralled me with its beauty.

Suddenly, I was involuntarily pushed out of my hypnotized mind– I couldn't feel the stony ground below my feet. My head was spinning as I saw the blazing sun, the wood–coloured peaks and…something bright again? I was falling. Oh no! My instinct made me scream but I couldn't as I could feel some air blocking my throat. Was I going to die? No! I tried to hang onto something but nothing came between my hands. Saying I was scared was an understatement. I tried to calm my panic–stricken state but I knew I was going to die. With that thought and one last look at the distance between me and the ground, I was pulled into a world of utter darkness.

"Who is she?" I heard a muffled voice ask. "I think she is a human," another voice answered. I jerked my eyes open as I felt cold liquid splashing onto my face. I gasped as I was face–to–face with a deer and moved backwards quickly. The deer was surprised also. I looked around expecting to see a human but all I saw were deer, deer and more deer. Where was I? I gasped again as I realized I was with the one and only herd of sika deer! "Why were you hanging on a tree? Are you a photographer? Because I have only seen photographers doing such a thing," the chocolate–coloured deer said. A deer! I gasped once again. "I do not think she is a human," the dark brown deer behind me spoke. I gasped one more time. "Definitely, humans speak a lot of languages but I do not think they speak this…" it hesitated and continued again, "gasping language". After a moment, all the deer started gasping.

I cleared my throat and tried my best to say, "I…I am a human," They almost immediately stopped gasping. "You…You can speak?" I asked, completely terrified by this whole situation. I heard a chorus of "yes". The same chocolate–coloured deer faced me and explained everything, "We saw you hanging on that tree", he pointed to a huge tree standing at the cliff of the peak we were standing on, before continuing, "and concluded that you were in trouble, as you weren't responding to us so we decided to save you. No need to say thank you", it said with a proud smile. "Thank you so much!" I replied, not listening to it. It responded with a slight nod while making eye contact.

After looking at my eyes, its face looked shocked. "Are you from a family of 'Han' Chinese?" Perplexed as to how it could know my original identity, I replied, "Yes". "You have the key!" I furrowed my eyebrows. A key? Is it referring to my necklace? My 'mother' had told me I was wearing this necklace when they adopted me, so I assumed it was given to me by my original parents and kept it around my neck as a symbol of their love. I showed the deer my necklace. After examining the necklace, it said, "Do you see my companions? We are a rescue team. We rescue anyone who is in trouble. But we couldn't save them.". "Them?" I asked. "Your parents. They were travellers. They

would have been the first people to reach the summit if they hadn't been…thrown off the cliff by their competitors, humans who wanted to reach the summit before your parents did," it explained. I was shocked to know the truth about my parents. All this time, I had thought I was an unwanted child. "But before, they rescued me from the hunters." It shivered from the sorrowful memory. "They told me their daughter, you, were special, you had brown eyes with a sparkle of blue dots, they made me able to recognize you, and that they would give the key they freed me with, to you, the most precious person in the world. They believed you would be the key. The key to save everyone." I couldn't see clearly as tears clouded my vision. I didn't know my parents were…heroes. They…believed in me. I tried to reply, but all I could say was "Wow". "Is there anything I can do for you?" the deer asked me genuinely.

I was quiet for a few moments, trying to digest everything the deer had spilled onto me. If my parents had faith that I was the key to saving everyone, I would. Smiling, feeling a wave of excitement within me, I told the deer everything about the competition and the reason behind why I had joined it. "I would love to help you, and besides, there aren't any rules for this competition. Are you ready?"

Not long after I was flying like dandelions scattered by wind. The breeze swept through my hair, making me shiver more because of the fluttering sensation in my stomach. "How is the weather up there?" Choco asked, laughing. I had named him Choco– that deer's skin constantly reminded me of chocolate. "Amazing!" I shouted.

"We are here!" I made it! Snow–white clouds surrounded me, blocking my vision of the time when I was at the bottom. Facing Choco, I said, "Thank you!" It grunted in response and said, "Every cloud has a silver lining," Sometimes, achieving your goals may be hindered by people around you, but the important thing is, you should believe in yourself. In the process, you may start falling, but being around people who make you feel self–assured, you start to fly, higher than ever. A grin gradually appeared on my sweaty face.

The Yellow Mountain truly is a magical place.

Forgotten

St. Paul's Convent School, Lee, Chloe – 14

Why is Huangshan so captivating? When you gaze at the endless wall of rocks, what do you think of? How time, no matter how fluid, solidifies and merges the modern age with Ancient China? How the soil you tread on has once been an inspiration for Chinese poets? How the fragrant air makes you understand the praises Li Bai once wrote for this mountain? For me, it's the overnight K46 rushing beneath a canopy of stars through the city of Fuzhou.

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With Hong Kong miles behind me and a blanket wrapped around my drowsy self, the train sails onto the bridge, drifts over the rail, glides on air, soars out of the tunnel and reveals the chartreuse plains of the land of dragons. The most thrilling ride in China indeed! Screams explode as carriages tumble into another black shroud. My window shatters to the rattle of metal wind chimes, and like Icarus, I plummet out of the twisted cage.

At the end of the portal lies pain as I hit the ground, but also a mesmerising scene. The Greeting–Guest Pine bows, its arm, jade and emerald outstretched and pointing to the heavens. I stagger towards the light and see a sage standing amidst its roots. With a bearded face and knobbly hands stroking the thinning hair, he directs his radiant smile towards the rising sun, as if challenging the stars to shine brighter. "Ah!" he cries. "The sparrows told me you would arrive." He turns around and his silver grey robe twirls in the wind. "Come, I know the perfect place to have lunch." If nature predicted my arrival, then let this be my fate.

Huangshan's mountainous landscape is harder to climb than I thought. Its sides are jagged and the sparse trees cover its barren body in patches like rags. All around us were mountains, mountains and mountains, their gorges dipping far below the fog and their proud crests braving the elements. I imagine that the gods pulled up piles of mud, draped them in random mismatching cloaks and set them on the far prettier stairway to their holy empire, to let them gaze on humans trudging on hills and plateaus. Suddenly I hear a whisper in my ear: "Oh child, that's not for you." The sage leads me, and I follow. Panting like a dog I finally reach the top of the peak and remind myself that I must exercise more in the future.

"Let me introduce myself" he announces to ease the growing tension. "I'm Yiwang, a poet–in–training. I come to these mountains to seek inspiration. Why are you here?"

"Would you believe me if I told you I fell through a portal?" I answer meekly.

He tilts his head. "A portal? It must be the work of the gods. They have given me inspiration!" His eyes glimmer as he proclaims "Thanks be to Huangdi! My work will soar beyond excellency!" I do not understand his ecstasy, but am glad to be the source of it.

We pass the Lotus Peak, climb up the Hundred Ladders, stroll by the Haixin Pavillion, and arrive at Bu Xian Qiao, the famous fairy bridge. Stationed in a crevice, its immense height adds to the feeling of flight. Between cloud and sky we lay out fruit, rice and leeks, and sup until noon. The sun beams at us mortal fairies, warming our cheeks as we chat and eat. "Where are you from, my friend?"

"The South, sir." I reply.

He clutches his peach and bursts into peals of laughter, the sweet juices running down his fingers as he chuckles, his black irises disappearing behind the slits of his heavy eyelids. "The South! There's no need to be humble; you fell out from the sky." Smirking, he glances up at the fog and stops guffawing. "We should get going. We have to arrive at the camp before sunset."

We continue trekking along the summits for 6 hours, Yiwang belting a merry tune or two to hasten our pace. His booming voice echoing in the heights, intense and passionate, round and round. "Chant the female part!" I, with my coarse howling, belt out his song. He doesn't seem to mind my cawing though. I wish my music teachers were also like him.

Slowly the sun leaves us to our own company as we arrive at our destination under Flying Over Rock. "Bai Jiu is a treasure in my village. Only the best is reserved for guests." He uncaps a wide jar shaped like a Greek aryballos flask, and pours out the transparent liquid. "I figure that we would wine and dine as I tell you more about a poet's life," he says mid sip.

"You must have heard of Li Bai and Du Fu. They write such amazing poems about nature. See, I aspire to be famous like Li Bai, and I know that anyone can achieve their goals as long as they have the right beginning. I have tried hard to wake up my talents inside. I sojourned to rural villages, stopped by every city, and wandered around the

countryside, in the hope that I would be stimulated to write something that would be marvelled at for ages to come. I constantly dream that after I die, scholars would pick up my work and be proud that they hold the original manuscript, like a precious piece of art. But nothing seems to motivate my pen to spill a single word. Nothing flows out like the Eastern wind. Nothing seems to sound right." I nod in understanding, having gone through the pains of writing an English poem myself. I asked Wendi, the patron god of poets for help so my writing could be realistic, enthralling and memorable. And you came!" He takes another swig of the liquor, furrows his brow and stares into the distance. "My name is of bad fortune, it sounds like the word 'forgotten'. I don't want to be buried in an unmarked grave. I want my story to be told, my legacy to be my sensational poems. But first I must write one." He empties his cup, stands up and hands me a writing brush. "You bring me promise, potential seen in none other. Quick, write before the candle runs out!" I swallow the savoury wine and grin at my partner.

What would otherwise be a boring night with Netflix becomes a flurry of ideas, imagination, images translated through ink. We delve into the depths of heart and mind, summoning every ounce of energy, channelling excellency into each stroke, infusing every page with power and pride, pouring out a masterpiece while gulping down spirits. We compose drunkenly, but passionately.

By sunrise, we unroll the scroll which Yiwang deems "Perfect!" The rays of the rising sun shines on the crests of Huangshan. "Look! Huangdi has shone his light on me! I see a glorious future, people lining up for commissions, waiting as I unlock the mysteries of Huangshan." I laugh hesitantly, knowing that I have done nothing to change his fate.

All of a sudden, flames engulf the pinnacles of the dragon and the sky swallows Yiwang in the middle of his speech. "Wait! Our composition isn't finished yet..." I shake my head helplessly. What can I do? I am no longer a welcome guest of this century. The clouds, like a pair of claws lift me from the ground. "Don't! I have so much more to write!" The heavens transported me here, and now they will return me to my city. They harden against my pleas and place me back in 2021. I reappear in Kong Kong, with its cars honking and dogs barking, as if my expedition to Anhui never happened.

***

While Li Bai and Du Fu went on to be acclaimed as the greatest poets of their time, I never heard of Yiwang ever again. It was as if Huangdi removed him from history, because he cheated on Calliope with a friend from another country. Or did he wake from his drunken dream, leaving his scroll in the labyrinth of time, ultimately fulfilling the prophecy of his name?

Our cups raised to the mighty Huangshan,
Flora and fauna crown my friend divine.
I care not when she would depart,
Creations with the muses will always shine.

Huangshan gave Yiwang the spark for his flame and took everything else away from him. Likewise, the misty mountains embraced me in their magic, but blurred my mourning eyes from the mystical scenes.

The Stranger Says Hi

St. Paul's Convent School, Lui, Zoe – 14

I'm constantly moving, but I'm always here.

For some of me, I've been here all my life. The beautiful Huangshan Mountain is all I know. For some of me, this is only part of a longer journey. Where the journey is to though, I only have a vague idea.

Sometimes, I stare down in an almighty, omniscient manner. I see everything from here. Time, while it is a significant matter to most who tread into the mountains, means almost nothing to me. I have seen famous poets, Li Bai and Du Fu. I have seen other poets, perhaps not as famous, throughout the centuries, and I will continue to do so as time passes (though an intriguing boy taught me that this wouldn't necessarily be true).

Sometimes, I fancy myself as the sea. People do call me a sea, after all. I am told that the sea can have many colours. I have never seen the turquoise waters of a bay, or ferocious waves crashing down into the inky depths. The sea is poetic, I am told, and so am I.

I am the 'Sea of Clouds'.

Or that's what they call me, anyway.

A young man is he, young as one could've been
Armed with first honours
With a heart full with glee
"Provide the poor with manors!
Bygone the ill men's drees!
Away with rich scammers
And scandalous decrees!"

Huangshan is known for its strange–looking pines, hot springs, mystical clouds and stunning peaks. We are called the *Sijue*, the Four Extremes. Sometimes we hope that it means extremely beautiful. It may sound vain, after all, we are marvels of the mountains, we are striking, otherworldly. But sometimes we ask ourselves, is this how we are defined?

Here comes Covid–19,
Quick, angry and keen.
Oh no his plans! His future! His job!
And his poor girlfriend Eugene!
"Away with earthly matters, my dear boy,
Come be zen like me!
Be enlightened! Inspired! And don't die!
Come to Huangshan with me!"

He came, he ran, he got lost,
And got tossed
Somewhere into the mysterious massive ancient towering multi–coloured mountainously–rocky Huangshan.

The boy is lost. I can see him with knees pulled to his chest from the sky. "Blasted old man," he mutters. "Why am I here? Stupid long beard!" Long beard? I think of one of Li Bai's famous lines: My white hair is three thousand feet long, but my misery exceeds it by far. A poor scholar told me about it. He wanted to be greater than Li Bai. I wonder if he succeeded.

Perhaps Li Bai himself brought the boy here. Maybe he came back briefly when the realms of Heaven and Hell and the realm of the living were open in Yulan Festival. I try to tell the boy that he is next to Pine. Which means he's about to fall off the cliff, when he murmurs:

To chop, or not to chop, that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler for nematodes to chew
The gnarled exotic branches of Huangshan's pride,
Or to marvel nature's brilliance, clear sky against loden leaves,
To chop? To admire?
And by that ax to say we decide all,
Pine furniture, or pine feed for bugs,
Which is better? Tis the perseverance,
That sets the pine on cliffs
To eat? To admire!

Granted, I only ever hear Chinese poets lamenting about wine (Li Bai's favourite, as I recall), or describing wars (Du Fu was born in the right time), but never Shakespeare parodies about chopping trees. Pine looked rather relieved that it wasn't going to be sold as a cupboard in IKEA, though bringing up pine nematodes is a terrible idea. Doesn't he know that it's a great threat to Pine?

"How do you stay up like this?" The boy asks Pine. "How can anything grow on rocks?"

Pine replies:

"I'm just a pine tree, boy. I grow, I survive."

A nearby squirrel adds:

"Now why don't you switch off your camera flash, it's disturbing."

"In hot springs you will find
(Aside that one should never wear jeans in springs)
Why beauty's essence
Cannot be captured
By pixels, by ink,
But by a genuine link,
Of nature's appreciation, by mankind's admiration."

But he sees this:
ALL HAIL SPRING THE CASH COW!
Dewdrops on leaves, twinkle, shimmer,
Mist in the mountains, wavers, drifts,
As gold under fingertips, from hotels you bring
Laughs, chuckles, whistles, sings,
Oh cash cow of Huangshan! How you are revered!
How you are worshipped!
By mankind's admiration of the gold you bring!

He stands on one of Huangshan's peaks. Spring is still fuming from the insult. Despite everything, Peak still gives him a stunning view. And I think, perhaps rather arrogantly, that he must be admiring how the huge boulders rise dramatically from the ground. Clouds encase them, like thick candy floss. The mist casts a thin veil over the striking rocks. His mouth drops open, his eyes shine brightly, and he finally says: "This is nothing like the Seven Star Crags!"

Ah, he isn't so ignorant after all.

He sighs. "You are such a beautiful cash cow." He even looks sad.

I take it back. I wish someone would just tell him that we have thirteen species under state protection, and a cloud leopard (one of those species) should eat him up for seeing us as a gold mine instead of appreciating nature's gift to mankind.

How can he judge, when he hasn't even explored all our imposing peaks, or our graceful waterfalls? When he would never reach the significance of the countless poets and artists who lived here, or the importance of us in Chinese art and literature?

"You have no sense of aesthetics," I say.

He looks up calmly. "Do you want me to like it here?"

"You must love the pandemic," he adds, "There're almost no tourists."

I am the Sea of Clouds. I am an endless ocean. I have no beginning, no end, no face, but he must know that I'm confused.

"Ah, I forgot, you've got your heads in the clouds," he smirks. "Literally," he says to Peak.

"You are breathtaking, only because you're… massive. Even the rich and powerful would feel small, standing here. You are the universe, and I am just a spot. You make us feel small. Is this why you're mysterious? Because we can't look beyond? Because you obscure our sight?"

"It must be," he says to himself. "Most people don't look at things twice when the path is clear."

"So they like us, BECAUSE WE *BLIND* THEM?" I roar. The sky darkens and splits like a desert after drought.

He glares at me. It looks rather comical, like an ant angry at humans for being too large.

You think you're so great
Cuz clouds can talk
And your vast botanology.
The Shanshui is nice
The poems all praise
And Avatar has blue aliens

Ancient pine trees
Mean nothing to me
'Cept they grow on cliffs
Does it matter to you?
Does it make you jolly
If we'd bow and wow and scream?
Everyone roots in soil
But your roots are in rock
And that's what's so amazin'
End of the day
You're just survivin'
They don't care if you're rottin'
They don't care if bugs a-chewin'
They're here cuz
Pine's a special tinkerthingy

Green in the mountains
Makes Peak less plain
What do people need for rock
'Cept for Shanshui?
People look at you
Cuz Pine grows sideways
Green looks better
Than plain old granite

I see your birds, I see your bugs
Bustling Thronging Buzzing Twittering
Those Living stuff, Feeling stuff
I see the litter, I see the cigs
Stinking Reeking Spoiling Rotting
I see
The green dots that dot your daunting rocks
Your flora, fauna, flourishing
We don't
Care whatsoever
But they
Were here forever
But they are what makes you true
Our cigs can burn you down
Our visitors wear you down
Dead things are only pretty
If we give you meaning
But your habitants love you through and through
So love them better
Your permanent residents
Before we make you go

Dead things are only pretty
If we give you meaning
But your habitants love you through and through

"When I think of Huangshan, I see mountains with no people and clear waterfalls. It looks heavenly, somewhere we can't reach. Now we can see you, hear you, feel you. We even have cable cars where we can wow at you for an hour then go back to hot spring hotels for a nice bath."

"We don't like you as much when our presence is so clear, but don't worry, your reputation from all those poems and paintings will keep you popular for a while if nothing drastic happens. But your natural inhabitants will love you forever. We may not."

He walks away. He looks satisfied with his lecture. As a response, I rain on the plants.

I went to Huangshan
The view's an electric shock
Pretty clouds can talk.

Affection Is without Rival

St. Paul's Convent School, Pang, Hin Yue Hillary – 13

When I was young, my grandmother used to be my personal storyteller and she told me all that she had witnessed and heard. There was a tale from China's magical mountains that she told me in her low, husky tone, and I still remember that tale word by word even today.

About 4500 years ago, there was a mountain that stood tall and proud in the southern part of China. Cottages dotted around the foot of the mountain, and villagers living in the cottages led simple yet harmonious lives. However, none of them had ever climbed up the mountain before, not to mention reaching the top and perhaps enjoying the picturesque sunset – the bloody red sun making its way down to the horizon, while the clouds shone pale pink, blending in with the blue skies. They were all scaredy–cats, and they did not even bother to try climbing the mountain as it was so tall that it reached the sky! Due to the mountain's monstrous height, it was named 'Sky Mountain". Therefore, the villagers considered climbing the mountain dangerous, and that reaching the top an impossible task for centuries, until a mute mistress named Hwang Yin, who lived in one of the obscured cottages, gave birth to a baby boy named Hwang Shen. When Shen was only two years old, he ran around the village as fast as lightning; and at the age of three, he was able to pick up two huge buckets of water and balance one on his head and walk all the way from the well miles away back to the village without taking a rest. It was almost impossible for a middle–aged man to do so during that time, and no one knew why three–year–old Shen was able to do so. Therefore, everyone in the village considered Shen a miracle child.

Shen grew up surrounded by the praises of the villagers, and indeed, he was growing stronger and stronger as days passed. He turned out to be a very cheerful gentleman, and he himself believed that he was indeed someone born differently. On a usual morning, twelve– year– old Shen woke his mother up from her sweet dreams by screaming in her ears. Hwang Yin woke up, annoyed, although her son had always been delightful, she had never seen Shen that excited before! She knew something fishy was going on. Shen looked at Yin with glimmering eyes, and instantly blurted out, "I have decided to climb Sky Mountain and go up to the top! Tomorrow!"

Yin was instantly snapped out from her daydream, and in horror, she held her son's shoulder and shook him furiously, and her terrified face showed: 'No! No, don't you dare! You will die!' Although she knew that her son was so strong that he could lift and carry an entire cottage on his back–and that Shen was unexpectedly athletic and had extremely nimble limbs, she knew once Shen fell off the tall mountain while climbing it, there was no way he was going to survive the fall no matter how gifted Shen was. Seeing that his mother's face had turned as white as a paper, Shen let out a chuckle and looked into his mother's teary eyes which were full of fright, and in a whisper, he said, "I can do this. I have the strength and potential to do so. I know that I am gifted enough to climb this mountain." The mute mother's face softened and she let out an airy sigh, for she knew that once her son had made up his mind, there was no turning back.

The next day, Shen carried a sack with some slices of soggy wheat bread and some water. With the villagers' and Yin's company, they approached the rocky wall of Sky Mountain, which signaled the departure of Shen. Yin gave her son a bone–breaking hug as tears rolled down her checks and she bid Shen goodbye with her airy sobs. Although Yin was worried to death, she believed her son had the potential to climb to the top of the mountain.

Shen gave his mother a slight smile and with one easy leap, he grabbed hold of the rocky walls and started climbing up the mountain. As time passed, Shen was gradually out of sight. Everyone in the village just wished that Shen could pay full attention while climbing Sky Mountain and make it back to the village alive.

Shen was definitely gifted in strength and he didn't get a bit tired all the way while climbing up the mountain. He only slowed down to grab a few bites and with his athletic body, he was able to make it safely to the top of the mountain in two days! Only with a few cuts and bruises, Shen stood at the top of the mountain with his head held high. The first man to conquer Sky Mountain! As Shen was admiring the breath–taking scenery of the endless turquoise sea stretching out far, far away, a goddess suddenly appeared in front of him.

The goddess was pale blue and was wearing a turquoise dress, and the goddess was shimmering in pale blue light. Shen was quite taken aback by the appearance of the goddess, after blinking twice, he cautiously questioned, "You are…?"

“I am the goddess of Sky Mountain. Congratulations on making to the top of Sky Mountain. I have waited so long.” The Sky Mountain said.

“What do you mean you have waited so long?” Shen asked in a whisper.

“Little did you know, you are made to meet me on this magically tall mountain. I am here to tell the truth.” The goddess said.

“The truth?” Shen asked.

“Your mother is mute because this mountain took away her voice in exchange for your gifted strength and athletic body. Before you were born, your mother actually gave birth to your elder brother, but he was so weak that he died hours after he was born. It was no doubt extremely sad and painful for your mother. Your mother then was later pregnant with you, she immediately came to the foot of Sky Mountain. Believing that this tall mountain stands in the form of a supreme king, she prayed, hoping to give birth to a strong child, so that the child can have a long healthy life. This magical mountain heard her wish, and that night in her dream, the mountain told her that you would be granted with unbelievable strength only if she would sacrifice her voice. Your mother promised this magical mountain without hesitation. The next morning, Yin woke up mute. As the goddess of Sky Mountain, I witnessed all this with my own eyes.” the goddess said.

Shen was speechless. His mother gave up her own voice for him.

“This is the great love of your mother for you. Now that you are the first person to conquer this magical Sky Mountain and is superior, are you satisfied?”

Shen nodded his head in anticipation.

“And now are you willing to give up your strength and athletic body in order to allow your mother to gain her voice back?” The Goddess took a deep breath and asked.

This idea struck Shen like lightning. Giving up his strength and athletic body, which was his first priority and the thing that he valued the most throughout the twelve years of his life? This prized possession of his was what made him so confident and cheerful during these twelve years. This was simply too absurd for him.

“You made a great achievement – conquering Sky Mountain, thanks to your mother. Now that you have completed the goal of your life, shouldn’t you give something back to your mother who helped you greatly? Do you love your mother?” the goddess questioned.

Shen nodded absent−mindedly.

“Then you should give it up for your mother. She had certainly done a great thing for you, in order to let you be strong and stay healthy, and even to become the superior child that conquered Sky mountain at the age of twelve.” The goddess softly spoke. “I swear to keep you healthy and long− lived. You will only lose your valuable strength and athletic body.”

Shen nodded slowly while tears welled up in his eyes. “I am willing to give up my strength and body for my mother, I may not be praised that much anymore, but for my mother, I am willing to do anything. This is my great love for my mother.” He said. Shen believed that for his mother, he was willing to let go.

The goddess nodded and with a snap of her fingers, Shen disappeared and reappeared at the foot of the mountain. Shen heaved a sigh and looked up to the mountain, and he was sure that he saw Sky Mountain magically shimmering.

After that day, Shen was not that miracle child who had unbelievable strength and strong limbs anymore, while his mother was not the mute, miserable mistress. Hwang Yin had become a lot more cheerful and always flashed radiant smiles, grateful to have her voice back. Shen was not that much often praised anymore, but certainly no one forgot his superior act of conquering Sky Mountain, and also the great love Hwang Yin and Hwang Shen shared.

Tales of Huangshan

St. Paul's Convent School, Seng, Si Laam Audrey – 13

The Yellow Mountains is located in Eastern China, and is commonly known as Huangshan. For generations, legends of these mountains are passed down; silent whispers in the house, elders telling stories to children. Though some do wonder: what if there is more to it than mere legends?

That is NOT the question in Ashley's mind as she gazes up at the looming mountains, a hand raised to block the harsh morning sun, clouds and fogs swirling around the mountain's top. With a sigh, she first takes out her video recorder and sets up her equipment. If not for her viewers' request, she wouldn't even be interested in climbing this mountain! Coming all the way to China from Hong Kong is quite annoying for her, and she has to waste money too! Alas, Ashley still wants more subscribers for her channel. She then smoothens her hair one last time and checks her appearance in a small mirror. She presses the start button and puts on an over–enthusiastic smile.

"Hello! Welcome again to my channel, and today I will be scaling... the famous Huangshan of Eastern China, per most people's wishes!" Ashley moves her recorder slightly to a higher angle as it takes in the mountain. She starts to walk and continues to introduce the mountain. Instead of taking the main path to reach the top, she turns and walks towards a more secluded path, knowing that her viewers would love to watch her challenge.

During her climb, Ashley continues to film her surroundings, the silence and tranquility of the mountain around her, only occasionally broken by cries of wild animals. At first, she is indifferent to the view, but slowly, she starts to become mesmerised by the quiet nature of Huangshan as well. 'I understand why my viewers will request this now...' she muses to herself, 'And of course, there are the legends too...' Ashley thinks as she remembers memories of her childhood, listening to her grandparents' tales.

Suddenly, Ashley notices a path snaking through the trees, barely noticeable that she has to squint to make out the way. 'Huh...? i don't remember seeing this path when I studied the map before...?' She pushes some plants out of the way to see the path ending at the entrance of a cave, and lights seem to flash from within rhythmically. Despite her mind telling her that it is dangerous, her curiosity won. Raising her camera, she turns and makes her way to the cave.

Inside the cave, everything is dark except for the occasional bright glow of mysterious crystals embedded on the wall. 'This must be the lights she saw outside,' Ashley thinks. She can feel her gradually ascend, and she turns on her phone to check the time. To her surprise, her phone is not working, and she starts to panic as all her electronic devices seem to stop responding as well. However, her terror doesn't last long as she sees light at the edge. Ashley immediately rushes towards the apparent exit, wanting to escape as soon as possible.

All of a sudden, a beastly roar seems to echoes through the cave, so strong that Ashley needs to take a few steps to keep her footing. Fear courses through her at the unknown monster. Even so, she knows she will be completely trapped in the cave and with no choice, she exits the cave.

The bright sunlight blinds Ashley, and she blinks a few times to adapt to the light again. However, what she sees make her questions her own sanity. Somehow she has managed to make it to the top of Huangshan, a clear sky above her as she rises above the clouds and fogs, but what makes her question herself is the fact that there are currently several dragons flying around, their scales glittering in the sunlight. She admires in silent wonder as the dragons dance in the air, weaving around each other. It isn't long until one of the dragons notices Ashley and lets out a roar. In her panic, she barely acknowledges that this is the sound she heard in the cave.

However, what happens next is foggy, as if something is messing with Ashley's memory. She briefly remembers one of the dragons descending from the sky, letting out a growl while looking at her, its eyes seem to bore into her very own soul. Then she remembers climbing onto its back as it takes her into the sky, the feeling of rushing the air with her hair whipping around her. There is a sudden descend, and the last thing she notes before blacking out is that she is back at the starting point of her hike...

Ashley wakes up in a hospital next, monitor and machines beeping around her. Doctors and nurses soon rushes into the room, quickly running medical checks on her. “A hiker found you on the route fainted,” they tell her, “You were brought to the hospital and set to receive treatments immediately, but the strange thing is there is nothing wrong with you...” Ashley merely nods, disoriented. ‘Then is what she saw only. Fever dream? It felt so real...’ It isn’t until she collects her own belongings that she sees it: a bright scale that glitters even in the white and blank light of the hospital...

“... so she kept it and treasures her adventure in her heart, forever.” A young boy stares up at his grandmother with wide eyes, intrigued by the legends of Huangshan. ‘How do you know for sure these tales are real though?’ He asks with his eyes twinkling. Her grandmother looks at him for a moment, contemplating her answer, then replies with a smile. “Who knows, maybe I have seen the dragons myself!” The boy sucks in a breath and gasps dramatically. “No way!” His grandmother laughs heartily as she messes up the boy’s hair, resulting in an indignant squeak.

Inside a shelf, an old video recorder sits in a back corner, a peculiar scale hidden behind it. And thus, the legends of Huangshan continue to be passed down...

Dark Secrets

St. Paul's Convent School, Tong, Charlotte – 14

The mountains were wreathed in mist and clouds. People said it made the mountains seem more magical, but are the mists actually hiding some dark secrets beneath?

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Rosalind took out her precious camera, capturing scene after scene of the heart–stopping view before her. When she was small, her grandpa taught her photography skills such that she could capture precious moments of her life. Huangshan was definitely a place worth remembering. It was a heavenly place in this mortal world. Putting her camera away, Rosalind continued her long journey up the mountains, squeezing her way through the narrow roads and staircases, until she finally reached the famous "yi xian tian" of Huangshan.

Light seeped through the gap, painting the dull grey of the mountains into a buttery gold. And standing on the exit of the "yi xian tian" was… a girl? Rosalind's mouth hang open in dismay. The girl, seeing Rosalind stare at her, signalled her with a whisper, "*Come.*"

Enthralled, Rosalind started walking towards the girl, curiosity taking the best of her. Yet, when she neared the entrance, the girl smiled impishly and ran away, leaving Rosalind alone, trying desperately to catch her. Running breathlessly towards the exit, Rosalind tripped, and entered a world of darkness.

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"Now, why did you have to complicate the whole problem, Sorbus? I told you this is serious matter." A voice said.

"Why didn't you bring her here in the way we told you to? Now look what you've done!" Another voice agreed.

"Oh come on! I just wanted to see her face when she ran through the gateway while chasing me! It's so fun seeing mortal's face when they find themselves suddenly in a new era." Sorbus replied, her voice tinged with childishness. "Besides, it's not like she will die from just a little trip."

A sigh. "Sorbus, I thought we'd discussed when you can have fun and when you should be serious, hadn't we? What if the trip was lethal? What if – Rosalind, you're awake!" The speaker exclaimed.

Rosalind looked around in confusion. Where was she? She took a glance at the people standing beside her, and was utterly shocked. The famous, and supposed–to–be–dead poet Li Bai, was standing next to her with two other teenagers, and the also supposed–to–be–dead poet Du Fu.

"Rosalind. Nice to meet you." Li Bai greeted.

"Why are you alive?" Rosalind responded, terrified. *Am I dead? Am I seeing ghosts?* She wondered.

"No, you are very much alive, and so am I." Li Bai said, and Rosalind realized she had spoken her thoughts out. "Now that you are awake, I'm sure you must wonder why you are suddenly here. Allow me to tell you the story as we enjoy some Huangshan Maofeng."

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"I lived here, in Huangshan during the 8th Century. I'm sure you know that. And I'm also sure you know people said I died because I was drunk. What a joke. Instead, I *nearly* died in a terrible war, between us poets and government officials. The government official who was the emperor's favourite back then hated me as he overheard the emperor admiring my works, thinking of giving me a position that is higher than his. He ordered people to create a poem in my name, shading the emperor, provoking the emperor, ordering to kill me. Du Fu and some of my

supporters formed an army in attempt to beat them and regain my name, but we lost. The emperor ordered people to make up some story faking my death and hid the whole history of the war.
They thought they had killed me, but they did not. One of the Eight Immortals pitied me and saved me, Du Fu, and the others, and built us this village in Huangshan to protect us from enemies. Time is frozen on the day of the war. We go through the same loop every day −− waking up, training, preparing ourselves for the war, and in the afternoon, the Emperor's Army invade us, kill us, we fall into darkness, and when we wake up, we're all fine again. It's just the same loop.

No matter how we train, we could never defeat the enemies. So we're hoping you might help us defeat them, to put evils back where they belong. Hell."

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"Wait what? Why me? I know nothing about fighting." Rosalind protested.

"It has to be you. The Eight Immortals revealed to us if anyone had high chance of beating them, it would be you."

"Now, do come on. You got to start training. We have 2 hours until the war begins." Du Fu cut in.

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The time has come. After two hours of training, Rosalind felt fueled up. Especially after seeing others training with such enthusiasm and passion, Rosalind trained even harder, determined not to let them down. And now the time has come.

They were standing in front of Huangshan, wielding weapons, eyes staring ferociously ahead. Rosalind could feel her heart thumping, not because of fear, she realized in a jolt, but because of the adrenaline from the incoming war.

The mountains were quiet, the chilling calmness before a battle. After a while, Rosalind finally saw something coming. It looked somewhat like a sandstorm, but no, they were thousands, millions of men on galloping horses. The galloping sound of the horse hooves drew nearer, the "clip clop clip clop" matching the rhythm of Rosalind's own beating heart.

Li Bai patted her on the back. "Remember, this is your chance to change history. Oh, and one thing I forgot to tell you, since you're not like us, who are stuck in this time loop, you'll really die if you get killed later on. Don't worry," Li Bai added, seeing Rosalind's face turn pale white. "you'll be amazing, won't you? Oh, also note you might see someone you love very dearly later on in the battle. But it's just an illusion. Ignore it and continue your fighting. If you don't, you'll get hypnotised and eventually killed. Keep this in mind: the only thing that matters in a battle, is the final winner. "

As if planned, the enemy started their fight once Li Bai stopped speaking. Quickly tying her hair back in a ponytail, Rosalind began to fight.

She was a hurricane. Her blade was a merciless blur of silver, killing everyone in her way until she reached −−

"Grandpa?" Rosalind whispered, dropping her weapon. Indeed, the face in front of her looked exactly like her long lost grandpa's face.

"Rosalind! Dear Rosalind, please let me go. You can bring peace to this land, by simply turning around, and letting me put this rope right here." The man said gently, though his eyes were merciless. He smirked in victory seeing Rosalind follow his orders. It was just a simple illusion, transforming himself into her beloved grandpa, and that was all it took to beat this girl Li Bai took to be his saviour. However strong she might be, he knew all too well about the common weakness of mortals. They are too cowardly to kill people dear to them.

The man pushed Rosalind violently to the ground. Putting his blade dangerously near her throat, he declared in a sing–song voice, "Put down your weapons! Or your little saviour dies~"

No! Rosalind screamed silently in her mind, seeing Li Bai and the others abandon their weapons to save her. But she could do nothing. Although she had broken out of her trance by the time the man pushed her to the ground, she was still unable to control her body the way she wanted. Oh, how useless she felt right now, seeing that man order his troops to kill Sorbus, Billis, Du Fu, and finally Li Bai right in front of her. They had looked up to her as their saviour, and she had got them killed. Even if she knew they would probably wake up all healthy again the next day due to the time loop, Rosalind still felt torn inside, knowing she failed them.

"Oh, Rosalind. All of your friends sacrificed themselves for you! How touching." Wiping his eyes sarcastically, he continued, "And you failed them because of not having the courage to kill your grandpa, to feel your his life seep away in your hands. You are so weak, when it comes to the topic of loved ones. As much as I pity you, there must only be one winner of this war. And that is, me." Tthe man stuck his blade into Rosalind's heart and drew it out in a swift. Rosalind crumpled onto the Earth, her blood slowly staining the trees near her.

Every spring in the years later, the trees that were stained by Rosalind's blood bloomed with bright red flowers known as the Huangshan Azalea, their presence a silent reminder of the dark, twisted history and the wronged poets who live in the village hidden behind the mists, on the peaks of Huangshan.

The Voyages of the Amber Hero

St. Paul's Convent School, Wong, Fook Yiu Tillie – 13

A towering mountain surrounded by mist and mystery resided in eastern China. No one knew what secrets it held, their only knowledge being the name they gave it, Huangshan, The Mountains of The Yellow Emperor, and a village that was way above the heights, where only the worthy could visit.

Adventurers who sought to reach the peak of Huangshan returned empty–handed, battered, and bruised, each coming back with different stories of how they have rejected entry. Only one part of the tale always stayed the same, a booming voice that shouted," We are the four evils." And disaster would take over.

A young girl, however, unknown to everyone, achieved this astounding feat and returned, not uttering a word. She was Xingyun, a name that destined her to reach the stars and clouds.

Decades ago, a passed down nursery rhyme called out to her, a small, catchy tune sung carelessly hiding a prophecy.

"The stars and clouds share the same sky,
For they climbed beyond the mountains high,
Yellow trails she would go up and down,
And so humble, not a sound!"

The song wrapped around Xingyun, a kind and gentle sound whispered, "Come to The Mountains of The Yellow Emperor…"

With that, young Xingyun wrapped her belongings with a piece of cloth and slung it over her shoulder. One more look at her empty home (She was an orphan), one more sigh and she set off on the journey of her life.

At the foot of the mountain, a stork flew above Xingyun's head and stopped in front of her on the yellow stairs.

"Halt! I am Ground Raiser, an adepti of Huangshan. Do you see the amber path before you?"

Xingyun fretted. Was this a riddle? What was she supposed to say? She couldn't be defeated even before she reached the summit!

"Yes, I do." Xingyun chose to answer truthfully, "There's a road that stretches into the horizon."

"I see. You may pass." Ground Raiser stepped aside

Xingyun breathed out a sigh of relief and began her hike into the misty mountain.

The surrounding slopes, cliffs, caves were adorned with pine trees, topped with white, fluffy snow that increased as she ascended to the slope. The amber path seemed to dimly radiate a warm glow that embraced Xingyun, making her feel safe despite no one was alongside protecting her. The wind felt different as if someone was blowing down instead of it coming from natural clouds. Birds chirped, lizards scurried, frogs croaked, complimenting the natural scenery.

However, the higher she went, the more obstacles she faced, rocks, beasts, and even unknown creatures that even the most courageous of adventurers would quiver before. Even the smallest, unsuspecting creature, a tiny dragonfly passing by, attacked Xingyun mercilessly, with every attack they had.

Was this a test from the gods? Xingyun wondered as she dodged yet another arrow shot from the trees, while pinecones were launched at her at full speed.

Just as she thought she was safe, a sudden shadow cast upon her. Evil, screeching laughter echoed through the cliffs, the soft snow suddenly turning into a raging blizzard, obstructing Xingyun's vision.

“Little girl, you think you deserve the gods to allow you through? You’re weak, worthless, leave before I kill you! I will take over this mountain, and everyone shall fear and worship me!”

“Who are you?” Xingyun shouted, secretly shaking in her leather boots, “Show yourself! Wherever you are!”

“We are the Four Evils, Tao Tie, Hun Dun, Qiong Qi, and Tao Wu. Turn away and run if you value your life!”

Xingyun felt herself begin to boil with rage, “Step aside! The gods are not for you to disrespect like that!”

“Xingyun…”

“Ground Raiser!”

“Do not fear, I will lend you my strength. You can do this. You can protect the Mountain.”

A strong force surged into her body and a sword materialized in her hand, her hand grasped around the weapon. All of a sudden, Xingyun genuinely felt like a hero, one that deserves to scale Huangshan.

With a war cry, Xingyun leaped towards the four evils, dodging and slashing her way through. Qiong Qiw flew to the air, baring his tiger fangs and his wings as he emitted waves from his gaping mouth, attempting to beat Xingyun by wrecking her nerves. A destined warrior doesn’t crumble that easily, and with a shake of a head, Xingyun returned to her charging, strong state.

Hun Dun sang a mismatched tune, causing Xingyun to flinch and cover her ears and the terrible sound. The growls that couldn’t even be described as music blocked Xingyun from coming closer, a barrier appearing before her eyes. She went into a fighting stance, charging the power, and lunged, cutting through the veil and landing a hit on Hundun’s chest, golden liquid dripping out from its wound. Hundun fell back from the impact, shocked that a mortal had such endurance and strength.

Tao Wu stretched its tail, doing a spinning attack to sweep Xingyun off her feet. Xingyun landed on Tao Wu’s back, digging the blade into its back. The demon howled in pain sparkles surrounding it as it dissipated into thin air, never to be heard of again.

The Four, now Three Evils gasped in fear, staring at the little girl who just killed their comrade. Qiong Qie was the first to return to his senses, lunging at Xingyun. Xingyun watched, her life flashing over her eyes, ready to receive the coup de grace from the monster…

BANG!

An explosion blew the monsters into pieces, leaving only Xingyun and the proud Ground Raiser.

“You did well, dear Xingyun. I shall now bring you to the village of Huang Shan. They shall know of your feat. Climb onto me and I will bring you there.” Ground Raiser crouched and allowed Xingyun to leap onto the comfy feathers.

Xingyun peered down as the small wooden huts came into view, pixies, fairies, and magical animals alike chattering and frolicking in the plains, laughter, and cheers echoing through. As Ground Raise landed, the abundance of flora and fauna surprised Xingyun. A small pixie flew over and passed her a berry, beckoning her to eat it. She popped it into her mouth, and immediately a sweet burst of juice covered her tongue, changing tastes every second, from apples to oranges, from oranges to cherries.

“Everyone, come meet your savior, Xingyun! She defeated the Four Evils and brought peace to our land.”

The creatures gathered around, thanking their hero. A group of fairies even placed a flower crown on her head. Xingyun had never felt this appreciated in her life.

That night, Xingyun and the magical creatures surrounded the village, around a crackling bonfire, celebrating the Amber Hero, as they called her, everyone drinking delicious stew, feasting on roasts, biting into multiple heavenly delicacies. Xingyun was the queen of them all, smiling as they crowded around, thanking her for all the work she did.

5000 years later, archaeologists found a gigantic piece of amber, and in it perfectly preserved a beautiful woman, silky smooth hair brushing over her qipao, a shining sword lying next to her. She seemed to not age, despite tests on her body reported she lived till 90 years old. The burial seemed simple on the surface, too simple for an amber encased woman. They continued digging, finding plants and artifacts they have yet to see in any site and unable to be left as deep as it is by humans. She was identified by a name carved into the blade "Xingyun, The Amber Hero".

Deciphering progress took place as people learned more about the Amber Hero. To this day, the song, now proven to be true, was still spreaded and would spread for an eternity.

"The stars and clouds share the same sky,
For they climbed beyond the mountains high,
Yellow trails she would go up and down,
And so humble, not a sound!"

A Piglon's Depression

St. Stephen's College, Cheng, Hong Ting Anson – 12

Legends has said, far beyond the boarders of China, beyond the villages, lies a mountain unlike any other—Huangshan. The mountain was abandoned when Chinese people have learnt of its enchantment on the mountain, some believe it doesn't exist, others believe that it is evil. When the Chinese had left the tall mountain, a creature unlike any other, awoken from its slumber……

The story begins with the most feared animal that once ruled China's land, creatures like dragons and tigers were threatened by its strength and evilness, being the bullet to all living creatures.
Surprisingly, its newest form in present time is a pig, but if you walked the earth before the beginning of time, it is called a Piglon.

Unlike the weak and lazy "pigs" we know today, a Piglon was a corruption of pigs. Piglons had wide and large bodies, their eyes were like telescopes, their hands were the size of human heads, they wore heavy medieval armour and their faces were covered with bruises and scars. Their strength is imaginary, unreal as they could lift a dragon with one hand.

They were powerful but very cruel to other creatures, Piglons were arrogant and rude, they only cared about their own species, seeing others as dirt. The entire land of creatures had grown hatred to Piglons, but no one dared to challenge their inevitable power. The creatures thought, after an extensive discussion, they summoned Buddha for advice and there he responded,

"I understand your problems, but I cannot punish them as their strength and personality are powered by cruelty, they're born with their cruelty, but I can fool them as they aren't educated."

Understanding how they could trick the Piglons, the creatures of China told Buddha their plan.

A few days had gone by and Buddha gave a message to all the Piglons in China, that they must bring out one volunteer that would be entered into a game.

The Piglons laughed at Buddha, calling him a fool and idiot to challenge the kind. That was when Buddha smiled,

"Once you had brought out your champion, he will determine your fate."

The Piglons were confused of what he said and asked,

"What do you mean?"

And Buddha responded exactly as how the creatures had asked him to,

"If your champion succeeds, you will all have my power, but if he loses, you all would lose your power."

Hearing this, the Piglons raised their axes at Buddha, threatening him that they would kill him after their champion succeeds. On Monday, the Piglons met with Buddha at a steep on Huangshan, the Piglons had chosen their strongest Piglon named Bulwark.Buddha waved his hand and a passageway to clouds opened, he went in and Bulwark followed behind him…

Buddha stood in front of Bulwark, the Piglon chuckled at Buddha,

“You’ve made a mistake challenging us!” Bulwark said.

Buddha ignored him and waved his hand again, three clouds appeared in front of him and morphed together into a snake. Buddha explained the rules of the challenge, that Bulwark must find the venom of the snake and bring it to Buddha, while he mustn’t receive any help. Bulwark must journey to the dark cave on the side of Huangshan.

Bulwark understood and asked to begin, Buddha smiled and Bulwark was teleported to a grass pit in the middle of nowhere.

Bulwark first arrived at a raging river, he scouted the area, the waves were as tall as trees, it was impossible to ride across the river.

“Need help?” A voice called behind Bulwark.

Bulwark turned and saw a tiger beside him. He took one more look at the river and turned back at the tiger,

“Quickly.”

The tiger walked towards the front of the river and gave a loud roar, as if twelve earthquakes were happening beside him. All of a sudden, the water stopped, a path opened in the middle of the river, revealing the opposite side of the river. Without hesitation, Bulwark bolted towards the path, taking one last turn, the tiger disappeared.

Not long after, Bulwark arrived at a enormous ditch, just like a “black−hole”. There weren’t any bridges that connected the two mountains. Bulwark spotted an eagle flying above his head, annoyed from the bird, he grabbed the eagle with his huge hands,

“What do you want?” Bulwark asked the eagle.

“To…..To……help…” The eagle responded nervously.

The eagle offered to help Bulwark to fly across the ditch and in return he could help him defeat an “evil beast”. Bulwark agreed and the eagle flew Bulwark across the ditch and landed on the other side,

The eagle was delighted and asked Bulwark to help him defeat the beast, but like the cruel and mean Piglons, he double−crossed the eagle, clutching the eagle in his large hands, throwing the eagle down into the ditch,

“No,” Bulwark said.

Down a spiral staircase, Bulwark had arrived at the dark cave, the cave was ghost−quiet, silent. Bulwark entered the cave, it’s dark and quiet atmosphere was like an abandoned asylum. At the end of the cave, Bulwark saw a gold and shining light, hanged on the wall was a snake shaped statue. Bulwark knew he had won, taking out a leather bag from his pocket, he squeezed the venom from the snake’s mouth, slowly dripping into the bag.

When Bulwark had returned to Buddha, he threw the bag of venom onto the ground, claiming that he had won and demanded for Buddha to turn him into a god. Buddha agreed but asked one last question—whether or not Bulwark had received any assistance through the journey. Bulwark felt a sense of fear and replied, “No”.

At that moment, Buddha claimed that Bulwark was lying to him.

Bulwark denied that he hadn’t told Buddha the truth.

Bulwark suddenly understood that Buddha was the animals, he had morphed into the tiger and the eagle, to test if whether or not Bulwark would cheat. Buddha stats that the Piglons had lost the game, and he must take away all the power they have.

As time moved on, centuries had past, followed my millenniums. The Piglons first lost their strength, then their abilities, then their intelligence. Now, from the mistakes of their past generations, Piglons had slowly morphed into lazy and weak pigs. As tourists point at the pigs for their stupidity, they would always remember to never make the same mistake as their elders had once made, to never lie again, to never be cruel.

Farewell

St. Stephen's College, Cheung, Yi Tung Kristy – 15

25 years of doing the same repetitive tasks of his job, Mr. Elliott Sun thought he might have gotten used to it. The day always began with him sitting in front of the laptop, reading emails while solving unimportant problems from clients, sometimes he had to socialize with managers from other companies, but this tedious job had never made him so sick and depressed.

It was as if he were a machine being restarted every day, he knew who he was, what he had to do with his job, but he couldn't control his emotions and loneliness was like a monster that he couldn't fight off.

Deep inside his heart he felt as if something was missing, a very important component of his life, had suddenly vanished in thin air. The emptiness felt as if a house was without lights, spacious, yet dark, cold and empty. His days were miserable, so he went back to drinking at night which kept the cycle going on and on.

Weeks of drinking has caused his sensitivity to decrease, sometimes he would drive to work feeling groggy and dizzy. Yet again he was drunk driving to work, but, he wasn't so lucky this time. 'BEEP!' an enormous lorry was driving towards him, and the next split second before Elliott could react, the car crashed with a loud thump, and he fainted.

The car crash landed Elliott in a coma for an entire, the doctors had expected the worst and informed his only relative contactable, his ex–wife.

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A cool breeze blew on his face as the birds chirruping surrounded him. He opened his eyes and was astonished by the beautiful scenery surrounding him, the sun shone on every inch of the mighty verdant trees while the sunlight resembled a spectrum of colors. For the first time in a long time, he felt extremely awake, feeling invigorated and refreshed, as if his whole soul and body had been purified and he was granted a new life.

A loud rattle abruptly disturbed the silence, resembling the noise of an old man's coughing, he turned around and realized it was made from the turning engine of a shuttle bus. He scanned the surroundings and found that this was a parking lot for shuttle buses, meanwhile a group of tourists were getting off the bus. He noticed a sign placed on the front window with black block words written on it, 'TO THE SCENIC AREA OF ZHANGJIAJIE'.

"Daddy! Daddy!!" These two words warming yet passionate, had completely melted his heart. He turned around and hugged his lovely daughter in his arms, oh how much he missed her. He hugged her so tight that she could have melted in his arms, yet his 14 year girl struggled away from his tight grasp.

"Oh, where have you been, you've got me scared to death! Lily! I miss you so much!" Their reunion had instantly lit up his hopes of life, Lily had been the whole of his life, and ever since he divorced with his wife, he had been living with Lily.

"What do you mean, we came here this morning together riding the shuttle bus, why are you getting so emotional? I just went to the toilet and when I came back, I saw you staring at that shuttle bus?" Bewildered by her dad's actions, she placed her hand on Elliott's forehead.

Lily started unfolding a map, "Well daddy, so I just checked the map and if we go this way, we can ride the shuttle bus to Tianmenshan which is really famous for its 'gate to heaven'. Oh, and also the misty mountains are definitely gonna be amazing!! Let's go or we're not gonna make it!"

It was a hot summer day where only thin streaks of clouds trailed across the azure sky, however it was more than comfortable to go under the canopy to walk in the arms of mother nature.

There were countless quartzite–sandstone formations soaring up into the sky, with the jagged edges and tiny bushes of green on it, the whole of it somehow resembled hundreds of giant stone fingers with moss built on it. It was breathtaking to see the panoramic view, a view that one could never imagine – realizing that they are nothing more than a tiny insignificant dust in this idyllic, sweeping world.

Elliott held Lily in his arms as they silently looked over the dazzling mountains, he sighed for being so foolish, he was ashamed for being so ignorant, for drinking, for wasting his life. He felt content, to have his daughter with him, they were together, finally, to see this glamorous scenery, and he asked for nothing more.

After half an hour, they continued their journey and boarded another shuttle bus to Tianmendong, Lily was so excited on their journey before they reached the scenery. Elliott could see she intentionally kept looking away from him, and she was blinking back tears.

Tianmendong didn't disappoint them. Looking upwards, they could see two enormous pieces of precipice joint together where the corner formed a natural hole, which looked like a gate in the two cliffs. To reach the hole, they had to walk 999 steps of stairs.

Lily held his hand, and together they took their first step, then they kept going upwards. Elliott felt a sense of sorrow as he looked at her forceful smile.

"Daddy, so how was today? I have always wanted to come here, to see the amazing mountains and to reveal its mysterious face. Well, I guess I had made the right choice." Lily exclaimed.

"Of course, I had so much fun today darling, this has to be the happiest day of my life. I wish I could stay up here the rest of my life! Wouldn't it be great!" He said this while turning around to take a glimpse of the mountains below them, it was almost sunset, the sun–drenched mountains were covered in a warm yellow gradient.

Lily turned away, trying to escape looking directly in Elliott's face, and said, "Daddy, I figured out it's time to say goodbye…"

"What do you mean goodbye, darling, huh," He forced a calm tone, while choking back tears.

"It's time to go back to reality, you have to accept the truth that I…died." Lily closed her eyes while saying the last word as tears trickled down her cheeks.

Elliott's felt as if he were hit once again by a car, his eyes squeezed shut due to the intense pressure as if his mind were travelling light–speed in a boundless tunnel, then a high–pitched wail stabbed his ears. Then clips came back to his mind, he remembered the moment when he rushed to hospital, just to open the door and realize that he was too late. He saw his girl on the bed, the bedroom was all deadly quiet with only his ex–wife holding Lily's hand sobbing quietly

Elliott and Lily were already halfway through to the top, but Elliott broke down, his face went wine red, and he barely held himself together.

"Daddy, you know I am so happy today to be with you once again, it is definitely a gift to go out with you! The misty mountains are amazing, and look at the view down there, this is definitely a place I would recommend everyone to come!" Elliott wiped off his tears, Lily was smiling so beautifully.

"You know, I am so glad that I can have you, my lovely angel, I love you so much daddy! So I would be really really sad if I see you devastated, drinking all night, grieving over me." They arrived at the top, she stopped and looked deeply into his red puffy eyes, "Thank you, I love you so much." She hugged him so hard, yet Elliott hoped this moment would never end.

He gathered his courage and said, “I love you too darling.”

“Goodbye daddy, I promise you I’ll be a good girl.” Lily barely said the last phrase.

Elliott could never gather enough courage to say goodbye, but he said it, “good…bye…”

She looked at him once again, peaceful and satisfied with that answer. Her legs started turning into golden dust, then her body, then her head, she looked in him with the last possible strength, then finally vanished into the gate of heaven.

The sunset was almost over, as the sun shone once again on Elliott, he felt defeated and forlorn, he waited for his time to vanish. As he saw the sun right in front of him, he squeezed his eyes shut.

“Mr. Sun! Mr. Sun!” he heard the voice of a woman, he opened his eyes, feeling groggy and unreal, he saw a white ceiling. He didn’t know whether that was a dream or not, but for now he had set his next goal, to go to Zhangjiajie to find his daughter.

Huang Shan

St. Stephen's College, Kwok, Hiu Yan – 15

"Honey, I'm going to Huang Shan to do a little exploring. I haven't exercised for a while, maybe that's why I'm feeling weak. For the millionth time, will you come with me?"

It was a beautiful day in the midst of May. The warm spring sun was shining brightly in the company of the lilacs in the garden, their flowers wide and in a large variety of colors.

The athletic wife of businessman millionaire Robert Wu, also known as Millie Lin, was begging him to climb up the mountains with her again—for the millionth time since their marriage. It's not that he didn't want to, it's because he physically wasn't able to— he'd spent his entire life with his nose buried in a book and rotting behind his office desk.

"I'm good. Be careful though, you're still sick." Robert replied sheepishly from the sofa with his legs crossed, reading a newspaper.

"I'll back in two hours, don't worry." After giving him a peck on the cheek, she grabbed a bottle of sunscreen and set off.

Climbing up the mountain was an absolute thrill. There's nothing better than seeing the neon green trees and nature awakening after a snowy winter. Many insects have left their state of diapause, butterflies have come out of hibernation, and bees are back buzzing around busily searching for nectar. Before she knew it, she arrived at the peak of Huang Shan. The view up there never ceased to amaze Millie, the air was particularly refreshing, with sudden swirls of wind ruffling the trees and flowers. The cliff rolls deeps into what seems like a never–ending bottomless pit, with mysterious mist filling it up as if it's a gigantic bathtub.

It wasn't really an exhausting run, but when she returned home, she felt as if she was drained of energy. Her muscles were sore as she drove herself back home, this hadn't happened in a long time.

"An ice pack will do the job. It's not a big deal, don't worry." That's what the doctor said, when Millie had paid him a visit. He'd laughed at her, apparently finding the fact that she had freaked out so much over nothing amusing.

At first, Millie's muscles did recover after a few days of resting, but over some time, they didn't even heal at all. The muscles stayed sore and weak for months, and with Millie getting impatient and exercising, it eventually started to spread across her entire body.

When Millie fell down the stairs at her very own house, she had enough. She booked an appointment with the hospital for a body check, and after a week of waiting, she received a phone call.

Nervously, Millie walked into the doctor's office. Her heart was pounding.

Clomp. Clomp. Millie's ears perked straight up immediately the second she heard footsteps approaching the room.

"Millie Lin? Nice to meet you. I'm Dr.Edward." He extended his hand towards Millie, and she cautiously reached out to shake it.

Why is he introducing himself in such a manner? She leaned back.

It's going to be fine. Robert had said that to her in attempt to calm her down before she left the house; *it's going to be just fine.*

"According to your symptoms and some scans from the physical examination the physician has done last month, it appears that you have been primarily diagnosed with the Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis— also shortly known as ALS." The doctor paused, giving Millie some time to absorb the news.

Millie's jaw dropped. ALS. The deadly disease that causes severe muscle weakness, one that will lead to difficulty chewing, talking, walking and ultimately, to death itself. *This simply can't be true…*

Her head stormed with all sorts of questions— questions not of curiosity but dread. *Does this mean I can't do sports ever again? Can I ever hike up the Huang Shan mountains again?* These thoughts horrified her— they were simply part of her soul.

"Well, we need more checks to further investigate your case, if that's fine with you?" Dr.Edward could see her face turning pale. It was gruesome news, and he very often has to battle this pulse of empathy to prevent his professionalism breaking down.

Millie didn't answer. Her mind had already zoned out far away from the hospital.

The road was dimly alight as she pulled up the driveway of her mansion.

Robert can be seen sitting behind his desk doing some paperworks. "Honey! I was just about to call you. How was the appointment? Did you receive some medication? What d—" Robert stopped abruptly when he saw the tears trickling down Millie's cheeks. He could tell something was wrong– Millie hadn't cried in a long time.

One hour. 60 minutes after Millie had spilled the beans on the appointment. Every second passed by as if he had counted every one of them, time passed by like sand from an hourglass falling down one by one. The news hit him like a truck— *how is this possible?*

"Robert, I want one thing from you." Millie sniffed, gathered herself up, and smiled sadly at him after sitting in silence for ten minutes.

"Say it. I'll do it, if it means making you feel better." Robert replied, determined to remove some pain and weight off her back.

"I want you to start exercising for me and get fit and healthy. I want you to one day, no matter how long it takes, carry me up the mountain so I can see my home again. Please, Robert."

Robert froze. He didn't have the capability to do it. He's too overweight to achieve that. This was something he had promised himself to never do, so that he wouldn't have to suffer.

He was about to reject it when Millie's face dropped, turning from full of hope and expectancy to agony. He had to do it. He couldn't decline her only request. "I'll try my best." Robert unwillingly forced out the words, against his will. He's a man of his word —now that he'd said it, he had to do it.

"One condition only. You'll guide me there. Be easy on me though." Robert added. Beside him, a bright smile lit up on Millie's face; even though she has lost her life–long hobby, at least she has achieved her life–long dream. Maybe this wouldn't be as bad…

1 year later

Her muscles had became so paralyzed she could hardly stand on her own. It's tragic, but Millie's not feeling as pessimistic as she thought she would be. Robert has lost over half of his weight from a year ago, and he became so strong he could run the entire mountain trail in just an hour. He has also been on a continuous diet ever since and it's been a whole thirteen months since he last drank a bottle of Coke!

Today, however, is a special day for the couple. Robert is going to be carrying Millie up the mountain for the first time in his life. For Robert, it has taken months of strenuous hard work to reach this day, and for Millie, it has taken decades of dreaming.

Jumping on her wheelchair, they head off to the mountain. A wave of nostalgia hit Millie, it's been a whole year since she was last here. *Oh, how she missed this place!* She carefully climbs onto Robert's back as he slowly walks towards the mountain. With Millie pointing here and there, directing him to what used to be her typical path up the mountain, they eventually reached the top.

On the way up, new flowers grew, while some have wilted, gentle waves of spring breeze ruffle their hair as they climbed higher and higher. At the top, the view is as astonishing as ever. Perhaps it's because it has been quite some time before she last visited the mountain, but she couldn't help but feel a sense of pride being able to reach up to this point. It's not only Robert's effort— she has spent a lot of effort coaching him and strengthening him. Even though her death was just around the corner, at least she got to see the view up here once again. A mysterious cloud of mist stirred up at the bottom of the cliff. *Who knows what exists underneath?*

Robert, on the other hand, collapses and lies down on the neon green grass. Winds of victory hit him in his face repeatedly, and he sighs in relief. He did it, he did the impossible. He wonders what would've happened if he didn't agree to Millie's request— would he still be rotting away behind his desk disappointing his wife? The view here is amazing. He's glad he went out of his comfort zone and dedicated his mind into achieving what he thought was impossible, in return, he got to discover the amazing world outside.

Azalea

St. Stephen's College, Lam, Hui Yan Grace – 15

"Can you tell me a bed–time story?" A boy asked an old man.

The old man thought for a while, "A hundred years ago, Huangshan was heaven with extraordinary animals and alluring sunset scenery…" Birds flew freely through the sky like spring welcoming them with a pleasant hug. Nature sang melodiously as to bid farewell to the frosty winter.

Once, a couple climbed to the top of Huangshan. The male proposed to the female. Unfortunately, the female rejected.

"Sorry, I… I don't think we are suitable for each other."

"That's impossible! We have been together for 3 years!" He confessed.

"I don't know…There is no true love between us, at least not for me."

"No…no, no! We have love…" He kept denying the truth while holding her hands harshly.

"Take your hands off me! Why can't you just accept the truth! I don't have feelings for you!" She struggled.

The fierce anger built up in his mind, without thinking, he pushed the girl off the cliff cruelly. An anguishing scream echoed like a dreadful alarm till it weakened away into the horrible depths. In just a second, Huangshan was overwhelmed with grief and mourning. The sky sobbed heavily, the mountain top was covered by thunderstorms with no ends. Since then, Huangshan has never been arrayed by a golden ray of sunlight.

"So is Huangshan still cursed?" The boy asked.

"Huangshan is no longer cursed, since an incident that happened thirty years ago…" The old man explained.

Since Huangshan had been cursed, no one could ever climb close to the top of the mountain. Villagers believed that only the one who could climb to the top of the mountain with courage could shake heaven and break the curse. People from all around the world who loved an adventure came to challenge Huangshan. Though they never knew that they would pay such a heavy price for this adventure.

The old man looked sorrowfully at the sunset painting on the wall and said, "There was once a foolish man who failed to protect his lover because of this adventure." He mumbled.

"Witnessing a dazzling sunset with you is the biggest wish in my life," Natalie said, smiling graciously to Christopher while holding azaleas in her hand, her favorite flower. Poems and legends over the past mentioned Huangshan's splendid sunset view. Remembering Natalie's words, Christopher regardless of the risks decided to climb Huangshan.

"Christopher and Natalie packed sufficiently for their climb. After a long–distance of traveling, they were finally at the foot of the mountain." The old man said gruffly.

Christopher looked up startled, sweat kept on falling from his palms. The tremendous layer of a grim overcoat covering Huangshan was a nightmare. Raindrops were bitter like bitter gourd, dry and inspirited. Plants wilted sighing, hopeless, and desperate. At the foot of the mountain, there was a direction sign with ivy curling around, roughly written:

Think wisely before you climb.

Overwhelmed with fear, Christopher swallowed as if it was the last second of his life. He walked, he talked, he smiled to Natalie like he always did, but inside he was dying horribly. He pretended to stay strong in front of Natalie. There were no fences nor steps but only a feeble rope that was connected tightly throughout the mountain which was made by the other climbers. The cliff was beside them while walking and the fragile rope was their only hope of survival. They climbed for three hours, barely even half the mountain, but their energy and supplies were running out. With the extreme weather getting more and more unbearable, climbing seemed to be more and more impossible. They stopped to rest.
"Let's turn back, we cannot climb to the top." Natalie panicked.

"Don't give up! I think we are…almost there." Swiping off the water droplets on his watch. Trying to be professional, but his body stiffened in fear.

A lightning struck out into insane zig–zags from the dark sky, a thunder roared overhead like the fury of the gods.

"Christopher! This is not the time to argue!" Natalie was frightened by the thunder.

Christopher had been keeping a secret during this journey. His hands were shaking constantly, holding an exquisite ring firmly in his pocket.

"We cannot risk our —" Before Natalie could finish her sentence, Christopher slipped from the wet ground. Swinging left and right on the edge of the cliff.

"Christopher! Don't let go of my hands, hold tight!" Screaming her throat out, tearing the air into a great shard of glass. She laid on the ground and tried to pull him up while tightly grabbing the stones beside her. Her hands were full of scratches, her face tightened while gritting her teeth. After a few tries, she pulled Christopher up and he was finally safe.

"Thank God you're alive, told you not to come up this mountain…" said Natalie.

"Thank you love for saving me."

She laid prone on the floor, heaving from the thin oxygen and exertion after using all her energy to pull Christopher. As she was standing up, she felt the world around her spin and dizziness slammed against her fragile body. Natalie slipped, her hands scrambling for something to grab on. All the physics theories suddenly applied to her and she lost her balance. "No—" Christopher tried to catch Natalie's hands. His hands kept reaching out, but he could only sense hails landing on his hands. Unfortunately, Natalie fell into the depth of the mountain. At that moment, everything stopped. Hails and raindrops were like slow motion. Thunderstorms were punishing nature anxiously. Raindrops hit nature brutally although nature had already begged for forgiveness.

"The foolish man burst into tears. Tears followed the raindrops and dropped into endless depths of the mountain. His screeched, yelled and shrieked, though this couldn't express his bitterness. His hands stroked his chest heavily, leaving tons of wounds but all of these didn't matter anymore." The old man groaned.

"What happened to the man after?" The boy was curious.

"He laid down on the ground for two days and two nights. There were no tears left for him even though he wanted to cry his heart out. His body was dehydrated like an empty bottle."

Christopher walked back to the village and became the first person who survived the mountain. He wasn't proud of his reputation. He hated Huangshan.

After twelve years…

Christopher became a famous mountain climber. He traveled to different scenic places to capture sunset photos. However, it was never enough to fill up his sadness. Every year on 12th December, he went to Natalie's grave. Put down azaleas and photos that he had taken. For twelve years, he hadn't been late.

“This is my twelfth time visiting you. This year, I went to Switzerland, Greece…” He quavered.
Tears raced down his cheek. Great sobs escaped him, and he bowed on his knees with shaking hands.
“Natalie! I miss you so much. I watched all these sunsets by myself, do you know how much pain I’m in?” He bawled.

After visiting Natalie, Christopher plucked up his courage and decided to climb Huangshan again. The second climb was much easier than the first one. He adapted to extreme weather faster and used different skillful techniques to overcome challenges. He kept going even though nature was blocking his way. His action touched the heart of the Lord. The overcast sky covering the mountain top seemed to disappear which made the climbing easier. To his surprise, he was able to climb to the mountain top.

Rays of sunlight shone on his cold face. He closed his eyes as the sunlight was so strong. He felt the warm balmy sunshine. The sun cast golden rays down upon the clouds of billowing smoke, turning them fire red. It was the most breath−taking sunset he had ever seen. There was an array of azaleas. Thousands of azaleas were painted on the mountain top, blossoming spiritually with diverse colors. Christopher’s eyes were filled to the brim with tears. For the first time, he cried with delight. Birds started to chirp beautifully. Monkeys were impatient to watch the dazzling view when they all climbed up to the trees. Trees were embraced by the wind. Nature was filled with verve again after a hundred years.

“Afterward, Huangshan no longer had extreme weather, but only layers of mist.” The old man finished.

The boy had already slept sweetly and soundly with his blanket over him. The old man looked over to the sunset photos on the wall he had taken. He took out something from the drawer — an exquisite ring and a sunset photo from Huangshan.

Filling Their Shots

St. Stephen's College, Lam, Ka Hei Heidi – 15

It was a busy day in the Wang household. As usual, Mr and Mrs Wang was busy hustling around, frantically checking their phones. "One of my clients just left! Excuse me? How dare he walk away like this—" " Oh for gods sake not again—"

Jing groans as he pulled his covers over him, trying to block out the yelling. Just a normal summer day in the Wang household. *Ugh why can't he just have a quiet morning without the whole world buzzing about sales and stocks?* Unable to fall back asleep, he sat up as the sunlight penetrated through the blinds and glanced outside to a jungle of concrete and steel skyscrapers. He supposed most people would consider this Shenzhen view beautiful, but instead he longed to wake up to mountains and seas.

"Jing!" A loud booming voice disrupted his thoughts, his frowning father was standing in the doorway. Uh oh, he knew that look only too well. He jumped up and strolled out, desperate to avoid conversation. Unfortunately, he wasn't quick enough, his father pulled him back and said, "Jing, starting from tomorrow you are attending our business workshop, so go and prepare – no buts."

Jing rolled his eyes and scoffed, "Dad, for the last time, I am NOT spending my summer nor my future as a broker, and don't expect me to take over your corporation because let's face it, both you and I know I'm not made for it."

Jing flopped back onto his bed and sighed. Staring at his blank ceiling, the only image in his mind was that dull office life.

The next morning, he was whisked away into a shiny car by two men in suits as soon he swallowed the last spoon of his cereal. He had just reached the front door when Mr Wong's stern face appeared.

As soon as he arrived the workshop, it was absolutely everything he had imagined. For several hours, his instructor droned on and on about numbers and stocks. Of course, it was so stupid of Jing to expect anything more.

After what felt like forever, Jing was finally released, leaving with one piece of precious knowledge after a complete waste of his morning: he was never coming back here again, and his hatred for stocks somehow managed to increase drastically.

The minute Jing got home, he browsed the internet for anything— anything at all to escape this absolute nuttiness. And there it was, in big flashy letters— "HuangShan Photography Tour". Perfect! He once dreamed to become a photographer, much to his parents' dismay, but that was ages ago, perhaps he would be able to convince them now?

It has been a long time since Jing has been in the forest. It hums with life all around him. Jing trudged on with his camera clutched tightly. He took a deep breath, allowing the fresh air flow freely into his lungs. This, this was where he belonged, not some dim, cluttered office with depressing stacks of papers. He wandered around, taking a variety of shots, but before he knew it, time had flown by. The scenery around him had changed so much that it was nearly sunset now, the sun dipping below the horizon to make way for the moon.

He returned home and Jing's parents completely freaked out when he mentioned, "wildlife photographer".

"Have you gone bonkers— you're just going to throw away your entire future for such an unstable job?!"

"Listen Mom—"

"And after 19 years you come here babbling about being a photographer?!"

They screeched hysterically, loud enough for the entire building to hear. By the end of the third sentence, it was quite surprising that the amount of steam pouring out of their ears hadn't set off the fire alarm. The shrieking and the bellowing kept cutting Jing off.

"And exactly how many people do you think succeeds in these— these onerous, toilsome jobs?! Fine, but don't you crawl back here begging us for money after your joyful little career hits the dust!"

"Fine!"

The next day, Jing woke up in the dawn before the sun barely rose. He went to the station and took off to Huangshan, where his tour would officially take place. He met several others with huge expensive–looking cameras.

As they got higher and higher, nothing met Jing's gaze as he looked down, but clouds and mist swirling around greeting them. It was tiresome but amazing, nonetheless. He wanted to capture every single detail around him– the misty mountain, spectacular rocks and the seas of clouds hovering across the peaks.

A large brick arch announced an idyllic village, and beyond that was clusters of brick houses. Jing exhaled, a small smile forming on his face, he had a feeling he could capture a lot of beautiful shots here. Strolling around the village, his gaze landed on a man crouching down, holding a camera. The man's face held an intense look of concentration with his camera held steadily in his hands, the lens pointed towards a baby fox.

The shutter clicked.

The photographer immediately sat down, reviewing the photos. Unable to contain his curiosity, he walked over and asked, "Excuse me, are you a photographer, too?" He just nodded.

The man then invited Jing to sit down and introduced himself as Jordan, a wildlife photographer who was here to take photos for a competition.

Suddenly, Jordan turned to Jing with a hopeful glint in his eyes. "Hey! I just had an idea. Why don't you tag along this summer and I'll teach you a thing or two about some skills I've picked up over time?"

It was so unexpected that it took a solid minute for Jing to comprehend what he just heard before nodding vigorously to this offer.

The summer went by in a blur, Jing had the most amazing time of his life along with Jordan, who taught him everything he knew. But eventually, summer ended, which also meant their adventures had come to a halt. He went home determined to pursue a career as a wildlife photographer.

Having spent a better portion of his time going back planning out an entire speech, Jing still felt rather nervous as he arrived home.

"Hi dad. I have something I want to tell you…" His voice came out small. Upon seeing Jing, he gave him a brisk nod, features impassive.

Mr Wang interrupted, removing his glasses and cleaning them on his shirt. He said, "Son, I know you like photography, but you can't turn this into a career. Quite frankly, I'm tired of hearing about this. We've laid your life out perfectly for you. Why won't you appreciate that?"

He glowered at Jing with such distaste that Jing lowered his gaze for a brief moment. His mom chimed in, "He's right, you know. You should appreciate what you have now. Don't you want to be successful?"

Jing felt like pulling his hair out in frustration.

“This isn’t even about money or gratefulness! This is about my choices! Why should follow to your ridiculous lifestyles so I can throw my life away? I don’t need a stocks empire; I want to travel the world and be a photographer! I met someone while I was in Huangshan, and he’s a photographer too! He made money by selling his photos and publishing books. I can do that. It’s not going to be as lavish as a securities company, but I’ll live. I’ve told you about my dreams to be a photographer, yet you don’t respect my decisions and force your ideal life onto me. Imagine this: you really wanted to be a lawyer, but grandpa wants you to be a broker. Would you really follow his instructions willingly?”

His father’s face twisted.

This quarrel went on for ages, but Jing could do this all day if it means having his parents’ acceptance. Finally, Mr Wang could go no further, he simply sighed and caved in.

“Fine”, he said, “But you are expected to succeed, I will not tolerate failure, nor will I provide you a living if your career fails.”

His dreams were going to come true!

6 years later Jing was walking around in a large exhibit. He stopped in front of a framed photograph of two otters. Underneath these pictures was a small tag, bearing the words *Wang Jing* in an elegant script.

He had finally opened his own gallery. 4 years ago, he started to publish his works in a series of wildly popular books. After the third instalment, a curator reached out to see if he would be interested in opening his very own gallery. Much to his delight, everything turned out just as he planned.

He let out a victorious sigh. After all these years of hard work, he’d proven to his parents that following his dreams and being a photographer can be just as successful as a stockbroker.

A Cure

St. Stephen's College, Lam, Yan Janice – 15

Gaping in amazement at the seas of clouds and fogs floating above the Yellow Mountains just under his foot, Noah finally perceived why An-hui people called themselves the villagers of Xanadu. He could imagine himself jumping off from the cliff and landing on a piece of mist. Although it was already his fourth hour of climbing the mountain since mid-afternoon, the sun hadn't started to descend as if the day was still at noon. The radiant, picturesque and celestial scenery stroked Noah's taut brain and relieved his uneasiness.

"Hey, what happened to your legs?" A girl interrupted Noah's leisurely hike by tapping his purple bruise on his ankle. She was about four feet tall, wearing a yellow button-down shirt with seaweed-colored pants, her outfit puzzled Noah as he'd never seen anyone wearing this kind of clothes.

"Hmm, nothing special." Noah pulled his trousers, so it was long enough to cover the bruise. There was actually a lot more bruises and scars over his legs.

"There must be something wrong with you." The little girl said. "I can give you my candy. But tell me your purpose of climbing as an exchange. Are you looking for Buddha?"

"No of course not!" Noah immediately denied despite the girl having guessed the truth. He didn't want to let others think he was naïve and still believed the folktale telling people they could make a wish if they saw Buddha, the mother of God on the peak of Yellow Mountain.

"Anyways. My name is Isa, nice to meet you." The girl said her words confidently and enthusiastically.

However, Noah was hesitant to reply. *It was just a coincidence, okay? A lot of people are called Isa, not just mama.* He told himself.

"Oh hi… shall we go?"

They squinted as they looked up toward the peak. It seemed like they were not really far away from the spot they desired to reach. Noah held the little girl's hand as they started to climb.

"What's your name?", "Noah."

"I am five, how about you?"

"Fourteen."

"Do you think I am annoying?"

"A little bit. "

"HEY! Then lemme tell you a joke… Once upon a time, there was a guy called Noah…", "Why are you using my name?" "It's just a coincidence, be chill. "

They began blabbering along their way up. Giggling could be heard every few seconds as they were climbing.

"Hey,"

"Yeah?"

“What’s the time right now?”

“I guess it’s 11 a.m. “

“Wait what?’

“I meant …yeah, 11a.m. on 12 April 1939. Why do I have to lie? “

This shocked Noah as if he was about to die within a minute. His heart pumped vigorously and he was too stunned that he felt like he was unable to react. He could not believe what he had heard. *It must be ridiculous. The time machine has not even been invented yet. How would it be even possible that I had travelled to thirty years ago, when mama was just a five old girl.*

“No, I just wasn’t paying attention when you replied me, so yeah sorry.”

They continued to climb, as they almost reached the crest of the mountain, they began to climb a rugged staircase which headed to the summit. Noah tried his best to be calm and pretend nothing had happened while they were chatting, however, whenever he saw Isa’s face, he couldn’t help relating her to mama, they resembled each other’s facial features strongly that they must be the same person. But their personality was entirely different. *So, how did mama deteriorate so badly?*

Noah kept thinking until some noises from probably a bunch of kids interrupted them.
‘Okay, I think I should leave now.’’ Isa said quietly.

Noah turned to Isa, as he was surprised of what Isa had said and her sudden change of emotions like she went through paradise and hell in a second, they met a bunch of kids heading down from above.

“Oh my gosh, ewww! It is Isa here.”

“Are you really going to find Buddha?’

“You dunce will never become rich no matter what.”

“Get back to your farm and feed the pigs”

“Shame on you.”

Those kids were probably the same age with Isa, however, their naiveness and innocence entirely disappeared as there were huge blades of malice in their words. *Oh hell, who taught them to say these spiteful words. They are probably only five, and well, they are too rude to continue being alive. Besides, they just ignored me. Hey! At least I am a teenage so shouldn’t they respect me a little bit more me huh?*

Not only Isa’s cheeks, but her whole face and ears also turned red. She didn’t say anything but seemed to accept what those bullies were saying. Meanwhile, she held Noah’s hand tightly as if she was about to use all her effort to crush Noah’s bones.

“STOP!” Noah shouted toward those kids as he peered down and stared at each of them anxiously. Maybe because of his voice change in the past few months, he had unconsciously made a hoarse roar, all the kids gaped at him and stopped talking at once.

Noah cleared his throat, suggesting to those kids to leave, ready to fling his palms at them should they approach them.

"Everything is okay now." Noah bent down and consoled Isa's nervousness and agitation by putting a hand on her shoulder. As if all her worries had been relieved at once, a drop of tear fell on her cheeks as she blinked after a few seconds Noah had talked to her.

"Okay yeah, I am fine now. Thanks."

"Shall we continue?'

"Yeah, of course!"

They started to climb again; Isa's smile was now even wider as she had become an even more gleeful and beautiful child. As they passed through several turns, they finally arrived at the peak.

Standing on top of Yellow Mountain definitely brought them a breathtaking striking spectacular view. Clouds were floating underneath, what you saw could really give an illusion that you had already landed in a paradise.

"Turns out Buddha doesn't live here, I guess." Isa said.

"Yeah… probably' Noah replied.

"But you know what, my wish has already come true. Cause I am wishing for a friend, and here you are. And I am very grateful for that." Isa glanced at Noah as to express how happy she was.

They laid on each other. Maybe because of the long hours of climbing, Noah had an urge to yawn and stretch. He closed his eyes as to fully enjoy the subtle aromas and the sounds came from the cicadas. He breathed slowly and regularly as he's ready to sleep.

Noah woke up on his bed in his house. His mother sat next to him, the bruises on his legs had disappeared, everything in his room was tidy and clean, as if sun had finally arrived their home and kicked those storm clouds away from his house.

She greeted him, "Good morning my darling, hope you had a good rest, prepared porridge for breakfast. Come join me."

The abuse had stopped, he finally understood her pent−up burst of outrage that stemmed from her traumatic childhood.

Noah's wish has come true.

Moop

St. Stephen's College, Wong, Chun Ning Lisa – 15

Scene 1

In the tranquility of a misty mountain, Heping village was a remote and peaceful village that was home to many animals. Centre Restaurant had been occupied, if not jam–packed, with many students and workers at this festive season called Friendship Day.

"Give me a basket of siumai and cha siu bao (roasted pork bun)" Monkey shouted.

This young monkey's voice was insolent. He desperately wanted to feed his hungry stomach, but the restaurant was too busy to respond to him. Panda was the chef of Centre Restaurant. He was busy rolling the dough, skillfully assembling the fillings into the wrapper and putting it in the steamer. Thoughtlessly leaving the steamer unattended, he was too caught up in a chat with a regular customer in the restaurant. Until the burning smell invaded his nose, he came back and saw some spilled shrimp from the steamer. 'Oh dear! My "har gows" are destroyed! I'm so sorry but I need time to remake it.' Panda said embarrassingly.

Monkey could not wait anymore, he jumped up onto the table and ran into the kitchen. He screamed with his loudest voice," Where's my food? I waited for 10 minutes already!"

Panda's frustration was met with monkey's impatience. He tried to stop Monkey from entering the kitchen. Monkey jumped across Panda's embrace and Panda pulled him from his tail. Monkey tried to kick but missed. Panda struck back but Monkey dodged flexibly. Their fight was witnessed by all other customers. Some were surprised by their combat skills and found it rather entertaining, while some tried to pull them aside.

"Your kungfu is not bad. Here goes my respect." Monkey remarked wittily.

"Child, don't be silly. If you make trouble again, you will be doomed." Panda said seriously.

Scene 2

'Attention everyone! We are calling for an emergency meeting. All of you please gather in the Middle Garden immediately!' The village leader, old Deer announced. A sense of unease overwhelmed the villagers as the last emergency meeting called was when the previous village leader died. The situation sounded serious. Schools were suspended for half a day and restaurants were closed. All the villagers sat quietly and waited for the meeting to start.

'Thank you for being on time. As you may be aware of the construction next to us, our homeland is now much in danger. This is the only place we can live but humans are encroaching upon us! We urge everyone to play their part in preserving our place and lives. We have sent a warning letter to humans, asking them to leave. If they do not follow our request, we will declare war!'

Old Deer stood on top of the stage in confidence, while the murmuring arose from the crowd.

'Human won't listen to us.'

'Should every one of us participate in the war?'

'They have guns and swords, but we have four limbs or some even less. How do we fight humans?' the villagers grumbled.

'Don't you remember our Kungfu skills? Hands and fists are the strongest tools we have. We will send the best of our kind to defeat them. Any suggestions?' Old Deer asked.

Silence travelled through the air until someone interrupted.

‘I want to be in the battle. Let me be one of the representatives.’ Panda volunteered and all of the villagers were surprised by Panda’s bravery.

‘Very well, Panda. We still need two more representatives.’

‘Old Deer, I recommend Monkey to join me. His Kung Fu skills are excellent.’ Panda added.

Monkey’s face blushed as everyone stared at him. ‘It’s my honor to join the battle with Panda.’

Monkey softened his voice as he spoke. ‘Oh, maybe we can ask Ostrich to join as well? He is the best in combat!’ Sheep mama suggested.

‘But doesn’t Ostrich live high up in the Heping mountain? How are we supposed to find him?’ Snake asked.

‘Monkey and I will persuade Ostrich. Count on us!’ Panda said.

‘Let’s put our hands together for Panda and Monkey!’ Old Deer looked relieved, with weariness across his wrinkly face as he walked down the stage.

Scene 3

The day after the emergency meeting, Panda and Monkey prepared to hike up to Ostrich’s home. It took five days until they arrived at the spooky, secluded place. A huge cave appeared in the misty clouds. There was only Ostrich living there, in a far−remote place from downtown.

‘Hi Ostrich, I’m Panda and here’s my friend, Monkey. We are the representatives of Heping village, and we are going to have a Kung Fu battle with humans. We need you to fight against the obnoxious humans. Can you join us?’ Panda implored Ostrich.

‘I don’t want to be in this fight. Although humans are destroying your village, we don’t need a battle. Humans are stronger and cleverer than we animals. What if we lose? There is no turning back with humans.’ Ostrich explained.

‘Ostrich I can empathize with your feelings. But there is no other choice. It's too late to withdraw from the challenge. We need to defend and stand steadfast against their onslaught.’

Monkey suddenly stood up with confidence. ‘Old Deer has told me that they have received the humans’ letter. Human refused to leave our place, but they initiated a combat competition. There is no time for us to cower. Ostrich, we need you.’ Panda begged Ostrich once again. ‘Very well, you two can stay here and practice Kung Fu in my hood. I will think about your suggestion. Come on! I will teach you my skills!’

Ostrich welcomed Panda and Monkey.

Scene 4:

Crops and poultry from the farm were made into scrumptious delicacies, rewards that they looked forward to each day for their discipline and hard work. One day, a letter was sent to Ostrich’s home.

‘Panda, Ostrich, wake up! Old deer sent us a letter!’ Monkey screamed in excitement. ‘Wait what? Let me read it. Oh no, the battle will be held next Wednesday. We need to fight against ‘The BEAT’. It’s a kungfu team that will represent humans in the battle. Monkey, I’m sure we are ready for this.’ Panda said. ‘

Guys listen. Your persistence and bravery during the KungFu practice has impressed me. I’m joining this battle!’ Ostrich announced seriously.

Both Panda and Monkey exclaimed with their big smile and embraced in tears. 'That means we need to think of a group name! Let me think……' Panda advised. 'I know! I know! We are the 'MOOP'! It comes from our names' first letters,' Monkey screeched in excitement.

'Wow! It's the best that can represent us. We should "moop" together and stand as one. MOOP can do it!' Ostrich said.

Scene 5

As time went by, the D-day finally arrived. Three representatives of each side met at the Third-finger mountain. Old Deer and Thomas were the judges. They announced the start of the fight. The first one-to-one fight is Panda and an old man called Bill. Bill firstly bounced on Panda's tremendous body and started tickling him. Since Panda's fur was too thick, he was resistant to tickling. Panda then swung his body, kicked Bill off the edge of the mountain. Bill was shaking in fear, he didn't have any energy to stand up and continue the fight. 'The first point goes to Panda!

Next, we have Monkey and Ethan in the second round.' Old deer announced. Monkey spun around Ethan. Ethan used his hands to cover his eyes until Monkey stopped. Instead of making Ethan dizzy, Monkey spun too quickly and that made himself muzzy. Ethan saw Monkey wasn't concentrating, he grappled Monkey tightly and squeezed. Monkey couldn't do anything, and he surrendered.

'Ethan gets a point in the second round! Moving on to the last round.' Thomas proclaimed.

'The result depends on me! Keep calm Ostrich, you can do it!' Ostrich encouraged himself.

Andy started the battle by pushing Ostrich off the cliff. He climbed on Ostrich's body and grabbed his wings. Ostrich struggled and swung his body side by side to get rid of Andy. They landed on both sides of the edge of the mountain.

Andy's legs were stuck between the rocks. At this moment, Ostrich ran to him, but Andy dodged. Ostrich tripped over a rock and fell into the hole. They both couldn't move, and the battle ended. 'It's a tie for the final round!' Thomas announced.

'No one lost or won in the battle, so all of you should respect each other.' Old deer said thoughtfully, and everyone agreed.

From now on, human stopped their construction work on animals' places and animals allowed humans to visit their town. They had a harmonious relationship and HePing village restored peace.

Immortal in the Mountains

St. Stephen's Girls' College, Chan, Ching Kiu – 13

Kwok Lok Ching, the Hong Kong mountain-climber extraordinaire, was currently running away from a pack of wild rabid dogs between the Yellow Mountains.

Ching was separated from her teammates in the middle of a competition. She was fed up with her two teammates arguing so much that she wandered off without telling them, and she ended up stranding herself in the middle of nowhere.

Suddenly, she heard footsteps faraway. She blew her whistle to get their attention. However, when the footsteps became louder and clearer, she realised it wasn't just footsteps, but growls and barks! Ching began to run as fast as she could. When she looked back, a pack of dogs were growling at her aggressively, she screeched at the horrifying sight and tried to dash away from them, but she tripped over a thick tree root and fell face first to the ground. One of the dogs sat on her with a thump and barked as others joined. Ching was beyond terrified.

"Are you fine? What's your name?" a deep voice was directed to Ching. Someone came, kneeling in front of Ching.

The poor woman looked up, extremely shocked by the amazing sight in front of her. The man had an otherworldly beauty Ching had never seen before – with long and straight dark brown hair, his gorgeous slightly slanted brown eyes were looking at her, sharp jawline streamed by long side bangs, his light skin tone with a healthy blush lining his cheekbones and slightly upturned nose, and rosy lips like sakura blossom. That man was even prettier than the female models she had seen in runaway shows, but he kept a firm masculine aura by his stance.

"You can call me Ching," Ching snapped out of her stance.

"A foreigner?" The man asked while coaxing the dog off Ching, offering his hand, helping her get up.

"Technically, I'm from Hong Kong," Ching replied, "Mister, why were your dogs chasing me?"

"My name is Tian Jia. My dogs must have heard your movements. This one is called Tofu. I brought the pack out because we were hunting," he explained.

"Do you have something that I can contact my teammates with? I got lost and wandered away from them.'

"Come to my place."

Ching followed Tian Jia. They trekked through woods, paths, rivers for hours. Thankfully, they arrived before sunset, and Ching was flabbergasted by the sight in front of her.

"Tian Jia, why are we in front of a palace?"

"Miss, this is my place."

"I was expecting an old cottage or some worn-down house. How did you get people to build you a palace all the way here in the mountains?"

Tian Jia mumbled something and walked in. Ching couldn't hear, so she brushed it off and followed him.

Inside, the rooms she passed by were all luxurious, but one thing was in common – there was nobody. No servants, no palace inhabitants, no nothing.

As she stood silently contemplating, his dog, Tofu pushed her, signalling her to continue walking. However, Tofu pushed too hard that she almost fell but Tian Jia's fast reflexes caught her in his arms just before she fell.

"Oh my! Thank you…" As Ching looked up to her saviour, she saw that Tian Jia was looking at her intensely, she became extremely flustered that her ear turned pink by the intensity of the gaze.

Tian Jia flustered, "You must be very tired. Stay here for a good rest tonight."

They arrived at her bedroom, and Ching opened the door to see the large and airy room, with large windows and a bathroom suite. There were a beautifully carved wooden bed, some chairs, a dainty table and a closet filled with clothes. The room was a mix of modern western style and ancient Chinese style incorporated so flawlessly that even top-tier designers would envy how the two cultures were put together and balanced so well.

"Tian Jia, how did you get people to construct this?" Ching was conflicted between being thankful or to be even more cautious of that unknown man. They hadn't known each other for a day and he helped a lost stranger woman and brought her back to his house, then gave her a luxurious bedroom to stay.

Her suspicion began to crawl out but her thankfulness for that man kept it at bay, for now.

"For now, take a shower. Dinner will be brought to you soon. We will talk in the morning."

"Thank you for doing this Tian Jia!" Ching smiled gratefully to Tian Jia. And unknown to Ching, Tian Jia's heart skipped a beat as Ching smiled at him that brightly.

The next morning, Tian Jia knocked and came into her room with a tray of food.

As Ching finished eating, she asked, "Do you know about the Yellow Mountains Annual Trek? I've given up on the competition, but I should contact my teammates. They must be freaking out now."

"Never heard, but you can stay here for the time being."

After a long silence, Tian Jia decided to speak up, "Ching, I need to tell you something."

"Yes?"

"I am an immortal being. I can command the spirits of the wind to do anything for me. The palace was built by them. Your dinner was also brought by them."

"Are you having a fever?" Ching worriedly put her hand on Tian Jia's forehead.

"Ching, I'm telling you this because I don't want to live as an immortal anymore. I watched wars happen, people suffering and historic events nobody alive except me has ever seen. I watched people I loved die in front of me, but I cannot save them and their souls slipped away from me and reaped by Death," Tian Jia sighed, "I was made an immortal because my soulmate from 3000 years ago did not love me. I was a cruel man. The gods punished me by making me immortal until I found my soulmate's reincarnation and made her fall in love with me this time."

"You're telling me this because?" Ching nervously asked, but she could already guess his answer.

"You are my soulmate's reincarnation. I knew it since I laid my eyes on you."

Sighing, Ching got up from her chair, "Can you bring me back to my teammates? You have mistaken me for someone else."

“Ching, please give me a chance. You were the one I didn’t realise I loved until it was too late,” Tian Jia begged, tears threatening to spill in the corners of his eyes.

Heart−breaking to see him begging on his knees, she softened, “You have one month.”

“Thank you, thank you for your chance! If you still do not have the slightest bit of affection for me after one month, I will bring you back to your friends and family.”

“Mom, so did you end up falling for Dad?” a young voice among the other three said.

“Kit, what do you think? If we didn’t fall for each other, you won't even exist!” Ching sighed, exasperated at her only and youngest son’s question.

“At least your love story is romantic. Dad brought you to places and countries around the world. He gave you everything you wanted. Why wouldn’t you fall for him?” Her second youngest daughter, Wing commented.

“Fall for who?” Tian Jia suddenly opened the bedroom door and poked his head inside, “You mean how your mother fell in love with me? That is definitely because of my handsome good looks!”

“Oh gosh, your ego is going to burst soon if you continue praising yourself. You don’t really have your great looks anymore Dad – your hair is turning white!”

Tian Jia was trembling at the thought of him turning ugly, bald and old. Will his wife not love him anymore?

“Jing, stop teasing your father. And the three of you, go to bed! You’ve passed your bedtime so much already,” Ching chastised her kids as they scurried out of the room, saying their goodnights and getting ready for bed.

“Ching, will you still love me when I turn into a wrinkly grandpa?” Tian Jia was still quite shaken after what his daughter said. After all, he lived through thousands of years without worrying about his appearance.

“Darling, I didn’t only fall for your good looks, you know. You, my love, have so much more underneath those pretty looks of yours.”

“But if it’s not my good looks,” Tian Jia started, “what made you fall for me?”

Ching shrugged, “You love me so dearly that touched my heart and you are kind enough to save a stranger from the woods. You have changed from the cruel man three thousand years ago to the man I love today.”

Tian Jia visibly brightened after Ching’s lovely confession, he kissed her temple softly and hugged her.

Unaware of the curious eyes of their three children watching them, the mortal couple fell asleep, the feeling of bliss and warmth wrapping them like a warm blanket.

Tales from China's Magical Mountains

St. Stephen's Girls' College, Chung, Yan Ling Bethany – 12

An aged woman sat on a bluff, surrounded by the mist−cloaked earth of Huangshan. A tiger lay beside her, its fur a knot of black and ivory. Wisps of clouds swirled just below the tips of the mountain, occasionally bumping into each other and moving on.

The old woman said, "Our time is coming to join our ancestors, Hou. A prodigy will have to be picked, and I will have to teach him the magic of our tribe before it's too late. But who could he be?"

Then there was a sudden shift in the air, and the evening breeze came back tinged with heat. The old woman stood up so abruptly her spine cracked. Pain shot up her back, but she dashed to edge of the bluff nonetheless.

At the edge of the Dividing, the elder and the tiger trembled, watching something that no Hiller has ever seen in a thousand years. The ash was rising.

⋆

Unsaid words rang in his ears as he crashed though the woods, tears blurring his path like raindrops on a windshield.

He shouldn't have acted out in front of Jin. Shouldn't have wanted to go beyond the Dividing, the layer of clouds that separated Huangshan from the mortal world below. And yet...he did. Anger stopped him like a brick wall. He wouldn't cry about something he wasn't sorry for. He let the wind dry his tears and looked up, realizing he'd arrived at the edge of the same bluff where the last Grounder wildfire had almost consumed the entire Huangshan forest.

According to Jin, he'd been brought up to Huangshan at the time of that exact incident – wait. Jin had never once said that he was brought up on Huangshan. Tam had always thought it was just a slip of the tongue, but what if it wasn't? What if he was a...Grounder?

Before Tam had time to dwell on it, flaming arrows rained down from above.

Had the gods declared war?

⋆

"What's happening?" Tam gasped as he pushed through the Hillers that had crowded around their elder, Jin, in a cave at the side of Huangshan.

Jin's eyes were dim as she said, "I'm afraid the end has come; Shangdi is angry, the Prophecy is coming true." Her irises crackled with hope as she looked at Tam. "You're our only hope now."

Tam stared wildly at the crowd. "What? Me? But I'm not even sure I'm a Hiller!"

He jumped when Jin put her hand on his arm, her mouth set in a thin line of resolve. "It's true. You are not Hiller, but you are not Grounder either. You are…something else."

Tam's shoulders sagged. "I knew I never belonged."

He pulled away, ran through his flaming village and down Huangshan with his head in a daze. He didn't turn back – not even when his feet touched Grounder earth for the first time. He refused to let the floodgates open, clinging to his determination like a lifeline. *You could run far away…* Jin's voice cut into his conscience, ... *travel across galaxies, and your legacy would still follow.*

Stinging hot tears pushed through like needles, causing him to trip mid–sprint. Tam found himself sprawled on the earth, violent sobs racking his chest as he hit the dirt with his fists. Why did it have to be him? Tam failed to notice the blood, nor the cart hurtling towards him – until it was too late.

Everything went black.

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He opened his eyes, but they found nothing to adjust to. Then a voice said from behind, "I've been waiting, Tam."

"Who are you?"

"You'd know me as Yan Wang, the god of the dead." He replied.

Bile coated Tam's tongue. "I'm…dead?" A simple 'no' was the reply.

"Why am I here, then?"

"You are here to learn you identity, son of Shangdi."

Tam had to laugh, "My father: Shangdi? The Chinese god of creation?" For a fleeting moment, Tam knew it was the truth. However, he was afraid that if he accepted it, everything he believed about himself would crumble. …*nothing can define you but you,* Jin was suddenly there, knocking down the walls he had put around him. A flaming symbol of the Chinese dragon ignited above his head: the creature of Shangdi.

Tam exhaled in resignation as the symbol faded. "What do I have to know?"

Yan Wang told him that once ago, Shangdi was full of mercy and kindness, always disguising himself as a mortal and giving to the poor. But not long after he was made king of the gods, his power and wealth blinded him to good conscience. Jin managed to find out from the beggars, and Shangdi, driven by his fear, was determined to destroy Jin's tribe. To stop his wrath, she had to compromise her tribe's magic. But an unexpected arrival stalled him: Tam. His mortal mother gave him to Jin in hopes of greater protection from his father, and seeing this, whatever shred of love he had left kept Shangdi at bay. But the ancient poets knew the inevitable:

Shangdi's nature will be revealed,

By child's hand be forced to kneel.

An elder's renege will seal their fate,

By Chang'e's moon he'll be too late.

Dragon's blood poured out for all,

Choosing path of love or war?

"That's why you need to train, with me." Yan Wang finished.

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Chang'e's moon was also known as full moon. Now, on the morning on The Full Moon festival, Tam could hear Yan Wang's voice in his head, guiding him. Tam envisioned his feelings of stress and anger as balloons and letting go of all the strings at once, and when he opened his eyes, he was encased in a hologram of a dragon. Tam spread his wings and took flight, leaving the underworld behind.

Back on Huangshan, all of the Chinese gods had dominated more than half of the mountain, and the Hillers were backed onto the edge of a cliff, cowering in fear. Flaming arrows littered the ground like fireflies.

Jin was horrified when she saw him, "No, Tam, leave! Now!"

"My son." A voice interrupted. "Glad you could join us."

"What do you want?" Tam spat, facing his father.

Shangdi smiled thinly. "Simple: your magic." He turned to Jin. "That was the deal after all, wasn't it?" The Hillers murmured, disbelieve plain on their faces.

Jin proclaimed sadly, "I'm afraid Shangdi is right; it's my fault. But please, take only my life, in place of the magic of my people."

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Shangdi roared with laughter at her plea as silence settled upon the Hillers. A young girl scrambled to her feet and squeaked, "Anyone would've done what Jin did. And even if it's her fault, I will fight for our home." Jin's face was a canvas of pride and shame.

Scattered applause from the Hillers turned into an uproar as they cheered, "For Huangshan!"

Tam took flight as the Hillers summoned their magic and attacked. He breathed fire down on the gods and cleared the path for his family, with Yan Wang riding piggyback as the god fought alongside him. But they were still no match against the army of gods.

Tam was suddenly thrown against a boulder, blood gushing out from his nose among impact. He watched as his blood penetrated the hologram and seeped into the earth. “You thought you could defeat me?” Shangdi roared and the gods shifted their feet uneasily. He spread his hands and tendrils of magic snaked out from the Hillers’ mouths and into his. All seemed lost, until Tam remembered the last line of the prophecy. The sudden boost of clarification freed Tam from the god’s magic as he realized what the words meant: with Shangdi vulnerable and the gods momentarily without a leader, Tam now had the power to choose between war or peace.

Tam’s voice was loud and clear as he shouted, “I choose love!” The gods didn’t need any more incentive: they all charged Shangdi. The king of the gods was past the point of no return.

With the last of his strength, Tam kicked Shangdi’s legs out from under him as the gods held him down. Tam’s dragon hologram flickered and disappeared as he took one last regretful look at his father. "I banish you, Shangdi, to exile.”

Shangdi's scream filled the air as his body turned to ash. “The mighty king has fallen.” Yan Wang murmured as he and all the other gods started to fade away too. “Shangdi is our foundation. As he goes, so do we. The universe won’t cease to operate, but we will be gone…for good, perhaps." Yan Wang’s words floated away, bittersweet like his ashes.

Jin was hurt badly in battle, and looking at her still body, Tam’s heart hurt more than his wound. Yet he knew Jin would've wanted him to fight.

Tam looked up. The ash was rising.

Foreset of the Mind

St. Stephen's Girls' College, Hanson, Anjalika – 13

As I woke up, I couldn't help but feel hungover and dead.

Slowly I opened my eyes, only to find myself in the middle of nowhere. Lost and alone. I tried to get up. I started to feel extremely dizzy. Colours soon appeared everywhere. I was in a familiar place.

I was in a place I once used to live in with my husband.

We chose to live in the tall mountains of China because my husband felt very connected to it as he was very intrigued by Chinese History..

I started to look around. I was surrounded by trees. The sky was blood red. I started to cry in confusion and fear.

"Am I asleep? Am I losing my mind?" I thought to myself.

I felt alone. Not knowing what was going on.

As I continued to cry, a neutering voice could be heard not so far away, singing. It was the voice of a man. Very deep and calming. I could hear music. It echoed. It sounded like my deceased husband.

My husband went missing a year ago. No one knows where he is and I haven't been able to process what has happened. Not knowing what has happened to him scares and hurts me the most.

I felt a sudden urge to follow the voice. Maybe this is where he's been all this time.

It was so alluring. I could hear the sound of loud doors creaking throughout the blowing air. I still didn't know where I was or where I was supposed to be. All I knew was that I wanted to follow this voice.

As I got up and started walking. I could hear the sound of loud birds flying in the sky. It was the same bird my husband and I would hear every morning while waking up in our old house. It felt so magical yet scary at the same time…sort of like a nightmare..

The further I walked into the forest, the louder the voice became. I was crying. I was finally going to see, hold and feel him again.

I walked faster and faster. I suddenly could see a similar building not too far away peaking through the unrealistically large trees.

I think this is our old house.

"Is this where the voice is coming from?" I thought to myself.

The wind blew so heavily that as I walked closer and closer, I kept stumbling to the ground.

After walking that felt like forever...

I finally made it, I was now in front of our old house that was now very dark in colour. The voice was louder than ever. It echoed so much through the sky. I needed to get inside and see him again. I entered and opened the door. A gust of wind followed.

I climbed up the large staircases, as the voice got louder and louder and felt closer and closer.

As I walked in, I saw that everything was broken and had huge holes throughout every wall. I was high on the ground and the blood red sky looked redder than ever.

I was starting to get scared, but as I walked more, his voice only got louder which made me feel...safe.

After walking through each and every hallway, I was now in front of a dramatically large door that was twice my size.

"This must be where the voice is coming from. This is where he is!" I thought to myself.

I immediately tried to open the door, and it was a struggle. I stumbled to the ground after succeeding. I was excited and wanted to see him again. So badly.

I got up from the ground that I had stumbled on.

As I looked up I saw blood, splashed all over the walls and windows that filled the entire room.

It was our bathroom.

I screamed. I turned around and tried to leave the room before the door shut closed aggressively.

Blood marks were all over the door reading, "You can't escape what you've created."

The voice was still playing only for me to start listening to what it was actually saying.

"What was I supposed to do back then?"

"I reach my hand to cover my mouth.."

"Have I lost myself or have I gained you?"

I started to remember. I started to remember what happened and what I did. My personality disorder…whenever I would dissociate to my alt, it would be nothing but filled with anger from its past traumas and would physically take it all out on my husband.

This time I must've taken it too far and ran away from home...

"Please… please tell me this is a nightmare."

I looked over at the bathtub. I saw his body...followed by the reflection of me drowning him to his death.

I fell to the ground and broke apart. I did this? I am such a monster!

He never told the police. He just couldn't. He knew that I didn't mean any of this and couldn't help the fact that my disorder caused me to do this to him. He would take the pain my disorder would put on him while still unconditionally loving me to pieces.

I looked over at the bathtub again, and this time fell into it and drowned myself.

I didn't deserve to live anymore after doing this to the only person who loved me and would sacrificed his life for me.

The Mystery of the Misty Mountains

St. Stephen's Girls' College, Ku, Tin Yan Siana – 12

The Mountains of the Yellow Emperor, also known as the Misty Mountains, stood tall in eastern China: the home of famous poets. Rumours about these mountains still went around from one person to another. Stories were inspired by them, mystical tales and unreal creatures. People made up things about the mountain that made no sense. Tiny houses perched on top of the mountains. Still, no one knew what truly lies in the mountains that people admired. Even with all kinds of rumours, people were certain that one particular tale was true.

One night, a shadow crept up the mountains. A young female, no older than eighteen. Only a backpack hung from her shoulders. Step by step, she walked up the ancient steps. The mountains were breathtakingly beautiful underneath the light of the sun, but they seemed completely different as the moonlight shone on them. It was empty, yet the unsettling feeling of someone watching her never seemed to leave the girl. The moon was the only thing providing light for the girl to see. A gust of wind blew, tangling her black locks.

The feelings of regret and fear washed over her. She turned around to leave, only to find a thick fog blocking her way, trapping her in the mountains. Without a choice, she wiped the sweat off her forehead and spun around, only to come face to face with an unearthly creature.

She screamed and stumbled backwards. The creature was like nothing she had ever seen. It had blood–red eyes and white pupils. It had no nose and no mouth. Its hair looked exactly like tentacles. It had the body of a human, its bones piercing through its skin and legs like a goat's. It crept towards her at a slow pace. The girl shrieked once again and ran down a never–ending path. Trees surrounded her and blocked the light. Soon, a house appeared in front of her. She smiled with delight and bolted for the back door, entering the house through it and slamming it shut.

She sighed with relief, but couldn't help but feel uneasy. Something was underneath her feet. Kneeling down, her hands touched the hard, wooden floor and felt a wet substance on it. Groaning with disgust, she stood up and heard the light switch on behind her. Adjusting to the light, she peered at the sight in front of her in horror.

Her foot was stepping on a bloody sword. Unconscious people were tied up in chairs in front of her. She picked up a satchel near her and rummaged through it. In it were pieces of parchment spattered with ink, poems describing the view from above the mountains. She looked at the ink–stained fingers of the people tied to the chairs. She immediately understood that these people were poets. She gagged at the sight of blood on the floor. Suddenly, footsteps echoed through the hallway leading to the room. Panicking, the girl hid behind a cupboard next to the unconscious poets. Just as she crouched down, she saw a shadow.

Surprisingly, there was no one there, only a shadow on the ground. She still heard footsteps and the sounds of someone breathing heavily. A choked sob escaped her. Burying her head in her knees, she knew she was doomed. Footsteps approached her and she felt a warm breath on her toes. She stayed as still as possible, stuffing the fabric of her sleeve into her mouth to muffle the sounds of her sobs.

After a few seconds, she saw a translucent hand grip her ankle hard and drag her from behind the cupboard. She shrieked and cried hysterically, begging the hand to let her go. She thrashed and tried to pull her foot out of the creature's grasp, but to no avail. Her cheek dragged against the floor, the ragged edges of wood piercing her soft skin. The creature finally stopped dragging her and sat her up. It clamped a piece of cloth over her nose and mouth, suffocating her until she fell unconscious.

The girl woke up in a dark chamber. After her eyes adjusted to the dark, she tried to stand up, but instantly fell to her knees due to a sharp pain in her leg. Blood trickled from her leg, spilling out of five marks which belonged to the hand's fingernails, to the ground. A putrid smell filled her nose as she gagged. The metallic taste of blood filled her mouth. Her hands were tied together with a piece of rope and a mask was clamped onto her face.

Using all of her strength, she crawled to a window and peeked out. Nothing had changed. It was the same view she had seen when she had first entered these mountains. The same houses. The same trees. The same path that she walked. It felt different to her though. A dark aura surrounded the houses. The trees looked more like spikes than plants. The path looked like a stairway leading to her death.

Ignoring the pain in her leg, she stood up and looked around frantically for an exit. She wanted to leave this place as soon as possible. She felt around the room using her back and eventually found a door. Opening it, she smiled with relief as it led to the stone path she used to enter here, but that smile disappeared as she saw dozens of demon−like creatures, searching their surroundings for their next meal.

Suddenly, footsteps echoed down the hallway leading to the room. Were these the steps belonging to that translucent hand? It seemed likely. She started to lose control. It was a dilemma. Either she got dragged back into a dark room with no exit, or she risked getting devoured by hungry creatures. Tears welled in her eyes. She was never getting out of here. Who knew that these mountains, which looked like a paradise in the morning sun, could hold such terrors?

"Hey! You!" Her blood froze as she heard the voice. She arched her neck towards her right and saw a boy. Blood was stained on his clothing and he had a scar on his cheek. His hazel eyes stared right at her as he motioned for her to follow him. Without thinking twice, she bolted towards the boy and thrust her bound hands in front of his face. He nodded and helped her untie the ropes before ripping off the mask on her face. She took in a deep breath and let out a happy sigh.

The boy told her that he had also been trapped in the mountains and was trying to find a way out. He said he had found a small house which was empty and full of supplies and food, saying that the two of them could stay there for that night and leave the next day. The girl's eyes were shining as she heard him say these things. She took his hand and they ran deeper into the thick fog. Neither of the two kids were ever seen again.

Some people say that they decided to live in the mountains, obligated to slay all the creatures in the mountains and save the trapped poets. Others say that the boy is in league with the shadow in the mountain and led her into a trap, causing her to suffer an undesirable death. The rumours about the mountains still go around in China, as people tell each other tales about these mountains. But to this day, what really happened, no one really knows.

Finding my identity

St. Stephen's Girls' College, Leung, Ka Wing – 13

Hi, I am Ashley, I am 11 years old. My mom and dad had a divorce three years ago and I had been in my mom's ward since then. My mom had never let me leave the house after the divorce not even for school, so I had no friends except Claudia. I met her when I was in kindergarten and we had been friends since then. I would always wonder: why did my parents get divorced and what was my dad doing now? But since I had never seen my dad since the divorce. I didn't know the answer. I would always ask my mother, when can I leave the house and explore the world and her answer was always the same,

"The world is too dangerous for you."

I was so tired of hearing the same answer every time I asked. Until yesterday, I received a package from my father. Inside the package was a wrapped present and there was a note inside the bag, it wrote,

"You could open the present tomorrow but don't touch the picture until you think you are ready. And also, don't tell your mother about this."

He drew a winking emoji and I was filled with excitement but feeling quite unsure.

I woke up early in the morning, feeling excited as ever to open the present, so I ripped off the present's wrapping paper. Inside the package, there was a book in it. Out of curiosity, I opened the book, there was a line that said, "Everything you want to know is inside." written by my father himself and above it was a drawing of a huge mountain surrounded by fog. It was so realistic that I couldn't resist myself from touching the picture. Suddenly, a yellow portal appeared and I jumped because I was shocked. I thought: that wasn't supposed to happen.

After this happened, I called my friend, Claudia and she said she was going to come and check it out. After a few minutes, the doorbell rang. Claudia was at the door. We went up to my bedroom where the book was hidden. I let Claudia look at the picture and she was really amazed by how real the picture looked and then we decided to search where this picture was from.

After a while of searching, we found out this mountain was in China, and it was called Huangshan. When we said the name Huangshan, the book glowed again and this time there was a loud humming sound that sounded like a bee. My mum heard it and she loudly called out my name.

"Ashley! What is that noise coming from your …"

Before she could even finish her sentence, Claudia and I were pulled into the book and we could hear the book closing itself. After a few seconds, we fell on rough ground. We stood up and looked around since there was a lot of fog, we couldn't see where we were going, so I asked, "Where are we?"

Suddenly I could feel that I was about to fall off a cliff but luckily somebody held my hand and pulled me. When I wanted to thank him, he gestured to me to turn around and my jaws dropped. In front were some huge mountains with sharp peaks and when the sun shined on them, the rocks became golden.

Claudia exclaimed, "There are no words to describe the scenery. It's just breathtaking."

After enjoying the amazing scenery, we turned around to see who just saved my life.

Claudia whispered, "It was Li Bai, the famous poet who just saved your life."

He heard what Claudia said and told us to come with him. Since he was speaking Chinese, I did not really understand said but when I saw Claudia following him, I knew what he meant.

We kept on walking until we saw a house. After we went in, Li Bai made some tea for us. While we were drinking the tea, we introduced ourselves and after he heard my name, he looked at me as if I were worrying him. Then he told us to sit since he got some important things to tell us but because I didn't understand Chinese, he was mainly talking to Claudia while I was wandering around his. But then, I heard him mention my name. When I turned my head, I saw him staring at me with concern in his eyes. What he said seemed to have surprised Claudia.

I looked at Claudia with confusion, "Claude, what did he just say?"

Claudia answered, "He said to solve the mystery, we must meet the King of Huangshan. There is a hole in this mountain that leads to his kingdom but since there is a group who has rebelled against the King, they would attack anyone who dares to cross the way to visit the King so we must be careful."

The next morning, we set off to the hole. It was dark and damp inside and we could barely see anything. Suddenly, Claudia grabbed my arm and muttered,

"Did you hear that?"

I looked up from where the sound came from and my jaw dropped. I pointed at the thing I saw and stuttered, "A be...beast."

As I retrieved from shock, I felt my hand being pulled and heard my friend yell,

"Run!"

The beast looked down at us and growled.

We sprinted hoping to lose him but just to find ourselves running straight to the beast.

The beast saw the chance and pranced toward us. He had his big furry paws on my chest. He used his claw to look at the necklace I was wearing and said slyly,

"What is a princess like you doing in the cave? Are you just lost or are you the 'heiress' that the King has always been talking about?"

All of a sudden, a wolf jumped out from behind and sunk its teeth into the beast's skin and the beast cried painfully and scowled at the wolf,

"Mind your own business, what are you even doing here? If you are about to steal the princess for the King, then, not on my watch."

The wolf launched his claws at the wolf but the wolf ducked and that was when they started fighting aggressively, scratching and biting each other but in the end, the wolf won and the beast escaped.

The wolf looked at us and said, "Follow me, I am going to bring you to the palace. The King wants to see you."

On the way to the palace, the situation had been bothering me: What do I have to do with the King? What did the beast mean?

Not long later, we arrived at a village and there was a palace on the hill, so the wolf led us to the palace. As soon as we entered the palace, the first thing I noticed was a portrait – the man inside was strangely familiar. We went to the King's room and that's when everything started making sense – the father that I had not seen for years was sitting right there on the throne.

My father patted the wolf next to him, "You did a good job." Then, he walked towards me, "Come with me, I need to show you something."

We went to the balcony in his bedroom and looked at the sunset.

I whispered very softly almost unable to hear, "Why did you leave us?"

My dad looked at me with guilt in his eyes and said, "To protect this country. It's a risk I had to take. One day, you will be the queen of this entire country. I know you don't understand right now, but they are your people. They came here to hide from war, but enemies have been staring at this throne for a long time, waiting for the perfect time to strike and destroy the country. To prevent this from happening, I have to find a talented successor to protect this throne, and this is you."

I asked, "So I have to stay here to have school?"

My father nodded.

Unsure of my choices, I left the room and a guard showed me to my room.

Later that night, I heard a soft knock on my door and my dad came in.

"Mum has agreed to let you stay here, you feel fine with that?" he asked.

I nodded.

The next morning, Claudia left by using a portal. Although I didn't want her to leave, I knew it was the right thing. I started attending school there.

That was how I found out I was a princess.

Utopia

St. Stephen's Girls' College, Li, Ming Yan –13

Am I dead?

This was the first thing that came to my mind when I woke up. I should have been dead.

I sat up slowly. I could still feel the pain spreading all over my body from head to toe. It seemed that I had been asleep for quite a while.

Wait–

I was still in my clothes, a cerulean blue sweater and black jeans. I pulled them up in panic. There were no bruises on my arms, elbows or knees. I was unhurt. Even my clothes were intact.

How strange.

Then I looked around. I found myself on a bed with white silk blankets, in a quaintly decorated house. This was not the kind of heaven I was expecting. I expected to be in a white, limitless space, and angels would be singing around me. Yet all I could hear was the birds chirping outside the house. I could even feel and listen to my heartbeats and my every breath.

So I have not died. Where am I, then?

I got down the bed. I was blinded by dizziness for a moment, but I managed to stagger towards the door. The wooden floor squeaked – it was probably an old house.

A blast of cold air rushed in as I pushed the door open.

Endless rows of peach blossom trees came into my view. The snow had blanketed the ground and ornamented the stems and twigs while the heavy fog blurred the whole dreamy scene.

"Fascinating, isn't it?"

I turned around. A tall woman in a grey cloak was standing behind me. Her complexion was bizarrely wan, but her skin was as smooth as a baby's.

"Who are you?"

"I saved you," she said with a slight Chinese accent.

"You're avoiding the question."

She chuckled, "So you don't want to know how you got here, or where you are. Instead, you want to know who I am?"

"I'm just trying to figure something out. How did you save me? I fell off the cliff."

"How? I found you here, on the pinnacle of the mountain."

I sighed and began to tell her everything.

I went to the Yellow Mountains with my family at dawn. We sat near the cliff, to watch the sun climb up from the east towards the middle of the sky bit by bit. It was a breathtaking scene. We were all enjoying that moment of joy and serenity.

"Come here, Phillipa." A voice coming from afar distracted me.

Did I just hear someone calling my name?

"Come!"

No, this must be my hallucination, I thought.

"Come catch me!"

This time I could no longer ignore it. The sound came from the edge of the cliff. I got up and walked towards it. I could see a golden ball of light floating in the air.

"Phillipa, come and have some sandwiches."

"Just a second, Mum."

I could see it clearer and clearer as I moved forward. It was dazzling.

"Where are you going, Phillipa?" Dad exclaimed.

It started dancing and squealing. I grinned and reached out my hand carefully.

"I just want to take a look at this."

"What are you doing—come back! It's dangerous!"

Ignoring the warning, I tried to catch the golden ball. Then, my body started to spin, everything obscure and I lost consciousness.

"A golden ball? Seems like Xiao Gin got bored and experimented a new mischief on you. Sorry about that. I shall educate Xiao Gin later," the woman frowned.

"What? That golden ball was real and has a name? I thought I lost my mind and fell off the cliff." I got even more confused.

"No, you didn't. Xiao Gin brought you here. I found you somewhere in the woods. You probably fainted since your body couldn't adapt to the weather here."

"This doesn't make sense at all! Where are we, and who are you?" I cried. This is ridiculous!

"Calm down, child. I'm Fantine, and this is Taohuayuan, the Peach Blossom Land."

"Taohuayuan? I read about it. Isn't it fictional?"

"No," she looked displeased, "the man in the story you read about did exist and came here, but our ancestors modified his memory when they found out that he wanted to tell everyone about it. That's why no one could find us," she said.

"So Taohuayuan is real, and this is it?"

"Yes. I'll show you around."

I followed her as she walked towards the peach blossom woods.

When we entered the woods, my jaw dropped. I was astonished by what I saw inside the woods. There were gold and silver flowers that were talking to each other, and monkeys, squirrels that were dancing…Everything was just surreal.

"This is—"

"A magical place," she cut in when I was still finding the right word to describe all these.

"Ah!" Suddenly, I was lifted up in the air by an unknown force.

"Xiao Gin, stop your nonsense right now. You almost killed her!"

"Ouch!" The next moment, I fell onto the ground. There was a bright golden ball of light floating in the air!

"Xiao Gin," Fantine pointed at it angrily, "I'm very disappointed with you!"

The golden ball of light turned blue and started squalling.

I got up and flicked the ashes on my clothes away. "What exactly is this?" I muttered.

"It is my pet," said Fantine,"it is surely older than me, but still acts like a child. No one knows where it came from, but we have got used to it." She bent down and petted Xiao Gin gently.

Every word coming out from Fantine's mouth perplexed me. She seemed to be amused by my dubious look and said, "I'll bring you to someone. He'll be able to answer everything you want to know."

The village was at the end of the woods. There were dozens of cottages, all wooden and antiquated, just like the ones I saw in historical Chinese television shows. There were cattle and dogs, farmland and ponds. The villagers seemed to be busy, but all of them looked joyful. Fantine greeted some of them and led me into one of the cottages that looked particularly old and shabby.

There weren't many decorations in the house. An old man who had greyish—white hair and wrinkles all over his face, was sitting in an armchair, humming with his eyes closed.

"Grandpa."

He opened his eyes, looking surprised seeing me, "Fang—ding?"

"My Chinese name," Fantine said to me.

I nodded.

"I brought an outsider."

"Good! Come closer, child, let me look at you!"

I walked towards him.

He sized me up and said, "Interesting. How did you get here?"

"It's Xiao Gin."

"Well, apparently it likes you. What's your name?" He smiled, and all his wrinkles rose.

"Phillipa. I don't understand, sir. The creatures, the plants...Nothing here seems to make sense."

"You can call me Tang Lao Bo. The peach blossom trees my great–great–great–grandfather built seem to have some kind of magic–extraordinary plants and creatures were born. Our people gain power from the trees too. Some live very long and some have supernatural powers."

"Do you want some tea, Phillipa?" Fantine walked out of the kitchen.

"I'd love to. Thank you."

Tang Lao Bo took a sip of the tea and continued, "To hide from wars, our ancestors found this place and settled down thousands of years ago. They planted trees and built houses. We never went outside since then."

"But why didn't you go outside when the wars ended?"

He shook his head and said in a hoarse voice, "We have no desire to do that. Isn't it amazing to live here? Up here, beyond the clouds, below the sun."

"How about you? How is it to be living outside?" Fantine handed me a cup of tea and asked.

"It is not as peaceful as it is here. Frankly, it is such a mess. Thousands of people die every day, justice is never present...I guess you're right. This is the best place in the world."

"Phillipa," Fantine patted my shoulder and uttered, "this place might be a magical, fantastical utopia... But the perfect place is always where our family is."

"You're right, Fantine." I started to miss my family. Are they worried about me?

"Would you like another cup of tea?" Tao Lao Bo asked.

"No, thanks. I think it's time for me to go home now."

"If you wish," Fantine smiled.

"Will my memory be erased afterwards?"

"We'll let Xiao Gin decide," Fantine whistled and Xiao Gin appeared out of nowhere.

"Touch it when you're ready."

Once again, I fainted.

"Phillipa!"

I opened my eyes. I was still standing on the edge of the cliff. Hours had passed for me, but not a second seemed to have passed here. I rushed back to my family and hugged them tightly. Yes, this is where I belong. I looked up and found that Xiao Gin was still floating in the air, among the clouds.

"Goodbye."

It blinked, and slowly faded away.

The Mystical Mountain

St. Stephen's Girls' College, Ngai, Hannah Hailey – 12

Molly and her mum were on a trip in the eastern side of China. They decided to go there because it was a summer holiday

It's now 9a.m in the morning and they had just arrived their destination.

Huangshan was beautiful and stunning. There were many mountains, more than you could ever imagine. There were tall ones and short ones.

Molly and her mum were climbing the steep and tall mountains with a tourist as their guidance. But suddenly, the sky grew darker and darker. And a few minutes later, the blue skies became gloomy and were filled with grey clouds. Molly heard thunder in the dark, jet black sky. "boom! Boom! Boom!" it stroked thrice. Then rain started pouring. It rained terribly heavy that day.

Since all three of them didn't have any umbrellas. They had to run through the heavy rain without a cover on their heads.

They ran and ran and ran. Until Molly slipped on a wet leaf. She fell down onto the edge of the sidewalk. And rolled down the mountain……

She fell down a small slope, but luckily she wasn't hurt too bad, but the problem was, she was in a totally different place.

She looked around, and didn't see her mum. She yelled," mum? Hello?" but no one replied.

Molly fainted for a while, but when she woke up, she found herself sleeping on fresh green grass. And there were also a bunch of people staring at her.

Molly was confused, but after hearing those people explain, it all made sense.

The villagers found her fainted right outside the door of their village, so they took her in for care. The villagers were super nice, they brought Molly to have a tour through the village.

The whole time when Molly stayed in this mysterious place, she didn't dare step into the temple. She didn't even dare walking one step close to it.

Many villagers had told Molly many times that that there was a myth that who evr lives in that temple will cast a deep curse on whoever trespasses.

But that was the only thing that was keeping Molly from going home, so she took out all her bravery, then walked to the temple's front door.

Molly knocked on the door, but no one replied, so she just walked straight in. the first floor was just like a normal house, a living room, kitchen… I think you'd know.

She hesitated if she should keep going up. As she heard some weird sounds coming from upstairs.

Then, Molly heard someone walking up the stairs, she was too scared to move…

———

" Ahhhhh !" Molly screamed in fright, as she felt the creature touch her legs. "Please don't bite or eat me ! Please…" Molly was about to cry. But she didn't, because she heard a," meow!" behind her. She turned around slowly.

"it's a cat!" Molly exclaimed, "Awww, it's so cute! You almost scared me to death haha."

It purred in joy, Then Molly decided to give it a name, " Hmm, your name will be.. brave!"

———

Molly opened every single door but they were all just ordinary rooms.

But when Molly finally reached the end of the corridor, there was a green emerald door. The door looked like it had been there for many years. It was old and had roots and leaves covering it, like the main entrance of this little mysterious village.

But this one was different. This door was locked. Molly could see many locks and chains on the door, too.

Molly searched every where she could, and finally found the key hidden in the walls.

———

Molly successfully unlocked the dor, but all she saw was a small tree sitting on a wooden table.

" turns out there's nothing special here."

As she sighed , she said " I wish I had a comfy bed to sleep in now, I'm exhausted!"

Then "poof!" a nice–looking bed suddenly appeared next to Molly. Molly got confused, she rubbed her eyes to make sure that this was a dream. But it wasn't. Molly had so many questions. Then, she remembered that she said the words " I wish"

Molly released her fingers on her palm and saw the violet leaf again. "Wait… could it be?"

To test if the leaf was magical, Molly wished, "I wish, that Brave would be clean!" Again, there was a "poof!" sound, and Brave's fur was spotless. Molly shouted, "Whoa! This is incredible! "

Then, she made a bunch of more wishes, auntil she had used up all the leaves…

Actually, Molly still had one more wish left in her pocket, a leaf flew in when she didn't notice. So, she had no idea.

After that, she started to drift off to sleep

Suddenly, a skinny tall pale woman burst into the room and scared Molly half to death. She had just finished making her wishes and just started sleeping.

“wait. What? who are you? And What are you doing in my room?”

“Excuse me, YOUR room? You’re not even in your own house young lady! You’re coming with me! Trespassing, going into people’s houses without permission, even touching our personal stuff, who do you think you are!”

Molly was too scared to react, then she was pulled out of that room, into another room.

A second later, she was being kidnaped into a room even darker and smaller than the one just now.

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About ten minutes later, the woman came back .

The woman announced, “ You will be staying here until you’ve served us enough.”

Molly yelled, “What!? How can you do this!? I have a home and I am only 12 years old!”

The woman didn’t care, she just slammed the door shut.

Molly started to cry.

After dinner, which was just bread and milk, Molly tried hard to fall asleep but failed as there was just so much things going on. She missed her family. Molly also missed freedom, but for now, she’ll just have to do what she doesn’t do best: Obey and wait.

The next day, the mistress of the house came in first thing at the morning, at six o’clock to wake Molly up and tell her to do her chores

Molly got up and sat straight and listened to whatever the mistress had to say to her. Then the mistress made a bunch of orders. But Molly only knew one thing from listening, This woman, ms foster, was a mean, cold blooded person.

- ----------

Molly worked so hard every single day. And every night when she lied on her bed, she would cry on her pillow and couldn’t fall asleep.

Time flies, and two months had already passed. But Molly was still stuck in the temple.

One day, Molly decided to wash her jacket.

As Molly took off her jacket, something dropped out. It was one of the magical leaves! Molly was overjoyed.

“hooray!” Molly screamed in joy. tears fell on Molly’s cheeks. She felt instantly grateful.

Molly whispered into her hands slowly and carefully, "I wish that I were beside my mum right now."

"Poof!"

Molly suddenly felt her head spinning round and round. And a second later, she was standing right next to her mum. But what surprised her is, her mum was still hiking on Huangshan!

When Molly's mum saw her, she yelled, "Molly! Are you trying to scare me? You've been gone for five whole minutes! Where did you go? And are you okay after falling down the slope?"

"Um…Yeah, yeah I'm fine, but… There was this magical village with a mean mistress who locked me up and.. Wait, five minutes?"

"Molly, dear you must be still hurt by the accident.. I'll bring you to the doctor right after we get back to the hotel."

Once Molly and her mum were on the taxi, Molly thought, "Could it be all just a dream?" Just then, Molly's palm fell loose and out dropped a blue leaf.

" The leaf! So it was true after all !" Molly exclaimed.

She clenched her fists , and thought that one day she could prove that it's all real.

But then Molly thought : "Should I really let the world know about this place? What would happen to the villagers there…" There were so many questions, but Molly the best thing to do was…Molly took a deep breath, and made her decision.

Molly tooka last, long look at those beautiful, tall, magical mountains. " I guess the quote which my mum always tells me about ,the most beautiful things are always hidden and always should be is true, its just the best way to keep things safe."

Molly then smiled at the flower, and held it tight. She didn't want to waste it. And, Molly also learnt that she didn't need anything that wasn't necessary and also didn't be so stubborn anymore.

China's Magical Mountains

St. Stephen's Girls' College, Yuen, Cheuk Ying Lea – 12

Hi everyone, I am John, a photographer that specializes in taking photos of beautiful scenery. I have been taking photos of the famous HuangShan lately, and its beauty completely blew me away. It just looks so magical and unearthly, I don't think words could describe it. You mean you haven't heard of this outstanding mountain? Well, the mountains are breathtakingly beautiful, as I have already told you, with their sharp peaks, raised villages and floating clouds. Some of the pine trees may even be 1500 years old! The tens of thousands of stone steps that lead up to the peak may be just as ancient. A pair of famous Chinese poets, Li Bai and Du Fu, lived on the mountains in the 8th century, and this is why I chose to take photos of HuangShan: to learn more about where the poets have lived before. However, I haven't been able to go to the top yet, as the road to the peak is not clear, and it is very dangerous. However, I am hoping to, one day, be able to reach the peak of HuangShan.

⋆⋆⋆

Hello humans in the future, I am Hestia, the goddess of Nature. What? You haven't learned about me, one of the most respected goddesses ever? Then I guess I have to introduce myself. As I mentioned, I am Hestia, the goddess of Nature. I make all the things in Nature, including mountains, animals and plants. Now you know a bit about me, let me tell you about the time I made HuangShan.

One day, I got called into Zeus' office (he is the leader of all the gods and goddesses). "Hestia, I heard from Akmon (the god of air and winds; he is also my teacher and taught me everything I know) that you are failing to reach the standards that a goddess should, so I have prepared a task for you. If you fail, you will not be able to keep your place as a goddess. "Please… please Mr Zeus, please give me a chance…. What … what is the task I have to complete?" "You must make a mountain that will take my breath away. Please take note that I have really high standards." Then, he ordered his men to usher me out. So that is why I made HuangShan like no mountain before. After a series of sleepless nights, I finally finished creating the most beautiful mountain ever –– HuangShan. Zeus was very impressed by my work, and let me continue to be the goddess of Nature.

⋆⋆⋆

Be careful, everyone, this is very valuable and we can't afford to break it…. Oh, sorry, didn't see you there. I am Flynn, the chief of Azmar –– the village on HuangShan. We are elves, and Hestia ordered us to keep HuangShan clean and peaceful. I was in awe when she first showed me the mountain: it was beautiful, so much so that I was rooted to the ground, not able to take my gaze away from the masterpiece in front of me that would be my home very soon. The amazing goddess even built me a village, and named it Azmar. The village was just as breathtaking as the mountain it was built on, with lots of beautiful architecture and landscaping and plenty of facilities. She offered me the position of chief of the village, and I couldn't refuse. She assured me that she would be watching us from above, and if there was any danger she would help us. That is how I became the chief of Azmar, and other elves moved in one by one. Also, Hestia had made many cute magical creatures to keep me and my fellow villagers company, such as griffins, celeritates (a speedy fox that leaves a trail of fire), dragons, and, well, you name it! So these are the creatures that live with us in HuangShan. Oh, I found a letter from the famous poets Li Bai and Du Fu, but I don't understand their language. I think you will know what they are writing, so let me give it to you.

⋆⋆⋆

(Translated into English): Greetings, whoever is reading this letter, I am Li Bai. Du Fu and I have discovered a place that is very beautiful and inspiring –– HuangShan. We decided to visit this gorgeous place to get more inspiration for poems. After days of travelling, we reached the famous HuangShan. It was even more beautiful than we could have ever imagined, with its sharp peaks and floating clouds, giving it a mysterious appearance, it was the perfect inspiration. We started our journey up the mountains, seeing many new creatures along the way –– creatures that we

had never seen. The creatures also inspired us to write poems, the best we have ever written. When we finally reached the peak, the chief of the village, Flynn, greeted us warmly. He was very nice to us, and introduced us to the other villagers living in Azmar (the village's name). The village was as stunning as HuangShan itself, with its modern buildings and facilities. Flynn let us rent a room to stay in, and we began our time in the mountains.

We got used to village life quickly, with cute creatures keeping us company. The villagers were also very friendly towards us, giving us ideas and opinions on how we could make our poems better (they actually had some very good ideas). Du Fu also got along well with the villagers, laughing and chatting with them every moment he got. The villagers are very hardworking, they work hard every day and do their best at every task they are given. We have a lot to learn from them. Also, they are very easy to get along with. Those were the best days of my life. Sadly, we had to leave after a month of living there, as it was time to return home. Dear reader, I hope this letter gives you insight into how the villagers treat people and what it was like to live in the HuangShan mountains.

***

Hello, I am Ashlyn, a writer. I am planning on writing a book about HuangShan. After reading these accounts of the mountains, I think that HuangShan is very unique. It is a magical place and not everyone can reach the top, due to its winding and obstacle–filled roads. It is a supernatural place (no wonder the *Lord of the Rings* is based on the misty mountains of HuangShan), and a very good subject to write stories about. I hope you like HuangShan and maybe go see it in person one day.

Tales from China's Magical Mountains

Wellington College International Shanghai, Alonzi, Eva – 12

Once upon a time there was a perfect world with no suffering, but one day in the northern part of China a pair of escaping slaves a woman and a man past by some magical mountains hoping that their lives may of changed like an urban legend spoken hundreds of years ago.

“Since we are in 2020, we have experience lots for example COVID−19 has happened in 2009 and almost 75% of the worlds population has passed away. In the world there are only about 20,000 people in the world.”

“Ya but that’s not our focus right now! We have to figure out a way to make the legend come true…”

Said the female slave.

“Look, look! “
He said with excitement.

“I found the scroll!”

“What does it say? “

“It says that if we don’t complete the tasks that have been given, our lives might change in the worst way possible…”
He said.

“Well what does that mean?”

“Oh it means we have to complete some tasks and if we don’t it going to be a problem.”

“OMG I KNOW BUT LIKE CAN YOU EXPLAIN WHAT TASKS WE NEED TO DO!?”

“OH! Sorry I thought you didn’t understand.”

After that, they read what was on the scroll and made a decision, they would complete each task to let their dream come true.

“Soooooo, what’s first?”
She said in a board voice.

“Umm, here it says that we need to collect 2 gems that fit perfectly in the dent of the most magical mountains of China…”

“Well do you know where there are?”

“I’m trying to figure it out you know!”

“Ok sorry, JEEZ!”

“OH look, look at the back!!”
She said in disbelief.

“Ok great now we know where we can find the mountains, now we need to start the journey.”

“Sooo, here it says we need to fight with the vicious ants of the west and the hungry clouds of the north.”

“The hungry clouds of the west???”

“Well that’s what is says…”
She said.

“Ok now can we go and fight the ants?”

“Ok, lets go!”
So the two brave slaves started their journey to fight the vicious ants of the west, after a short while they saw the ants coming in their direction…

“Looook they are coming!!”
She yelled.

“But but they are so tiny.”

“True but you don’t know if they might sting you…”
Said the male slave.

The male slave started to step on the ant until they fought them all. But one didn’t die and gave them the first gem.

“Wait what, why are you giving me the gem?”
He asked one of the ants.

“You fought well and complete the task given so you deserved the gem.”
Said the only alive ant.

So then the two warriors started to head to one of the magical mountains to see if the gem fit in.

“Here, place it here.”
Said the man.

“Ok ok .”

“Yes it fits in!!!”
They said at the same time with the same enthusiasm.

“Ok now let’s head up the mountain because it says That we are supposed to put the gem in there.”

“But it doesn’t make any sense here it says that there are two mountains, am I like wrong or something?”

“Let’s just give it a try, you never know!”
She said with a proud voice.

So the two brave slaves started to go up the mountain until they spot a grey cloud.

“Look it’s the hungry cloud of the north!”

“ See I was correct it must be here where we have to place the gem!”
She said proudly.

“Ok but let’s not get to distracted! FOCUS!”

They started to fight with the cloud but it didn’t seem to work.

“It’s not going away what are we going to do now?”

“Remember how this cloud is called? It’s called ‘the angry cloud of the north’ so it must be hungry right?”

“How is that going to work?”

“Let’s just give it a go.”
He said.

So they started to toss some grass into the air , whilst it was starting to suck it all up with its mouth.
Before it left, the cloud left a gem.

“Look it left us a gem!”
She said in disbelief.

“Let’s try to place it in.”
He murmured.

They were both so afraid it wouldn’t of worked that they hugged each other for about 5 minutes.

“Look at the scroll does it say something?”
He said.
“YES LOOK WE HAVE DONE IT! Now it’s time for us to make a wish.”

“Ok so 3, 2, 1, MAKE A WISH!”

They both expressed a wish but both of the slaves fell into an everlasting dream.

“OH NO! WHERE ARE WE??”

“I TOLD YOU WE DIDN’T COMPLETE THE TASK GIVEN!”

THE END

TO BE CONTINUED…

Tales from China's Magical Mountains

Wellington College International Shanghai, Bielew, Dominika – 11

Dan and Rad were sitting on the grey, IKEA sofa. Dan was scrolling through Instagram while Rad was reading Harry Potter.
"Oh my gosh! We have to watch the news. According to Instagram, they will be talking about UFOs!" Dan said while picking up the remote.

"Sure, but before we start , let's read a booo… " Rad commented while being rudely interrupted by the news man.

"Hello and Welcome to China's International News. I am Jefrey Moon and I will your reporter for today. Today we will be talking about a shooting in the North West hospital, pigeons attacking a pregnant woman, iPhone 12 coming out and a UFO landing on the Qing Ming (清明) mountain." The news reporter said.

While watching the news for 20 minutes already they finally mentioned the UFO.

" A UFO landed on the top of the Qing Ming (清明) mountain this is a clip of the scene." The news man announced.

"Wait! Can you replay that?" Rad asked.

"Why?" Dan said

"Just replay it !" Rad shouted .

"Fine! Chill" Dan said calmly.

Dan replayed the clip.

"And pause! Pause it! " Rad screamed. Dan then pause the clip of the UFO. Both Dan and Rad were confused trying to look for an idea in their mind what in earth could that be.

" What is that ?" Dan asked then looked at Rad.

" Well that might be a rock but the fact that alien's dropped it makes a rock too basic. So in conclusion I think it might be a alien egg." Rad answered Dan question in the most formal way possible because what other way would he have impressed his younger and more successful brother.

"We would be billionaires is we sold that thing!" Dan commented, " like richer than Bill Gate!"

" Firstly you are already rich. Secondly. Bill Gates ! The richest man on earth forget about it" Rad mentioned

“ Well fine but come on we can have an adventure,” Dan advised, “ like only us two!”

“ I guess I can write my China’s Magical Mountains essay actually being on a magical mountain!”

Dan and Rad then spent the rest of the afternoon packing for the trip. Then the next day they could get on the jet and go to the mountain.

6:18 am

Dan woke up. He first called up William , who is Dan’s private pilot, to tell him to pick them up at 6:50 so they can arrive at the mountain at 8:30. Then Dan went downstairs to wake Rad up.

6:30 am

Dan and Rad ate breakfast. Annabelle (their cook) cleaned up the plates and the cups from breakfast.

6:50 am

Dan and Rad already are on the plane. Rad sitting behind Dan in a row. Dan was drinking coffee and eating a bigger breakfast. Rad was reading his book and drinking his English breakfast tea.

8:30 am

They arrived. Looking at the QingMing (清明) mountain.

“Wowww!!!” Dan claimed. His jaw dropped. He reach to his pocket to get his phone. Then opened up the app Instagram to take a picture.

“ What do you think you’re doing!” Rad questioned. He snatched Dan’s phone and deleted all the pictures he took of the mountain, “ Now let’s start climbing.”

8:31 am

“ I can’t we have been walking for hours can we rest please?” Dan complained.

“ Dan honestly we have been walking for 1 minute and you’re complaining.” Rad explained to Dan

“Ok fine! We can order a DiDi? I can’t anymore!” Dan suggested

“Really. I thought you would never ask! Of course order the DiDi.” Rad agreed.

8:40 am

The DiDi finally arrived. It was a

My Story

Wellington College International Shanghai, Brennan, Anna – 12

It is the beginning of time. The almighty panda god **花花** has decided that he is lonely in his heavenly palace. He thinks that he should make the earth full of friendly pandas and let them live where they like. So he used all his power to create an earth, which took him 1 week. Then, he started making pandas, one by the second. This took him 50 hours.

But suddenly, something else happened. He stopped making pandas and instead of fur and chubbiness, he started making dragons. Big, long, and all the different colours they flew to the earth and landed in lakes. And then, to his bigger surprise, he started making all sorts of different animals that we know today.

But that was not it. Instead of animals he started making these creatures with no fur whatsoever and only two legs! He tried to stop himself but it was too late. The creatures got up and started walking around on his earth! What to do?

"I have put these dangerous creatures on our earth," he began, "you must live in the high ground to protect yourselves from them."

With those words, he started making mountains of all shapes, colours and sizes for the pandas to live in. Then, he put lakes in them to let the dragons be safe too.

100000 years later.

"Dad!!!! 爱爱 took my necklace again!!!!"

安安 tore down the stairs and stood, fuming in front of her little sister,

"Honestly, you have such a hot temper!"said dad.

"It's only because of 爱爱!"

"What I do?"she responded innocently.

"You know what you did. Give it back!"

"Fine!" 爱爱 stomped up the stairs.

"I wish she wasn't so annoying," said **安安**.

"Come on, you can't admit that she is not cute,"

"Well yes, but looks aren't everything,"

爱爱 appeared at the bottom of the stairs and threw **安安**'s necklace to her sister.

"Thank you, and don't do it again," said **安安**.

爱爱 thrust her chin into the air and marched off to her room.

安安 ran outside into the fresh mountain air while adjusting her necklace. She ran through her village in the 红龙 mountains. Panting like a steam train,(she was a panda, after all) she stood, looking down onto the long, column mountains. She crawled into the bush nearest to her right. There was the same clearing that she had made 7 years ago, when she was 3. At first it was just for playing by herself. She would bring dolls with her but after a while it became a place to gather her thoughts and relax.

Her parents always told her NEVER EVER go down the mountainside as there was dangerous creatures down there. **安安** dreaded this thought but nevertheless she was very curious who those dangerous creatures were.

A pigeon swooped by over head. It was**果果**, her messaging bird. **安安** jumped up and crawled back through the bushes. She tore down the steps, breathless. Through the village, through the front door and without even a second glance at her mum and dad, ran up the steps to her room and found **果果** nesting on a pile of old clothes that **安安** had prepared for him to rest on.

She still hadn't told anyone, but **安安** had a pen pal. Her name was **小**苏 and she lived in the far North mountains called **北雪山** and they were really tall and had lots of snow on them. 红龙**山**was in the South where it was always very warm. This was the letter:

Dear **安安**,

How are you and your family? Sorry it took me so long to reply, **果果** got stuck under a pile of snow so I had to rest him for a few days. Mum and Dad have been busy, and as always 圆圆 has been stealing my necklaces again and wasting my mum's makeup.

I really want to meet you! I think it's time you told your parents about me and I'll do the same. I'm sure 爱爱and 圆圆 would love each other!

Your loving friend,

小苏。

PS.

I built a snow panda! Do you like it?

安安 read the letter through twice while silently feeding **果果**. Suddenly, she tore down the stairs and ran up to her Mum and Dad.

She told them everything about **小**苏, 圆圆and **果果**.

"I think that's a great idea! We should definitely meet! Can you give me their address, and I'll write them a letter?" said Mum.

"Yes!!!!" Yelled **安安** and tore up the stairs.

She got out a piece of bamboo paper, a brush and some ink and wrote:

Dear **小**苏,

I just told my parents and they said yes!! Mum is writing a letter to your parents and I will send it with **果果**!

Can't wait to meet you,

安安.

She let **果果**rest for the rest of the day and in the morning tied both letters to his leg and opened the window for him to fly out.

2 days later **果果**came back with two letters on his leg. **安安**ran downstairs, gave her mum one and the other she opened herself.

Dear **安安**,

My parents also said yes!! They received your Mum's letter and have now invited you to come to our house. Yay!!!

Your excited friend,

小苏.

安安 looked up at the clock. 2:55! She ran outside and up the peak, crawled into her bush and settled down to gather her thoughts. She was too excited! She found herself reading the letter over and over until her eyes got sore.

After dozing off for a few minutes, she ran back home to see what **小**苏's Mum wrote.

"So, it's decided that we are going to their house. We will set off tomorrow morning," said Mum. "You will need to pack lots of warm clothes and all your essentials."

"Cool!!!" said **安安**. "爱爱, you will get a new friend called 圆圆!"

"Yay!!!" yelled 爱爱.

安安 couldn't sleep that night. She was far too wriggly and excited!

It was a chilly when she woke up. She grabbed her bamboo bag and tore downstairs.

Her family were already at the door, ready to go.

"Come on!" Shouted 爱爱.

"I'm coming," said **安安**.

They made their way through the village and across mountain tops. It got colder and colder the higher they got and they had to keep stopping to put on extra layers.

Suddenly, they saw something in the distance. They could only see the outline, but they knew what it was.

It was a human.

"Hide!" hissed Dad and they hid behind a pile of snow.

But it was too late.

It came at them with something small in its hand. Something square. It held it at a distance and something went 'snap'. Then, suddenly it took a huge jump and landed on **安安**. She screamed and tried to push him off, but it had grabbed her leg. Her Dad then stepped up and gave a huge ROAR! He swiped at the human and he let go. Then it took something black out of his pocket and held it to her. She knew it was dangerous but she knew not to move or it would kill her. Dad took a big swing at the human and it fell, yelling down the mountainside.

"That was close," said Dad.

The rest of the journey they stayed really alert, but they didn't meet anyone on the way.

The next day they arrived at the **北雪山** village. They walked to number 8 and knocked on the door. A young panda answered the door.

"Are you**小**苏?" Asked **安安**.

"I sure am,"she said. "And you must be **安安**!"

"You guessed it,"

"Come on in and I'll show you my room!"

"Where is 圆圆?" asked 爱爱.

"圆圆! Come here! It's 爱爱!" yelled **小**苏.

A toddler about 爱爱's age came running down the stairs. As if they were best friends, they gave each other a hug! The new friends laughed as she led them into a small, neat, living room.

"Come on, let's go," said **小**苏.

They left quietly as the adults met and started talking to each other.

小苏's room was small, pink and round!

The friends finally met and regularly visited each other. When they couldn't see each other, they wrote letters. They now learnt never to go down the mountain as they knew how dangerous those humans were!

Tales from China's Magical Mountains

Wellington College International Shanghai, Chang, Constance – 12

There has been a myth in Hong Kong stating that every dragon guarded a piece of magical jade. The jade is said to have powers to make you immortal and can also grant you as many wishes as you want. Several people have been on adventures trying to find one, but no one that went had ever came back, let alone ever finding one.

"Why do I need to come with you, on this "special business trip". I have absolutely no interest of finding what your boss wants," Bettie whined.

"Please Bettie, I have no choice but to take you, there will be no one to take care of you at home while I'm gone."

Tree after tree flashed past as Elvina, Bettie's mom drives past. The mountain ranges unfold in front of them, such a beautiful sight must belong to Hong Kong. Beneath the mountains, the ocean glitters under the intense glow of the sun. They drive on, finally reaching the claustrophobic city in time to see the sun dive behind the mountains where they had just been. The rest of the drive is silent, disrupted by the cheerful welcome of the hotel. They trudge their way up to their room, have a quick shower and fall asleep.

"You're chosen." A mysterious voice whispers.

Bettie stares at it in disbelief. A mountain stands right before her carving with several details no one, not even the finest craftsman could have created. A set of steps wind up to the top, each made of pearly–white stones, which matches the color of the mountain perfectly. It looks like a masterpiece made by the great goddess Athena herself. Up the stairs, on the top of the mountain sits a lonely temple and curled inside, sleeping, is a dragon.

Bettie opens her eyes and bolts up. She isn't at the hotel anymore, but at the foot of the mountain she's seen in her dream. Right next to her sits a tiny, wooden sign with the words "Pearl Mountain, the mountain of imagination" carved deeply on. She rubs her eyes, still there. Up the stairs she darts. The same thing.

Just like the dream, in the middle of the temple curls the same dragon she'd seen from before. Once, twice the dragon snorted and opens its eyes.

"Ah, you." The dragon whispers in its mysterious voice, "The chosen girl."

Bettie stares at the dragon in awe. Me, the chosen girl that got the jade everyone has been looking for in the past thousand centuries . Me, the chosen girl! The excitement finally finds a way out as she continues staring at the dragon, still can't believe in her luck.

"Yes, just as I thought. Excited, aren't you. Just like the people that had somehow found a way into me and my sibling's mountain. You definitely hadn't heard of the second part of the myth, have you. The part about giving up what seems to be the most important to you, which is the life of your mom, as you already had lost your dad during an earthquake? Ridiculous, I may say. Do you still want it, the jade?"

"Yes, the jade. I want it."

"You sure, there's no regretting in this trade."

"Yes, I'm sure."

Bettie wakes up again and looks around the room. No Elvina. In the middle of her palms, is a tiny gold embroiled jade. "I wish to have my mom, Elvina , back".

A voice echoes as the ground splits open and when Bettie edges closer, she gets sucked in.

"No regrets."

Mystery of the Dragons

Wellington College International Shanghai, Cheng, Nathan – 12

Long long ago, the dragons inhabited the beautiful mountains of China. These mountains were like a picture coming to life. The 6 dragons could control how the normal people who lived at the foot of the mountain. Although they had magical powers, they only used it for good things not evil deeds such as making it rain when villages needed growing crops. Normal people would not go up into the mountains as they heard legends that these dragons were evil and if you climbed up there, you would walk right into an illusion and the second you walked out of the illusion, there would be traps all over the floor and one wrong step, you're dead.

On day a man named Bob –a villager scientist wanted to go into to the frightening mountains to find these dragons as he was curious and has been studying about them for his whole life. Villagers were counting on him. Some person even came up to him and said, "All on you". "Bob was ready to face whatever happens. It was a daring task, even if he died, he wished to see the dragons, maybe only for 1 second as no one has ever been so daring. After climbing thousands and thousands of meters, he suddenly heard growling sounds and rustling noises. He was frozen like a statue for almost 5 minutes waiting for the sounds again. Could the dragons have made these rustling sounds? Bob regained his courage and decided that he should check. He jumped over the spiky bushed and dodged trees until he came to a clearing. Six enormous dragons were camping around a fire. The fire was so big that it seemed it could touch the sky! Bob was amazed. He had finally caught a glimpse of these magical creatures. They were talking amongst themselves. Dragon number 1 was talking fast, and Bob could only hear parts of it. "How can we help the humans?" this was the only sentence he heard.

For a person who did not know or study dragons, it looked terrifying to them but to a person who studied dragons for his whole life, he understood everything except one thing–that dragons were friendly. One of the dragons saw him. Without thinking, he scrambled out into the bushes and hid in there. The only thing he never knew was that dragons were harmless. These dragons acted as if they see nothing and everything became normal again. Bob was still not satisfied. Something was bugging him at the back of his brain. He went back and talked with the dragons. The dragons were talking amongst themselves. Only after a while, they became friends. He talked with them as they knew how to speak the same language as him and it was easier for them to communicate. Years of training with the dragons, he had the same amount of magic as one of the dragons and the dragons let him to be free. Always, when he had power, he always thought of something bad and horrible. This was the only thing that the dragons did not know as Bob had kept this secret. He started descending the mountain, but quicker has he could jump longer distances and not wasting too much energy. The second, he came down these beautiful mountains he started to rob, kill and SLAUGHTER these innocent people. These dragons saw everything as they had a particular special power. It was long.

Once again, he got invited back to the mountains and he happily accepted it. He thought this time he was going to get new powers. He never thought this time he was going to die. When he finally reached the top, he was welcomed be 6 dragons hard cold stare as if it could pin right though you. At the same time, all the dragons asked him "What bad deed did you do**?**" obviously, he lied. Although he had the power of 1 dragon, he could not defeat all of them. The dragons ripped alive into 6 parts and gave one to each dragon. They hid it safely as they did not want anyone to resurrect him. One of the dragons took pity on him and discussed with others that they should give Bob another chance. Each dragon went back and found their piece of him but one of them could not find it. They looked for it for a long time and found it sticking to him. They let him live and Bob became kind to others as if he was another person. He came back down from the mountain once again. This time all the people that lived at the bottom ran away from him, but he did not care and started to clean up this mess. One by one, people from the village saw and became friends with him. Everyone in china thought of him as a hero. Since then, more and more people have been going into the mountains to find the magic and the dragons. But none were even seen after Bob came down.

The Magical Mountains of China

Wellington College International Shanghai, Godin, Jules – 11

John sat back on the front of a dusty, wet rock. He gazed through the evening sunset as he felt the beauty hypnotizing him. But this feeling couldn't last long as he couldn't help thinking that his father's death was only 20 years ago on the very same day. On that day he was only 2 and the upcoming day was John's 3rd birthday. He never felt as much determined to find his dad's murderer as he was now. He decided to head down to the Guilin market to get some food and some rest to prepare for the mission that was awaiting him. As he was walking down the leafy path, he slipped on something unusual. John bent over to see what he had just slipped on, he rubbed the dust of a blank piece of paper, but for some weird reason, he had the intuition that this wasn't an ordinary one. So, he tucked it inside the back pocket of his black stained with ink shorts and walked ahead. 1 hour later, John arrived at the market, he was starving so he rushed to the oat and bread stall. He poked his hand right through his back pocket to see if he had some spare pennies, but together with them he pulled the piece of paper. John gasped. He saw that the paper had words written on it now, he had no time to waste so he nabbed a loaf of bread and threw the money on the table. A few minutes later, he slammed the door of his apartment. He was eager to find what was written on the paper, so he slipped it back out and saw words get magically displayed on it. When he was a kid, it was often said that if a courageous and brave men would climb the mountains of China, magic would be formed to tell him a pathway to his dream. John had mixed feelings about that. He felt anxious but excited too. On the inky piece of paper it was said an exact location that was known to be on the east of Guilin. John's only idea was to go there.

John was about to complete is 5th hour of hiking, he was sweating and felt dizzy as the sun was bright and it shone right on his head. The map was filling up with more details as he walked step by step to his destination, as he did not know what was there. When all hopes seemed gone, John distinguished a statue that looked familiar. As he got closer and closer he noticed something, and that was not the material it was built in, he had just understood that the map led him to the statue of his father. When John observed the statue in detail, he saw that there was an inscription engraved in it saying" If you want to find your next clue, look around for darkness, As you may know, I died near this place". John thought that everyone could see the inscription, as he silently tip toed to a young man that was having a friendly jog, John asked' Can you see this". Pointing at the inscription. But the jogger said he couldn't, in fact he could not even see the statue. As John got more and more confused, he just worked out the hint his dad gave him. John knew exactly what he meant. The day his dad died, they had a huge ceremony as he was head of the military organisation. It was right at that place that John was thinking about. So John found nothing else to do but to go there travel through the Mountains of China and once and for all… find who killed his dad.

As John was seeking for the nearby cave the intuition told him to go to. He tripped. He looked around for what this could have been caused by as he found a chest that was seen to be wrapped around with chain. Well John made a good choice to have brought his army knife with him. As he cut the chain in half, not even looking tired from all the hits he took to destroy it. He pulled out the cracked and heavy chest. John was wondering what could be inside as he was excited to find out. He snatched open the chest as he saw a bright and shiny sword light up to him and a shield that would help him through rough times. John asked himself why he would need these sharp and useful gear. He slipped the sword right back into the sheath that was hung up by the left side of his waist. He carried the shield with him to. As John continued to tread along the pathway, he suddenly heard a crackle. He checked in the nearby cave as he thought it might had been there. The mountains he and his dad always used to go on a hike opened. John's memories flew back. At the far side of the cave, John saw glowing fire eyes. As he silently walked through the old and dusty cave. Fire crackles came out a bit more underneath the glowing eyes. As the monstrosity of a thing showed up. John felt betrayed. His uncle was wearing a vapor hot suit with an oven crackling with fire ready for burns. John asked "What are you doing here?". As Uncle Jake had no time to answer, he simply said "Ahhhh another day, another to kill". Fire came roaring out of his mouth, John safely dodged the flames by flipping to one side and using his shield to block it. John felt angry, furious. confused and stressed. As John was tapping his feet on the ground silently behind a rock that had spiders on it. He thought of an idea. He ran out, and so he made some sound. Jake came to hunt for him as he slowly made himself out of the cave. John was only hiding beside a rock next to the

deadly cave, and so John went for it. He threw his shield in the middle of the oven so it got jammed. This meant Jake had no way to attack. As John leaped over Jake, he jumped on his hard, metal armour and placed his sword on Jake's neck. If he was not going to explain himself then he was going to be slaughtered to death. Jake started begging for help. He explained himself. He said that he was sent by a mission control near Vietnam so they could conquer Guilin as his father was head of the military organisation. Tears dripped down his cheeks. As John felt it was not fair that his dad died in heroe by the hand of murderers that remained unpunished, he asked Jake to join him in his quest for justice. "Let's go find that team that scouted my dad to kill him and bomb their area". John was ready. He slipped his sword back in the sheath and wiped his tears of. No matter how long, His dad's soul had to get back to him.

To be continued…

Tales from China's Magical Mountains

Wellington College International Shanghai, Greener, Zahara – 11

The heavens fell into chaos. Two dragons both wanted power over Heaven. 'One must win and one must lose.' Said Mother before she disappeared. One was the water dragon and the other was a fire dragon. Every time the fire dragon tried to do damage; the water dragon extinguished the flames of anger. The water dragon had soon gained such a great reputation in the heavens it succeeded in impressing the emperor of the skies and thus became ruler of the heavens. The fire dragon was thrown off heaven and into Earth, its duty was to help the only newly created human civilizations. Angered and betrayed, the fired dragon smashed its head into one of the pillars holding the heavens up, it was the pillar of air. The most vital element. The oxygen from the air fueled the fire and permanently disappeared. Now there was a big hole in the sky.

✦Four pieces left ✦

The story was passed on generation by generation. Rae had heard it so many times. She looked into her locket like she did every day. The mesmerizing blue and the degraded brass. Rae inspected the bolt. It looked different that day. She dug her fingernail into it and tried to pull it apart but it still remained closed. She got the closest sharp item, a needle, and tried again. This time there was movement and the locket fell into two. One piece lay on the bed and the other in her hand.

"Lay your little head on my lap
Where the stream ends there is a gap
Dear child there is nothing to fear
For the end isn't getting near"

On the other side of the locket, she found a key. Rae knew many locks in the household that had keys that were either lost or hidden. She looked around. Rae caught a glimpse of a green Qipao in the corner of eye.

"What are you doing there, Li An Rae? You were supposed to help me mop the floor," Rae recognized the raspy voice, it was Sister Qin, "who wants to marry a snobby girl who can't cook nor clean?".

"Why do I have to get married? Why do I have to cook and clean? Why"

"Because you will one day have to search in hope for a wealthy man who will take you as a bride..."

"Pfft, I don't need no husband in my life, you will never make me look for love..."

"Rae! Listen to me!"

"Well, if every woman needs to be wed then where is my father?" said Rae in a whispery voice.

"Young Lady, I have told you many times and I will not repeat myself; we will not talk of the incident. What happens here stays here. Do not talk about your mother to anyone else."

"Is mother a widow?"

"Li An Rae!"

✦Three pieces left ✦

Frustrated, Rae shut the door and her sight landed on the locket again. She flipped the locket and lifted up the key. There were three symbols, a daisy chain, a lantern and a stream.

Rae took a match and lit a lantern with it, opened her window and plucked a few daisies from her window box. She then proceeded to put on her prairie dress with lace and tulle which she spent the entire summer last year learning how to sew. The girl quickly scribbled down a note and fled through the window. She ran and ran until she saw a little trickle of a stream. Rae sat on a rock next to it, huddling herself to keep warmth from the wind. She wove the daisies into a chain. She then knotted the two ends together. At this point Rae was numb from the cold.

She tossed the lantern and the flower chain into the stream. She blew at it. At that moment, a lush green spark ignited. Then a burning flame joined in, a gush of water and finally, a mist of grey smoke. Rae felt dizzy, her head hurt, and her eyes were burning. She rest her head against the cold rock. All was pitch black. The wind murmured, the trees shook as if they were whispering, the water flowed, and the fire kept burning. Rae was unconscious yet conscious...

The heavens saw the signal. So, they sent Lillian. A woman who was as pale as snow, with skin as smooth as paper appeared. She had little dimples at the side of her cheeks. She had rosy lips and hazel freckles. She was tall, skinny and was fair. Her delicate hands stroked the little girl. She sprinkled some sort of ground up rock salt on the girl's chest. At that moment, a flower bloomed in its place, the petals were dripping pearls of dew. The pearls of dew then were

set ablaze. The last element before completion and the summoning of her sisters was the girl. The girl inhaled then exhaled. The prophecy was completed.
✦Two pieces left ✦

Rae looked into the stream and peered at her reflection. She was wearing a cloak made of shadows from the depth of the darkest realms. The cloak corrupted her skin, and she was ashy grey. She ignored her troubles and stared down deeply at the woman.
"W−what happened to you child," the woman stared deeply at the girl, "your mother was so elegant yet you're in this sloppy, disgraceful mess."
"What's wrong with that?" Rae replied harshly, the words stinging her tongue.
The woman stared solemnly at Rae.
"What do you mean child. You are the last of your kind!"
"I am?"
"Yes."
All was quiet. Overwhelmed, confused and annoyed, Rae grasped her arm and felt how cold it was. Frost was growing on her skin, the darkness spread, the anger ignited, the leaves flaked off her skin. Time slowed down. Rae was irritated.
"You have the burden to carry on your mother's duty, you will always be responsible for it," Said the Woman startling Rae, "you must trust me. I have insight and I will help you! Call me Lillian." Lillian said this whilst holding Rae's hand. Rae looked at Lillian
"How do I trust you?"
"I was your mother's assistant and right−hand lady though I served mainly in the Water Court."
"You were?"
"Yes."
"But why I am I this way, why does it have to be me?"
"Ah well, you know how there is hole in the sky? The pillar that got destroyed was the Air pillar. You see. We are powered by the pillars; they contain our strength, mentality and powers. If a pillar gets destroyed then that certain element loses something, for you, that was your control. Ever since the last 1,000 years all the successors were cursed with that. Of course, your mother knew that and controlled it, she was wonderful. You on the other hand grew up in a human world, no one is as unique as you, which means that you never knew you had these powers. You had gone corrupted as all the darkness your power contains expanded."
"What should I do?"
"Fix the pillar."
"How?"
"Close your eyes."
Rae closed her eyes. She felt the air beat against her and swish through her hair. She opened her eyes when she felt the wind stop.
"This is the palace of the heavens," Lillian declared. Rae remembered how it looked so similar to the Imperial Palace in the Forbidden City, "Girls, gather round me!"
Rae touched her arm. It was covered in scales. She looked at the other girls. They had scales as well.
✦One pieces left ✦

One of the girls were wearing a dress made entirely of lilies, vines and ivy. Starlings rested on her shoulder. Another dressed in a silken attire and a jellyfish skirt, wore pearl shoes that was composed of water. The last girl, standing far away from everyone, had a glistening frock which was sparking with a burning, bright fire. She had a cape made only of a flame and smoke.
"Hello, I'm Aqua." said the most elegant one, the water dragoness.
"I am Eva." said the gentle, youthful girl, the earth dragoness.
"Hi, I'm—" There was a large silence, it was so quiet you could hear a needle drop somewhere in the palace, "uhh, I'm Fyre." said the last girl uncomfortably twitching and fidgeting.
"Meet Rae." said Lillian.
"How do you know my na−"

"−I just do," snapped Lillian sharply, "be nice to her." Lillian mentioned whilst looking at the three girls. Lillian then swiftly disappeared through the crowd of people
"Show me to the pillar please." Rae said humbly.
"You do it Fyre, me and Aqua need to tend the Rivers and the Corals." replied Eva.
"Thats grammatically incorrect, it should be "Aqua and I" and plus no." Fyre answered.
"Please!" begged Aqua, "I always do things for you, it's only this one time you get fed up and quit! In the name of the Lord, Fyre, just do it."
"Ugh fine! Is that what you wanted to hear?" By the time Fyre finished saying the sentence Aqua and Eva had already left.
"I can't do this, especially what we, the Fires, have done to your kind. I'm sorry Rae, but I just cannot." uttered Fyre.
"Well then bring me to someone who will take me there."
"Then we must go to the Elders."
"The Elders?"
"That's the most I can do for you."
Fyre led Rae through all the whispering highly respected citizens living in temples and in the palace. Through a door Rae saw an old husky man sitting on a chair. He was drinking tea and chatting to those around him.
"Sorry to disturb your afternoon, your majesty, but please could you show Rae to the pillar of air please?"
"Who is that Rae you speak of?" demanded the Elder.
"Me, sir." Rae said quietly as she could to try seem normal.
"You! The successor of air who we lost among the Human population. I must show you."
Fyre waited patiently outside the room Rae currently was in. She was led up a staircase and up to a cold and windy platform where she saw a plinth of a pillar and nothing more.
"Only you, my friend, are allowed to go on the pillar and touch it. Try it, climb on top."
Rae did what she was encouraged to do and climbed on top with all her might. The pillar was large compared to her. Rae hushed the wind with a gentle touch of her fingers and built an invisible staircase with a flick of her hand. Rae climbed up and rested herself. There was a keyhole in pillar right next to a crack. It was shaped in such a familiar way. Rae suddenly remembered the key attached to her locket, took it out and put it in. It worked like magic. The pillar started to shift and a piece of the pillar tumbled down. Rae started to sing the words:
"Lay your little head on my lap
Where the stream ends there is a gap
Dear child there is nothing to fear
For the end isn't getting near"
The words were sweeter than honey, the tune was familiar in an odd sense of way. The words 'jamais vu' swirled in her mind and she suddenly remembered the distant time in her memory when her mother used to sing the exact sweet tune to her.
✦No pieces left ✦
All the fragments of time unified. Rae felt the empty half of her complete. She smiled a true smile. She couldn't remember the last time she smiled. She didn't care anymore as she was happy.

All It Takes to Make a Bird Fall

Wellington College International Shanghai, Hong, Yixuan – 12

Lu: The first rays of morning light tardily trickled into my bedroom, wordlessly waking me up. I stirred, and following a yawn, my body found the willpower to prop up. The fuzzy feeling was rare yet precious. Sunlight struggled and squeezed and squirmed through laced curtains before sprinkling like confetti on my lap. I dressed, consuming the time that morning had left me. The morning dragged into noon. My leather boots kissed the tiles tenderly. As soon as my front foot left the house, it gave way to a feathery figure that swooped from the skies. In a fraction of a second, I was soaring a hundred feet above sea level; adrenaline coursed through me as I sailed the skies. Bai's widespread wings fluttered at seemingly the speed of light. His beak sliced through the white fog that soaked the mountains; clouds, at fingers' reach.

I gazed at the blood–red patch that encrusted his white feathers and ran my hand through it, messing with the streamlined alignment. A smile flickered across my complexion. He nudged against my arm and nipped at my hair in return. Our feet greeted the thousand–foot drop to the bed of the sea of clouds; we leaned against each other, lightheartedly perched on the scabrous cliff of the Yellow Mountains.

Ping! An arrow disturbed my thoughts and forced itself into the ground. The yellowing bamboo paper tied to it was more than familiar; it had been harassing them for more than two weeks. The faint fragrance of expensive ink lingered in the air around the practiced characters. "Greetings from the magnificent city, darling. Last night I dreamt of you and me married. You are the last piece to making that dream come true. Your word of agreement will take you to riches you could never imagine, houses with gold tiled roofs, and tables with the most exquisite food. Please, leave the mountains–they are nothing more than a pretty ornament; am I not better, more handsome and richer than that wild white bird you speak? I trust you will fall for me, all in time." Ugh, I groaned. Disgustingly sickening sweet. And bitterly chilling on second thought. This had been the seventh letter from the duke, who fancied an attractive new wife after exiling his previous one. And I had been his target.

Nauseating, the Imperial city was nauseating. The rich wore jade robes while the poor were in tattered rags. They ate exquisite meals while the homeless were living off grime, filth, and whatever crumbs of dirt stricken, water–soaked staples they managed to scout. Yes, this was the very person who had sworn his love for me, which he did with each of his four ex–wives.

Besides, Bai was here, and that was enough.

Letting go of the letter was like easing a ton of bricks. I watched the letter sway side to side before descending to a depth beyond sight. Bai ruffled his feathers; his crystal–cut eyes bright.

Another few days sped by, and I can feel the duke's patience burning out. If all goes well, he'll leave me to the serenity of the mountains. Flipping the thick ivory–shade bamboo paper to a close, I sighed as I processed the content. Something about a carriage. And chains. My vision clouded, mostly from the over–intake of information. My eyes shut, and in the darkness of my eyelids, white blotches were pressing against my eyeballs. Carriage. Chain. What else? Oh, I remember, he swears he will uproot the mountains from its foundations if I refuse him; laughable.

I knew I shouldn't have laughed when the fifty battle coaches descended from the skies.

Coaches fully armed with troops and herds soldiers. Fear filled and flooded my eyes. They watered with sheer fright, raw–cut, and spine–stabbing.

Every slender finger of mine was coated with cold sweat.

The sun was too vivacious to make out the coaches, but I knew they were advancing with every second.

I ran, as fast as my legs would take me, courage faltering with every stumble along the way.

Swoosh! A huge shadow dawned on me. I halted my staggering steps and looked up. A display of long, neat feathers, lined up in a perfect streamlined array, shaded me from the sun.

Miscellaneous emotions boiled together, stewed in my heart. My eyes followed the silhouette above because that was all I could do: watch. A fragile body of white feathers was the only thing between me and my death. A sharp rust–colored beak glinted as it dove into the soldiers' neck, bringing with it blood and flesh that sprayed everywhere, that dyed the beak one shade closer to sinister. The soldier gurgled; with one last exclamation of panic, he died. Blurs of movement and the pungent scent of blood encompassed me.

Squawk! A lonely drop of blood broke away from the vessels that crisscrossed and entwined within Bai's body; it oozed and inked his white feathers, before losing grasp and finally, with much anguish, plopped onto my pain–stricken face. An empty hole burned through him; an empty feeling burned in me. My face twisted into a strangled cry, creases of worry illuminated in the morning light.

Batting his wings, he persisted ever so hard against his fall. For the first time, his tender eyes hardened with desperation. Why did he have to go through this? A pang of guilt and remorse strikes me. The duke wanted me, I refused, and now all of the mountains have to pay.

The rough surface of the mountain was merciless to Bai's fall. Blood drenched, dirt–smeared. But I don't care. Without second doubt, I embraced him, ignoring the filth on his feathers; memories of their once white appearance come flooding back. With a hoarse, wavering voice, I whispered:" You'll be all right." Over and over, like a mantra; like if I kept saying it, a miracle would occur.

It didn't. The morning left, taking with it his life. All it takes to make a bird fall was a noble thought, a courageous heart, and an act of stainless selflessness.

An ear–thundering moan of agony ripped my throat as I unleashed a sound that was so foreign yet that felt so right. It tore a gash in the sea of feelings and all those emotions came pouring out like a gushing waterfall. Hatred. Sadness. Soul tearing, mind shredding resentment at the fragility and feebleness of mortals; how we were merely play–puppets tied to destiny's sinful fingers.

Delicately, I put it down; both the dispirited thoughts and Bai's body. If I had looked in a mirror that day, even I would've been terrified of the malicious, vengeful smile that I had worn. You only become half–person half–beast when sentiment becomes revenge. Smiling, I thrust a dagger into a soldier's thigh. Then laughing, I shot an arrow into another's eye. Then giggling, my blade carved a long red scar on a neck. The duke's neck. Three words flew over my shoulder as I snickered at his frantic look at the blood flowing from his neck. "You deserved it." The Yellow Mountains had become a bath of blood, sin, and wrongdoings that seemed so right.

The first rays of dusk tardily trickled out from between the clouds. Smiling, I lay next to Bai. How I would love to see the first rays of tomorrow's light dribble into my bedroom, then wordlessly wake me up. Soundlessly, I stroked the red patch that encrusted Bai's feathers. A boiling hot tear scarred my cheek. My heart felt empty, so did my body. But maybe that was because of the huge gash in my chest. Breathing tenderly, immune to the pain and the acrid smell of ripped flesh, the muscles on my face twitched upwards into the brightest smile I could muster. And as the sun inched under the mountains, I departed.

Bai: I wanted to see the last sunset with Lu. But that's out of reach. Legend has it that if a bird does die, its corpse evaporates into mist; so I have faith that I can still be with her. Lu, you guard the mountains, and I'll guard you.

Lu: So I did.

To this day, Lu's spirit still lives with us. She rests on the Yellow Mountains situated in Anhui and is known to us as the "Guest–greeting pine" or the "Ying Ke Song" which overlooks the mountains. Bai, on the other hand, did become mist. His soul melted into the "Sea of Clouds" that surrounds the seventy–two peaks that make up the Yellow Mountains.

The Dream

Wellington College International Shanghai, Katsarska, Bea – 12

It was foggy. The only things I could see were the trees' peaks, towering over me and the fog. There was nothing for me to do there, other than to breathe. Breathing in. And out.

For once in my life, I was calm. The quietness just, just brought me to peace. I was smiling. I was happy, but then suddenly, I ware the sound of a gong…

"DING, DONG!" It was my alarm.

Usually, the first thing I'd do when I wake up is to make my bed. However, today was different. I turned on my back, my grayish–blue eyes staring at the surprisingly clean sealing and thought. Why was the dream so vivid? Almost as if it were real, I could actually touch, feel, smell, hear and move normally. I couldn't tell If it was just a dream.

Ten minutes might have past, maybe even less. But it wasn't long before I heard my sister's obnoxious voice, coming from downstairs.

"Manny, breakfast is ready!" Judge me all you want but she is the most annoying little five–year–old with buck teeth and long hair there could be! I was eight when she was born. Best eight years of my life.

I got up, made my bed and went to brush my teeth. Then I washed my face, hoping my freckles would magically wash off…but they didn't. My ginger hair was particularly tangled today and its length didn't help my case. Finally, I got back to my room and and went with my go–to outfit – a hoodie and sweatpants. Then it was time for breakfast.

The smell of oatmeal could be whiffed from my room upstairs. However, it wasn't Jenny's, my sister, voice I could hear. It was our TV.

"I swear I've been there! Everything was so clear!", said the man on the news. His clothes were ripped up, he had long, great beard and hair and his face resembled a raisin. The title at the bottom of the screen said: "Crazy guy on the streets claims to have visited China's mountains".

"Look, Manny! That guys is even more delusional than you!", Jenny cackled. I swear she was a witch in her past life, sent here to torture me.

"Jenny! You need to stop terrorizing your brother!", yelled my mom. She always had my back. "But that guy does sound like a lunatic." Never mind. If I were to tell her about my dream, she'd probably think I'm crazy! I just had one question, why were people saying he is a psycho? It was better If I did some research myself.

After breakfast, I ran back to my room and sat on my desk. I turned on my computer and decided to look up the mountains. However, I didn't know where to start, like where were the mountains from? Maybe that guy wasn't crazy and they were from China?

Suddenly, it clicked.

I remembered something! The trees, on one of them, there were Chinese characters carved in. Chinese for sure. I just had a breakthrough!

Since my computer was already open, I went on Tringle to look up China's mountains and what I saw was the second most–shocking thing I'd ever heard (after finding out that penguins have knees)! Every website I looked at said that China was a dried–up and abandoned place! However, it wasn't always like that. Two thousand years ago, China was full of forests and mountains, until a giant wind fire came and destroyed the whole country. But even with all that information, my gut was still telling me I was right…

After a good twenty minutes of thinking, I figured it out! Even though pictures weren't invented yet at the time, painting was still a thing. I tringled paintings of mountains and when I tell you I passed out, I mean it. I saw the exact same painting like my dream – tall trees, fog and Chinese characters carved in the bark of one of the trees! The feeling of victory was the best feeling I'd felt in a while.

Thing s were working out pretty well for me – I had oatmeal and a whole "realizing I am special" moment. However, I didn't know what to do next. Tell someone? Try to find the person from the News?

Realistically, I only had two options – make everyone think I was insane, or find the man. Spoiler alert, I went with option two.

The street from the News was pretty popular in Sofia, where I lived. It was the only street with Bulgarian culture, so it wasn't hard to find.

When I got there, loud music was playing by an accordion. People were dancing and tourists were buying junk they didn't need for an unrealistically high price. It was sunny and the News crew seemed to be gone. I stopped to look around and there it was!

I walked up to the spot, but the man wasn't there! Instead, there was a note, so I picked it up, without knowing what would happen next…

The only thing I could see was flashes but after that, I was there, the mountain! The fresh air, the fog, the trees – all the same! Except for the fact that this time, the man from the News was there.

"Nice to see you, Manny, I'm Yu Cheng!" Said the man in a very quiet and calm voice.

"Ok, where am I!? How did you bring me here and how can I come back home?" I started freaking out.

"Don't worry, you'll be back before you know it! However, before you go, I need your help. WE need your help." He said.

"You know it's illegal to hold people against their will, right?" I asked.

"Not here though. Anyway, after China burnt down, the Magical Mountains became invisible to the human eye. However, because the mountains have been invisible for too long, they, along with everything on them, are starting to disappear. We already asked two people for help, but they failed and perished, just like China. You're our last hope!" Yu explained.

"So, what do I have to do to help without being burned alive?" My sarcastic self was really showing.

"You see this tree, the one with the Chinese characters on it?"

"Yeah?"

"Burn it. That's all you have to do. It's only a tree, what could possibly go wrong. Here, use this," He passed me a match. "and we'll all be saved, thanks to you."

"I'm sorry, but no. It's completely ignorant to think that just because it won't make an impact to you, it won't impact anyone or anything else. If I burned this tree, the whole mountains would burn too. Is that what you want?" I was furious.

"Are you sure?" He asked.

"Yes." I didn't even hesitate. However, what happened next really surprised me.

He started clapping. And smiling. Why though?

"You did it! You saved us! You are the only person to truly know the importance of thinking not only about yourself, but also others. All of the other foolish children did what I told them and perished. You didn't." Not long after Yu said this, people started coming out from the deepest parts of the mountains and started cheering. I was proud.

"So, can I go back now?" I asked.

"Yes, you can! And again, thank you!" Yu snapped his fingers and…

"DING, DONG!" My alarm started ringing.

Tales from China's Magical Mountains

Wellington College International Shanghai, Lam, Lee Tong – 12

The morning sun shone through the valleys of the majestic mountains. The beaming rays of light are like golden water poured down from the sky. The village on the mountain side was still very quiet, waiting for the roosters to wake them.

Tang was eighteen, he was good friends with Linh— a beautiful girl since young. Everyone told him that he would be a good couple with her, and yes, he was in love with her. Tang had black and shiny eyes, like marble balls. Linh had deep black hair which was smooth as glass. Tang had a very bright face and sharp features. There was a problem, Linh's family won't agree that they can marry each other or be in love. She tried to persuade her parents, but none worked. There was only one option left. To run away. Tang and Ling knew that they would have to be strong for the next few days. They decided to go to the peak of Phoenix mountain. Tang heard that it was like heaven up there. His goal was to reach the peak with Linh and to live there, free. He told Linh the plan and finally, it was time to leave. He prepared for the journey, taking some water, food and clothing.

Tang crept out of his home, secretly. He met Linh at the village well, taking one last glance at their village. They started hiking towards Phoenix mountain…

After a while, the village was nowhere in Tang's sight, everything was unfamiliar. The sun was high in the sky, shining on him, as if it was telling him to be courageous. The trees around made him fell safe like being cradled. The flowers bloomed in every colour in every way, reminding him that life was lovely and wonderful.

As Tang kept on walking, he saw a meadow with beautiful flowers. He decided to take a rest there. He told Linh to rest and they sat down on the grass. They ate a few loafs of bread he took with him. He looked at Linh in the eyes. Linh said, "There will be many challenges ahead, and we will have to face it together."

"Yes, we will. We chose to go, so we won't regret it." Tang replied.

The wind blew. It wasn't very strong, but it was a sign telling Tang and Linh to move on. They packed up their stuff and got up. They walked until they met a flowing stream. The stream was clear as air. Every detail of the bottom of the stream was visible. Tang refilled his and Linh's bottles with the water. He drank some of it, there was a hint sweetness to it. As he kept traveling, the temperature dropped. It was getting cold, so he put on his coat from his bag. He noticed that there are less plants and more rock, it was making him nervous, but not enough to stop him. His feet was numb, but didn't just call it a day.

The sun was setting and a red glow filled the sky. Not long after, the sun was gone, hiding behind the mountains. Tang and Linh finally decided it was time to sleep. They got under a tree and fortunately there was grass under it, they won't have to sleep on the hard surface of rock. The tree was a shield, making Tang feel safe. He lay down, so tired after today. It wasn't a great place to sleep, but the best he could find. They stared into each other's eyes, until Tang broke the silence. "Today was tough, and tomorrow will be tougher. We must get to the Phoenix mountain before we run out of food and water. Phoenix mountain will be like heaven so we can enjoy the rest of our lives there."

"Yes, I have faith in us. We are going to make it." Linh said.

"Let's rest," Tang whispered. "We need energy for tomorrow."

"Goodnight." Linh said gently.

"Goodnight." Tang murmured…

A yellow bird gazed at Tang and Linh from a branch on the tree. It flapped its wing, no response. It chirped, no response. It shrieked loudly, they opened their eyes. Tang sat up straight, he couldn't see properly. There was a big fog, covering his sight. He could barely see the bird.

"Oh no, the fog is too thick, we can't see clearly. How would we see the direction we are going!" Linh exclaimed as she sat up.

The bird landed on the ground, flapping its wing, getting Tang and Linh's attention. Linh gazed at the bird in wonder. The bird continued to flap its wing, as if it was trying to tell them something. It pointed its head toward somewhere and looked back. "Perhaps we should follow it, in the fog we can't see anything," Linh suggested. "It might lead us the right way, maybe god sent it to guide us."

As Tang and Linh stood up, the bird flew up too. They packed their bags and walked towards the bird. It flew slow enough to let them follow. They were keeping close to the bird because the of the fog. The bright yellow colour of the it also helped them to follow. They were getting higher and higher as they followed. The ground was almost all rock except for some dirt and bushes. After a while, the sunlight was beaming through the fog like millions of shining blades. The fog was thinning, it was easier to see. They didn't stop yet, kept climbing up. Tang saw the last patch of bush leave behind, now it's only rock. *After this point, it's going to be tough* he thought. The fog was almost gone, they could see the greyish–blue sky. The bird flew up high into the sky and disappeared from their sight. They will continue without the bird guiding them. They were close to their destination, the mountain peak was visible. Tang and Linh traveled until they met an old man sitting on a rock. The old mans eyes was closed, eyebrows tight together. It was clear that he was in pain.

"Hello, what are you doing here? Are you hurt?" Tang asked.

The old man raised his head and looked up at them. "I was traveling up to the mountain peak. I fallen on a sharp rock and hurt my leg. I cannot travel anymore nor go back down."

Tang thought for a moment. "I will carry you down."

Tang looked at Linh. " You go to the peak first, stay safe. I promise I will come to find you. I have to help him, I can't leave him to die."

Linh sighed, "I really don't want you to leave me, but I know you have to do it. Be safe and come to find me as soon as possible."

"Hmm," the old man suddenly brightened up. He stood up, looking healthy and strong. "I am actually the god of Phoenix mountain, and it peak is a very special place, only worthy people can stay there. I can see that you are kind and caring. You are worthy enough for a place here, but only *you* can stay."

"Only me?" Tang exclaimed. He was shocked by the the god pretending being a old man, but only allowing him to live on the peak shocked him further. "We came here so we could live together, I would never leave her alone!"

"Tang," Linh said gently. "If you want to live there, go ahead, don't worry about me. It is my problem that my parents don't allow us to be in love. You don't even have to come with me here, you could just have married another girl. But always remember that I love you."

"No, I won't leave you. I came here with you because I love you, why would I just leave you behind? It is not your fault because of your parents." Tang replied with confidence.

"Hmm…" The god muttered to himself.

Tang and Linh looked at the god. He told them, “I see that you love each other very much, perhaps I would let you both stay. On one condition, you must love each other forever. This place is a place of happiness, if you don’t love each other anymore in the future, why stay here?”

Tang and Linh looked at each other in the eye and said with confidence, “Yes we will love each other forever. Thank you for giving us this opportunity.”

“Then you can stay.” The god said. He snapped his finger.

Suddenly, Linh and Tang was at the peak of the mountain. The god was nowhere to be seen. The peak of the mountains was nothing like below. Instead of rocks, it is filled with nature. Tress, grass, flowers, creatures of every kind… It was like the garden of Eden. Tang and Linh was amazed by all this, this place unimaginable. They ran around like children and wondered around like adventurers. There was countless fruits on trees for them eat, a million types of flowers to smell and many friendly and cute creatures. They were so happy and smiled at each other. Linh leaned forward, and kissed Tang.

Tales from China's Magical Mountains

Wellington College International Shanghai, Lee, Boyi – 11

"Today's my birthday!" That thought screamed happily through Hualing's mind when she opened her eyes from her bed.

She stretched her arms out as the sunlight shone brightly across her face. The rooster crowed loudly as ever. She was a curious and adventurous 12 years old girl that adored the beauty of nature. Hualing and her parents were from a humble family, full of love. They lived in a remote village on a mountain named Mount Tai. selling bread for living. She also had a pony with soft black fur called Dark Knight who Hualing treated as best friend. Everything was fine until Hualing's mother fallen sick 2 years agp They tried every possible medicine but the situation never truly improve.

After her daily Kung Fu practice with her father, she went back into the house.

"Remember the "Spin Kick", it was the ultimate Kung Fu inherited from our ancestor! It should be 360 degrees spin in the air, and 90 degrees for the kick, not below nor above. More importantly control your "Chi"! This knock can be vital but it can protect you from danger combined with the flow of Chi ." Father reminded her.

"Yes, I know father, you told me thousand times about my fists too!" Hualing playfully spoke.

It was night, the sky was dim, enlightened by the source of moonlight, flashing through her window.

"Happy birthday Hualing!" Her mother exclaimed with delight.

"For your birthday gift, I give you the story of our ancestors, The Powerful Flower Of Cure." Her mother spoke softly.

Her father sat next to her mother, stroking her cold hand into his warmth. Mother lied in the cozy bed with a pale face.

"Long ago, there once lived a caring and generous Kung Fu master called Jia Long. He hosted some apprentices to learn Kung Fu in a forestry temple. Jia Long had a very clever apprentice called Li Shu, but laughed at others if they were wrong or slow in practice. Li Shu becoming snobbish and arrogant with his genius intelligence. One day, Li Shu left the temple abruptly because Jia Long refused to teach him one ancient martial art, afraid of him misuse the power. After 10 years, Li Shu was said to invade the temple and try to challenge Jia Long to be the best Kung Fu master. Li Shu's Kung-fu ways were strong but full with hatred. Jia Long refused to fight him. Li Shu saw this as insult, became rampant and killed a dozen of young apprentices before Jia Long could react. To show him goodness and also buy time for the young apprentices to escape, Jia Long stood and used his 'Chi' to build an

He not only gave us a place to call home, when he died it was told that he dropped the seeds near his tomb, with 'flower of cure' which can cure many sickness.

Hualing's eyes glinted as bright as stars. 'Maybe that could cure my mother!'

But the tomb was guarded by Li Shu's dark apprentices and no one could go near there. Hualing felt that it was her destiny to find the flower of cure, she begged the dragon to help.

After much persuasions, the dragon carried Hualing to the other side of Shi Long Tan, where 'flower of cure' was known to be grown.

The dragon arrived silently to the dark gigantic temple.

Hualing saw Li Shu and his guards standing there, guarding the Garden of Peace, obviously having sensed Hualing's presence. He gazed from above, staring into her eyes.

"No one could steal the flower of cure, it is mine!!" Proud Li Shu laughed to himself and the guards with a malicious grin.

The dragon swooped down with lightning speed, and blowed fire with his nostrils towards the guards.

When confused Li Shu turned his back, she punched him with power, hard in the face. But this was not enough. She knew there was something more ultimate. Stronger. More powerful. It suddenly came into her mind.

"Take this!" Hualing shouted in the top of her lungs.

At the key moment of the battle, she spun in the air, showed her ultimate "spin kick" with the strongest flow of "Chi". Her white robe flying and did what was done. The force was so strong and it formed a tornado with Hualing at the center of storm eye. A flash of light was just to be seen before Li Shu could even react.

Li Shu lied lifeless on the ground.

With outstretched arms, Hualing quickly took the flower of cure and went back to dragon.

"Yes! Let's go tell the others of our success!" Her tears dried instantly, a mask of happiness shining upon her face.

The dragon nodded in agreement, tired .

Young children and the elders hugged them, eyes twinkling with tears of joy. Relived they were safe.

"Young Hualing, you really are our hero! Thanks for saving us and overcome our fear!' Exclaimed the villagers.

invisible shield to defend Li Shu's aggression. Ultimately, Jia Long exhausted all his Chi and disappeared from the thin air. Legend said he was reborn to be "The Flower of Cure" due to his sacrifice that will bring kindness in the darkness."

"We now give you this necklace with a dragon pendant, to symbolize our ancestors." Mother muttered, giving it with her bare hands.

"What?! Are we the descendant of Jia Long?" Hualing stammered with joy and shock.

That night, she just gazed at the ceiling, clutching tightly to her dragon necklace, suddenly a piece of paper fell out of the pendant.

"Looks like a map". Hualing studied it closely and it showed the path to "flower of cure", near a place called Shi Long Tan.

"Was this an adventure journey for me?" she murmured and gradually fell asleep.

One day when she was riding Dark Knight in the forest, she heard a howl of pain nearby...She followed the sound and found out it came from a creature.....a dragon! She noticed that the dragon looked exactly like the one on her necklace! The dragon was wounded in a very bad state and growling. Feeling empathy and connected with the dragon, she quickly put healing leaves over the large wound, used her white bandages to wrap it up.

"Thank you. What is your name?" the dragon looking at Hualing with his gleaming emerald eyes and grand voice.

"You can talk! My name is Hualing! Why are you damaged so badly?" For some reason, Hualing was not afraid of this talking dragon.

"My enemy attacked me by shooting me with a huge arrow whilst I tried to escape to my home at Shi Long Tan." The dragon stared at her with curiosity.

"Shi Long Tan? That is the place in my dragon pendant!" Hualing galloped in her mind with excitement.

" Can I join your journey to Shi Long Tan?" Hualing asked nervously.

The dragon nodded. Next, Dark Knight galloped along with the dragon, off they went to Shi Long Tan.

Not soon, they arrived. A temple stood there with magnificence. It was coated red and gold paint. Little boys and girls wore Kung Fu robes, practicing with concentration. Colorful dragons of all sorts were flying around.

In the middle of fountain, there stood a male statue with Kung Fu robe.

"He is Jia Long. our founding father", a young kid kindly introduced.

"Thank you! But it is time for me to say farewell. I have to retrieve this flower to my ill mother." Hualing told them, hugging everyone goodbye.

There galloped Dark Knight, and in no time, they were back to Mount Tai.

"Home!" Hualing was looking at her family's small house! She could not believe they were back from this adventure.

"Mother! Father! I am back! I retrieved the flower of cure!" Hualing raced with the flower in her small hand, running as fast as lightning.

"Hualing! We have missed you! Where have you been in the last few days?" Father and mother touched her warm face, on the verge of tears.

"I did not think it was possible! The flower of cure...how?" Stammered father by her face.

On a table, was a small book lying there. It noted "Magical Ingredients". She flipped to the page of "The Ultimate Cure". Through the list, she added hot water and mixed it with two petals of the flower. It instantly dissolved into the water, and smelled a scent of...hope! Hualing's mother carefully sipped the precious creation, after a night sleep, she was able to stand up!

"I feel like...my legs are back! It's all back!" She energetically shouted out.

Everyone came to see what was it...and were astonished seeing Hualing's mother back on her own feet! Everyone became very cheerful. Hualing planted the flower in the heart of the village to help anyone who was critically ill.

Poets wrote beautiful poems about her; *"Her journey, one of thy mighty prophecy, withstand dark power to unleash the Chi, peace and beauty to us you see, thy flowers yellow, nature green, Hualing a girl never seen."*

Now, pure white flowers and all kinds blossom, everyone singing the song of merry. She was now a grown woman, training young apprentice to master the Chi and communicate with dragons, still with the dragon amulet on her neck.

This was the story told for generations of the mountain of peace; Mount Tai.

Tales from China's Magical Mountains

Wellington College International Shanghai, Liu, Kevin – 12

As legend goes, the Jade Sword once was wielded by the feared bodyguard of emperor Qin, Cao Zheng the "Immortal Slayer". According to folklore, the sword was crafted by a master sword smith, renowned for making magical swords for the heavenly gods. The Sword was forged from iron, mined in the depths of hell, dipped in the blood of dragons and beaten with the bones of dead men. It has a reputation for being the sharpest and strongest sword between heaven and hell. The blade reflected light, like the sun beaming off the moon. The handle was assembled from white jadite, with gold tigers imprinted across the ornate surface. The sword's sheath was a luxurious snakeskin with golden attachments.

Cao Zheng was first presented with the sword by the great emperor Qin Shi Huang for heroic deeds at the battle of Phoenix Crossing, where Cao gallantly took on one hundred men, single–handedly, to rescue Qin emperor from the clutches of death.

And from then on, every time he charged into battle, his sword would reap carnage through the battlefield.

After he died, the Qin emperor had his people build Cao a magnificent tomb of honour, in the lush green mountains at Phoenix Crossing, where he had saved the emperor's life. Inside the tomb was room after room of treasure. The most important item of all was of course, the Jade Sword, that was buried in the coffin of Cao Zheng. Many treasure hunters have tried to locate the tomb and retrieve the sword, but none ever came back. It was filled with so many traps that the creators themselves never made it out.

Jacob and Amy the two children of the Famous Zhao explorers, had come across their missing parent's documents in a dusty attic. Upon opening them, they discovered a map showing the whereabouts of the Mystical Mountain, where the tomb of the Jade Sword was believed to lay.

Jacob and Amy's parents had gone missing ten years ago on a quest to find the legendary Jade Sword. Now it was their turn to continue the family's unfinished mission.

Two days after finding the map Jacob and Amy found themselves at the foot of the huge, jagged Magical Mountain. It wasn't what they had expected.

Shrouded in mist, the pair could barely make out the several peaks that towered above them. The rocks were a deep shade of black and they protruded out of a thick layer of gray dust. There was a surprising lack of life on this mountain. The trees were wilted and bare. There were no signs of life anywhere to be seen. Shadows loomed across this deathly landscape.

> They knew this was going to be a difficult journey up hill, but it was the thought of their parents passing away somewhere on those rocky ledges above them that spurred them on. Step by step, the two clawed their way up the mountain path, cutting their hands and knees on sharp rocks as they clambered through narrow ravines, wrestled with the remnants of the forest that once lay there, but now only presented knife–like spikes, that would pierce your flesh, like a needle through a cloth.

After a day of climbing, the exhausted duo were ready to collapse. Their feet were throbbing, their muscles were tightening and their morale was sinking, when Jacob Stumbled across two giant–sized lion statues on either side of a stone entrance. Chinese characters were engraved all around this unusual doorway. Above it, read Cao Zheng's name. On either side of the gate were less typical characters that were once used by a secret sect of monks, known to place curses on those who went against them. They read, those that disturb the crypt of Cao Zheng will be followed with a lifetime of unfortunate events. Jacob gave himself a pep talk and the two went in.

They were on their third stair down when the door slid shut behind them with a muted click.

“Guess we ain’t going out the same way we came in.” Jacob said, the hairs on the back of his neck standing up.

“Whomp! Whomp! Whomp!” the torches on the sides of the stair−case lit up, casting shadows on the walls and floor. They danced and whooped like ghosts and demons...

When the two finally made it down the flight of stairs, they reached a crossing. In the middle was a key, and there were three locked doors. The path on the left led to a room labeled “wealth and riches”. The one on the right was labeled “Exit” and had a warning, saying last chance and the one in the middle had nothing on it, except for the carving of two dragons on each side of the door and a massive pearl key hole in the middle. With out hesitation Jacob stepped forward, stuck the key in the keyhole and twisted. But as soon as he did, a hissing sound started and ghastly green fumes started spewing out from all corners of the room. They rushed forward holding their breath and with all their might, smash their bodies against the unbudging stone door. As the door gave way the two collapsed on the ground, breathless with their heads spinning. When they looked up, amoeba danced in front of their eyes, but when they cleared, they looked up and were shocked to discover they were in an imperial chamber, with twenty bronze warrior statues staring towards them. In amongst the statues lay the remains of numerous humans, that appeared to show brutal wounds, suffered from sharp and blunt traumas. Broken bones, and smashed skulls adorned the path to a golden tomb.

Jacob and Amy where scared and confused. “What happened here?” Amy whimpered to Jacob. Jacob replied in a shaky voice “I don’t know, but it doesn’t look good.” As Jacob put one tentative foot forwards, the door behind them slid close behind them. They could hear the sound of mechanisms grinding together. Then the most horrifying thing of all happened, The statues were coming to life! As they moved Dust and dirt cracked and fell creating a sand——storm, after they could see again, they found that under the muddy brown coat, was a bronze warrior armed to the teeth. They charged and Amy let out a shriek of horror. Without hesitation Jacob slung Amy across his shoulder and started the hundred−meter sprint towards the other side of the room, towards the golden coffin. Almost as a natural instinct, he shoved aside the coffin lid using it as a shield, with his other hand he took the Jade sword from Zheng He’s hand and just like that, the Jade sword had been brought into battle once again.

With his sword and shield, Jacob hacked and bashed his way through the bronze warriors, giving a occasional poke in the back for good measure, leaving behind him a pile disassembled amour platings. After he had gone through the very last one.

He turned back and was surprised to see sunlight, the moment he had opened the coffin lid and held the Jade Sword, it was as if he had opened the door of life and sliced apart the chain locking it with his Jade Sword. Outside birds chirped, leaves rustled, and the stream rushed down the mountain. A crevice appeared in the wall beside them and as they climbed out, the most amazing thing happened, out of the glimmering sun light, appeared their mother and father. The leaves crunched beneath their feet as members from the Zhao family flew into each other’s arms in a tight embrace. And the happy family was once again united.

It was one month later when Jacob and Amy were alone at the museum admiring the Jade sword behind a sheet of bulletproof glass in the china’s top artifacts section. This exhibition wasn’t set in just any old museum, it is set in the famous resting place of emperor Qin. The sword’s glass case was next to a few others, those held impressive bronze and terracotta warriors, suddenly there was a crash behind them and when they looked back what they saw made their jaw drop open and eyes widen in recognition and horror. The bronze warriors had hacked the glass apart with their swords and were making their way up behind them sword raised above their heads. The duo turned and ran screaming.

(This is a piece of fictional writing, all events and characters has come from the author’s imagination and any link to reality is entirely coincidental. This piece of work has been created by Kevin Liu from Wellington College International Shanghai 7E upper prep Hill)

Tales from China's Magical Mountains

Wellington College International Shanghai, Luedi, Sophie – 11

Brooke stepped out of the forests, into the plain field on the mountain. She sat down on the seeing stone, and she closed her eyes. Hills. School. Friends. Physics. Exams. Exams. Her eyes sprang open, as she noticed her heartbeat had gone quick. She was sweating, and tears were leaving her eyes, without her noticing. Tests. She suddenly lost the ability to walk, and she felt down to the ground. She then suddenly felt a burst of energy and she could walk. She slowly walked away from the stone. And didn't look back. She looked at her watch. It was 6:00. She needed to go to school now. She needed to go to an exam now.

She put some concealer on, some lipstick on, blush and finally mascara. She was in 7th grade so she could put a little bit of make up on. Although she didn't like it, she did it to hide her emotions.

"When I give you your exam paper, do not turn it around until I tell you to do so. You have 2 hours to complete this exam." The teacher said.
Brooke was panicking now. She could feel the tears generating in her eyes. The watery substance then rolled down her eye. It hit the concealer, which left a dark line on her face. A few more tears rolled down, and soon her mascara was wearing off. The teacher then passed her the test. The teaher signalized that she could turn the test paper over. She looked at the test paper. She wrote down a few equations, but she wasn't sure she was correct. On every question, she had a specific doubt, that her answer was wrong. She looked at the time. Every second was ticking by. Every second she looked at the clock, she was wasting time.

"Times up" the teacher said.

Brooke was suddenly started panicking again. She had at least left 2 questions blank. That meant no 100% for her, and if no 100%, you can't go to Harvard, and if you can't go to Harvard you can't be the best.
"Brooke I need your exam now" The teacher said.
With her hands shaking, brooke gave the exam to her teacher. The teacher then dismissed her.

Brooke left thinking she did terrible on the test. She didn't know what she would get. He scenarios filled up her head, with the what of I flunk the test, or the what If I get 100. She decided to just stop thinking about it. She still had the rest of the day of class, but she had no classes she really enjoyed. Her classes were pretty easy, so she didn't have to fully concentrate on them.

The day went by really fast. Without anything to distract her anymore, she could finally enjoy her favorite part of everyday, mountain climbing. She went to her school fence, and she uncovered the hole that's been there for years. Every morning she would hide her climbing gear there, a backpack, ropes, and protective gear. She took her backpack and put it on her back. She then walked to the mountains. China's magical mountains.

No one knew except her that it was a magical mountain. The mountain range had 12 mountains and each of them had something different. One of them had a steep, challenging but fun climbing side that brooke went to every day. Another one had very nice ski slopes, one had natural hiking paths. To everybody else, they thought ancient civilizations were habited in these places. However, Brooke knew that this was no coincidence. She knew the spirit on the mountain, and she knew the story behind it. The spirit was forced to to make these mountains, when the first Pangaea was still there. When the spirit was still a women, death wanted the spirit to marry his son. However when she said no, death tried to kill her. But because of the strong present of good in her, he was only able to turn her into a spirit. As a spirit, lots of her good had disappeared, meaning that death could turn her into a dead person. Howver, death offered mercy. If she created mountains that were unique, so his son could enjoy them, she could be a spirit forever. She quickely agreed, and she built the mountains. However, when death's son walked on it, he would die. The spirit quickely modified the mountain so they would curse death's son. After his son's death, death realized that

the spirit was more powerful that him, so he decided to flee. Not even now, millions of years later have people discovered where death went. It would just appear, and disappear again. Years later, the mountains still survived, and as the daredevil she was, brooke decided to check it out. She met the spirit, and had many adventures with her, since she was 6 years old.

Today, she went to the mountains to relief her depression. She wanted to find the spirit, and she wanted to talk to her about the test, and everything. In other words, the spirit was practically her therapist. Except, with a snap of her hands, she could solve all the problems.

Brooke took her pickaxe out, and she threw it to a high point of the mountain. She had 2, incase one got stuck or some other reason. The pickaxe had a strong rope attached to it, meaning that she wouldn't fall down. After she got all the safety precautions ready, she started climbing the mountain. She calculated that today according to the position of the sun and the angle the sun is facing, she would have to climb 800 meters. She threw her pickaxe about 20 meters, so she would have to throw it 40 Times. It wasn't too much, but for a 12 year old that was a lot. Howeevr, do to the experience she had, it wasn't that hard. After she climbed the last meter, she saw the spirit meditating on a rock. The spirit had no face, and she was dressed in white robes, and her skin was white she was so pure, light was shining from her skin.

"How did it go?" The spirit asked
"It was ok" Brooke replied
"No it wasn't. You stressed out" The spirit replied
"I messed up 2 questions."Brooke said
"You'll be fine. You will get a 96 in your test."The spirit said
"Thats pretty good. That means I get one question wrong." Brooke said
"Yes." The spirit replied. "Brooke. I need your help"
"What do you mean?"
"recently, I have located death, and using my powers I have detected that he now has the power to destroy me"The spirit answered
"That's impossible. You're the spirit of china;s magical mountains."
"It is very possible. Have you seen how many people he takes each day? Millions. Babies, teens, adults, children, a lot everyday. I *must* go into hiding. I need you to locate somewhere I can hide."
"Why can't you locate somewhere?"
"The last time I left these mountains It was still the pangaea. The pangaea was when the continents you know today were where together. There was the oceons on one side, the other side was land. These mountains, due to my presence was the only thing that hasn't changed. Have you noticed all the mountains around the world? They were never there when I was a human. Every single mountain, river, landscape and sea will disappear one day. Except for these mountains. The Chinese magical mountains will be destroyed if I am gone."
"You have to give me a clue. Do you want to hide in a cave, or what?" Brooke said, annoyed.
"I don't know. That's why I'm asking you."
"Look you can't just hide. We have to fight."
"Well then we should prepare."

The spirit then closed her eyes, and chanted an ancient spell. She suddenly had lots of staff with her. She had sticks made out of pure astatine. Astatine is one of the rarest metals in the world. She then chanted again, and green gases started leaking out of it. Poision. Something even the strongest masks couldn't protect you from. Astatine poison however, was a whole different story. It was made to kill. Like an atomic bomb.

The spirit suddenly sat down on a rock. She was obviously hurt. What was happening? No one knew. Suddenly, a black portal appeared in the sky. Brooke pointed her wand at it, and the poision flew toward it. But something black muffled it's way to the portal. It was plain black, not anything else. It was death. As the spirit got worse, Brooke took the spirit's staff, and put them together. The power of the poision got larger and larger. The black material then started to slowly fade away. The green poision started to eat away the portal, until the sky was clear. The spirit suddenly got better. But then they saw something mortiphying. Death was dead, but his son was alive.

Mystery Mountain Story

Wellington College International Shanghai, Quan, Elizabeth – 11

Long time ago, there was a huge mountain in the east of China, and there are two families on the mountain, they are both rich and they got powerful armies. In the north of the mountain, there is the Changs family, which got a good trade relationship with the nobilities around the king because they do seeing and divination, and there is only a 10 minutes' walk to the palace. And in the east of the mountain, there is the Lees family, which do food 1trade for the king. As the families both work for the king, they should have a good relationship between, unfortunately, they don't. As for why, the housekeeper of the Changs said, when Chang Ting, the daughter of Chang Chuen was born, the prophecy ball threw a nightmare like prophecy: from the north, there is a man, who got enough power to kill her. Chang Chuen thought that it must be the new born son of the Lees, Lee Hua. This left the two families at a permanent stalemate: no contact, no affinity, no war.

As the time lapses, Lee Hua and Chang Ting became grown–ups, their first met was in the market at the foot of the mountain, Lee Hua was jumped out at Chang Ting's beauty and Lee Hua attracted her for his heroic, they both fell in love with each other, their eyes couldn't leave each other at all the time, the housekeepers of both families discovered that something was going in a wrong track so they carried their masters away from the carnival.

The turning point of this story happened here, the prince took the old king's place to do trade stuffs with the Lees, and the prince fell in love with Chang Ting, but her heart was with Lee Hua's heart. The prince wanted to get engaged to Chang Ting and gave her three days to think and arrange for the wedding. The prince left, Ting started crying, she left her house and went to find Lee Hua, he was really sad, angry and helpless for this thing. They decided to run away from their family, unfortunately, they were caught by the prince who was hunting. He was ashamed with Chang Ting, he wanted to kill her, but he loved her, and the trade relationship will be damaged, he sent them back to their family and wrote letters to the families' leaders, the leaders were both ashamed by them, so they had made a huge battle, the prince heard that the battle happened, he hastily sent 2,000 soldiers to rescue Chang Ting, but the soldiers don't know what does she look like, so they were only doing fighting and killing. And they had killed Lee Hua, Chang Ting was buffeted, she cried, she held his dead body, she cried that heart–wrenchingly, no one answered. She saw with her own eyes his former lover's complexion turn from rosy to pale. She started doing prayers sobbed, the rain cloud accompany lightning joined the battle, the landslide took everyone's life, except for one person.

Today, the mountain is still wet, smoke–filled, and deserted, except for one woman who lives at the foot of it and tells her absurd but touching story.

Tales from China's Magical Mountains

Wellington College International Shanghai, Shue, Olivia – 11

It was cold here. Dry. At first I didn't want to come, but Ariel had insisted, so I had to. It turned out to be quite nice here, like she had described. She had always wanted to visit this place, but it was dangerous, so she needed someone to come with her. I walked over to her tent. The stunning white snow crunches under my boots. I see her warming her hands over a fire. I take my gloves off and do the same. "So, Anthony, do you want to go for a hike tomorrow? she asks, "I've heard that these mountains are magical. The mythical creatures will protect us."

"Sure," I reply. It was a good opportunity for me to collect some information about these mountains. I work as a geologist at home. So does Ariel. We're friends. Colleagues. Nothing else. "We're also going to have a professional guide, just in case." She smiles at me. "We leave first thing tomorrow, ok?"

"Alright, see you!" I reply and trudge back to my tent.

The sun shines through the small plastic window on the side of the tent. I sat up and see the beautiful mountains, coated with a thick layer of white snow. After I finish getting ready for the day, I start packing some climbing equipment into a bag. I saw Ariel waiting for me at the main tent, so I quickly finish packing and trudge over to her. She was standing there, next to two men. She promptly introduces me to them. "This is Daniel Roberts, our guide. He's a professional climber, she says, "and this is Mr. Meng. He's been living here for more than 20 years."

"You can call me Bill," he tells us. With that, we set off.

The sun was cold and bright in the sky. I had my studded climbing boots on and I strode across the snowy ground. "Need any water?" Ariel asks.

"No, it's alright, I have some in my pack!" I shout back.

"Tell me if you need any more!" she responds.

We soon arrive at a steep slope. Our studded shoes help with climbing up. Daniel went first, with the help of his ice pick. Ariel was prepared to climb and was halfway up the slope when we hear a deafening "BANG!" For a second, it seemed like time had frozen, and everything around me was still. Motionless. Then the world comes back to life and I find myself standing inside my house back home in California. I hear the comforting crackle of the fireplace and suddenly I find myself on the ground, in the snow. I see the others not far away from me. I whip my head around and see the base camp, down below us, a burning wasteland. Something must have exploded. I'm so thankful that we decided to go climbing today and not some other day. In the corner of my eye, I catch a glimpse of a bird, a huge, fiery one. The base camp immediately stops burning, even though it is still blackened and scorched. I gasp. I run over to Ariel and quickly helped her up. No point in going back to the base camp now. "There are other camps further up the mountain. I think, if we can make it to the next camp, we should be fine. The next one is about 800m above us," says Bill. Good. With Ariel injured, I'm not sure we'd be able to make it any further. I sigh and start climbing again.

We hike up one slope after another. Ariel follows behind us, limping. It's around 4 right now, and we still haven't eaten lunch. I grab a couple of crackers out of my bag and start eating. " Are we close yet?" I ask.

" Sort of, we should arrive by nightfall," says Daniel.

“When we get there, they’ll call a helicopter,” says Bill, and they’ll take you into the city, where there are a lot of hotels.”

“ Sure,” I reply, “and I’ll take Ariel to the hospital.”

Bill spots a cave where we could have a short respite from the climbing. We sit down in the snow outside the cave. I hear a grunting sound, but I just ignore it. Suddenly, a huge head pops out of the mouth of the cave. Not just any head, a dragon head. I’d only seen these beasts in fairytales and myths. I was so surprised that I jerked my arm back in alarm and dropped my lunch. Even more shocking, it actually started speaking. Not in English though, in Chinese. It had a deep voice and little flames came out of its mouth as it spoke. “My master is inside the cave, and he is sick of this place. If you can help me find him a new home, I will grant you one wish.” translates Bill. Daniel immediately pushes Bill out of the way and hollers, “You’re just a dragon! What can you do?” The dragon’s eyes abruptly become fiery and unkind, and smoke starts coming out of his nostrils.

“Stop!” Shouts Bill, “You don’t know what he can do!”

A thought springs into my mind. The charred, blackened base camp– a perfect home for a dragon. He would be perfectly camouflaged there. “No. Tell him about the base camp. I’ll tell him what our wish is.” I murmur.

Bill translates everything into Chinese. The dragon nods in satisfaction. He flies back into the cave and comes out with his master, an enormous dragon nearly double his size. Its scales were as black as the night sky and its claws sharp like a knife. The servant dragon leads its master in the direction of the base camp, and it flies off itself, leaving a black trail behind. Then, I see the great, fiery bird again. A Phoenix. The servant dragon flies back. He mumbles something in Chinese, and Bill translates it for us. “He says that he is very grateful that we told him about the base camp. He will now grant us one wish.”

“Tell him to revive all the people who were at the base camp during the explosion,” I say. Send them back to their homes and leave them a note telling them what has happened.” Before the others can stop us, Bill has already translated the sentence. The dragon looks us all in the eye and grants my wish. Right before we are about to leave, the master Dragon comes back. “It seems like some of you are disappointed,” Bill translates, “why is that so?”

“Could you please take us to the camp above us?” I say.

“Your wish has been granted.” The great dragon bows down and signals us to hop onto his back. He takes off and we are soaring through the clouds, watching the last speck of sunshine disappear from the sky. Minutes later, he lands in the trees, around 30 metres away from the camp. We get off, refreshed. We half lead, half carry Ariel to the camp. A small lady comes and leads us to a helicopter. We say goodbye to Daniel and Bill and walk into it. The driver puts on some headphones and takes off. We watch the snowy terrain below us turn green and lively as we depart the mountains.

The next day, I’m sitting in a hotel room. I turn on the television and switch to the news channel. I see two familiar faces looking at us– Bill and Daniel. They must’ve reached the summit. I turn off the television and walk downstairs. I smile. I call a taxi and I’m on my way to visit Ariel. I want her to see this. This little adventure between us, how it lead to something much, much bigger.

Tales from China's Magical Mountains

Wellington College International Shanghai, Su, Rundi – 12

A peak shrouded in a perhaps cursed mist, so beautiful yet so hideous. A peak containing perhaps enough treasures to keep a man wealthy for generations. A peak where tremendous forces of nature and perhaps the will of the Jade Emperor himself finds manifestation. The gate to eternal secrets, and those who control it may wield more power than the gods might ever possess. Maybe that is the reason why its mysteries will never be probed. But, the determination of those who do will burn bright like a flame, and will never ever be extinguished.

In the holy realm of Terra, the most magnificent creation of the Jade Emperor, civilization flares bright as development pushes the limit of mankind again and again. Mighty offerings and endless sacrifices bloody the altar of the temple. Faith to the gods spur men and women to raise great monuments in praise to the glory of the Emperor. Though disaster and war have pushed us to the brink of extinction time and time again, nothing can ever shatter our soul. We recover from our wounds and forge even greater creations than the past. Through disaster we unify and become much more powerful than we ever might before. Eternal glory beckons to us.

But fate is cruel, and shall not stop in its campaign that craves our destruction. Our intellect grew, but savagery followed its footsteps, in turn to be exploited by the misguided or the evil. We were obliterated in a storm of heresy and blood, people in their thousands being massacred and hundreds of settlements being annihilated, their populations being twisted beyond recognition. Disease followed in the aftermath, bring death to those who had managed to withstand such a tragedy. Survivors quickly descended into conflict, a losing struggle for resources. Once a land of peace and prosperity was torn apart by war and death. The Jade Emperor, instead of utilizing his infinite and supreme power to help, instead turned away in disgust, retreating to the Sky Palace with his servants, where they will be shielded form the blasphemy. Terra had been abandoned by its most divine protectors, the state of China and the empire of Rome plunged into never–ending strife. It seemed all hope was eradicated, replaced by dissension and demise.

An escalating rumor told of an ancient artefact that was fabricated at the dawn of time, blessed by the stars and the moon. A scared codex, preserved using means that the mortal may never comprehend. The only object that may bring enlightenment to a world on the verge of being consumed by chaos. Hope reborn in such a time of darkness. Yet it was the difficulty of claiming such an immense antiquity that brought demise on optimism it aspired, for it rested on the one place the sublunary cannot possibly access. Such a place was the Peaks of Discipline, a gathering of colossal sanctified might, a district where the residents of Terra ascend to godhood through thousands of centuries of meditation, so that only the most holy are to remain from the erosion of time.

Though the consequence for the acquisition of this relic is dire, its protector spirits bent on the extermination of anyone who dares to even hint to claim it, none of these can possibly contest the horrors that await the wielder when they finally reach triumph, only for them to be torn apart by the epic power the codex had harnessed when it was contrived in the Sky Forge, as a last resort to the trepidation that may shatter reality at last. Deemed to intense even for the Jade Emperor, it was sealed away forever on the Peaks of Discipline, an unimaginable spell cast by the Four Lords of The Sky, a feat that siphoned away fully half of their power. Terra shuddered at the curse, raw magic roving across the war–torn lands in form of hurricanes that ignores any form of physics and science. The catastrophic era that followed the Demonization of Discipline brought the terrors of destruction to Terra, in a period known as the Maelstrom of Strife. Serving as a painful reminder of the divine power being misused, Terra attempted to forget. Now, for a realm drowning in darkness and horror, it has entered its hour of need at last.

The Emperor of China debated the issue behind the magnificent doors of the Imperial Palace of Luoyang, the greatest Chinese settlement of all time. In a vision he was revealed the godly power of the Codex. He saw fresh hope, the seeds of restoration being planted, a chance to bring back order to a world now plagued by conflict and tyranny. A chance for hope to be reinstated back to a world suffocating in the grip of violence and brutality. Thus, began the crusades of Eternal Rehabilitation, the greatest quest of history.

Many will perish and degenerate in that strange and sadistic place, but ultimately more will fall to the spirit of the mist, vengeful and drunk on the will of extirpating any intruder that dares to undertake that ground. The crusade forces have been halved as delinquent bands and hidden dangers tear at the ranks of the crusaders. What almost completely shattered them was the breaking of faith to the Emperor as the sanity of many were finally destroyed, driven to madness by the strange abominations that haunt the shrine of the Codex. Forgotten treasures lie amongst the ruins, prodigies produced to the glory of an age long forgotten. Though greed drove some to claiming those, their decaying bodies serving as a reminder to others who let that cursed thought cross their minds. It seemed everything here has been tainted by the Devil's hand, spreading corruption to every particle.

At long last, braving dangers beyond count and hardships beyond number, did the surviving number, now reduced to a mere handful, sight the peaks. Wonders of nature and just a demonstration of the powers of the Jade Emperor, they rose high into the clouds, their peaks shrouded in the golden mist siphoned form the souls of those who failed to pass the test. Unmistakably was a faint sliver glow, forbidding in nature. Perhaps, the silver of restriction was surrounding them and whispering their lust and seeking to devour their souls. Perhaps they will only fall to what has felled many before, just another page in the endless history that has spelled doom for many, all seeking one goal, perhaps out of their reach forever. These did not matter. These cannot matter. Their only quest is to claim the codex, and if they perhaps will be made a martyr in the struggle only the gods will know. They will execute their mission, perhaps entrusted to them by fate or someone much bigger than even the mightiest entity ever created.

At long last, the two last members of crusaders stepped into an extensive valley enveloped in a dazzling light, blinding them momentarily. The Codex lay just a few meters in front of them, a distance so small compared with what they had to endure. A beam of pure energy emitted form the Codex, illuminating the corpses of those less fortunate for their fate and piercing the night above. A faint humming surrounded the gorge, but was accompanied by only an eerie silence, an atmosphere of death sheathing the area. But their task is done; all that is left is to claim it and wait for their judgement.

Breathing hard, they stepped forward as fear continues to erode their courage. One of them reaches out and touches the surface. A hard, leathery material once formed the relic, but was withered by time. He puts his hand around it and brings it to his chest.

A blinding flash lights up the dark sky and a golden ring forms as the Codex begins to erupt in a cyclone of raw magic, deforming rapidly as the ring expands and fills the sky. Across Terra, new life grows and blooms as the blood form the endless slaughter disintegrate into a red mist. The devastation is replaced by the once prosperous structures of the glorious age mankind had. At long last, a hint of smile crossed the emperor's face as the burden was finally lifted form his shoulders.

The two last members did not witness this, however. Centuries later, when this area was finally mapped, they saw the decaying bodies, dead from pure exhaustion. The Crusade ended in victory, but at a terrible cost, though it is certain the sacrifices they had made will not be forgotten.

Terra may have suffered the most grotesque fates before, but both the body and the soul of this realm will recover. Perhaps this was just another test, but no matter what, our resilience and intellectualness should carry us through tragedies untold, past and present. Fate will exam us again, but through the bravery and determination of many, a new sunrise will dawn over us

The Tale of the Pin Point Peaks

Wellington College International Shanghai, Tittmann, Eloise – 11

I ran home from school feeling really happy, I had aced my test. As I climbed up the narrow steps to my house I thought about the fact that tomorrow was my birthday. I was turning thirteen! When I finally reached the peak of the mountain I looked up at the view. I could see dozens of mountains and trees on the horizon, barely visible beneath the clouds. My house sat on top of a mountain, it was small and cozy, surrounded by flowers and trees. I lived with my father and my two siblings. My mother had died only a few years after I was born, she was very sick, and I do not remember her well. As I thought of her I suddenly remembered she had left me a box. She told my father to let me open it when I had turned thirteen. I hoped that the box would help me get to know her better. I loved my family dearly, but it still felt like something was missing.

I woke up feeling refreshed and excited, "It's my birthday!" I shouted, springing out of bed. I ran downstairs to the kitchen and saw my father making me a special breakfast. "This smells scrumptious, thank you Baba."

Then I saw the box, it was a beautiful cedar box, embellished with jade details and my mother's initials intricately etched on top. Father saw me looking at it "open it, Ling Ling," he said.

"Ok," I replied.

I carefully took the lid off, inside I saw a letter. It said 'Dear Ling Ling, Happy Birthday. I am sorry I am not here with you on this special day. In this box there is a map, follow the map precisely and you will find something amazing. Love, your Mama.' "What could it be Baba?" My father just shrugged.

The next day I started my voyage, I knew it was going to be long so I prepared well. I woke up very early after a long night of sleep and started traveling. I had insisted that my father stayed with my siblings and take care of them. When I got down to the village, people asked me where I was going as they saw the large rucksack. I just shrugged and said somewhere amazing.

It was almost nightfall and I had already been walking all day, and I was tired. My toes were numb in my shoes and my legs felt like noodles. I looked at the map and noticed I still had a long way to go. I sat down and munched on an apple. After that I lay out my blanket and went to sleep with the moon pouring its blue light on the soft grass. Strangely there was no wind that night, there were no mountain bears so I had nothing to fear.

The next morning, I woke up to the disorientating sway of a carriage. I was incredibly confused and searched for who was driving it. I did not recognise the man. I could only see his back, he was wearing a long black cloak and he had greasy dirty hair. I started to panic. "Who are you? Let me out!" I screamed, hoping someone would hear me.

"A little girl like you shouldn't be out alone," his raspy voice travelling through the carriage reaching my petrified ears. With trembling hands, I rattled the door of the cab and to my relief it swung open. 'This guy is a terrible kidnapper', I thought to myself. I rummaged around and found my bag in a pile of rusty tools. I prepared to jump out of the carriage a few seconds later I jumped. As the carriage was going quite slowly it was very easy to jump out.

I ran a little bit to make sure I lost the carriage, I calmed down and started to walk. I kept hearing the sound of a carriage rattling behind me but it was never there. I took out the map and realised I was on the wrong side of the forest because there was a village. I was thinking about asking someone but after this morning I decided not to. The forest was beautiful, it had vibrant marigolds and dainty little daises. The leaves dancing in the wind, their rustling is their music. As I came to the edge of the forest I snapped back to reality. "Focus Ling Ling," I said to myself.

I walked until I finally found the river I was supposed to follow. By then it was already sunset, I decided that tonight I would only sleep a little. I found a small cave and settled there, I stayed awake for a few hours listening to the sounds of the night. I heard the owls and the wings of the bats. I could see the moths attracted to the little bits of moon light. When the moon light hit the river, it was beautiful.

I woke up at sunrise and was glad I did, this was the most beautiful sunrise I had ever seen. The sky was all types of colours; there was pink, purple, yellow, blue and orange. It was magnificent. I could tell it was going to be a good day.

I followed the river along until it flowed into a pool of water. Reflected in the water was the final mountain I had to climb. I gasped. With renewed enthusiasm, I pulled myself up the mountains. I took no care of the branches lashed my cheeks and the thorns at my ankles. Finally, I got to the top, the peaks looked like a line of soldiers watching over me. I thought that this must be what my mother was talking about, and it was the best birthday present I could ever receive. I felt as if I was with my mother when I was looking out at the horizon. I knew that she had experienced this before and it felt like the hole in my heart was slowly being filled.

When I returned my father asked me what it was like, I just smiled and threw myself into his arms. I was crying happy tears, and so was he.

The Story of Yan Feng

Wellington College International Shanghai, Upton-Zhao, Braden - 13

Under the peaceful sunshine lay the village of Yun on the riverbank. An ancient path surrounded the village, and the pale river of Chang was known as the river of the god of rain. For hundreds of years, newly born babies have been taken to this river for the blessing of the god of rain. There was a well-grown forest nearby where all the material for architecture and craft-building came from. The fields beside the houses were mainly covered by herbs and rice. The herbs were the only source of traditional medicine that citizens of Yun relied on. The recipe for medicine was left and inherited by the original founder of Yun. He was an herbalist. Quite a renowned one. Rice is the main course for the citizens of Yun. They cannot live without these two crops.

One day, the mayor ran panting, gasping for breath. He had his eyes open wide, trying to remain steady out of fright, leaning against the tree. It was clear that he could barely stand, as if his legs were full of lead. He announced to the crowd who had just gathered around, with a frown, in the loudest voice he could speak in, "citizens, there is big trouble!" he cried, and carried on, "the god of rain has been enraged, deciding to pour massive rain down into Chang! We are in danger... according to the speed of pouring rain, an unstoppable flood will hit our village. It will hit all of us... and..." The mayor paused, looking desperate and helpless. Melancholy surrounded by the crowds of villagers like how heavy murky clouds obscure the bright, shiny sun.

Suddenly, an 18-year-old teenager jumped out of the crowd, breaking contemplating citizens' silence. "I have heard about the old myth of the Pearl of Water. In the myth, it explains that the pearl was created by the old man who was famous for water-related studies, but then disappeared mysteriously into the unknown world forever. The pearl was a secret invention of his, it could make all the water in an area evaporate instantaneously. Apparently, people gave hypotheses of where he eventually went, and some said that he took the pearl with him then settled on the summit of Kunlun Mountain..." the teenager took a deep breath, then suggested, "I mean... I can volunteer to give it a try to Kunlun. It's the only solution now, isn't it?" The crowd fell into meaningful thinking again. "How about this..." the mayor said, "If you have faith in making your way there and back before the flood arrives... then... go for it..." the mayor sighed, unwillingly putting a young teenager under such danger, risking his life. However, it was the village's only chance. They had to grab it. The teenager finally introduced, "My name is Yan Feng"

The next day, in the early morning, before the rooster contributed to the Dawn Chorus, before the sun peeked its head over the horizon, in the chilliness of the wind and the thin mist over the river Chang, Yan Feng embarked on the long and threatening journey to Kunlun.

After two hours of tiring hiking along the path leading to the highest mountain range in China, Yan Feng arrived at the bottom of Kunlun. He narrowed his eyes a little and looked up to the summit of Kunlun, "Wow, how tall is that?", looking amazed by the power of mother nature. He placed his hands on his waist, trying to rest against the power created by it. Regardless of the freezing temperature of Kunlun, he was still sweating all over. His hair was wet as if he had been in a rainstorm, and his shirt was sticky inside. He carried a heavy rucksack on top of his back which contained nourishment, sufficient water, a sword as a weapon, and tools to climb Kunlun with. Yan Feng then carried on climbing.

Days past, the spectacular view of the mountain range gradually became larger and larger in Yan Feng's eyes as he got higher up the towering mountain of Kunlun. The smoke-like clouds drifted slowly beneath Yan Feng's feet little by little. The rare pines that grew on the frightening cliffs stood upright. The dark green colour of the pines reminded Yan Feng of the environment back down underneath Kunlun. The burning sun cast a rosy hue onto Yan Feng's hand, and warmth filled the atmosphere as the sun rose.

Days later, Yan Feng finally saw the summit of Kunlun in front of him, he protectively gripped his tool on to the cliff of the summit then cautiously climbed up the rough rope dangling down from the precipice. The wind howled like a fierce and violent monster, and the frosty flows of wind sliced Yan Feng's face as sharp as aggressive knives and

shooting arrows. The snow blocked Yan Feng's sight and suddenly, the hook that had been attached to the cliff wobbled. Yan Feng frowned fearfully and looked up at the cliff. All he saw was a hook that was struggling to hang on to the last piece of rock by the edge of the summit. The wind got stronger. The hook finally lost its balance and fell off the cliff. Yan Feng's mind was empty, feeling powerless and vulnerable after all the life−threatening climbing he did. He fell from the cliff miserably. Seconds past. Yan Feng sensed a massive pain that came from his back, and he turned around his body, finding himself landed on a narrow piece of platform naturally created that branched out from the side of Kunlun. "Few!" Yan Feng said with relief, then climbed extra−carefully back onto the peak of Kunlun with his nasty injuries.

"I finally arrived!" Yan Feng shouted with victory. Tears filled his eyes and dropped out of his eyelids. His cheeks were as red as tempering steel, his legs were shivering, and his hands were numb and swollen. A cave was revealed behind the highest layer of clouds, and a stooping old man walked out patiently with his crutch. "Hello!" Yan Feng greeted him with a friendly smile. The old man was bald and had a long white beard that typically all old men had. His eyebrows were wide and thick, and he said with an indistinct tone, "So... what are you here for? I have not seen any fellow human beings since... um... three hundred years ago." He seemed precise and confident with his calculation. Yan Feng answered, "I have heard about the Pearl of Water in the traditional myth that had been passed on through every generation. I am here today to save our village – Yun. It is in immense danger of flooding and this is the only way that our village could be saved! Hundreds and thousands of people live in Yun, and... it is just overwhelming to talk about... or even to think about what would happen if I didn't return with the Pearl of Water to save Yun from the tragedy of flooding..." Yan Feng said with a fearful look. "Look," the old man said, "I can give you the Pearl of Water, but..." the old man thought for a while, then carried on, "But you will have to give me your life as an exchange to extend my lifetime." The old man said seriously. Yan Feng was shocked. He could not believe how terribly filthy the man's heart was. However, Yan Feng still had the whole village waiting behind him for the victorious moment of him saving everyone from this unexpected, disastrous catastrophe. Tears fell from Yan Feng's eyes again, and he said with a trembling voice, "Yes, I consent your request." The old man nodded and gave Yan Feng the Pearl of Water without hesitating. Yan Feng took the pearl fearfully, seeing it as the most precious treasure in the world. "Thank you." Yan Feng said politely, then returned to Yun.

Down at Yun, the hills and the forest looked familiar. The rain was still pouring down, creating a damp, humid environment. Things were sticky, and the tree barks were already sloppy and gooey as if they were going to fall off at any time. The trees were filled with fungus and moss and vines climbed all over plants and houses. The crops were wilted because of excessive rainfall. Citizens of Yun looked desperate and vulnerable. Yan Feng ran as fast as he could down the hill path leading to the village. He held the Pearl of Water in his palms and took a deep breath. He took one last look at Yun, the place where he grew up over the past 18 years. He looked around for the last time, at the houses, the shops, and the fields. Memories started to fly back through his mind. The scenes of him running along the main street in Yun, playing with his best friends; the scenes of him in the fields harvesting the crops with his parents and all the happiest memories came back into his head. "Goodbye, Yun" Yan Feng shouted with tears, and he threw the Pearl of Water into the river of Chang.

Golden lights immediately came sparkling out of the river. The dark heavy clouds dispersed, and strips of warm, harmonious sunlight shot through the fissure in between the two big clumps of murky clouds. The bright blue sky was revealed behind the depressing weather of storms. The crops magically reemerged stronger, and the trees and houses recovered from the damp conditions. Yan Feng gradually floated and rose from the ground, facing the sky. Citizens gathered around to see this incredible and historical moment. Yan Feng's body grew fluffy white wings. They moved and carried him up into the sky, above the clouds, and all the way until villagers lost sight of him into the mighty world hidden above the sky...

Tales from China's Magical Mountains

Wellington College International Shanghai, Valdez, Ailani Tomasz – 12

I ran. My eyes had only just started to adjust to the darkness. The alarm went off. They were looking for me. I ran up a small rocky hill. I saw lights turn on from inside the building. Lots of kids had woken up because of me. The matron was calling my name trying to find me. "Kate, KATE, WHERE ARE YOU!? COME HERE RIGHT NOW!" She looked out the window and saw me. " KATE GET BACK INSIDE RIGHT NOW, WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE!?" I ran faster than I had ever before! Two strong guards chased me with whips. I climbed up a tree. They stared at me. They didn't know how to climb! I jumped up to the tallest branch and threw myself to the tree next to it. I kept doing this until the guards gave up and walked away. Then I jumped out of the tree and landed in a pile of yellow leaves. Then I thought "I have lost everything, my bed, food, shelter, what am I going to do now?" A noise broke my thoughts. I thought this noise was from a thing called an animal. I had read about these creatures in the old broken down library I had loved to visit. I followed the noise. It brang me me to a small cliff with a waterfall gushing down onto the ground. I emerged out of the yellow leaved bushes and saw an animal howling into the horizon. I walked up to it. It growled showing its teeth. They were as white as pearls in the sea and they were as sharp as knifes. I inspected it. It was a teenage wolf but it didn't seem old enough to hunt without his pack and parents. I looked around. He was lonely. It had looked like it had been in a fight. He had a scar across his eye and he had a scratch on his back which was bleeding. His looked like it had been bitten and his ear was half chopped off. He looked in a lot of pain. I sat next to him. He didn't bite me, instead he just curled into a tight ball and whimpered. I felt bad for it. It looked like he was lonely like me. I stood up. "I will take you somewhere to help with your wounds follow me". Weirdly the wolf understood and got up and followed me. "And one more thing I'm going to call you Scar!" I said and we began walking.

We had walked for 3 hours! The whole time we were looking for shelter but we couldn't find any! It was like humans don't even exist! That's when Scar's ears went up. I followed his eyes. It lead me to a small hut with smoke as grey as pebbles. Scar put his tongue out. He smelled something. A few seconds later I smelt it to! It was fresh apple pie. The smell reminded me about how hungry I was. Scar and I ran to the little cottage. We heard humming from the inside, it sounded like an old women. All of a sudden the door opened. " Aaaa Kate I have been expecting you, and you too Scar." An old women a bit taller than me looked down at us .She had long grey hair and light blue eyes. She stood there smiling at us. I was speechless. " H…How do you know my name? And W…ho who are you?" I asked her. I had so many questions I thought that my brain was going to explode! "Ah Kate when you get older you will understand, but now you are still young like a bird leaving it's nest for the first time. You mustn't worry…" she replied. "Come in come in, there is plenty of food for everyone!" We walked inside. There were old pictures of her and her friends playing a type of sport, there was a sofa an old tv and a small round wooden table. I sat down on a chair, and Scar did to. The old women went to her small kitchen then came back with a big appetizing apple pie. I began to drool! " Eat up you two you don't want to be tired tomorrow remember, it's the big day! You must defeat the dragon." I wasn't paying attention I just grabbed a slice and ate it so quickly that you could hardly know it was even there! After I had finished eating I started to process what she had said a few minutes ago… I asked her to repeat herself. "A dragon, what dragon! What's happening tomorrow, CAN YOU PLEASE EXPLAIN!" She looked at me then sighed " Ok let me tell you a story that happened a few years ago. Once a pon a time Your parents were going on with daily life when something happened. The king had wanted power, more power than he already had. He wanted elemental powers! He asked his guards to bring him any person with a power, then he would ask if they would willingly give him their power. If they said yes they would be free with return with lots and lots of money but if they denied then they would be killed. Now the only two people in the village that had these elemental powers were you parents! But they didn't want to give their powers away they wanted you to have them. So they left you in an orphanage and ran up a tall volcano guarded by an evil dragon. The dragon would only let them pass if they gave their life's to him after they put the elemental powers away in a special chest only you can open. He would also guard the chest. Your parents agreed. Tomorrow is when the dragon is weakest you must kill it then! Tomorrow at 6:00

you must venture with Scar to the volcano and forfil the prophesy." I was speechless and stared at her. I looked at her for about 1 minute then finally said something. " Ok I have got to get ready. Do you have anything I could use?" I wasn't really sure what I was saying, but I would do anything for my parents and if this was something my parents wanted to happen then I must do it. Then I started thinking " Why should I believe an old women that I have only met a few minutes ago?" I felt this weird connection with her. It was like she was part of me. She gave me a backpack. Inside there was an apple, a map and an old ancient sword. I gasped. It had two tigers Incarved into it on the sides . They were holding stars in their mouth. At the middle part of the sword it had a picture of my parents. I looked at it. It was the most beautiful I had ever seen. "How did you get this?" I asked "Magic" She replied. I looked at her confused but didn't say anything. It was turning to night. She told us to go to bed. She lead us to a room. Inside there were two cozy beds with blankets as blue as the sea. I lied down on one of the beds. It was soft as clouds and make me feel extremely comfortable! She turned the lights off "Wait" I said. "Yes?" She replied "what's your name?" I asked her. "Call me Sky" she replied. "And one more thing, Sky, thanks, thanks for everything." I told her. She smiled and said "Your welcome Kate, goodnight!" And with that she walked out the room and closed the door.

Mountain of Worship

Wellington College International Shanghai, Wang, Midas – 11

The great temple on the the top of the mountain; a place to relax and feel the energy flowing around you. It is said that everyone's hopes and dreams happens on the very tip of the mountain. Once a year, people sacrifice valuables in order to be granted luck and wealth.

Long ago, a city lies on slope of the mountain, they had everything they need there to live for centuries. People occasionally run around the mountain to stay healthy but a young boy decided to climb up the mound of earth and was amazed at what he saw: a shrine decorated with jewels all around. He thought if he places something on the shrine, something would happen.

A few days had passed and the boy was thinking of what he can do. He put a apples, food and everything he carried, and at last he placed some coins in the shrine, sighing with no hope, but this time he was granted a wish, he wished for wealth for his family and to forever be safe and lived a long happy life.

1000 years later, the mound of earth still remains with the city long gone, it has grew almost 10 times taller and also started growing cracks all over. And no one has yet to discover the history of this enormous mountain, but one day, the light found it's way through the cracks, and broke through revealing what lies underneath.

Over 10 years laying undetected, a man discovered what the shrine can do and kept it all to himself, he wished for immortality infinite power, but the gods won't accept this wish and punished him for his greed. Many has faced this fate and has scared other greedy people because they don't want to be punished by gods themselves.

To this day, people climb this mountain to worship a structure made from what was once gold and now stone. Monkeys and other types of animals come to this shrine for a visit once and again, and once a year, the whole city climbs the mountain and rests some valuables in the shrine to pay respect to the men of the sky.

The Hanging Garden

Wellington College International Shanghai, Wong, William – 11

From time to time, I often look back at my memories and find it hard to believe I actually went there with him. My grandpa, the only witness, just passed away at the age of eighty-five.

My grandpa was a very wise old man. I never really knew my grandma; she went to heaven when I was a few years old. To my grandpa, that was like dropping a bombshell on his head and left a permanent hole in his heart. However, the twinkle in his eyes was never mistaken.

When my grandpa was little, he lived in a relatively small cottage. It was not much compared to modern dwellings but, it meant everything to him, while he was there. He often liked to tell stories about himself and he especially likes to describe his little, but mystical cottage.

The cottage had stone pathways that split into three. One led to the never-ending water well, another led to the cottage itself and the third one led to the lawn, which was connected to the barn stables and some horse stables. The house had two chimneys that were, seemingly, smoking endlessly.

The little cottage was in the middle of a majestic forest so, countless species of animals often came to visit. There were deer, rabbits, kind foxes that never showed any aggression at home and many more. Some animals that my grandpa saw are now extinct like blue monkeys, yetis, unicorns, flyfants (elephants that can fly), as they used to call them. The list could go on forever.

My great-grandpa was a cabman who worked six days and my great-grandpa was a cow milker. This was not much then but, again, the cottage was just like an utopia to my grandpa's family. My grandpa was called Linju, which means living in the forest in Chinese.

My grandpa was especially fond of horses and loved to ride them. He used to ride horses for weeks exploring the forest and used to compete in horse races with other tribes in the woodland. However, because of his old age and lack of energy and strength to keep up with the horses, he was forced to give up his magical cottage and his life in the woodland to come to live with us.

We now live in the crowded city of London, bursting with people all the time. Grandpa always seemed happy but, sometimes the magical twinkle would fade, and he would look rather blue. My parents and I guessed that he missed the old times. Where he could roam in the forest either on horseback or walking.

Today, FINALLY, was the start of the Christmas holidays and grandpa's sixty-fifth birthday!

My parents and I secretly made a cheesecake while grandpa was having his daily stroll at the park, down the lane. We decided weeks ago that we should go to Huangshan of China for the Christmas holidays which would hopefully cheer grandpa up, so we surprised him with flight tickets alongside the cheesecake!

We packed our bags in the next days and got ready to leave home at 9:00 pm on the day of departure, heading for the airport. My father said it will take us 12 hours by plane to arrive in Shanghai and a few more hours of car ride to Huangshan.

We arrived at Shanghai Pudong International Airport at roughly 5 o'clock in the afternoon. We slept all the way, but grandpa didn't catch much sleep, as he was very excited to get back to his homeland and to his hometown again. From time to time he looked out of the window and ask the stewardess, "How long is the remaining time to touch down?". Finally, we landed on grandpa's homeland! Dad went to pick up the rental car and then we drove all the way to Huangshan. By 10pm we arrived at the hotel situated at the foothill of Huangshan.

We stayed a night at the hotel and early next morning, dad drove us all the way to our hometown, which is located up in the mountain. On the way I saw many weirdly coloured birds, monkeys and natural landmarks like the rainbow geyser that I have not seen before in London Zoo.

We dropped our bags at my uncle's house, and dad said this was where we were going to stay for the rest of our holiday. It was quite a spacious, detached house and was beautifully decorated too. The following day, my parents went to get a nature spa, so they left grandpa and me. We decided to go around and have some fun.

We couldn't choose between archery, horse riding, basic survival knowledge and many more. So, we did everything in turns, until my parents came and took us to dinner. Grandpa was so good at horse riding, that the coach told him to teach us and even the coach learnt something!

The next day, we heard a rumour that there was a secret garden which contained thousands of unknown species and it sounded just like the setting grandpa has been describing in his story telling time. So, we decided to check it out on horseback.

We quietly borrowed two horses from my uncle's stable, and we travelled into the woods. We took enough dried food for two days, and we spent a long time trying to figure out clues that could lead us to the entrance of this magical place. We searched for almost a day and finally grandpa found the mark. He excitedly exclaimed, "I found it! I found it!". I quickly hurried over but, I didn't see it at first. Then grandpa pointed his hand, still quivering excitedly, at it and I saw it immediately. We removed the dirt that covered it and found a pathway just big enough for grandpa and me to squeeze in. We left our horses outside because they were too big to go through the path. When we reached the end of the tunnel, we were engulfed in colour. There were loads of very strangely coloured birds, a unicorn or two, monkeys, etcetera. I could also see something, although I couldn't recognise what it was, at first.

Then I realised how stupid I had been. It was none other than a bigfoot! I gasped loudly; grandpa just chuckled. It was almost 10 feet tall, looking friendly from the distance. Then he quickly disappeared into the haze.

This place was exactly the same as grandpa described before! I even saw a flyfant take off, and it was just like a helicopter, but the blades had a larger surface area which go up and down instead of rotating. It was just like Dumbo! We spent the rest of the day exploring this magical place. With every step I discovered something new. Every animal was different, no matter if it was the colours or the species. They were all friendly animals, but with strangely beautiful colours that I had never seen before, such as baby blue monkeys, zebra print deers, white elephants, dragonflies that sparkle under the sun just like fairies, and many many more. There are also many types of fruits that we could just pick and eat whenever we were hungry. It got dark before we noticed, and it would be too late to return so we found a safe and warm cave to settle in. That night I slept a wonderful night's sleep.

When we woke up, we were no longer at the cave the night we had been in. I bolted up, got out of my sleeping bag, and woke grandpa. It felt like we were only dreaming of those mysterious creatures, and now faced with just trees and rocks. Another strange thing was that we could no longer find the mark and the only choice that we had was to leave. The path we took to come here was blocked because of a landslide so we had to take the dangerous route of the steep mountains. We were galloping past a mountain when the horse reared, and grandpa fell off. He was seriously injured but was still alive. I sped of at full gallop back to the village for help.

Apparently, my parents called 110 and the police were searching for grandpa and me. We arrived at the nature first aid hospital. They tended the wounds while the emergency helicopter came. Mum and dad came and held his hand. We went with him to the hospital and was by his side all the time he was getting revived.

It was a happy ending as the doctors finally rescued him on Christmas Eve as if by magic. The whole family had a truly relieving and amazing Christmas in my uncle's house. Grandpa and I could not stop recalling the details and repeating our excitement several months after we came back to London. I still see it in my dreams from time to time; it was simply magical and so beautiful.

The Mystical Mountains

Wellington College International Shanghai, Wu, Melody – 12

High up in the clouds

Pole like mountains

Unheard of creatures

Full of mystery

High up in the mountains above a sea of clouds, the shrill cry of a baby reverberated through the gnarled tree branches traveling to the ears of everyone in the mountain. The cry was loudest at a cliff top monastery. Why was the baby there? Nobody knew. How had it got there? Nobody knew. When did it arrive? Nobody knew. Not even the monks of the monastery knew exactly. But what all living creatures of the mountains did know was that he was the son of a dragon. His name was Zi long.

The monks took him in and his childhood at the monastery passed happily. He even attended school in a nearby village named The Village of Phoenixes . At first, his mystical powers were not very obvious. Every body thought it was just the dragons being nice for a change when they let Zi long play with him when he was two. They thought it was just a coincidence when he yelled "DRAGON" and made them do his own bidding and when he was six. They were nervous when he could control all the creatures of the mountain and by his teens he could almost control all elements of the earth. If he wanted to make it rain, it did, and if he wanted a mist to come down, it would. This made the villagers so scared that they kept their children away from him and never let them play with him. Everybody was too scared of him to be able to like him. So to pass time he would play with the forest creatures (because to them he was just like a brother).He learned to meditate with the the under ground bears that are native to the mountains. He also mastered how to swing from branch to branch with the long limbed monkeys and he learned to hunt with the foxes. It of course went without saying that he found his inner dragon with the dragons. But still it was not the same. Animals cannot replace a human friend. So Zi long lived happily, but not without some melancholy.

Until one day Zhang came. That day was just like every other day but every body seemed to get along with each other better than before and even the sun seemed to shine brighter and more merrily than other days . Even Zi long, who had been acting particularly mopey of late, seemed to have straightened his back at least by one millimeter. Then as a silhouette emerged from the trees, everyone looked up and saw a lean teenager with short black hair holding a brown duffel bag smiling at them. He was Zhang.

Zhang brought happiness to the village every day. Within his first week, everyone in the village had received a gift from him . For example, he gave a new sweatshirt to the chief and to the elders he gave each a delicately carved wooden walking stick. He also gave elaborate pieces of silk for the mothers, and thick durable white towels to the fathers. The children, of course were not forgotten; they received toys. He even gave Zi long a gift— friendship. And now, because of Zhang, Zi long was able to hang out with people of the village too. Sometimes once in a while, the villagers would even give Zi long a gift.

Now that Zi long finally had a friend, they did everything together. When Zhang handed out daily groceries Zi long came too. When Zhang planted the crops, Zi long came too. And when Zhang handed out The Villages Daily newspaper, Zi long came too. All was peaceful and joyous until the day of the Battle of the Villages . Every one was preparing for it. First they had to choose who was to represent the village in the battle. Every young teenage boy of 14 had to stand on a wooden stage for approval. Zi long was forbidden to compete because if he went , the winner would be obvious so this time, Zhang was chosen to represent this village.

" What is the battle of the villages?"asked Zhang.

"You don't know what the battle of the villages is?" Said Zi long surprised. "Well I never paid much attention to this before but The Battle of the Villages is when two boys from opposing villages fight to the death and the purpose of it is to make the rank of the village higher. Another purpose is to gain more mountain land to fight, farm, or live in. Currently the Sky village has the most land."

"Ahh I see…" murmured Zhang and he sank into deep thought.

Suddenly a loud voice rang through the crowd "…and the trainer of Zhang is …drumroll please… Zi long!!!" Everyone in the village cheered.

The schedule of Zhang for the next few days before the battle went like this:

5 ~7:00	training with swords.
7 ~ 7:15	breakfast and give out newspapers
7:15 ~ 13:00	crops
13：00~ 13:30	lunch
13:30~ 14:30	meditation
14:30~15:00	hand out daily groceries
15:00~ 17:00	spear training
17:00~ 20:00	sell products
20:00 ~ 21:00	practice dueling with all weapons
21:00	sleep

Finally the day of the battle began. Zhang's village, Phoenix, was fighting Horse which was a rank lower than them. They were to fight to the death. Zhang and the other boy Mo circled each other ,making sudden lunges and inflicting small wounds on each other. They were also fighting on a cliff to make matters worse. After a good 20 minutes, Mo was getting impatient so he dove at Zhang who dodged and then all we could hear was the sound of Mo's scream getting farther and farther away as he plunged to his death over the side of the mountain .Then Mo's brother, Ho could not bear the loss of his brother, punched Zhang in guts causing him to slip and follow Mo's path down the mountain. In anger and grief , Zi long caused the sky to first rain , then lightning followed by thunder. The ground shook, roars of dragons were to be heard, raging plumes of fire shot from the valleys between the mountains , then all went black.

After the sky cleared, everything seemed to be the same as before but the dragon's son had disappeared into thin air , never to be seen again.Though sometimes every 12 years people might claim to see a solitary dragon flying across the moon.

The Chinese Magic Mountain

Wellington College International Shanghai, Yang, Laurel – 12

In the hundreds of mountains, there is actually a little country inside it, this country is called cloud, it's a very small country but it's is really rich, it's also a place that everyone want to go because this place is very beautiful but many of them want to find it ,but in the rate of 10 nine has died. There is also a reason for why everyone want to go, there is also a very good school that is called" The cloud school". But there is a rule that only boys can go to school and the girls can only stay at home. Because in ancient China people likes boys more than girl, just because of that rule someone break it…..

A girl called Wen Xi (文曦) Who is actually a assassin from another country called the mist , her mission is to kill the emperor of the cloud country .But Wen Xi do not want to do that ,but the emperor of mist tell her she must to do that ,because Wen Xi has a brother who is sick(her brother is called Wen Bin).If she finish her mission then she will have enough money to cure her brother.

She pretended that she is a writer and also pretend to be a Boy , One day when the pro king around to have a look at how they do, the emperor saw Wen Xi and thinks he is very smart(she is pretending to be a boy now) so the Emperor invited him to the palace to serve him .Now Wen Xi thinks it's a good chance to murder him. Wen Xi has been served him for one month, she thinks it's time to murder him now, so her first try is when no one is beside and the emperor can't see her (she is at the back) she took out her knife, but just at this time, another servant came in, she hidden her knife as quickly as she can.

The second time, she tried to murder him when he is asleep when she pulled out her knife, she stopped , she doesn't want a emperor of a beautiful country to die.On the next day,WenXi was kneeling on the ground ,she wants to tell him everything.
"What are you doing on the ground "the emperor said.
"I'm so sorry your majesty ,I lied to you."WenXi said

So then WenXi told him every thing, and said "l can tell the mist king that you are already being killed, then I will pick up my brother and mom and come back here ."

But wenxi's plan didn't work very well ,then king of mist don't believe her but still let her go.WenXi kind of notice that the king don't really believe her,so she packed her family's things and quickly go off with her family.

Magical Mountains Story

Wellington College International Shanghai, Yangoubpour, LiYang – 13

Along time ago in the Chinese ancient times, there was a beautiful woman, a woman with most elegant, dark luxurious hair, a woman carrying the most alluring ocean blue eyes, and has skin soft and white as snow . Any man would crawl on their knees wishing to get a closer glimpse of her beauty. Despite her special features, she in fact was no ordinary girl, she even carries her own deepest, darkest secret that not a single mortal soul knows about.

She has the power to lure men to the urban lake and do anything at her command, yet she never used that power, and she can sing a magical song to enchant others with joy and has a pale white, scaly shimmering tail. Indeed, she was a Chinese magical mountains siren, which were pretty rare back then since they were hunted by humans which made them almost extinct. It was a curse she had to live with for the rest of her immortal life, that fairly disappointed her.

Then one day, she got sick and tired of being a Siren, all because of this…

It was a full moon that night, she was gazing up into the midnight sky, lost into the moons eye and the stars shine, daydreaming about the dark horizon on the mountain.

She heard the crack of a twig. Someone was there. Feeling alarmed, she quickly turned around and hid her tail in the gloomy waters, just to see the dull shadow lurking around her. She was being watched, "By who?" she thought to herself. She then slowly turned around…

To see a woman. Not another man but a woman. Both of them stared deeply into each others eyes in curiosity, and wonder. "Who.. who are you?" the young woman stuttered. Less starteld now, Sirena replies "my name is Sirena, and yes before you ask anymore questions I am the last Siren in China's magical mountain. The woman was in shock that Sirena replied but at the same time in awe of her response. She took a second to reply and said "No way! My grandmother used to tell me stories about the legends of the magical mountains sirens! But I never really believed if it was true, by the way my name is Ming Ling." They gradually started to become more comfortable with one another and told each other stories about themselves, and later on lost track of time since they were so interested with one another's lives. A few moments later, Sirena came up with an idea where the next full moon they meet each other back at this lake where the waters powers are strongest, where then Ming Ling could be a Siren and Sirena a human for one night. They both were extremely excited and waved goodbye, and swore to meet each other again the next full moon.

Sirena and Ming Ling waited patiently for the time to come and finally a few fortnights later the day has arrived. They met each other in the same lake just like they promised. But that night Ming Ling didn't see Sirena there, and she was starting to wonder if she forgot about their planned special night. Shivering, Ming Ling started to worry, "Was she ok, what if something bad happened to her?". All of a sudden, she heard a distant cheer of some angry people. She was curious and wanted to see what all that commotion was about. Her heart skipped a beat, she couldn't believe her eyes when she saw Sirena stuck up to a wooden pole with her hands and tail visciously tied up with no mercy, Sirenas face was covered with anger and fury as if she was going to take down all of them one by one, yet at the same time she looked anxious.

Both panicking desperate for answer before they burn Sirena for being a Siren, since humans despised them having this picture in their mind for being only evil and dangerous. Without warning, a young man jumped out of the crowd and defended Sirena just as they were about to burn her to crisps and swiftly cut her loose within a blink of an eye, and they both disappeared in the mist. The air was filled with confusion, everyone felt the trauma of what they just witnessed. At that time Ming Ling checked her arm and it wrote "meet us at the enchanted Siren lake", and without a doubt she followed the instructions on her arm and left the scene.

It was her! Sirena and the boy! Ming ling bursts into tears of relief and hugged them both tightly. "But how, I thought you couldn't enchant men when your out of water!?" she asked, and at that moment the young man replied

“Hello! I’m sorry I didn’t introduce myself to you guys yet, but hello my name is Nicholas and I am a magical mountains nymph. I disguised myself as a young man so people wouldn’t hunt me down since I am actually the last of my kind like you Sirena! In fact I actually knew your sister Opheila before she got hunted down like you. I knew your face looked familiar when u were in trouble! *chuckles* anyways I’ll be on my way now see you guys soon!”. “Well then again thank you for saving me!” Sirena said with gratefulness. “This is why I don’t want to be a Siren people wont accept you for what you are” Sirena shedded a tear of disappointment. “What on earth do you mean! You get to encounter so many magical beings where no single human being might’ve ever met”. Ming Ling encouraged. Sirena thanked her for her support and wished her well.

At the right moment, the sun rose from the north, the gleaming sun rays reflected on the water spreading various colours of joy and relief, the two girls sat beside each other leaning their heads on one another and watched the horizon.

“It’s Me Kiddo”

Wellington College International Shanghai, Zhao, Tiffany – 13

Gracie:

It was the 3rd of November when I first met the man who kept me waiting for him for 5 years…

We were both in HuangShan for a business trip, or so I thought we were. I was walking into a restaurant for a drink after a day of hiking and taking photos for my gallery at the Met back in New York, when a figure bolted right past me and held me by the shoulders. Slightly older than me, He had a strong grip, ash grey eyes, short sleek brown hair brushed back. He was wearing a jumpsuit that you would expect out of a spy or agent film. I was too lost in my thoughts before I realized that he had gripped me tight and kissed me. It was just a few seconds but I could still feel the tingle down my spine. After that, he apologized so quickly, leaving me stun in shock and ran off, leaving no mark. It was as if he was running away from something, running for his life.

Stanley:

It wasn’t part of the plan to kiss that girl in the restaurant but it was the only way I could loose the group of terrorists chasing behind me: hiding in plain sight. It wasn’t the first time I had to do such a thing on a mission. As I ran down the hills and roads of the village, I dropped all the accessories on my utility belt down the mountains of HuangShan.

I arrive to my safe house . The doors unlock as the sensors scan my face. When I finish settling down and reporting my status and success to the head quarters of the CIA, I finally have some time to sit down and relax. But just as I grab a book from the shelf, my thoughts float to the girl I kissed today. Her flashing black eyes, chestnut wavy hair and the daft smell of roses on her…

Gracie:

It wasn’t until the next day that I met him again. Right as I was in the middle of adjusting my camera, someone grabbed my purse and ran . I kept on running after the thief and shouting for help but no one came. Just as I lost hope of getting it back, I saw the same figure from yesterday, shoving the thief onto the ground and grabbing for the purse.

The police arrives and the thief is under arrest whilst I see the same figure walking towards me with a dashing smile. He raises his eyebrow and my purse then asks “Hey Kiddo , aren’t you goin’ to thank me for getting this back?”. Before I even get a chance to answer, he’s dragging me down the street to one of pubs.

Stanley:

I push open the doors of the pub and sit down with the girl on one of the tables. There’s a bit of an awkward silence before I break it. “So kiddo, what’s your name? I’m Stanley and I work at a museum” I lie. No one can know about my real job. No one. Not even the girl I might’ve just fallen in love with.

Gracie:

“Gracie” I answer with a smile.

As the pub gets busier, the music gets louder, I let myself relax and lower my guard. We talk for ages, I see the sparkle in his eyes as we talk. The way his eyes shine when he mentions HuangShan…

It’s late into the night and Stanley offers to take me back to my Hotel. We walk down the road in silence but not the type of awkward silence like when we first met anymore. It’s a comfortable silence that makes you feel warm inside. He takes me by the hand and I don’t pull away. The grip of his large hands gives me a safe feeling. We arrive to the hotel and we lock eyes just before we part. I see that shimmer in his eyes again and I lean in for a kiss. We don’t let go of each other, we savour the moment and finally let go out of breath.

5 months later in New York

Gracie:

"And that's a wrap for today everyone, thank you for all the effort you've put into this gallery!" I announce to my team as we pack our things. I walk out of my office after telling my assistant to cancel all my plans for the rest of the day and practically run towards Stanley that's standing outside waiting for me. "happy 5 month anniversary kiddo" he says with a peck on my lips and a bouquet of flowers on his hand.

Stanley:

I pull Grace out of the building and take her to our usual diner: Mike's. We sit down. "the usual right?" says mike, without us even needing to tell him.

Just as I see mike walking back with our food, I hear a loud BANG! outside. Gunshots. Everyone ducks under their tables with terror, I tell Grace to do the same as I pull out my gun from my coat and walk outside the door.

Gracie:

I wonder in bewilderment, terror and confusion all at the same time when I see Stanley with a gun. Where did he get it? Why does he have it? And Why does he need it? These questions take over my thoughts as I kneel under our booth.

Stanley:

"Alright, Pierre, what do you want? Every that has happened between us in the past strictly stays in between us, do not bring other people into this. I thought we had a deal" I say as I raise my gun at him.

"Oh, but no my dear little Stanley Stan Stan. You broke our deal first. In fact, you broke our deal years ago when you killed my brother. Don't remember? Well how 'bout I refresh your memory by taking your little girlfriend there. Ei?" answers Pierre with a chilling smirk.

"bring Grace into this and I swear our feud will not end." I shoot back, as the veins in my fist start to flare up.

"very well, then your other choice would be, give me back that 20 million you took from me, plus your arm and we're even" Pierre tells me

I have nothing to do but to do as he says because no one can hurt Gracie. No one.

I call the bank to transfer the money to Pierre which alerts the CIA. The Clock's ticking and I don't have enough time to run…

When I wake up again, I realize I'm in a hospital and I can't feel my left arm any more…

Gracie:

The second Stanley wakes up, I start questioning him in worry: " you better explain to me RIGHT NOW about what happened yesterday. Why did you have a gun? Who was that man? And why did he saw your arm off?" My eyes flare up with tears as I ask him, the feeling or betrayal and how he kept secrets from me stabbed me in my heart but even more, the fact that my most beloved person is lying on a bed missing an arm.

Stanley:

I could see the fear and pain in Gracie's eyes and I cannot ever stand it when she's in any sort of pain or negative state. So I tell her the truth. Everything. Even my job.

Gracie:

I don't even know how to react to Stanley's sudden confession. I take a minute for everything to sink in. I tell Stanley I'm going home even though I'm not while he begs me not to.

Stanley:

The next day, I woke up early an left a note on my bedside for Gracie because I knew she would come. " To the love of my life, Gracie, I know that I've lied to you, kept secrets from you but you just have to me trust again this time. I'm going to leave for a long time, I cannot tell you where I'll be but only that on every 3rd of November each year, I want you to wait for me at HuangShan. I don't know if you will do as I say, I guess we will only find out until the day we meet" I pack my things a fly to HuangShan where I spent the next 5 years hiding from the world and training with my master.

5 years later—Present

Gracie:

I walk into the restaurant I first met Stanley in, like I've done for the past 4 years on the 3rd of November. I sit around, looking for him, maybe even just a trace of him. But no, I don't find any. Just as my hopes are gone, I walk out of the restaurant. I see him. I see Stanley. I see the figure I've been longing to see for 5 years…

Stanley:

I smile to Gracie when I see her "It's me kiddo, I'm back"…

Tales from China's Magical Mountains

Wellington College International Shanghai, Zhu, Asun – 12

Once upon a distant time, in a mountain valley lived peacefully Sam and his brother, Tom. They passed their days in harmony, unaware of time and change. In this ever–land, the trees stood for millenniums, the flowers blossomed for centuries and the clear blue streams ran for eternity. Nothing seemed to end here, and it's also as if there wasn't a beginning. It was an isolated realm of immortality, where inhabitants lived so innocently and joyously.

"Come on brother, the sun is yet again rising to the sky!" The laughter of Tom broke the tranquil, amicable silence. "Wake up! Another adventure packed day awaits!" Drearily, Sam drags himself out of his bed. He was already quite used to this; it was pretty much every consecutive day that he was woken by the playful cries of his energetic brother at 5am. Surprisingly even in such a world of freedom one cannot even sleep upon their desired schedules.

"I don't understand," Sam groaned, "Why is that I have to perpetually wake up with you at such an early time to do……absolutely nothing?"

"Time is money, brother. In life you have to use every second efficiently. How is laying in bed being productive at all?" Replied Tom.

"Is that legitimately your worry at this moment? We are living in a land of eternity, brother, we have enough of the time!" Complained Sam, who was gradually getting irritated by Tom's immaturity.

"You never know." Said Tom, trying to hide a satisfied smirk that's starting to reveal. "We might all die tomorrow." Sam retreats the conversation of incompetence, shaking his head in disappointment.

But in the past few days, a feeling of insecurity started to grow inside him regarding his brother's words of annoyance. As if a bad omen, the thought of death, such an askance topic, was forebodingly stuck inside his so innocent mind. It's something he has never experienced, something he didn't want to experience. But he lived in the ever–land, so the promise was that they would've lived without death, isn't it?

But what if they did all die tomorrow?

Another day, another adventure. It has really never changed. Though every single day they did it again and again, it seemed that they never ran out of places to explore and the countless possibilities to encounter. Today, it was The Valley Mountain Walls, where they would dig deep into the mysterious caverns and follow the natural pathways through the mountain. Sam and Tom prepared their baggages, started towards their destination.

They arrived at the mountain leg. Looking up at the peaks, Sam was utterly petrified by the height of it, level with the clouds.

"I am not doing this." Announced Sam. "You know I am afraid of heights, Tom. How can you be so obnoxious?"

"Life is about trying new things." Replied Tom cheekily, "Overcome your fears, brother, and all will be easier." For many years already and many years to come, Sam has been and will be filled with resentment by Tom—so there was nothing abnormal. *Not yet, at least.*

He bit his lips and started up the valleyside, weary of every minuscule move he makes. *Step by step, Sam, step by step,* repeated Sam in his head. *You are not the chicken Tom says you are. You can do this.* He felt sweat snaking down his severed back; he felt his heart pounding his ribcage, almost like it would burst right out; he felt his hands shake vigorously, as if he was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. His fear of heights was always a problem; it wasn't going to go away.

On the other hand, Tom blithely skipped up the steep hill, as if it was just another stroll in the garden. In the realm, he was named 'The Master of Nature'. Since no single natural obstacle could ever oblige him to do something, it was almost like he could manipulate the ways of nature in his favor.

“Hurry up Sam, pick up the pace! If you continue dragging your legs, we wouldn’t even get to the top at sunset! Come on, we have a view to catch!” Urged Tom impatiently. Sam rolled his eyes and kept on hiking.

A few hours past, and they finally reached the apex. Bathed in sweat, gasping for breath, they laid themselves down.

“Argghhh!” Sam groaned at his exhausted muscles and exhilarated lungs. “I am never doing that again! We are legitimately committing suicide! Why did you—”

At the corner of his eyes, Sam caught a glimpse of a somewhat extinct world, extinct of all matter, drowned in ashes and engulfed in statements of death. *Meh, just another hallucination of dreariness,* he thought to himself. Sitting up, he rubbed his eyes and slowly recovered his state of consciousness.

It was real. The sight was soul−crushing, mind−blowing, and quite frankly, morally misleading. An apocalyptic wasteland of some sort, it was. It was as if an exasperating flame was ignited and disintegrated all matters of life into colossal piles of loose ash and dust.

Sam felt his eyes watering. He slowly turned his head around, facing his home. Acres of superfluousness and life. Then he turned his head back around, facing the extraterrestrial. Miles of death and decay. *This is not real,* thought Sam, comforting himself. He could not accept the haunting truth. *This is not real.*

He closed his eyes, desperately wishing this was all a dream.

‘The truth cannot he wished away, Sam, but it could have been prevented.’

No. None, of this, is, real.

‘Stop the immaturity, Sam. The truth cannot be altered!’

Shut up! You are in my head. All of this is in my head!

‘Sam, whatever you think does not matter, it’s what you do that matters.’

This is incredulous! What am I supposed to do?!

‘It is time I to tell you a tale, Sam, one that decided the devastating fate of your world. One of your despicable grandfather.’ The amorphous voice then took a shape of an old oak tree, It’s eyes, nose, mouth and ears distinguishable from the bark.

Every bit of matter suddenly disappeared, evaporated out of existence. The everland, the death land, the hill they were standing on—even Tom, who was still recklessly bewildered as to what was going on. It was just Sam and the Old Oak Tree, in a vast room of nothingness.

‘Go on then.’ Sam said bitterly.