

Fiction

Group 1



The Voyage

Dulwich College Beijing, Li, Damien - 6

Glaring at the bustling museum hall, Percy sighed: “This is going to be boring!”

Following his mother into the Ancient China exhibit, Percy walked to the center of the hall, where an exquisite vase with swirling blue patterns and vivid drawings of sail ships was displayed.

“Who did this vase belong to?” Percy wondered as he walked closer to the vase.

Suddenly, there was a whirl of colour, a flash of golden light, and a gust of strong wind. Percy was sucked into the vase.

THUD – Percy landed on the dusty deck of a gigantic ship. Dancing in the air, a yellow banner with the Chinese character “Ming” hung on the mast.

“Where is mum?” Percy wondered with butterflies in his stomach. Around him were hundreds of ships lined up on the crystal-clear sea.

An arrogant looking, middle-aged Chinese man dressed in a long robe with fine embroidery interrupted his thoughts. “Are you spying on us?” he yelled in a deep voice.

Trembling in fear, Percy responded in Chinese: “No! My name is Percy. I am from Whistler, Canada. Can I join you? Please?”

“Canada? Where is that? Does everyone in your place have blonde hair, pointy noses and pale skin like you? I have led me fleet to 30 countries in six expeditions but never been to Canada. You will take us there.” He beckoned Percy closer and nodded, “On behalf of the Great Ming Dynasty, I, Zheng He, sail to our neighboring countries for the seventh time to deliver silks and porcelains, trade for herbs and spices and reunite our friendships. And from now on, you shall be my guide to Canada!”

Hoping to find a way home, Percy nodded reluctantly: “Yes my Lord!”

As days went by, Percy followed Zheng He to amazing places like Java and India, met people speaking different dialects and tasted scrumptious cuisines.

However, one gloomy day, a panicked shout came from the deck: “Pirates! ARRRRRRRRRGH!!!!!!” Percy ran up and saw greasy pirates jumping onto the ship. All of a sudden, a long-beard pirate grabbed Percy and put a sharp sword to his neck.

Percy closed his eyes in agony: “Mum, I can’t go home anymore...”

“Let him go! He is only a boy!” Zheng He bellowed as he charged to the pirate, armed with a broadsword.

Hours later, Percy woke up gradually on a blood-soaked deck. Not too far away, Zheng He, with a sword piercing his chest, leaned against the mast. Tortured by the unbearable pain, he said his last words: “I always knew dying on the ocean was my destiny. I will never make it to Canada. Please take the vase from my cabin and give it to your king as a present of friendship from Ming.”

With tears all running down his face, Percy limped to the cabin, found the strangely familiar vase and held it gently. Suddenly, he was sucked into the vase again and THUD-back in the museum.

“May you rest in peace!” Percy mumbled.

Dairy of Admiral Zheng He's Voyages

Kau Yan School, Wan, Kalysta - 8

It is the 15th day of the 9th lunar month. Today we saw some strange shark-like creatures. Admiral Zheng He said they were playful and entertaining. They jumped out of the water every few seconds and made sounds like a mouse squeaking.

It's the 19th day of the 9th lunar month. Today a storm came suddenly, it rocked the boat back and forth and ripped one of the sails. Sailors were busy mending the sails. Before sunset, Admiral Zheng He said, "Some giant boats are following us! They look like pirates." By then, most of the crew were tired and asleep.

Everyone was wakened up by the pirates yelling "Charge!!!!!" as they ran across the plank from the Pirate Ship to the Bao Chuan. The soldiers on board tried to kill the pirates by cutting the plank of wood that connected their boat to ours. Eventually the plank began to fall and quite a number of pirates immediately fell into the water. However, one despicable pirate managed to jump and grab hold of the rope and stay on the lower deck of the Bao Chuan without alerting us.

When we all settled down to sleep again, the pirate climbed quietly to the upper deck and crept into the Treasure Room. In the Treasure Room he saw our Giant Panda and lots of glittering gold. He was distracted by the panda. It looked like a huge monster to him. He screamed loudly, and woke up the sleeping guard.

The guard quickly caught him, tied him with stiff ropes and woke up Admiral Zheng He. Admiral Zheng He told the guard to lock the pirate in the cage next to the panda.

The pirate was terrified to be in a cage next to the big, fat monster who kept chewing on juicy bamboo leaves.

Admiral Zheng He asked, "Where do you come from?"

The pirate, with big round eyes and teeth chattering from fear, said, "The Paracel Islands, Sir."

The Admiral looked at the pirate and saw that he was actually very small and had a piece of rope tied around his waist to keep his trousers from dropping down. Admiral Zheng He said, "We will take you back to the Paracel Islands, but you must never be a pirate again!" The pirate promised.

It's the 20th day of the 9th lunar month. Admiral Zheng He told us that we didn't have enough bamboo leaves for the panda so we needed to go faster. We dropped off the pirate in the sea near the Paracel Islands and let him swim ashore. The boat was too big to go too close to the Islands as the water was very shallow.

Admiral Zheng He said, "We need one more sailor to go faster. No more writing, Scribe. You are one of the sailors too!"

So this is my last entry in this interesting diary as we sail towards Mogadishu to present the Giant Panda to the important ruler there.

Friends Adventure

Regents Primary School of Shenzhen, Kim, Ji Hoo - 7

Zheng He, a brave explorer of the Ming Dynasty, dreams of traveling the world. ‘There are many kingdoms in the world and I desire to congregate with their rulers. It is important to affiliate ourselves with others in order to call attention to China,’ said Zheng He. He went to the palace, persuaded the king and finally got his permission to build a ship.

Upon reaching the approval of the emperor to set forth on his mission, he first meandered through the woods to cut down trees to build his ship. He ended up experimenting and testing different wooden materials as he later found out that not all kinds of wood were able to float upon putting weighted goods on top of it. Zheng He went through trials and errors but never gave up. To his surprise, he finally got the idea from eating bamboo rice one day. He wound up using bamboo to build his ship. He was able to finally set sail!

Down in the city, a young wide-eyed boy named Cha Cha took the sailor recruitment test but was declined. He was too young and short but they determined to become a sailor. One night, they slowly and curiously sneaked onto one of the voyage ships, not daring to make a sound to avoid being detected. Suddenly, a sailor popped out and shouted, ‘Thief! Thief!’ They scurried hurriedly and tried to escape from the sailors, running all the way from the supply ship to the warship where they ended up in a ship that carried all the horses. He was exhausted and he slowly crept into a dreamless sleep. Not long after, the peaceful sunrise shone in the barn and woke him up. Cha rubbed his eyes and cleared his sleepy vision. From the window of the barn, he could see the endless rivers, beautiful villages and gigantic mountains. He finally landed on an island with the other crew members. Later on, they started to trade goods with some local people...

A powerful storm was bearing down on the island at dawn the next day. They told the local people on the island that a tsunami would be coming. Knowing how dangerous the tsunami waves were, the local people took no chances and boarded Zheng He’s ship to escape from its’ wrath. As the tsunami tore through the nearby lands and shook the ship to its core, there was a sudden gush of water that entered the lower deck of the ship. The ship was punctured and the sudden influx of water made the ship start to sink. It was so dark, so cold and so scary. Everyone was panic but Cha stayed calm throughout the ordeal. Thinking quickly on his feet, Cha bravely blocked the hole and saved everyone. When the storm and tsunami stopped, the local people gave Zheng He a unicorn as a gift of gratitude. This horse that had a horn was a precious treasure. The Chinese people had never seen such a unicorn before, and so when he took it back they were astonished. Due to the success of this mission, talks began for the next adventure to other lands. Zheng He and his crew were overjoyed and looked forward to their next big adventure.

The Great Voyages of Zheng He

Shanghai United International School Wanyuan Campus, Cao, Zachary - 8

This afternoon, I walked to my garden as usual. Suddenly, I noticed a small house on top of a tree. I was curious, so I climbed inside it. I saw a note on the floor. It said, "I can send you anywhere." These days I was learning about Zheng He, so I told the note, "I wish I could go to Ming Dynasty." The tree house started to shake and then everything was still. Absolutely still.

You would never guess where I was now. I found myself standing on a boat. No, it wasn't a boat, but rather an enormous ship. The Captain of the ship, you guessed it, was the famous Zheng He. While on this ship, I found myself just as a Chef. I cooked a famous traditional Yunnan dish, steam pot chicken. I remembered that he came from Yunnan Province. Very quickly, I was summoned to see the great Zheng He.

He smiled at me and said, "You did a good job. You cooked well and made me think of my hometown."

I felt happy.

"For this reason, I can answer you two questions," he added.

I felt honored. My heart danced with delight.

I asked Zheng He the first question excitedly, "My master, you've been to many foreign countries, which is your favorite country? Can you share with me?"

He looked at me for a while and said, "This is a good question. I like Africa most because I brought back a giraffe. I was born in Yunnan in 1371. There are many rare animals there but I have never seen such an animal. It looks elegant because it is very quiet. It not only has a long neck but also beautiful large eyes and long lovely eyelashes. It's amazing. You know, in 1405, I set off from China for the first voyage. We visited South-East Asia, the Middle East, and even the east coast of Africa. But I've never seen giraffe before. I like giraffe very much."

I was shocked, but I managed not to show it. In fact, I didn't think he liked giraffes so much because he didn't look after them every day.

Then I asked Zheng He the second question anxiously, "My master, this is the seventh voyage. What do you think of your voyages?"

He laughed and replied proudly, "My voyage developed trade between China and foreign countries and also encouraged the exchange of cultures and technologies. China is now very well-known from my voyages."

"Always be brave, and follow your dream." Zheng He looked at me firmly and spoke.

I looked at him and nodded, too excited to say a word. I couldn't agree with him more.

Ring, ring, ring!

"Zach, it's time to get up." A voice said loudly. It's mum.

I suddenly woke up, looked around, and saw an open book called The Great Voyages of Zheng He lying on the desk. I smiled and said, "Wow, I dreamed a wonderful dream."

Ming Treasure Adventures

St Stephen's College Preparatory School, Cheung, Elana - 6

Xiu Ting was only six years old when her older twin brothers, Li Ming and Li Hang, left their small village to become pirates in the imperial Ming Treasure Fleet. Her brothers had always dreamed of seeing the foreign world, so when they heard that the Emperor was looking for a crew of young men and women to sail the seas, they immediately sent a letter to the imperial capital of Nanjing declaring their interest. Within weeks, they had packed their bags and were ready for their journey.

However, both brothers did not have any sailing experience. Therefore, they were assigned roles onboard the ship. Li Ming wanted to know how to make the cuisine of the world, so he joined the cooks. As they travelled around the world, he learned about the different spices and dishes from the local people. Li Hang, on the other hand, wanted to learn how to fight to protect the ship from dangerous pirates. So, he trained until he was ready for battle.

During their voyages, Li Ming and Li Hang explored many new places in the world. They visited Java, a beautiful tropical island, and saw lots of interesting wildlife and beautiful scenery. The people there were friendly, and had a colourful culture full of traditional music and dances. Li Ming and Li Hang danced and sang with the local people for many days until it was time to leave. To thank the people, they gave them gold, silk, wine and precious jewellery. The local people were very touched and thankful.

However, not all the people they met were friendly. On the way to Ceylon, pirates who wanted to steal their treasure attacked the Ming Treasure fleet. But, Li Hang fought bravely with the other soldiers and defeated the pirates. Luckily, when they reached Ceylon, the nice local people gave them delicious curries and thanked them for defeating the evil pirates. Li Ming learned a lot about cooking spicy food from the local people, and when they left the island, the people of Ceylon gave them different spices to take back to China. Using these spices, Li Ming was able to cook a lot of delicious curries for the people on the ship.

Li Ming and Li Hang sailed the seas for seven years with the Ming Treasure Fleet, and visited as far as Africa. When they came back home, Xiu Ting was thirteen years old. They told her of their many adventures, and of everything they learned from the people of the world. “You can learn a lot of fascinating people by travelling the world,” said Li Ming. “I also saw the most breathtaking natural scenery and manmade architecture. I’ll remember it forever.”

From then on, Xiu Ting also decided that she wanted to become a pirate on the Ming Treasure Fleet like her brothers. She studied hard at school, and when she was finally eighteen, she had her very own adventure.

New Tales of the Ming Treasure Voyages

St Stephen's College Preparatory School, Mui, Megan - 6

Chapter One: The First Voyage: 1405–1407

In a thunderous night I was summoned to come to the royal palace. His Highness Yongle Emperor could not sleep. He eyes were swollen as he yelled in pain saying, “I could not sleep and I am having these nightmares that my nephew will be coming back seeking his revenge. Our spies reported that he disguised as a monk and left the country on a large fishing boat a few months earlier. We thought that he hid somewhere in the South Sea. Gather a fleet and hunt him down.”

In early spring 1405, we set sailed with twenty ships and two thousand sailors. It was like a picture painted in blue with our treasure boats scattered like little dots in the sea. Our fleet sailed straight through the Indian Ocean following rumours on the whereabouts of Jianwen Emperor.

We were not able to locate Jianwen Emperor but we ran into a local pirate named Chen Zuyi at Palembang on our return trip. He was a pirate who dominated the Malaccan Strait. He sent his pirate ships to attack our ships with arrows and fire bombs in the middle of the night. We returned fire and destroyed ten of his boats and captured another seven. Chen sped quickly knowing that he is no match to our fleet. Chen and his lieutenants were captured and publicly executed on 2nd October 1407.

News spread quickly and our victory was widely publicized. We returned to Nanjing at the end of October; two and a half years after we left. Members of our fleet, the local officials and the people in the vicinities staged an extravagant welcome for our return. The city put up dazzling fireworks during the night to celebrate our return. That night gitters lit up Nanjing while we enjoy our feast. Dancers performed in front of major municipal officials and local mandarins from the vicinity. Scores of people came out to congratulate us on our victory as the local establishments gave the sailors free food and drinks.

We brought foreign envoys from Calicut, Quilon, Semudera, Aru, Malacca, and other smaller nations along the sea routes that we visited. We went back to Beijing with the envoys two days later. We were invited to visit the royal court to pay homage and present tribute to the great Yongle Emperor. His Highness ordered the Ministry of Rites to prepare generous gifts for the foreign envoys to show his appreciation.

Everyone in the court was amazed by exotic animals such as monkeys from Malaysia; Tapir and Orangutan from Indonesia. We asked the natives to teach the cooks in the royal courts how to prepare food with the spices we brought back.

Everyone but the Emperor seems to have forgotten what the underlying objective of our trip – to hunt for the fugitive Jianwen Emperor, who is still at large. But before we were able to indulge on our success, His Excellence quietly asked us to plan our next trip and set sail as soon as we can.

The Untold Eighth Treasure Voyage – in Memory of my Beloved Godfather, Zheng He

St. Paul's Co-educational College Primary School, Yuen, Fe - 8

Dear Godfatherⁱ,

Idid it! I have just realised your lifelong dream of circumnavigation, to prove that Earth is round! Hope I have made you proud. I missed you dearly and regretted incredibly for my absence at your funeral, as I learnt about the tragic newsⁱⁱ only recently when my fleet reached *Quanzhou*.

Ten months after you embarked on your seventh treasure voyage, *Xuande* Emperor ordered me to lead an expedition of circumnavigation. The emperor thought previous voyages focused too much on the display of wealth. He believed a global circumnavigation could demonstrate the superiority of China in scientific exploration in the region. The emperor ordered us to keep the plan a secret, and understandably so.

As it was the first time I led an expedition of this scale, I wanted to stay modest. Instead of a more ambitious plan of a complete east-west circumnavigation, I planned to circumnavigate north-south, just around the oceanⁱⁱⁱ outside the East China Sea.

It was May 1431. My fleet left the port of *Liujiafang*, travelled northeast, and passed through the strait between *Jin* and *Wo*^{iv}. Based on the methods described in *Zhoubi Suanjing*^v, my crew and I duly observed the midday sun to track our latitudes. The fleet reached the farthest north as it navigated past the Kamchatka Peninsula. Since we had been travelling in a reasonably straight line, the changes in latitude made us believe that we had been moving on a curved surface instead of a flat one. The evidence for a spherical Earth was emerging.

In November of the same year, we discovered a new world. It was vast, occupied by very friendly *Ohlone* natives. They were delighted to receive treasures from us, and in return, asked us to give their place a toponym. We took the opportunity and named it “*Xuande*”, after our emperor^{vi}.

After leaving *Xuande*, we kept navigating south. We reached the farthest south on our journey in September 1432, encountered a continent, covered entirely in ice and occupied by exotic animals — bird-like animals that waddle and live in colonies. They were very agile swimmers, in contrast to some lazy, gigantic species which laid still sunbathing near the shore.

Everything sailed smoothly until a thunderstorm hit us in April 1433 and wrecked one of our ships. Luckily, we found a nearby island where we took the time to reorganise. Finally, the critical moment came on 18 June 1433 when our fleet approached *Liujiafang* northbound, the opposite of how we departed. I murmured to myself in disbelief, “Earth is indeed spherical!!!” Everyone on board burst into tears of joy.

It has been a long two years, and I am glad to be home. Last night, I dreamt of us to be the very first global circumnavigators. After waking up, I keep wondering if the eighth treasure voyage were the world-first^{vii}... Anyhow, I shall bring the good news to the emperor tomorrow. Wish me luck!

Sincerely and respectfully yours,
En-Lai

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- i I role-played Zheng En-Lai (鄭恩來), Zheng He's godson, when writing *The Untold Eighth Treasure Voyage*.
- ii Some believed Zheng He died in Calicut, India during his seventh voyage in the spring of 1433.
- iii Today's Pacific Ocean.
- vi Jin (辰): Today's South Korea.
Wo (倭): Today's Japan.
- v *Zhoubi Suanjing* (周髀算經): the earliest books on astronomy in Chinese history.
- vi Xuande city was renamed to "San Francisco" by Spanish colonists in 1776.
- vii The Magellan–Elcano circumnavigation completed in 1522, 89 years after Zheng En-Lai.

The Ming Treasure Bottle

Victoria Shanghai Academy, Sze, Kristen – 8

“Ugh.” Stephanie was at the beach with her mom cleaning up rubbish from Typhoon Mangkhut. “I hate volunteering! Why don’t we just throw the rubbish back in the water?” Stephanie complained.

Dragging herself along the beach, her foot hit something hard. She picked it up. It was a glass bottle containing a Chinese model ship. She was fascinated, and unknowingly stroked the bottle several times. She felt dizzy, and it seemed as if the world was fading.

Stephanie was woken up by the sounds of fighting and water splashing. The first thing she saw when she opened her eyes was a flag with the word “Ming” printed on it. She got up and looked around. Stephanie was on the deck of a Chinese sailing ship!

“Stop the pirates!” The ship captain shouted while his men scurried around the pirates trying to stop them stealing the gold the ship was carrying.

“Take all the gold! Chuck everything else OFF THE BOAT!” The pirate leader screamed. *Whoa! I have to do something!* Stephanie thought.

The pirate leader was standing close to Stephanie, and she found that the pirate was standing on a sheet of silk. Being smart, she grabbed the sheet and pulled with all her might.

The pirate leader stumbled and tripped and he fell overboard.

Realising what happened, one of the pirates made a face and cried “Cap’s down! RETREAT, RETREAT, **RETREAAAAAAT!!!!!!**”. The ship’s captain and his men chased off the remaining pirates until they were all gone.

The ship captain recognized Stephanie’s heroic deed and praised her. “You are a true hero. If the pirates were not stopped, they would have ‘chucked everything OFF THE BOAT!’” The captain chuckled and Stephanie joined in on the laughter. “That would have been quite catastrophic, and would definitely end the beautiful beach and most sea life around here.” Turning towards the horizon, the captain said “We need to respect the sea.”

Stephanie pondered at what the captain said, and suddenly came back to her senses about her own situation.

“Wait... where am I? And who are you?”

“Why, I am Admiral Zheng He and you are onboard my great expedition of course.”

Stephanie was in disbelief and held out the glass bottle. It shone a great blinding light and everyone closed their eyes.

When Zheng He opened his eyes. Stephanie was gone, leaving behind in her place the glass bottle. Shocked, he picked up the bottle wondering if Stephanie was a spirit sent to help him.

“Bury this bottle on the beach.” He ordered his men.

Approximately six hundred years later...

“Stephanie! Stephanie! Are you okay?” Stephanie’s mom yelled as Stephanie sat up, still clinging onto the bottle with the Chinese model ship.

“I’m alright, mom. Let’s continue with the beach clean up!” Stephanie said, blinking but enthusiastic as her mom looked at her puzzled.

Stephanie placed the bottle carefully into her backpack. For a moment, she thought she saw little figures running around on the model ship inside the bottle.

Fiction

Group 2



Zheng He's Bold Adventures

Alliance Primary School, Kowloon Tong, Law, Joy In - 11

Spools of golden silk thread rolled back and forth in a wooden trunk as the ship rocked violently in the howling wind. In the stores, crewmen were busy tightening ropes to fasten the porcelain urns in place and covering other treasures with an extra layer of oilskin cloth. “Admiral Zheng, water is gushing into 285!” shouted General Wang as he scrambled onto the deck. “Do not fear. Abandon 285. Drop the sails and separate the ships,” replied Zheng He, the young leader appointed by Yongle Emperor. His steady command offered the only calmness at that turbulent moment. Wang, who was second in command, nodded trustfully and quickly got to work. By the time all the sails had been reefed, the crew was exhausted. While the men laid down to rest in their cabins, their nine-foot tall admiral stood alone under the mast, waiting for the first light of dawn.

The fleet of nearly 300 treasure ships drifted about in the dark for another hour. The storm finally subsided. The sky turned from black to grey, then grey to gold. A while later, coconut trees along a coastline were spotted from a distance. “Land ahoy!” yelled the excited Zheng.

The fleet sailed towards the shore. Anchors were dropped. Five ambassadors were sent to survey the island. Two came back, badly injured. “Admiral Zheng, Ma, Zhou and Hu were killed. The ruler and his men were fierce beasts. We were lucky to have escaped.” Zheng was shocked, saddened and angered by this report. He was still thinking over the next step when General Wang rushed in to report the fleet was by now confronted by a vast troop which hoisted a huge flag that read “Ceylon”. Zheng knew there was no choice but to rage a war. Bombs were fired from the Chinese ships. Twelve commanders then led eight thousand elite soldiers to fight the enemies on shore. The Ceylon soldiers had the fright of their lives. Vira Alakesvara, the ruler of the island, soon surrendered to the Ming army. Taken captive, the defeated ruler was sent to the Chinese Emperor along with some peacocks, Sambar deer, junglebowls and other exotic animals.

The name of the Great Ming Empire began to reach far and wide. A few years later, another expedition took Zheng He and his crew to India. The local king there was amazed by the size of the ships. A splendid banquet was served to the visitors. Looking at bowls of brown and yellowish mixtures, one general whispered to Zheng, “How are we supposed to eat that?” “Not with a pinch of salt,” the Admiral joked lightheartedly. He liked this country very much, finding it a lot better than Ceylon. Towards the end of the feast, upon the command of the Indian King, barrels of herbs, spices and dyes were presented to the guests as gifts. In exchange, Zheng also offered the Indians stacks of delicate silk fabrics, barrels of tea leaves and a chest of golden coins. Drinking to the newly established friendship with the Indian ruler, the young diplomat had never felt more proud of his country.

Zheng's ships were on their way back to China when they were met by a fleet of four vessels carrying armed pirates. “We can smell treasures from miles away,” shouted the tallest of the pirates. “Now, tell me, shall we take the gifts or your lives?” To this, the Admiral replied, “You won't take anything, but take care!” His generals promptly bombed all of the four pirate ships and captured the leader Pirate Chen. They tied him up and took him to

Zheng. “I won’t allow you to keep on robbing ships anymore. You will be taken back to China and executed,” announced the great leader triumphantly.

Back in the Captain’s cabin, Zheng was drinking a cup of hot tea. A map had been laid out on his desk. He dipped his writing brush in the black ink and put a circle around East Africa.

Zheng He's Command

Chinese International School, Keswick, May - 8

It was 1414. Captain Zheng He and his crew went to the emperor to ask about their next mission and were totally surprised by his command.

“Take my gold and give it to the pirates. Please don't harm anyone! No people should get hurt. And remember... you all have courage and kindness. Even if they fight, you can fight back – but in a kind way. Never give up!”

This was the first time the emperor had made such a request. The crew loaded as much gold as they could onto the boat. Zheng He was with the crew as they put the gold away inside a treasure chest. After careful planning of the route, the crew put up the sails and set off to sea.

Zheng He shouted, “Ahoy crew! First, we will be setting off to the Indian ocean and will be going across to the Bermuda Triangle.” The crew were a little worried by this as they knew it was a dangerous place.

As they entered the Bermuda Triangle, they saw so many unusual things. Enormous sharks, crashed boats and airplanes surrounded them. A huge tornado circled around them... When suddenly, out of nowhere appeared a massive ship. It was owned by their old enemy Cheng Tang. Straight away, the crew ran to get their weapons but then remembered they could not fight.

Zheng He murmured, “Cheng Tang. We come in peace. Please can we just give you some gold and then we will go away?”

After a long time of giving away gold, they realized they had very little left. The crew started to panic. They had no gold and they weren't allowed to fight. They had to come up with a plan and make sure no one could hear them.

“What do we do?!” Zheng He asked, feeling very stressed. All the crew felt panicked.

“What do we do, what do we do?!” Zheng He suggested that they should trade ships.

“But we can't. Our ship cost so much more than their ship!” the crew yelled,

Zheng He cried, “We just have to get on with it.”

The crew jumped off the ship. “We surrender... but we will give you something. There is some gold on our ship but it is not much. So we decided to give you our ship but you have to give us your ship because we can never go back.”

All of the pirates on the other ship shouted, “We don't trust you trying to trick us.”

They raised their guns and shot two of the crew. The bodies sank to the bottom of the sea and the fight began. Zheng He and his crew could not fight back. Their emperor had given them the order and they had to obey. Instead, they swam to the pirates boat. They took them by surprise and tied all the pirates together.

“Now, do you trust us or not!” they asked the pirates. “Do you want our ship and gold or not? We are just trying to help you!”

The pirates captain replied “Okay we trust you!”

Zheng He and his crew went to the pirates' ship. It was ugly with scratched off paint and cracks in the basement but it would get them to where they were going. They were sad with what had happened to the two crew members, but knew that they had a good life. No one would ever forget what they did to help other people.

All of a sudden, Zheng He saw a rainbow parrot. It was beautiful and even said HELLO. The parrot travelled with them to Cape Town.

Zheng He messaged the emperor and said “We have given 100 pirates gold but we had to give away our ship because we did not have enough gold left... Sadly pirates shot two of the crew.”

The emperor proudly replied “It is fine. At least you are safe and you learned how to be kind.”

Zheng He and his crew went back to Nanjing. They had a funeral for the two crew men called Tao and Yan. Zheng He had to explain what happened to all their friends and family. He kept the parrot for company and taught it how to speak Chinese. Zheng He planned his next mission with his new friend, the parrot.

Saving My Father

Chinese International School, Marsh, Megan - 8

Isn't it ironic that I'm literally fighting against pirates and my own father? And yet the whole reason I joined this treasure fleet was to get away from the pirates and what they did to my family.....

Just to let you know, my father didn't want to be a pirate! He had no choice but to work for Chen Zuyi as he had to repay a debt. His bakery business had failed so suddenly he found himself feeding pirates. This brought shame on our family so the rest of us left Guangdong and went north looking for work.

After 12 days of walking, we arrived in Nanjing. We had been told that there were jobs there because Emperor Ha Gao was constructing The Ming Treasure Fleet. Over one hundred ships needed to be built for trading, making international voyages and expanding the community.

My father had taught me well when he owned the bakery. I was an excellent cook - especially with making sweet pastries. So I found work in the shipbuilders cafeteria while my brother worked in the shipyard. We worked hard and when the fleet was finished, my brother and I were lucky enough to gain jobs on the fleet. In fact, on the Admiral's very own ship!

Admiral Xui Mai had travelled a long way from the palace to the shipyard to inspect the ships. When he arrived, the chefs were summoned to cook the finest dish for him. I decided to make the admiral a slightly spicy slow-cook lamb rack with an extra dessert on the side. It was a citrus tutti frutti jelly. He absolutely loved my dish and he offered me a job on the voyage. My brother got a job too - working on deck. My brother and I decided not to tell anyone that our father was working for the notorious pirate, Chen Zuyi. It was too risky.

The Admiral always enjoyed my pastries and encouraged me to be creative. He really supported me and eventually promoted me to be Head Pastry Chef. I think he saw something of himself in me as he used to be a poor boy until war came and he had to fight. He fought so hard that the emperor promoted him and eventually he became an admiral.

We visited many cities on our voyage. These included Champa, Java, and Malacca. We gave gifts to the people in every city we visited. For example, we gave porcelain, calligraphy scrolls, and copper coins. We too got many gifts in return. We even got given exotic animals - including a giraffe.

Our route home took us through the Malaccan Strait which was a shortcut. Many pirates lurked around here because many merchants used this passage way to go to their destination.

On our way we met Chen Zuyi's fleet and we did not expect an ambush attack from Chen Zuyi. Admiral Xui Mai was quick to start planning the attack strategy. I told him I had heard that the pirate was paranoid about sticky sweet stuff. I suggested to make a dough bomb filled with sticky corn honey slime with food colouring.

Our fleet started attacking Chen's boats with the dough bomb. The minute it landed on them, the bombs splattered all over oozing out the most stickiest green slime.

One bomb crashed onto Chen Zuyi's face. He stumbled backwards as liquid burst all over his body. He screamed as he tasted the sweet corn honey and turned green with anger!! It was terribly sticky and awfully sweet but quickly hardened. He was stuck and could not move.

The other pirates hated these sticky sweet bombs too... except for my dad. While the other pirates were powerless, he was surprised by the sweet bomb strategy. It felt familiar because he was reminded of his daughter who used to make sweet bombs during her childhood.

The pirates struggled, unable to move. After another round of attack and they finally surrendered. We locked the pirates in the dungeon. My father was one of them. He wondered if this could be the work of his sweet lovely well missed daughter. Would he ever see her again? And I needed to start thinking of a plan to save my father.

On the way back home everyone was raving and laughing about the pirates. My brother hugged me and gave me a wink!

When the ship arrived in China, the Admiral reported to the emperor about the victory. Emperor Yong le was very impressed with my clever plan. I was promoted to be the personal chef for the emperor, because my cooking was delicious.

Of course I remembered this was my chance to save my father. I explained the whole story to the emperor and begged him not kill my dad. The emperor discussed the situation with the court and finally they agreed to let him go because I had contributed to the victory.

Without my father, I wouldn't have been able to make the dough bomb. It was my childhood boredom that had turned into a fantasy of dough balls. I squealed with excitement. Finally, after all those years, my family was back together again.

Medicine of Immortality

Creative Primary School, Lee, Jeston - 11

It had been a long time since I last set foot in a ship. But I had not forgotten the feeling of having the wind on my face and the salt in my hair. Fifty years ago, I was a cabin boy in the legendary Ming Treasure Fleet. I was a young man then and here is my story...

“Wong, the Naval Captain is coming in a minute, so be ready for his arrival.” My master shouted from outside.

“Yes, sir.” I muttered under my breath.

A man stepped into the room. Even without my master telling me, I would know that he was the Naval Captain, Cheng He, as he had that kind of gaze that would make people around him back down.

I quickly made way for him and bowed to him. Cheng looked at me for a long time. Then, he said, “Your master told me that you were smart, and recommended me to hire you as my cabin boy. Come and meet me at the Qiang Long pier tomorrow.”

The next day, I went to the pier. I could see a group of enormous warships in the port. They were huge, with cannons and detailed chiselled dragons.

I saw Cheng standing on the deck of a warship, supervising the loading of goods. The deck was crowded with people, with some sailors heaving large sacks and some scrubbing the deck. Tremendous sails towered high above me. It was an extraordinary sight, with a hundred ships navigating together.

I was the youngest sailor on board and responsible for serving Naval Captain Cheng. Despite his stern look, Cheng was kind to me. He also served the Emperor with unswaying loyalty. I respected him a lot.

We worked day in and day out and very soon we were out in the Arabian Seas. The sailors were superstitious and said there were demons in the Arabian Seas. The demons would play tricks on you and lured you into drinking their wine. Once you had drunk their wine, you would come down with an incurable disease. The only thing that could save you was the Medicine of Immortality, which could only be found on Penglai Island in the East of the Bohai Sea. But no one had been able to find the Medicine of Immortality, so the best way to protect oneself was to avoid drinking wine during the whole sail in the Arabian Seas.

Cheng dismissed all these as nonsense, and he continued to have wine in his meal. One night, a heavy mist came hovering our ship when Cheng was having meal in his cabin. I was serving him with wine. Suddenly, Cheng’s face turned pale and he clutched his chest. He began panting, gasping for air. I shouted, “Help! Help!”

The doctor did not know what caused Cheng’s illness, but we could see that Cheng was getting very sick and might soon die. The rumour spread that Cheng had drunk the demon’s wine. I felt responsible for it as I was the one who served him the wine. I decided to go to find the mystical Medicine of Immortality.

The other sailors thought that I was a fool, and no one wanted to risk the wrath of demons. So I set out alone. For seven days and seven nights, the seas were rough. The waves were soaring and twice I had been thrown out into the waters and almost got drowned. But

nothing could stop me from finding the Medicine of Immortality. I continued to battle the angry seas and the unforgiving waves. But my boat was small and finally a huge wave came washing over me and I went under and lost consciousness.

When I woke up, I found myself on an island. The island was covered with lush trees, green grass and beautiful spring flowers. A girl came towards me. She looked strange when her face was illuminated by the moonlight and she said, “You have found Penglai Island. My father found you worthy and decided to give you the Medicine of Immortality. Follow me please.”

The girl led me to a huge cave decorated with beautiful jewels.

“So you want the medicine for your immortality?” An old man with a long white beard asked me kindly.

I was lost for words momentarily. I then managed a smile and asked, “Can I have the Medicine of Immortality please? My captain is in dire need for this medicine. He is now dying!” I felt my throat tightened and tears came to my eyes.

The old man smiled and said, “Well, here it is. You have proved yourself worthy of taking the medicine, and it will give you immortality. Of course, if you take it, you can’t bring it back to save your captain, but you can live here forever. However, if you give the medicine to your captain, he might be saved but he can’t live forever. What a waste!”

“I’ve come all this way for my beloved Captain, not for me. He is a good man and I will do anything to save him!” I pleaded and begged him to give me the medicine for my Captain. At last, the old man seemed satisfied and handed me the medicine. Then he asked the girl to take me to a boat and showed me how to sail back to the Ship.

After a day’s sail, I saw our Ship. When I saw Cheng, he was in an even worse condition. Cheng took the medicine and after a while, he returned to his normal state and could even stand up. He looked at the now empty bottle and said, “This is unbelievable! We must find one for our Emperor!”

Cheng redirected the whole Fleet to search this Penglai Island. But no matter how hard we tried to find it, it seemed to vanish without a trace. I guess this place was either really magical, or nobody deserved to be immortal.

The Revenge

Creative Primary School, Tang, Jayden - 10

I was standing on the top deck of my Bloody Devil glancing over the horizon. The breeze swept over the top of the sail and made it sway. The sea looked calm and peaceful. I was interrupted by my spy, Hawk Eye, who rushed towards me and shouted, “Cap! Good news - Lots of treasures on Ming’s ships!”

“Calm down.” I frowned, “Our chests were already full of silver and ivories.”

“Each ship in this fleet is heavily loaded with gold and jewels!” I could see dollar sign in his eyes.

“Really?” I raised my brow. “Then this might worth a battle.”

Immediately, we took off and roved among the seven seas to look for the “treasure ship”. We have sailed for years, but still could not smell anything. I started wondering if Hawk Eye’s intel was just a joke, thus I ordered him to locate that fleet again.

Months later, Hawk Eye returned with news. “Cap, the fleet is mainly sailing in the South China Sea and Indian Ocean, giving away treasures to other countries.”

“What? Giving away?” my jaw dropped. “This is the silliest thing I ever heard.” I could not believe until he added, “The Chinese emperor wanted to make friends with others, so he did it for diplomatic purpose.”

“Then what are you waiting for?!” I roared, as my crew untied the ropes and charged to the Indian Ocean, ready to raid the Ming’s ships. “Not even a gold coin will be left on those ships, and we will be very rich!” I grinned. It might be a long fight, but the rewards would be definitely worth it. With my famous Bloody Devil, and I, Captain Golden Hook, we were unstoppable!

During the journey, I heard more about the fleet, such as the captain was Zheng He and they were very shallow to believe that giraffes were some kind of mythical animals for worship. Bah! They did not know what the world is like! Unlike me, Captain Golden Hook, who has captured many vessels and circumnavigated around the globe, it will be easy as pie to loot all the precious items from them!

All the time, I did not have any worries about plundering the treasures. Until one day while we were approaching to destination, Hawk Eye told a rumor about a giant sea serpent near the Indian Ocean that would crush everything into bits when it was annoyed. Since then, we had been cautious of any movement in the sea and tried to avoid that terrible monster.

Next day, the sea was unusually rough. Maybe it was just another storm, I thought. Suddenly, a ten foot tall black shadowed “Unidentified Object” thrust out of the water. “It’s...the sea...serpent! Ready the ca...cannons...throw explosives!” The sailor hollered stammerly. But the sea serpent was pissed and its tail smashed violently on the ships that the crew couldn’t even load the cannons.

“Link the ship, link the shipp!” monkey Jack squeaked.

“Great idea, Jack!” I praised. “Link all the ships together to stabilize.” I yelled to the crew. Sailors instantly chained up all our ships in line and formed a horizontal fortress on water. The sea serpent was starting to lose strength because it no longer bashed as hard as before.

Now we should attack. Bam! Pow! All cannons were firing, so soon the monster was defeated as it dived down and vanished. “Whew! Now we are safe.” I muttered to myself. Just when I thought the coast was clear, Jack scanned around and squealed, “Ship! Shipp!” Sure enough, there was navel fleet, and it was Zheng He’s fleet!

“Surrender and we can be friends “Zheng He gave me a stare as he slowly approached. How dare him to underestimate me! I never lost any battles and I will not throw a towel under any circumstances. I remained silent and longed to attack when the sun went down. The first blow was half the battle.

Zheng He did not push further and we were all hushed except monsoons were blowing hard and making “whoooooo” sound. I was starting to wonder if there was any conspiracy behind all this, or was he really that friendly? It was a windy night as Caesar, my chief warrior, had been discussing the strategy with me on the deck. “We must strike first! Let’s send all the warriors swimming to Zheng He’s ships as it’s dark now, the crow’s nest won’t spot us.” Caesar was confident since he has won so many battles with me. “Be cautious, Zheng He may not be asleep,” I warned.

While my crew was swimming silently towards the misty darkness, I was on the deck hoping that our plan would work. But things don’t always go as we planned. All out of blue there were flashes of light moving rapidly like shooting stars, before I realized those were fire arrows, my ships were hit and lit up completely as we had chained up to fight the sea serpent before. Zheng He was on the stern of the ship and slowly appeared through the smoke and he gave me some “surrender or die” look. I would never abandon this ship! I decided to fight back even though it was hopeless. Zheng He’s forces were much stronger, plus my ships were extremely damaged and slowly sinking. I knew the time had come. “An eye for an eye, Zheng He! You... will... pay the... price...” I cried with my last breath as I went down to the sea with my ships. All my crew, my glory, my treasures and my ships were gone in one single battle. However, this was not the end, yet.

Years later, Zheng He died in his last voyage, his 7th journey. Everybody believed that he died from illness. However, among the seven seas, people knew that it was me, Captain Golden Hook who haunted him, near the India Ocean where he sank my Bloody Devil. Ever since, the Chinese emperor had forbidden any sea voyages.

Journal of a Sailor

Diocesan Girls' Junior School, Choi, Pui Yan Valerie - 11

3rd year of Emperor YongLe

Waving, we gazed out across the sapphire-blue velvet of the sea, watching the triangular land of India gradually fade into the horizon. It became nothing more than a distant coastline, delicately outlined by the touch of the glowing sun, separating us from the many exciting adventures we have had. The adventures may be gone, but the thrilling memories will always remain. Now, the fleet headed home.

The visit to India— which was led by Admiral Zheng— had been a successful one. Aside from making a trade deal between the countries, we had seen countless items that were new to us, varying in shapes and sizes. Among all, there was one that was the most intriguing-- the Tigrises. Regally, they roam amongst forests of dew-kissed grass with utmost grace, their bold, majestic stripes adorned on the flamboyant coating of their fur. Their blazing feline eyes resemble the lustrous eyes of a dragon, one that can only be found in legends, and one that can see into the deepest parts of your soul. They are like liquid orbs of amber, threateningly placid. These creatures watch with silent ferocity, their cat-like face perfectly symmetrical, evoking a sense of fear, respect, and awe in me at the same time. Yet most intimidating of all, are their formidable, bloodthirsty fangs, sharper than bronze swords. Just picturing a Tigris tearing flesh apart sends chills down my spine. Since it was such a monstrous creature, we had no choice but to leave it where it belonged. It was a pity, I thought, as it was such a beautiful beast, full of hunger and elegance.

“All crew members, prepare to switch sails,” the voice of our captain sounded through the ship. Lithely but carefully, I clambered up to the top of the mast and watched intently for instructions. As soon as Captain waved his hands in the air, I untied the sail, watching it slowly descend. Then, my fellow cabinmates hoisted the spectacular flame-red sails that, as said, symbolized the pride of the country. Captain nodded, and I slid back down, only to see the morning haze lifting off, revealing patches of fire burning in the crystalline water. Taking a deep breath, I stood a little straighter, embracing the pride that I had.

We continued to steer across the ocean for a few weeks, following maps and a compass, and as we nearly reached home, we encountered the most dangerous thing a sailor can encounter at sea.

That day, the weather was perfect. The ocean filled itself with shimmering diamonds as it melted into the silky sky. Perfectly pillowed clouds sailed lazily across the creamy blanket of blue, leaving streaks of white behind and painting a dynamic, ever-changing picture. Golden beams of sunlight spilled out from behind them, never failing to show its face. But out of the corner of my eye, at the far corner of the flawless sky, I glimpse a sullen, menacing, even ominous cloud that started leaking. My heart stopped— a storm.

Soon, everyone felt the cyclone. The air was sharp, and the azure sky was now replaced by a heavy sheet of lead. We frantically fixed the mast, the sails, and the wheel, adrenaline rushing in our body. Blood roared in my ears, the sense of dread pounding in every heartbeat. Whispering a prayer, I clutched the nearest rope and pole tightly, knuckles white, as everyone did. We had nothing to do at this stage, everything was to be left in the hands of Fate.

Suddenly, a jagged bolt of lightning split the ominous sky in half. Layers of thick clouds built into a thunderous deluge and torrential rain poured down like an avalanche. The gale was a tyrant. Roaring and screaming, she conjured rain and waves, splintering the boat like daggers. At the very front, trying in vain to steer the wheel was Captain, shouting orders over and over again. Beads of sweat rolled down my face as I strained to keep the sail in place, balancing the seemingly frail boat. Claws of tempestuous waves lashed our ships, tilting it from side to side mockingly. We were toys in the eyes of the brutal ocean, trapped at the very heart of the raging sea.

“Captain...two members...of our crew co...collapsed and a few were sw...swept in the o...ocean,” I heard my friend telling our captain, voice quivering. The fear in his eyes was uncovered, like glass that could be shattered at any moment. I couldn’t hear what Captain said after that.

The waves continued to surge, threatening to engulf our ship, and drag us into its bottomless depths. All we could see were the angry walls of water— dark as coal. Panic spread across my body. My lungs felt as if it carried the burden of a million rocks as I gasped wildly for breath. The only thing I could think about was not to lose my grip.

Our boat lurched back and forth as my stomach tightened. Then, it tipped. The rope broke. The pole cracked. Everything was a blur, and all I could remember was that I was plunging into the jaws of the sea...

My body ached, and my brain was fuzzy, but I struggled, only to find myself in water. I couldn’t move forwards, seawater crashing on my face, and causing me to cough and splutter. Then, I recalled what had happened. I kicked and I kicked, with hope that I could find land, but all I saw was an endless stretch of nothing. My arms flailed on the surface, desperately groping for something to hold, head pounding with an electric pain. I felt my body go weak and sank. It was all too much, and I just wanted to give up...

No, you can’t. A voice in my head told me. You have to survive.

Survive? I thought.

Yes.

And so with a painful effort, I broke through the surface and started thrashing again.

Ming Voyages

Dulwich College Beijing, Lam, Yoko - 10

Blazing sunshine beat down on the ocean, illuminating the turquoise waves. The ship full of bounty thrust onwards, navigating the blustery winds, in search of the unknown, desperate to share her wealth of treasure with deserving souls.

On the deck was a boy, the youngest of the crew, scouring vigorously and watching others hustle about the captain's commands. Captain Zheng He, a well-respected man, was currently a trustworthy servant of the Yongle Emperor, who had specially plotted the voyage and was his benefactor.

Stunning everyone into silence, Zheng He bellowed in rage. Everybody scurried downstairs to observe the crisis. Intrigued, the boy followed the crowd. The nimble boy managed to squeeze to the front. A stowaway! Glancing at the slim boy that was no older than himself, he noted the streaks of black hair peeping through his tall camouflaging hat and the drooping white sleeves of a Chinese.

"Sorry sir," the stowaway stammered in fluent Chinese, "Please, sir, forgive me. I can fight on this ship for you." Dumfounded that the boy could speak in their own mother tongue, everyone curiously awaited the captain's verdict.

Zheng He paused, "There's no need of you in this cupboard, better to have more crew. Feng, our cabin boy, will guide you to his cabin, which you will share, and show you to the weaponry to let you pick out a sword that suits you. The rest of you, back to work!"

Murmurs arose as everyone filed out, eyeing the stowaway. Holding the boy's wrist, Feng led him to his cabin. Again, he couldn't help staring at the stowaway. As he looked closer, this peculiar person reminded him of his close friend, Wang Xiu Ying. But he couldn't be.

"What's your name?" Inquired Feng.

"Wen Hou."

Feng, wary of Hou, steered him to the weaponry, departing Hou to single out his preferred fighting tool.

A fortnight later, when the moon was beaming down onto the ship, like lights for a stage, Hou settled on the edge of his bed. When he was certain only Feng was looking, Hou took off his black hat for the first time and revealed long black hair, with a bun at the top. The tips glistened in the moonlight as his ink-coloured hair swayed in a light merry tune. The only person he knew who looked like this was...

"Xiu Ying?"

"Yes, Feng, yes." With that, Xiu Ying slid her hat back on and shut her eyes, ready for bed, quiet as a mouse. Feng shut his eyes, trying to soothe his astonishment. However, he tossed and turned in bed the whole night. Could the fatal secret be kept?

The sun was long above their heads when Feng emerged from his dreams. Hang on, thought Feng, there's no sunlight! Out of the filthy window, he realised that the sun's duty had been misplaced by the menacing clouds, cackling their evil laughs as their sons struck lightning at the ocean; that the ship was being tilted from side to side, struggling against the strong currents with her might and that the waves were roaring for all they were worth.

Getting ready for the day, he saw that beds were all vacant except his own. Feng scrambled onto the deck and vomited violently off the side of the ship. Scanning his familiar

surroundings, he glanced at Xiu Ying, who was slaying tentacles with a shining sword, fresh from the weaponry.

Purple tentacles were all over the place, attempting to drown the ship. Sighting Feng's green face, Xiu Ying, who had been fighting until the interruption, hurried to Feng's side, dropping her sword without meaning to. The fighter retrieved her sword, examining it for dents. In her distracted moment, the monster squeezed her so tightly that she could barely fill air into her lungs! Xiu Ying wriggled, resulting in failure of escaping. Her sword was tossed onto the ship and her disguise tumbled off, unraveling her photogenic hair. The cover was blown! His new friend, Chong, tossed the fallen weapon at Feng. Too far to be of any help, Feng clasped the weapon anyways, hoping for a miracle.

"What now?" Feng questioned the captain. Silence greeted him. Chong pulled him aside. "I think the captain's mad at you. It might be because of you and the girl..." How did *he* know?

Before Feng could speak, he was abruptly interrupted by Chong.

"She spoke like a girl, her hat appeared to be fit to burst so hair was probably stuffed with hair underneath, it was never taken off in public and she cared for you a great deal..." He glared his blazing ebony eyes. Oh. Chong's bed was on the other side of his so, Feng deduced, Chong must've secretly spied on them that deadly night.

"Right. Give the captain my apologies." Feng turned away before his friend could peek at the lonely tear rolling down his cheek, leaving a trail of sparkling water.

Cloudy white tears streaming down his pale face, the cabin boy strode into his room, collapsed onto his bed and opened his confider. Feng jotted down in his journal:

It's my fault Xiu Ying is taken as the Kraken's prisoner. My fault I blew her cover. My fault that the captain and Chong is burning with rage. My fault I distracted Xiu Ying. I should've been there to help her, like she's always done for me. That's why she was here in the first place, to protect me, to be here for me, to save me as she always does.

Finally, I understand it. But even if I do, what use will it be now?

Everything's my fault. I owe it to Xiu Ying to make things right. Like it was before I got tangled up in this mess, before Xiu Ying came on board, before she showed me her true identity. I'll save her, I will. I'll make amends with the captain and Chong. I'll make the wrongs into perfect rights.

I must. For Xiu Ying.

New Tales of the Ming Treasure Voyages

Dulwich College Beijing, Wang, Ariel - 10

The story you're about to hear was passed down through my ancestors. It all started in the early 14th century, when she heard the ocean rumbling beneath her...

On a winter morning, white gulls swooped and squawked in the spray of the waves, a bright red parrot dipped and swerved just ahead of the ship. On deck, a filthy teenage boy watched the birds, as if hoping he could soar with them. As he paused for a moment's rest, he licked his cracked lips with his parched tongue. Just at that moment, the bellowing voice of Captain Zheng He exploded behind him, calling his crew into formation on deck. Silently, the teenager tried to allow the shadowy corners loom over himself, but he felt the eyes of the captain pierce through him which led him to turn abruptly on the spot and face the enraged Zheng He.

"Yun, evading your assignments? Night patrol the entire night!" roared the captain. He stormed away, grumbling at the crew. As for poor Yun, he joined in with the struggle whilst weeping soundlessly.

The streets of India were filled with various stores, as the parade appeared around the crowded area. Amongst was the little boy, Yun, transporting numerous gold. Despite the weight he was given to carry, curiosity got the best of him, and even the tears stopped dropping. It was around 6pm when they finally reached their destination, a large truck awaits as they layered the gold on top one and another. No one can hide their disappointment, for the members with high expectations they expected the majestic palace awaits them, but even with low expectations, at least a storage room!

The ship stood on the North-west coast of India, staring out to the diamond-tipped waves. As the crew boarded the ship, eyes drooping, the moon, long above their heads. Everyone else seems to be getting ready to sleep, when unfortunate Yun is getting ready for night patrol. Unexpectedly, the tears started to flow according to its own will, whilst the wind blew, swirling around the troubled boy, making him cuddle in a shadowy corner, rubbing his hands from time to time. "Hello." A mysterious voice echoed in the dark, effecting the numb boy in the corner. A shiver ran down his spine as Yun shivered uncontrollably. He didn't know what, but something was urging him on, to run, to hide from whoever is calling. However, his legs wouldn't move, only the thumping of his heart accompanied him as the night passed on hour by hour, little by little...

The next day was foggy and unwelcoming, it wasn't until 10pm when the sun was to be seen through the mist. Never were the members of AS Conqueror so silent, so unwelcoming. Deep below in Yun's heart he knew there was something exotic about the voice and it will do them no favor. The sooner the owner is found, the better.

Slouching to the hall, everyone seemed to be occupied so no one noticed him when he dragged his foot as quietly as possible into the private chambers of the Captain. Something lured him to go on, to step into the unknown. He didn't know what or who made him venture inside, only that an invisible rope seems to be tugging him on. Once again, Captain Zheng He detected his presence and was indeed irritated, which led him to another night of

patrolling the grounds. The tears were blocked by the waves of determination, Yun is going to uncover the mystery within and discover the possessor of the cold, hallow voice.

There wasn't a single light up in the sky, wasn't a single bird in sight whilst Yun faced another night of darkness alone. All that followed him is the swirling of the winds and thumping of his heart. Somehow, the voice is all Yun could think about, not the hallow within, but the mystery that lies beneath. Tonight, it showed itself again: the voice.

"Hello." It whispered softly. Yun stirred from the shadowy corner as his eyes grew into focus. There it was, the owner standing in front, ebony black hood covered her body, the only feature that is visible is her lips. Another rub of his eyes, she was gone. Yun stayed unmoved for a moment and stared blankly at the spot the figure once stood on. It wasn't until 5 minutes later when he finally came to his senses and smoothed out his eyes to make sure he wasn't dreaming. Still nothing. Nothing at all. Even the winds stopped moaning as if it was aware of another's presence. Little by little the night went on, leaving the boy standing there. Unmoved. Untouched. Unwanted.

The sun rose and perched itself on the horizon, sending strips of sunlight through the member's window, leaving the crew awake. As for Yun, the main goal was to keep on the bright side of the Captain and don't get into any unwanted inconvenience. Arms full of gold, Yun marched down the streets of India yet again, his arm seems to be falling off as curiosity didn't accompany him. Finally, the moon uncovered itself, as they trekked down to the safety of their chambers and Yun stumbled to get an old piece of cloth to clean the deck. There was the helpless youngster, cleaning the deck whilst tiredness drizzled through him, making him slump on the deck, falling asleep.

The voice didn't bother him that night, only the sound of the waves whispering and the wind whooshing. On the vast ocean, was the AS Conqueror, as a boy slept motionlessly into the night.

Glorious sunshine glinted off the crystal-clear waves, as the ship drove on with its AS Conqueror fluttering in the blustery winds. As for the boy, he went away too and was never seen again...

The voice in the story was amongst us, the youngest siren, daughter of the Queen. She's now the eldest of the sirens, soon to decease.

Haven

German Swiss International School, Wong, Madeleine - 11

Father slipped. If only it hadn't been raining...

We were moored in the sea off the Indies. During the journey, every day I looked at the flags flying on the majestic *bao chuan* — all 63 of them speckling the sea — and they were glorious in the morning sun.

"Mei Li, when you deliver water barrels over to the *ma chuan*, make sure no one notices that you are a girl," said Father. "Remember, girls are not allowed on these ships."

Father couldn't work for at least a day or two so he wanted me to cover for him. This was my chance; I couldn't miss the opportunity to finally observe them close up. I was ecstatic and couldn't focus on my congee.

I had always wanted to see horses. Before I came away on this small ship, I'd lived in an old fishing town near Nanjing and was very exposed to going to the sea. One day some important looking men galloped into our village on their horses. That was the first and the last time that I had seen any horses and I became instantly fascinated. The men circled the village once and went into Mr. Wang's noodle shop. Our only noodle shop that can fit a large crowd. Then I saw Mr. Jing, our village head, run hastily inside after them.

After a whole *shi*, he came back out – rather pompously to my eyes – and made an announcement. He said that they were looking for people who could contribute a boat to carry water — *shui chuan* — for the Treasure Voyage led by the great Admiral Zheng He.

"I would but can not!"

"My heavenly goodness! I could never in the world afford a *boat!*"

"Of course I would. But how would I make such a boat?"

The villagers each exclaimed. Just then someone raised a voice.

"I will contribute a boat to carry water along with the *bao chuan!*"

It was father. Father volunteered to make a boat. Everyone wanted to. But no one had the timber nor the money. Father didn't either but what was his plan?

"I will use the timber from our house — the house that we live in!"

People gasped. Our neighbors told him it was preposterous to give up a house to build a boat. I felt disappointed and sad by Father's decision but decided not to dwell on that feeling. Anyway, we had been away at sea most of the time in those days, trying to earn a living on the boats that came from big towns. At the same time, I was proud of my father for contributing to such an important project by the Emperor. Maybe he will build a reputation; maybe he will go and work for the Emperor one day!

Everybody seemed excited about the spices and goods that were given to us to take back home. My back was sticking to my shirt with sweat. It was so hot that I had to try hard not to succumb to the temptation of glugging down all the water that we are carrying on this boat. I knew that it was one of the most important supplies for the thousands of people on the fleet. Our boat supplied water just for the four *ma chuan* that carry the horses. Some of these were used in battle; some were given as gifts to the countries that we visited. It was horrible to even think that the horses could die of thirst because of my thoughtless action! Then father and I would have to leave our boat and go back home somehow, where we actually didn't have a house anymore.

Our boat slowly approached the *ma chuan*, which was at least five times bigger than ours and my heart beat fast. I quickly lowered the anchor and soon the plank came down. As I rolled the water barrel up over to the higher platform of the *ma chuan*, I sniffed the air; it smelled just like the time the officials came with their horses. Where were they kept? A man motioned for me to bring the barrel downstairs. He means below the deck; that must be it!

As I entered the lower deck, the smell of the horses grew more evident. I paused, took a deep breath and walked in, ready to meet the horses, at last. Wow. My eyes followed each stall of horses; rows and rows of them! I parked the water barrel and stroked the silky black hair that seemed just like my own.

Suddenly I was startled by a growl. It came from a beast with black dots and burnished orange eyes. “Cameleopard” it said on the cage. Then I noticed. There were many more different creatures in the stable — colourful birds that made talking sounds! Fantastic feathered fowls with green and blue tails and grey wrinkly cows labeled “Rhinceros”. Weren’t these animals supposed to be on the *bao chuan*, as they were “treasures” given to our Emperor, too? My solitary awe was interrupted by a sense of being stared at. I swung around and searched for the eyes. There it was, in the far corner of the room, an animal that resembled a cross between a deer and a lion — or more like a horse and a dragon? I tread over to it, and the closer I got the animal seemed to grow taller. In fact, my height came up to just around its lanky legs. My eyes followed up its spotted body all the way up the towering neck to its enormous bulging eyes. They were delightful, dazzling and divine and looking down to me. I got a feeling that we may become great friends when we got back home.

I couldn’t think of leaving this haven of exotic creatures until I heard someone calling for me. Reluctantly, I tiptoed out of the room. At least I would get to come back once more tomorrow.

New Tales of the Ming Treasure Voyages

Heep Yunn Primary School, Chan, Antonia - 11

As Zheng Le walked up the gangplank onto the ship, the *Jadeflower*, he felt a rush of excitement to be on this voyage. Though he was just twelve, everyone on the ship respected him as his father was Zheng Wu, brother of Admiral Zheng He, chief of the voyage to East Africa. Named after Emperor Yong Le, Zheng Le knew he was a privileged boy of his time.

For the first few weeks, the merest suggestion of breeze carried the ship along. Zheng Le enjoyed the sunshine. He also had different jobs on the ship such as helping the navigator to locate stars and looking after the ship's sails. He saw, did, and learnt much.

Suddenly, strong gales rocked the ship, tossing everyone and everything on board this way and that. The wind morphed the sea into mountains of ferocious waves. When Zheng Le and the others heard and saw how frightened the sailors were, they panicked.

"I miss home and Mum. I will never make it back home..." Zheng Le whimpered.

Zheng Le and other passengers stared forlornly at the horizon. No land was in sight. After sixty days, a brown strip of hope appeared on the horizon. That day, there was great jubilation on board.

"Good job, men! We have finally reached land!" the captain, Zheng Wu boomed with excitement, "Let's go and explore! My brother will be proud and the Emperor will be pleased."

Zheng Le followed his father to explore the land, exhilaration coursing through his veins. Suddenly, a towering creature with a long neck, long legs and dark patches on its body stumbled past Le. He spurted back to his father as fast as he could and blabbered, "This is a monster land. I've just seen one..."

Before Le could say another word, a native man with skin as dark as midnight appeared before them. Le and the man looked at each other in curiosity. Then with hand signals, the young man motioned for Le and his father to follow him back to the village. They found themselves surrounded by a crowd of inquisitive natives. After establishing that they were people of peace, Le's father took out ten dark green pieces of jade flower pendants from a silk pouch and gave them to the natives. The villagers seemed ecstatic with the gifts and brought out an assortment of local delicacies.

At last, the villagers indicated that Zheng Le and his dad could take back any animal they wanted from their land. Le's dad bowed low in gratitude.

They then scooted quickly back to the *Jadeflower* to gather soldiers to catch an animal. "Let's round up the long-necked creature that I'd seen!" Zheng Le blurted as he showed the ship's soldiers where he saw the creature.

"ATTACK!" Zheng Wu clamoured as the soldiers blitzed in on the creatures. The wild animals all galloped away like waves of thunder, except for a young, feeble one. The soldiers rapidly threw a rope over the smallest creature's neck and started to haul it back towards the ship.

"We got a long-necked deer for the Emperor!" the soldiers cheered.

However, as they boarded the ship, a larger long-necked deer dashed out from the trees to thrust the soldiers away. The soldiers fought back by shooting arrows. Blood flowed down its legs as it was clear this was a mother desperate to have her child back.

Suddenly, a wave of sadness washed through Zheng Le as he remembered his own mother waiting anxiously for him to return home.

“Dad, set him free, please! Let it roam in the wild again!” Zheng Le begged Dad.

“No! I need to take it back to the Emperor!” refused Dad. “Your Uncle, Zheng He, demands it.”

They pulled the pitiable creature up onto the ship where it gazed despondently at Le.

Late that night, while the rest of the crew were sleeping soundly, Le stealthily took a key from his father’s pouch. Sneaking and slinking, he slithered to the cage below the deck and unlocked it. Wordlessly, he led the creature down the gangplank.

Le was surprised to see its mother sitting wistfully near the dock, her wound already slowly healing. As he cut the rope with a knife, the creature bent down, and nuzzled him tenderly.

“Go back to your mum. I’ll never forget you, my long-necked friend!” Le wept as he bade good-bye. The long-necked deer’s mother limped away with her baby joyfully by her side in the moonlight.

The next day, when he was eating his tasteless breakfast after the ship had set sail, a sailor rushed in and screeched anxiously, “The creature has disappeared!”

“What-t!!” exploded Dad.

Zheng Le was terrified. He then steadied his breath and admitted to Dad, “I was the one who let it escape and I’m sorry...” Le then explained every single thing.

Dad murmured with new understanding, “We’ll have to ask the ship’s artist to present of the drawing of the deer to the Emperor. It will not be easy.”

Back in China, Zheng Le’s father presented the dazzling drawing of the long-neck deer to the Emperor.

“Your Majesty, here is a present from our travels... the long-necked deer! Forgive us as the creature unfortunately got away from the ship,” Le’s father apologized.

“How dare you,” the Emperor admonished, “You exchanged ten jade flowers only for a useless picture. Bring the creature in the picture to me tomorrow or I will execute you!”

The colour of Zheng Le’s face drained quickly as fear sucked out his very breath.

“I’m the one who should be execute! I helped that deer escape. My father’s innocent!” Le stepped out and confessed, as he sobbed out his story, “I’m sorry...” Le ended as he wholeheartedly apologized for his actions.

After listening, the Emperor was moved with compassion and announced, “I pardon you. You did the right thing.”

And that was how a picture of the long-necked deer ended up in the palace during the reign of Emperor Yong Le.

The Missing

Heep Yunn Primary School, Chong, Colette - 11

Chang Ze and Zheng He had always been best friends. They used to play together when they were young boys growing up in a tiny, Chinese village in the Yunnan Province of China. They would often go on their own little adventures around the outskirts of the rural village, causing mischief but making the locals smile. They were inseparable, like brothers. As they grew older, the boys remained very close. Therefore, when Zheng was to lead a voyage of ships like no other, packed with gold, silk, fine art and other wonderful treasure, Chang thought he would never see his friend again but when Chang heard the news that he would be among the 30,000 crew, he and Zheng were delighted and talked of all the adventures they would have.

During the first year of the voyage, the young men had seen more than they could ever have imagined. They visited Vietnam and Africa, which they were in awe of! They saw animals that they had never seen before, giraffes, Hippopotamuses' and zebras. They even saw an ostrich, the biggest bird they had ever seen, they actually thought it was a baby cow and laughed once they discovered it was a bird. The first voyage was going smoothly until the sixteenth month, when disaster struck and things would never be the same for Zheng and Chang again...

Chang Ze:

It was an extremely rough day at sea and we had many jobs to do today in the engine room. I was just talking to Wang about the plan to fix the boiler in the engine room when pirates rushed onto the ship and began attacking crew members. I ran as fast as lightning to the weapon room but all of a sudden, I felt a thick, rope around my chest and was being pulled backwards. There was shouting, gunfire and mayhem all around and I could see pirates carrying rolls of silk and bags of gold off our ship. I was struggling against the rope and my feet kept slipping beneath me, "Where is Zheng?," I shouted desperately as I felt myself being pulled backwards.

"Pirate attack!"

It was no use, there was so much chaos going on around me and more crew were appearing from the depths of the ship and being attacked. It didn't look like many of my friends would survive, as they couldn't reach their weapons in time. I was pulled across the deck, a bag that was secured over my head was wet and I started to feel drowsy and dizzy, I was falling asleep, my eyes feel heavy...

Zheng He:

After hearing loud bangs, deafening gunshots and men yelling, I rushed up to the deck from the engine room and couldn't believe my eyes. Pirates were taking treasure but most devastating to see was the amount of bodies, how did they not see the pirates approaching? I looked around and saw so many of the men I had spent the last sixteen months with lying there dead. "Sir, the pirates have taken some of our men!" I heard as I ran to the back of the ship and I could see a black ship in the far distance. In the next moment, the thought of Chang hit me like an unexpected tsunami. "Where's Chang? Chang!" I

bellowed. I felt crushed, a crew member missing his forearm ran over and informed me that Chang had been taken. I couldn't believe what I was hearing, I kept thinking over and over, why?!

Over the years and voyages that followed, Chang was never far from his best friend's thoughts, Zheng missed his friend dearly and felt guilty for not being on deck when the ship was brutally attacked. Zheng has never given up his search for Chang but has never come across a black ship since that dreadful day. He had no idea whether Chang was dead or alive.

10 years after 'The Black Ship Attack'

Zheng was on the twelfth voyage! He was now a grown man and had successfully completed many voyages. During all his missions, Zheng was always on the lookout for the black ship. It wasn't until one dreary day that among the huge waves and dark clouds in the distance, that Zheng spotted the black ship. It had to be the same ship that kidnapped Chang a decade ago. Zheng ran to alert the crew as the ship was edging closer but didn't have time, it seem to just appear. Once close enough, a few pirates jumped onto the ship and demanded, "We must speak to Zheng He."

"I am the Zheng He." Zheng declared.

"We believe we have something that you want." Snarled one pirate, as a man was thrust forward. He had very long hair, a long beard and looked much darker but there was no mistaking who it was...

"Chang Ze?" Uttered Zheng in disbelief. "Is it really you?"

Zheng staggered forward and the men hugged, many questions were exchanged.

However, when Zheng looked up again there were no pirates or ship in sight. "Where have they all gone?" Zheng asked.

"Don't worry about that." Said Chang.

Chang and Zheng spent the whole afternoon talking about the last ten years, it felt so good to have his best friend back, he couldn't believe it. He went to go and get Chang some rice as he seemed very thin. On his way to the kitchen, Zheng bumped into Wang and told him the brilliant news of the black ship and his friend being returned. Wang couldn't believe it and ran to the top deck to greet Chang but he was nowhere to be seen. "That's strange." Thought Wang, as he ran up to the captain's booth to ask if they had seen anything as they can see everything from up there.

"No sir, no ships or any pirates. Fortunately, we have barely seen another ship at all today and Sir, Zheng He has been sitting there alone all afternoon..."

"Alone?"

"Yes sir, alone."

The Storm of Bravery

Marymount Primary School, Ng, Cherie - 10

“Wake up, YuLong! It’s time for breakfast!”

I groggily opened my eyes. TianMing, my bossy older brother, was standing next to me, his expression sour. I got to my feet and put on my hand-me-down boots. I then followed TianMing out onto the deck of the pirate ship.

My name is YuLong, and I am part of the Ming Treasure Fleet. Instead of stealing treasure, like your average pirate fleet, we deliver invaluable treasure from the finest silk to the purest gold to foreign countries as gifts from the Emperor. You can guess by my name, YuLong, that I’m a girl, and the only one on the ship. The captain decided to let me stay because my father was a well-respected member of the crew. He died of typhoid fever shortly after I was born, leaving me and TianMing in the hands of the fleet.

I shivered as I stepped out into the open air. The sky was covered with stormy gray clouds and there was a cold draft.

A crowd of pirates were chattering and munching on their breakfast. TianMing joined them while I sat in the corner with the boys about my age, waiting for the pirates to finish their meals so that we could scavenge the scraps. We were the slaves of the crew---those who did all the dirty work and got fed the least.

LungLi, our Sailing Master frowned as he eyed the dark sky. “There’s a storm coming,” he croaked. “I can feel it. Everyone back to your cabins after this meal.” He glanced at us. “Except for you skinny brats. Stay in the kitchen and wash the dishes.”

“The only reason why we’re skinny is because you don’t feed us well.” I mumbled under my breath. LungLi glared at me.

“What did you say?” the aggressive pirate growled, clenching his fists.

“Nothing.” I gulped, quickly scooting away from LungLi.

The next hour was exhausting. It was bad enough without the boys teasing me about being a girl. I was overwhelmed with relief when the Cook dismissed us to our cabin. I curled up in a corner and quickly drifted off.

I was awoken by a gigantic lurch. The ship was swaying from side to side. Everyone else must have felt it too, because nobody was asleep anymore.

A moment later, TianMing rushed in. “Everyone wake up! The ship just hit a rock, and water’s leaking into the storage rooms now. It can be fixed, but it’s not safe for you all to stay down here. Everyone out onto the deck!”

Everyone was in a scurry of panic. There was a lot of pushing to get to the deck first. It wasn’t until I had stepped out that I realized how violent the storm was. Rain was pouring down from the sky.

“Are you sure this is safe, TianMing?” I shouted sarcastically, but nobody could hear me over the roaring wind. The ship was tilting dangerously to one side.

Suddenly, the ship jerked to the other side, sending us stumbling. HoMing, one of the boys who had made fun of me earlier on, tumbled overboard, screaming. He splashed about in the water, tears rolling down his cheeks. I immediately ran to help him, but a hand grabbed my shoulder.

“Forget it,” KwokChi, TianMing’s best friend, said. “If you dive in, you’ll drown as well. Leave him be.”

“What?” I yelled, incredulous. “You’re just going to let him die?” Before anyone could stop me, I plunged into the waters.

Instantly, nail-biting cold overcame me as I struggled to resurface. I was frantically searching for HoMing when I felt a hand grab my wrist. HoMing. I then used all the strength I had left in my body to swim me and HoMing to the ship. We were almost there when my body numbed and couldn’t move. I screamed as I tried to fight back the cold, but it was impossible. I was wondering how painful death would be when a rough hand grabbed me and hauled me out of the freezing waters, along with HoMing.

The next hour was a blur. For the first time, the whole crew had their attention on me. TianMing, who had been the one hauling me up, dried me and brought me to his private cabin. He laid all the cloth and rags he could find on the floor, creating a makeshift mattress.

“You...saved my life,” I stuttered after I had recovered from the trauma. “Why would you do that?”

TianMing let out a sound between a laugh and a sob. “Because you’re my baby sister, of course. I know I might boss you around sometimes, and never seem to care about how the others treat you. And when you dived in to save that boy...I was terrified of losing you. You’re the only family I have. You know what, YuLong? You’re the bravest person I’ve ever known. And believe me, I know plenty about bravery. Now go to sleep...you must be exhausted.”

Tears formed in my eyes---happy tears. It was comforting to know that someone loved me. “TianMing, sing me the lullaby Papa used to sing us.” I asked. I didn’t have much memories of my childhood, but I still remembered how our father used to sing us to sleep each night.

TianMing frowned, but started singing softly. I closed my eyes and let the music consume me. I began to fall asleep as TianMing sang the last line:

You’re safe as long as I’m here.

Life on the Ming Treasure Fleet

Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Muk, Tuen Callie - 10

I stared up at the great ship, which belonged to the Ming Treasure Fleet. How I longed to be up on its deck, breathing the fresh sea air and staring down at the rolling blue waves. But I was too young to be allowed in the fleet. I watched enviously as men piled into the ships, wishing I was one of them. I was watching so intently that I hadn't heard the sound of footsteps coming up behind me. "Hello, child," boomed a deep voice behind me. I whipped around to see the great General Zheng He standing behind me. Shock pulsed through me, for General Zheng was the one who commanded the fleet. I bowed in deepest respect, still startled by his appearance. "It's a pleasure to meet you, sir." I stammered nervously. Zheng turned to the ships. "You want to go too, don't you?" He said suddenly. "Y-yes." I replied. Narrowing his eyes, Zheng walked around me slowly, studying me and making himself seem even more imposing than before. "You have broad shoulders and strong hands." he commented after walking a full circle around me. "Perfect for a sailor." I gaped at him as he concluded, "You shall join me on the ship. Now come!" I quickly hurried after Zheng as he turned and walked onto the ship, not believing my luck. "Wow. I'm on the Ming Treasure Fleet!" I murmured to myself as I climbed onboard.

A few days later...

I hurried across the deck. It had been a few days after I'd joined the fleet. The ship was amazing. It had so much treasure and precious goods that it could last me two lifetimes! As soon as I came on-board, Zheng had me working hard to prove my worth. It's so great up here feeling the wind and looking up at the sky. I feel relaxed and happy on this ship. I'm glad Zheng let me join.

"LAND AHEAD!" yelled a voice. I looked over the rail and saw a large patch of green land. I looked on nervously as the ship slowed and stopped near the coast of the little island. Zheng appeared near the head of the ship and told us, "We're not sure if the people who live here are friendly or not, so we'll approach warily and be ready for anything." Then he stepped off the boat, right after telling some sailors to get the treasure ready. I followed him, along with some of my fellow sailors. Zheng came walking alongside me. "Be ready for anything, child. Be ready to fight if needed." he whispered in my ear before moving on.

As we went deeper into the island, two men came running out. They wore friendly, peaceful expressions on their faces as they greeted us warmly. "Hello," The first one said in a strange accent, "Welcome to Java! You are from China?" Zheng dipped his head politely. "Yes, and we come in peace. We come to give magnificent treasures to you!" He said respectfully. The second one beckoned us to follow them. "We show you Serang, our home. You come in peace, we shall give you peace!" They went off swiftly into the trees, leaving us to follow them hurriedly.

After a bit of walking, we finally arrived in Serang. "We are in Serang now!" The men exclaimed grandly. It was beautiful and amazing. Tall buildings and trees were everywhere, decorated beautifully with lights and sparkling rivers. "Wow," I heard Zheng whisper beside

me as the men led us into Serang. Zheng stepped forward to talk to the men. “We like your home and your island, and you are peaceful and friendly men. To thank you for being so kind, we shall give you gifts!” he said. The first man looked surprised. “Of course. But it’s nothing really. We didn’t do anything special.” Zheng smiled, and waved a hand. Two sailors came up, hands loaded with precious treasures. Another sailor followed, dragging a treasure chest behind him. The island men gaped at them in shock.

“W-we can’t accept this!” one of them cried. “I-it’s--” Zheng cut him off. “Please take it.” he said quietly. The men looked at each other, then nodded. “Thank you, so much!” They cheered as the sailors dropped their load at their feet. Zheng stepped back and gestured for the sailors to go back to the ship, leaving the men to marvel over their treasure. They went back onto the ship, and to their surprise the men followed. As Zheng and his crew climbed onboard, the men below yelled after them, “Thank you for your visit! Thank you for your gifts! You will always be welcome here!” Then the ship started, and off they went. I watched the island get smaller and smaller in the distance, my heart warmed by the men’s gratitude.

A few days later...

I woke from my slumber. Unsure of what had awoken me, I scrambled out of bed and went up to the deck. A storm was raging. Hard. Rain lashed at my face as thunder rumbled and lightning flashed. The ship rocked violently. Suddenly, I saw a dark shape emerging from the darkness ahead, heading straight for the ship. It took me a moment to realize it was another ship, and so I yelled, “SHIP AHEAD!” Soon many sailors arrived on deck, and Zheng stood beside me. “Good sighting,” he murmured quietly. “Go get ready for battle. Those are pirates. Hostile pirates coming to steal our gold.” Then he raised his voice and shouted to the other sailors, “PREPARE FOR BATTLE!”

And so we did. By the time the pirates came near our ship, we were ready. Our cannons blasted the pirate ship, blowing up bits of it. The pirates aimed their cannons back at us, rocking our ship. Then the pirates swung a rope across to our ship and climbed along it. We ran forward to meet them, and as the first of the pirates emerged, we swung our swords and shot our guns at them. I carried a long, silver sword, cutting and stabbing at the pirates in front of me, feeling more exhilarated than ever before. The pirates fell back as we fought, but more kept coming. The cries and yells of battle filled my ears. I slashed my sword swiftly at a pirate, watching in triumph as he collapsed at my feet. Slowly, more pirates fell back. We were winning! The crowd thinned until only a few pirates remained, who soon fled back to their ship. But we weren’t letting them go that easily. We ran to the cannons and fired at them relentlessly. “Nobody dares to steal our treasure!” Zheng yelled. “We must show them that they cannot steal our treasure so easily!”

The pirates’ ship was ruined. Fire burned on their decks, and huge holes covered their ship from the cannonballs we shot. A few more cannonballs and they would sink. But Zheng told us to stop. “We shall show them mercy today, but if they come back, we will destroy them.” he said. We watched as the ship sailed away, until the ship came close to a small island. The ship rocked violently and sank, but we spotted many pirates appearing in the water and swimming onto the shore of the island. They’ll survive. I thought. Zheng came up behind me. “You did a good job fighting, child. But it’s about time you got off.” I stared at him in surprise, but I understood. I was only a young person, and spending time with Ming Treasure Fleet, on the same ship as General Zheng, was already a great opportunity. I did not belong here now, but perhaps I could become a sailor when I grew older.

A few days later...

We arrived back in China. It was my time to leave this magnificent ship. Deep sadness lingered in me as I got off, Zheng at my side. As I stepped back on land, Zheng said, “You have been a great sailor. It has been an honour to sail with you, but now you must go. Perhaps one day we can sail together again.” I nodded, filled with emotion as he turned and went back onto the ship. I watched as the ship sailed away into the distance, and I knew I would never forget the wonderful experience I had on the Ming Treasure Fleet.

The Final Truth

Quarry Bay School, Bratton, Luke - 9

“Sir! Ship sighted!” called a sailor on board Admiral Zheng He’s flagship, The Liberty. “Do you think they’re traders from across the seas?” Zheng He shouted across his ship filled with cargo as he took in a big whiff of the smell of beautiful flowers and spices. He was back in the Straits of Malacca for another treasure voyage two years after they had killed the infamous Cantonese pirate Chen Zuyi. “We have no idea, sir,” another sailor answered. “Look! They’re raising a flag!” It was the dreaded flag that all traders hated and feared. The Chinese flag with yellow skulls instead of stars. It only meant one thing: Cantonese pirates.

Another flag was then raised. It was the terrible red one that signified death for all. No one on the fleet was to be spared, especially the Admiral. The mysterious pirate across was thinking of the most excruciating death imaginable for Zheng He, while looking at the massive treasure fleet. It may look glorious and beautiful now, he grimaced, but it would be more befitting when reduced to ashes. Already he could smell the burning embers of the treasure ships after he has had his way. He ordered his fleet into an almost invincible flanking position.

Meanwhile, Zheng He was studying this pirate as he ordered his crew to prepare the cannons and man the decks. “Prepare for battle! Get to your stations!” Admiral Zheng He hollered. Whoever this pirate was, he thought to himself, he knew he was facing an opponent as skillful and intelligent as he was.

The pirate mastermind also ordered his men to load the cannons in anticipation of the major victory that he had envisioned. He gave command for all of his men to charge forward. The famous Admiral countered this attack by ordering all his combat ships to turn to their portside and open up on the cannons, with smoke billowing in full force. At first the battle was not going well for Zheng He. He had started with a moderate fleet of combat ships but in no time he was down to around half the number. But Zheng He had wisely ordered his crew to keep the treasure ships away from the battle in case the pirates sank them.

However, the pirate had taken more casualties despite seeming like he had the winning edge, due to his recklessness. He had started the battle with a superior force three times larger, but unbelievably in a few hours it was almost a draw between the two sides. To counter this, the pirate had ordered every single ship to hit portside hard and fire their cannons with maximum power so smoke rained down on everyone. This resulted in the destruction of a few more of Zheng He’s ships and even more suffering severe damage, leaving him with only a handful of battle-ready combat ships.

The pirate was feeling extremely smug about the outcome of the battle. He was gloating too much to realise that half of Zheng He’s remaining ships had managed to outflank his own forces. The Admiral felt his hopes rising as he witnessed his enemy’s errors.

Zheng He’s plan was beginning to come together. The famous Admiral’s fleet had now surrounded the larger, more powerful enemy fleet. It continued bombarding the opponent, obliterating some of the pirate ships. But the pirate retaliated by blowing up even more of Zheng He’s ships. It dawned on the Admiral that the tide could be turning against him and called out: “Men! Whoever this pirate is, his fleet is far too strong for us! We will retreat now but we will return!”. The pirate mastermind began laughing his loudest at Zheng He’s retreat and his crew celebrated their supposed victory with heavy drinking and merrymaking.

Several hours later, Zheng He and his crew had recouped for a final all-out battle. His fleet sailed back in heavy mist and his men began firing the cannons while the mystery pirate and his crew were still asleep. They took out even more of the pirate's ships. The enemy crew awoke with a start and jumped up to duty, bumping and pushing each other overboard to man the cannons. They steered the flagship in a drunken stupor, crashing some ships and leaving them with an even smaller fleet...

The Liberty's heavy firepower took out some more of the pirate's fleet. Now the heat was really on. It came down to just the two flagships fighting for survival. The pirate ship fired fiercely, which saw The Liberty's sails being damaged but the ship remained standing. Zheng He remained calm and ordered his men to fire the only ammunition they had left to blow a tiny hole in the hull of the opposing flagship. There was no way they could win now. Zheng He went to face the devilish pirate. "We surrender, but I have a proposal for you. I will give you my ship, my cargo and myself on the condition that you spare the lives of my crew. Do you accept this generous offer?" The corrupt, nefarious pirate laughed hysterically in victory. "I accept! Do you realise this is my revenge for you killing my father Chen Zuyi? For I am the shrewd and cunning pirate Chen Hanyi!" Unbeknownst to Zheng He, the anger and hate for him lingered in the Chen family. The mastermind pirate had turned out to be Chen Hanyi, who had spent months hunting down his father's killer to seek vengeance.

A few hours later, Zheng He was tied to a mast for maximum security. He had just witnessed his enemy blowing up his ship and stealing his cargo. With all the pirates getting drunk and falling asleep. Zheng He stealthily whipped out a small knife to cut through the rope and finally broke free.

He crept to the cargo hold and found it, filled with barrels of gunpowder. He also found some tough wire and a lit candle. He stuck one end of the wire in one of the gigantic gunpowder barrels and he brought the other end to the top of the stairs. He grabbed the candle and lit the wire, and dropped it on the ground for the fire to spread. He could smell the fuse burning as he ran. He sprinted across the massive ship and quickly got in a tiny rowing boat which he unclipped and as fast as he could, rowed half a mile away across the freezing, icy seas with his heart pounding. He waited for what seemed like an eternity. Suddenly, his concentration was interrupted by a massive explosion. His plan had worked and he breathed a humongous sigh of relief. He stared intently as the entire blazing ship sank.

Life Under the Ship

Sha Tin Junior School, Kuong, Bryan - 10

I was not the only one who had been thrown overboard into the gaping depths of the South China Sea, by the sailors aboard the Admiral Zheng He's ships. But, I was the first one ever to survive. Using the anchor when it was still hoisted, I pulled myself back up onto the hold of the ship and secretly hid in the spacious unused area under the floorboards.

It was a cold, rainy day out on the fleet. I, being a slave was forever kept to the damp, worn floorboards of Admiral Zheng He's massive ship. All of us shared the same target: stealing gold from Zheng He's treasure ships. Never had anyone ever succeeded in doing so. Many have tried but all ended up dying in the hands of Zheng He's crew. While I worked, the commotion up on the decks was muffled, but I could still make out a few words. Zheng He called out to one of his crew "Sound the horns! Tell them that we are changing course to Java!"

"Aye aye, captain!" shouted the crew member, and started climbing the ladders. Soon, the sound of the horn rose up of above the noise of the sea and wind; 3 long and 2 short blows, meaning a change of course.

Just as I was about to wash down the windows a voice called down to us, "All hands on deck! Get up there now, no questions!" By the time we all got up on deck, a strong wind had started blowing, throwing debris around the decks like a fish in a current. "Take them to the treasure ships with the living quarters and keep them on the lower decks. Be sure to keep them secure if not, you know what's going to happen." Admiral Zheng He commands, shouting over the howling wind.

"Yes, captain." the crewman said, and turned to our direction. "Line up one by one and follow me!" We shuffled nervously into line, with me leading at the front. Then the massive array of the treasure ships came into view. I could make out the massive billowing masts, and the sleek shape of the hull. A ship capable of holding a couple million tonnes of treasure yet still cutting through the water with no problem. Spacious wooden decks stretched out as far as the eye could see. It appeared like it was a piece of land, I estimated it would be about 130 meters long and 60 meters wide. The crewmember lead us hastily onto our assigned ship. Glancing at the others I could tell that the only thing on their minds was the treasure. Right beneath our feet could be a lifetime supply of, gold, and other precious gems. The crewman led us down into the hull of the ship, pointing to a cluster of beds in the corner of the room.

By dawn, the distant shout of soldiers rang out in the whispers of the vast sea. I could vaguely hear the shuffle of the soldier's boots above me on the deck of the ship. My senses were sharp and aware after the intricate planning of theft the night before. The screws on the crates were loosened (with splinters of wood found on the walls), just enough so that even a slight pull on the crate would open it, which would hopefully spill loot on the ground. Everything was prepared. Footsteps thudded closer towards our quarters, and the sickly smell of mouldy bread filled my nostrils. The sound of a lock scratching against the hatch was followed by a squeak. The same tough crewmember entered the room, holding a loaf of mouldy bread and a bucket of water. He placed them roughly onto the floor, a bit too roughly. The crates fell open. Gold and silk spilled onto the floor, carpeting the floor with eye-blinding gold. I ran forward, grabbing the bucket and scooping up as much gold as I could. As if immobilized, the others just stared, wide-eyed, their mouths dropping open.

The guard rushed at me, trying to stop me. Reflexively, I grabbed a piece of silk and threw it over the guard's head. He shouted, blinded, tripping to the floor. As I looked up, three guards charged at me, knocking me onto the ground with a thud. My forehead throbbed, my vision went blurry and I blacked out.

When I finally woke up, my hands were tied together, a gag in my mouth. I looked around, I was in a barred room. Tied up on the right side of the room. In my periphery, I could make out someone coming towards me. "Ah, there you are, thief. Zheng He's waiting for your demise." I could sense a hint of smugness in his voice. I tried to retort, but all that came out were muffled sounds. Pulling me to my feet, the unfamiliar soldier pushed me onto the deck of the ship, where Zheng He was waiting. His confident smile was curved into a sneer, and I could see that a gangplank was already prepared. A polished piece of unused wood balanced treacherously on the side of the boat. With a rough shove, he pushed me off the side of the boat. The freezing water engulfed me. Panic burst into my mind. There was no way to survive. The only thing that saved me was the anchor. I used the rope and that tied my hands together hooking it onto the anchor, and using whatever strength I had left, and hoisted myself up. The rope snapped from the strain. Taking a flying leap, I grabbed onto the side of the ship, kicking into a porthole, and tumbling into the bottom most floor of the ship.

This is where I have been living since. Surviving only on the food and water some slaves sneakily give me at night. Zheng He and his crew are definitely going to regret throwing me overboard once I take my revenge.

New Tales of the Ming Treasure Voyages

Shanghai Singapore International School, Yang, Si-Han - 11

I had joined the Ming Treasure Voyages when I was five years old. Even though six years had passed, the memory of the voyages was crystal clear. The leader of the trip, the great Zheng He, had told his crew to pass on the great and unusual story of the Ming Treasure Voyages to our children. Well, I don't have any children but I could tell this unordinary story to you, right?

I am Zheng He's most loyal dog, Tian Tian. On July 11, 1405, we prayed to Tian Fei, the goddess of protection for sailors. Despite being different in size, I closed my paws and prayed for safe travels.

It was a marvelous sight to see millions of people clapping for us as we set off. Some were holding brightly-coloured flags while others were praying for our safe return. The Yongle Emperor was there in his yellow robes with intricate designs. He had a long sooty black beard and a special black hat on his head. He was the one who had sent us on this special trip. He strutted towards me, I was a bit fazed, thinking something bad was imminent. Looking into my eyes, he whispered, "Take care of Zheng He and be safe." That would be my mission throughout the voyage.

The ship was brown, like the colour of dark chocolate, and was tall and massive. It had enough storage for thousands of people and chests of gold and treasures. The sail resembled a dragon's tail, with ropes pulling it upright. On this ship, we sailed to unique lands and had epic adventures. However, the journey back to Nanjing was most unforgettable.

We had beaten a hasty retreat from Ceylon because the ruler there was hostile. He thought we were enemies and tried to attack us. After that belligerent trip, we went to the west coast of India, the city of Calcutta. The emperor there was much friendlier. As I jumped off the ship, I could see the people's confused faces. The indigenous people were not used to outsiders. Some were staring at Zhang He and the other sailors' unusual clothes with misery, while some were whispering. Mothers grabbed their children tightly. Their native ruler came and Zheng He commanded his men to bring out the gargantuan amount of gold and pottery. After offering the precious items to the emperor, the latter invited us to the palace.

Along the way, I saw people donning different clothes. Some women were wearing red pieces of long cloths wrapped around flimsy blouses. Xu Li explained that it was a 'sari', and was India's traditional clothing. Some women were wearing three pieces of different cloth wrapped around the main blouse. I discovered that it was called a 'Mekhela Sador'. The men were wearing special clothing too, such as the 'dhoti', a long and big piece of white cloth wrapped around the body and sometimes had a belt at the waist.

In the palace, the native emperor, Akbar the great, served us with a Bengali cocktail called 'Kaal Baisakhi'. I would like to taste some but Zheng He waved his hand in my face and drank till the very last drop. I knew I was barking up the wrong tree, so I begged Xu Li for a sip. Big mistake. I swore never to try a cocktail again. After receiving gifts like gold, spices and tea from the emperor, we left Calcutta gaily and began our return to Nanjing.

"Prepare for attack!" the sailors suddenly yelled.

“What’s happened?” I wondered nervously.

Xu Li told me that it was Chen Zuyi. I remembered the gruesome pirate. We had met him and his crew when we first begun our voyage. I followed everyone and started barking at the sailors and officers, commanding them where to go and where to hide. Everyone was busy preparing for the attack.

Chen Zuyi’s pirate ship arrived, but Chen Zuyi did not fire any bombs or weapons. Instead, Chen Zuyi jumped onto our main ship. He looked apologetic.

“I surrender.”

The crowd let out a gasp. But Zheng He didn’t look convinced.

“I realised that it would be a lost battle fighting against your strong army. I have learned my lesson and won’t mess with you again.”

Zheng He’s pensive expression softened a little. “I believe you will not bother us again,” he bellowed.

I didn’t trust the pirate; this situation was fishy. I followed my gut instinct and bolted to the storage room.

I was right! I saw three men attempting to steal our treasures! I bit and scratched like a lion. The pirates yelped, retreated, and hobbled up the stairs, with looks of regret on their dirty faces. When the sailors and pirates saw the three escapees, they gasped in shock.

“Attack!” Chen Zuyi suddenly yelled.

From nowhere, a myriad of pirates appeared and bombs were fired. Boom! Ships were sinking, blood was everywhere, and pirates jumped onto the ship.

Boom! Boom! Boom! Zheng He’s army retaliated. I watched the pirates scream in terror as their ship sunk deep into the ocean.

I knew I had to do something. I ran towards Chen Zuyi. He was battling Zheng He. I leapt and snatched the gun from his hand, just in time before he fired. Zheng He grabbed the rope lying on the deck and firmly tied him against the burnt wooden pole.

“Ouch! I’m sorry! Let me go!” Chen Zuyi cried.

“Too bad,” Zheng He boomed and patted my head.

Crash, bang, bong! Another ship had sunk. Wait a second, it was the ship Xu Li was on!

“Woof! Woof!” I barked as tears cascaded down my cheeks.

“I’m sorry buddy.”

I wasn’t sure how the battle ended. I was wailing for Xu Li throughout the journey home. I could have saved him. I felt ashamed of myself.

Today, although I am still left with a void having lost a good master, I yearn to experience such adventures again.

The Zheng-Chen Sea Battle

Singapore International School, Wong, Shang Le - 10

On 7 October 1407, the great admiral Zheng He was anxiously pacing around his ship. He was due to return to China by year end. Zheng had yet to destroy the pirate Chen Zuyi as ordered by Emperor Yongle before his return to China. The pirate was endangering trade, killing Chinese nationals and causing chaos in the high seas.

Suddenly, one of his crew shouted, "There is a large fleet of ships coming toward us. They may be a pirate fleet. There are about 17 ships." Then they heard loud shouts came from those ships. His lookout yelled, "I think they are trying to tell us something." An arrow thudded onto the mast of his ship with a message attached to the arrow, which said "This is a robbery. Send three men with all your valuables to the main ship or die. You have until tomorrow afternoon."

Zheng sent his right-hand man to gather his crew from his fleet for a meeting. During the meeting, Zheng strategized in destroying the pirates. They concluded to send three men to the pirate ship with fake diamonds and jewels to trick the pirate into lowering the guard and letting them go. This would give Zheng's navy the opportunity to attack them with the full force of the mighty Chinese armada. The pirates would be crushed, and either be taken as prisoners or killed.

When Zheng's men presented the treasures to the pirates, the pirate chief became suspicious that the jewels were not as sparkling as other gems they had looted before, so he locked up Zheng's men.

Upon learning his men were locked up by the pirate, Zheng kept calm and decided to stick with his original plan. However, Zheng did more research and found that the pirate chief was none other than the legendary Chen Zuyi. He was overjoyed with his good fortune in finding Chen. Zheng learnt that Chen had terrorised the seas of Southeast Asia and ruled several cities including the Indonesian city of Palembang. At Palembang alone, he had 10 ships and 5,000 men. Chen was also one of the most feared pirates to terrorise the Strait of Malacca and had amassed a following of over 20,000 pirates and 30 ships. Zheng muttered "No wonder Emperor wants him dead."

Zheng knew that Chen was not an enemy to be taken lightly and unnecessary bloodshed could be prevented by having the pirates surrender to his fleet. Therefore, Zheng sent a messenger to ask Chen to surrender peacefully. Chen read the message and thought: I could attack Zheng's fleet from behind if I pretended to surrender. Then I could destroy his fleet and plunder Emperor Yongle's treasures.

Later that day, a Chinese official from Java rushed onto Zheng's flagship, panting and yelling, stuttered "Chen ... trick ..." Zheng said to the official "Calm yourself down first. Have some buns and tea." When the official felt good enough to speak, he said "Pirate Chen will launch a surprise attack on you tomorrow. He will attack you with 17 ships and 8,000 men."

The official had been overseeing a fishing boat when he saw the pirates and overheard what they were saying. He was able to pass undetected because his boat was small. Zheng replied "Thank you for your information. I will make your contribution known to Emperor Yongle. If I had not known this, our navy would be crushed even with our superior firepower."

Zheng thought: “How interesting, Chen and I are deceiving each other with our false surrender. If the official did not come, we would both been surprised.” Although both fleets were similar in size and strength, Zheng believed he had the upper hand because he knew about Chen’s plan.

Zheng summoned his officers and told them about Chen’s plan. All his officers were outraged at the thought that Chen would attempt to trick the intelligent Ming naval officers.

On the fateful day of the pirate’s pretended surrender, everyone on both sides were nervous. The Ming soldiers were stricken with fear by having such an infamous pirate as their adversary. The pirates were fearful that Emperor Yongle had sent such a powerful naval fleet to destroy them.

Zheng attacked first with his archers which showered flaming arrows and burnt six ships. The pirates retaliated by firing 50 cannons and sunk five warships. Zheng’s eyes were ablaze with fury as he recalled how pirates would torture their defeated enemies and let them die. He ordered another round of flaming arrows and burnt another four ships.

At that time, the pirates were overwhelmed with fear, as the mighty Ming navy had yet to unleash their full destructive power without firing any cannon. Chaos reigned on the pirate ships. Zheng ordered the soldiers to raid the pirate’s flagship and to capture Chen.

It was a long and bloody battle, resulting in heavy casualties on both sides. Although the pirates fought zealously, they were no match to the powerful Ming navy and fell to Zheng’s scheme. Over 7,000 pirates were killed, 10 pirate ships were burnt, and seven pirate ships were captured. Chen and his lieutenants were taken to Nanking to be tried and executed. When Zheng returned, he was greeted by crowds of celebrating citizens who had heard of Chen Zuyi’s defeat by Zheng He. Emperor Yongle was also impressed by Zheng and continued to fund his future voyages.

Sunset from Cochin

The Independent Schools Foundation Academy, Zhang, Miya - 11

Lian stared ahead at the golden sunset as the waves cracked against the helms of China's treasure ships. She looked to the distant horizon and made the promises she owed to her friend, and to the world. She made vows, and thought back, to that soul whose fire rivaled that of the sun's.

Lian thought back to the time she'd had with Anala in Cochin. The day she met her friend had been when the sunset was at its full, glorious climax. The sky was swathed with vibrant ribbons of light in purple, ruby and gold. The healer had leapt off the treasure ship, "neglecting" her duties as her father would later say. She raced through the streets of Cochin, gliding past silk-clad bodies speaking in a language like the gentle currents of a river, or like gusts of wind rolling off the tongue in soft, melodic trails. She inhaled the sweet aroma of steamed seafood as it drifted through the air and admired the sky's brilliance. Lian had skidded to a stop only when she'd heard cries of pain from inside a cottage. That was when she'd spotted the other girl lying on the floor, trying to shield the gaping wound on her forearm. Silently, the healer had lowered herself so she was face to face with the other girl. Anala, who couldn't have been much older than Lian herself, had sun-kissed skin the rich color of star anise. But her eyes – they were ablaze with a flame-like quality. She had a fierceness that seemed to rival even the flames of the sun. It was these flames in the girl's eyes that encouraged Lian to reach into her sleeves and produce the bundles of healing herbs.

Absent mindedly, Lian spoke in a soothing tone as she tended to Anala's wound, describing her first few days at sea with China's fleet. How she'd had the good fortune of being chosen to accompany the imperial eunuch Zheng He on his voyage for the Yongle Emperor. When Lian was finished, Anala had spoken in uneven Chinese to tell Lian her name. Anala had gone on to discuss Zheng He's voyages with Lian during their many conversations. Though the girls had both known how their friendship was to end, they still had felt crushed when Zheng He's fleet's time in Cochin was announced to have expired.

So, the girls had prepared themselves for their last night together. Lian had sat with her head on Anala's shoulder. "Do you suppose what Zheng He is doing is noble?"

Anala had contemplated her question, her soft smile flickering like a flame. "I do in fact. He came to give. To provide. So many people come to Cochin because they want to take back a part of its luxury. It's spices or whatever else they find valuable. I think it's noble that the Yongle Emperor sent him here to give to the Calicut Kingdom instead. Perhaps it's a fool's way of thinking, but I can admire that. Maybe what China is doing now, what you're contributing to, is helping the world. Maybe. I'm hoping that this act of selfless goodness will bring our worlds back to the light."

Then, Lian had laughed, for she did not understand. As laughter-like beams of sunlight hit the sails of China's fleet, she exclaimed, "Anala! This began as a voyage to obtain pepper!"

Anala smiled a little wider. "Hope, Lian. Hope that we will be brought back into the light."

Lian and Anala had talked that night away. In the few moments Lian had with Anala before boarding the treasure ships, Anala had leaned in and said to her words that were to be more cherished than even the precious pepper aboard the treasure ships. Words murmured beneath a sunset painting their faces, lacing their hair with color. "I wish to know you by the

name Kanaka. A piece of Cochin, and of me, to take with you on your voyages.” When Lian had given her a perplexed expression, Anala smiled back and spoke in hushed tones.

“Gold, Kanaka. That is the name I have chosen for you. Gold. Remember me when you see the sun, or embers rising up from flames. Remember me, and hope, for that is what you gave me when I was wounded and lost. Gold, Lian. Gold, for what you gave when I had nothing. Gold, for the glory that will befall China. For the hope, you will bring as Kanaka, or Lian, or whatever you wish to call yourself.

This memory of Anala was what kept Kanaka going. Somedays, Kanaka could still feel the warmth of Anala’s breath beside her ear. This friendship helped her fulfill her silent promise on the deck of Zheng He’s fleet.

“I promise to spread that hope and to give until my very being is shriveled up and crumbling. If only to honor my homeland and the fire of the friend I shall never see again.”

Fiction

Group 3



Forgotten Boy

Carmel School Association Elsa High School, Golovsky, Milly - 13

Beasts of the oceans. The boats float here in the bay just below me, impatiently. Almost as if yearning for the feeling of the open currents. I share the urge. My life is good, but then that's it. It is just good. My toes savour warmth from the hearty cabin fire. My nana in the kitchen, the smell of the ornate spices and roasting onions making my mouth water. "Bo-Hai come to the kitchen right now", she exclaims sharply, "be a good boy and help you grandma with the vegetables." I was raised by her and my father, in a small cabin by a shipyard. My nana loves me with all her heart. My father did, until one day he stopped.

Ten years later...

"That will be three bronze coins," the cashier asked.

I crane my neck and glance over my shoulder to see my father's great ship standing in all its glory. From a lowly sailor to a celebrated captain. As he rose through the ranks, his affection for me withered. To him, I am now nothing more than a mere scullery assistant.

Today is the day we have been waiting for. It is January 19, 1431, and very soon we will be setting sail on a voyage of a lifetime. The 7th of the Ming Journeys. An army of ships awaits at the dock, their towering sails billowing in the wind. The anticipation has been growing inside all of us: captains, chefs and the thousands of crewmen.

"All aboard," the Quartermaster booms. I rapidly turn my neck to see my father's ship, pulling away from the dock, with the other ones close behind. The market street overflowing with merchants with their vastly different stores. I drop the final supplies I was to get, and the bag of money I am holding, leaving the bronze and brass coins toppling to the ground. I thought I had more time. I sprint towards the docks, full of fear, this ship is my only home.

The soles of my shoes dig into the ground, running closer a spray of ocean water hits me. Cold and salty. My father's boat, the one with treasure, has already ventured away, with the final boats trailing behind. I fight through the crowds but no one cares. A scream leaves my mouth but no one can hear me. Finally, I get through but it doesn't matter anymore. The dock is empty now, a sense of emptiness overcomes me. I slowly hobble towards a nearby bench. My nana has passed and there is nowhere else for me to go.

I lie down on the bench in a fetal position for hours until the light begins to fade and the hunger in my stomach grows. My brain racking for the image of the map that I had barely seen, I need to catch up to the fleet. I shift my position and then realise just nearby is the night market. Slowly I plant my feet onto the ground and push off from the bench, my head spinning a little.

The hustling and bustling of the busy night market warm me. All the smells create an eccentric aroma, filling my nostrils, however, the crowds are overwhelming. To get away I walk down a dimly lit side alley. To one side, I see a rather strange building, seeming very out of place. I can hear the murmuring of voices coming from inside. Curious but cautious I peek in to see, a narrow hallway with the highest of ceilings. Shiny black bricks coat the wall as the

faint light reflects off them. At the end of the hallway lies a round table seating eight richly dressed merchants. One of them stands and begins to pace around the table. We lock eyes for one-hundredth of a second but it's enough for them to notice me.

"Hey boy," he grunts, "what are you and your nosiness doing here?"

"Get out!" The other men quietly but angrily agree with him,

Full of shock I stutter, "Oh I'm s-sorry" I hastily walk away but don't turn my back on them. I hear them arguing clearly in a dispute, their voices echoing eerily. The same man then speaks again, "Boy come back here for a second." I freeze and then slowly turn around to see them grinning unnaturally at me. I swallow and then stiffly make my way towards them. "So boy, what leaves you wandering around here? This is no place for a fresh piece of meat like you." I cautiously explain how I ended up sitting before them, an uneasy feeling settling in my gut.

After I finish speaking their leader breaks the uncomfortable silence.

"We have a little business we want you to get done for us." He snaps his fingers and two more men dressed alike enter. They throw a bag down about the size of an infant onto the table, they want me to deliver it to Cuttack, India. I realise this is on the way to where my father's fleet will dock in Calicut. Delivering this parcel for them could be the only way I can get food and board to make my journey, even though I don't know its contents and expect it could something illicit.

Nanjing, January 20, 1431

At the rise of the dawn I quietly leave with the bag attached to the horse they have provided me for my journey, and a few meagre supplies to get me started. Leaving Nanjing it will be many months before I can even hope to catch up to the fleet as they journey southward. I will have to travel overland to get to Cuttack, across China, then through Burma and the Delhi Sultanate.

Chittagong, April 2, 1432

More than a year has passed, riding on my horse. Through our journey, we had seen beautiful sunsets that we thought nothing could compare too. But then the sunrises would come exploding with colour and would be just as beautiful as the night before.

As we ride closer to the final destination, at times I forget the reason behind this. Although it always comes back, igniting a flame inside of me.

Cuttack, June 15, 1432

With my hands steady on the reins, I glance down to check on the package I was delivering. I see it gently bumping against the side of the saddle, untouched and unopened. Getting closer to the city houses begin to appear, as we near the markets, I see the tables yielding with thousands of spices. I dismount the horse and tie him up. A man approaches us, he catches a glimpse of the bag and then silently nods. I go around untie it from the saddle and place it into his arms. Abruptly the man takes the reins and starts walking away. Sensing fear the horse resists and begins to kick. I stroke him calmly on the forehead, stilling his movements. Calmed I stroke him for the last time.

I walk down to the dock and find myself once again sitting on a bench. The dock is crowded with traders and merchants making their sales. To my right is a small group, I overhear them discussing their next trip. To Calicut. I walk over and introduce myself, "Hi, my name is Bo-Hai. "I couldn't help to overhear that you plan to sail around to

Calicut?” “Yes we are,” one of them replies “, and the name’s Mei-Xiu.” I smile and ask, “Would it be okay for me to join? In return, I can prepare the meals.”

Calicut, July 7, 1432

Three weeks it had been, smooth sailing on the ocean currents. We had just docked and tied up the ropes. I occupy myself with shipyard tasks as the months go by.

Calicut, December 10, 1432.

It has come to to the final month of the year and I begin to fear that I have missed them. But then, out from the mist emerges a great fleet of boats. The same fleet of boats I had known so well. I proceed to the dock mixed with caution and excitement. From the deck of the front boat, I see the head chef. We meet eyes and he welcomes me on.

As the weeks go, to my father I’m invisible. The hardship I endured to be with him feels like a waste. I can only hope over time some warmth and affection will find its way into his heart.

My left-hand grasps the icy door knocker belonging to the office of our Captain. In my right hand, a bowl of tangmian soup. I knock once. No answer. I lumber in to find him sitting at his desk, back arched with his head in his palms. I walk quietly to place the bowl on a nearby chair, careful not to disturb him. But I know he’s aware that I’m there. His eyes focus on me, at last, I can see warmth in his eyes.

“Thank you...my son.”

Admiral or Pirate?

Dulwich College Beijing, Lu, Michael - 12

Autumn sweeps over China, glazing the beautiful maple trees bronze and rustic red. The fourth voyage is set to fly, my enormous wooden ships sitting serenely on the azure sea. By the sides of the ships, cannons, polished to reflect the sun; on the ballast, a huge dragon figurine posed to strike fear into all who mean evil to us. High-spirited and singing, my crew of 5000 well-trained soldiers and sailors await my final instructions.

I watch as the druid cast dragon knuckle bones onto the sandy floor. His eyes are shut with concentration and sweat is dripping down his forehead. Finally, as if pricked by an invisible needle, he jerks his head up and smiles feebly- “All the signs are favorable; the Gods are on your side.”

Another voyage — trading, patrolling, but more importantly, gaining and preserving the respect of foreign countries and traders, accumulated over years and years of hard work and toil. And now we set sail from Palembang, the strait of Malacca.

Wind blows through the masts of my ship, and the waves lap obediently at my feet. The azure blue of the sea and the sky make it impossible to discern where the horizon starts. Gradually, a small smudge of green in this giant canvas of blue. My crew grows animated, rushing to the front of the boat. Peering at the first sight of land in a month, they holler and whoop. Smiles and cheers break out over the top-deck, penetrating the crusty skin build by weeks of sullen silence.

Stepping off the boat, we are greeted by a group of well-dressed, middle-aged men. They all have that same, tired expression, hidden behind a facade of welcoming and benevolence. Streaks of grey dash their knotted hair, the crow's feet by their eyes and the wrinkles etched onto their faces all tilt upwards as we approach. Behind their mask of all smiles and enthusiasm, I can see that everything they do is tinged with fear. Fear of me and what I represent. The quick glancing gazes at me; the slight tremble of the arm. Nothing escapes me, nothing escapes us. They are afraid of us, because we control the trade routes, we control what comes in and goes out. With a snap of my fingers, or my name on paper, I can stop goods from coming into their port in an instant.

Though both of us know it is a one-sided affair, the lead trader and I go to a secluded garden to discuss our goods. He is a tall man, his face pocketed with acne scars. Leaning on his delicately carved cane, he speaks in a slow, flaky monotone. “What do you have to offer in exchange for our cotton?”

Soon we are finished, and I go back to my ship. It is clear that this port is stale — simply no one comes to trade here anymore. Their product, cotton, is just not needed anymore — silk, a much better fabric, has been on the market for long now, and at a much better price too.

My crew and I visited island after island, port after port, extending our reach to even the smallest of ports. We have seen lush islands and barren wastelands, swampy marshes and rolling mountains. For me and my crew, nothing is impossible.

Standing at the prow of my ship, I am proud to see my crew working diligently and efficiently. The synchronized rowing of the oars, the polished decks and the agile rigging-monkeys calling out everything around us. A chorus of voices and sounds fill the air. My crew are the best, the elite of the elite. Suddenly, one of the rigging monkeys shout out, “Ship ahoy!”

A ship? Here? Why, this part of the sea is practically deserted! Squinting against the blazing sun, I peer into the patch of sea my lackey points to. A huge fleet. In the distance, I can barely see the sign imprinted on their sails, but... could it be them? The dragon insignia that strikes terror into the hearts of all of us traders. Or maybe it is not a dragon. Maybe I am mistaken.

Still, isn't it better to be prepared?

I bark out order after order, my crew frantically obeying each with precision: Haul up the mast! Prime the cannons! Get ready to fight!

A grim smile appears on my face — this will be a battle to the deaths.

“Fire!” A steady line of flame erupts from my ship — lighting up the mast and the prow of our enemy. Sweat, blood and the stale odor of gunpowder lingers in the air, a foul stench, the stench of death. Drawing closer, they fire off a rally of cannon shots as well. All shots miss.

Our ship draws nearer and nearer — as it does I can clearly see just how *few* men are on their ship— half of what we have. My men are swarming over their ship, and I whoop, leaping over the side of my ship to join the fray of battle.

Swords and spears clash; roars, yells and screams penetrate the sooty air. I plunge my dagger into the breastplate of a soldier recklessly charging towards me, feeling the squelch as the metals enters the flesh. A fountain of blood erupts out of the wound, and the soldier trampled under the feet of another who take his place. My new adversary swings his spear wildly, exposing the underside of his chainmail. I duck, stabbing swiftly at the unguarded region. A strangled cry escapes his lips. Suddenly out the corner of my eye, I see a stream of armored soldiers flowing from the hull of the enemy's ship — a trap!

“Fall back!” My shout is inaudible over the noise of battle. It is futile to continue. Slashing a foot-soldier down his front — he crumples instantly, I resign myself to the end. Soon, we are all overpowered.

The haughty captain of the ship leers over me, grinning horribly. “So Chen Zuyi, it ends like this. Finally, we cross paths. I knew I would find you. You know, I wasn't even looking. I am simply on a trading voyage, I see you are on the same.”

I sneer back at him, “Scoundrel, you know you stand no chance of defeating my crew in a fair fight, so you employ an underhanded ambush to surprise us, do you.”

“Underhanded or not, you will be hung.”

“Zheng He, you will pay for this!” Fury courses through my veins, replaced immediately by a cool rage, simmering beneath my skin. Is there any way for me to persuade him to release me? “Admiral, why do you attack me? You and I are not so different, we both trade for a living, both have immense fleets, and are both ignored, hated, unwanted. I am a pirate, a castaway, and you? A Eunuch. You will never be remembered, never thought of after your death. You will be forgotten, recorded only in the dusty annuals of each passing year.

No family to carry on your legacy, no children to look after you. You wouldn't kill me, a defenseless man? I am just like you!"

"Am I, Zuyi?" By now the soldiers surrounding me has vanished, back down where they came from. "Perhaps. True, I am a eunuch, but that doesn't mean I cannot do great things. This is my first voyage, and the Yong Le emperor has promised me greater things to come"

"And you believe him? How has he treated you? As a servant, a slave, just another messenger to do his bidding! You are worthless to him, as I am!"

Has it worked? I can see the shadow crossing over his brow, I can almost hear the working of his mind turning this over and over in his head. Zheng He stares at me. His eyes remind me of a snake, waiting to strike. I tilt my head away, only to see my pride ship sinking, burning into its watery grave. The only visible parts are the masts already charred at the sides, smoking and frayed... They are just like the Admiral's — only his has the imperial sign, the dragon on it.

"Is that true Zuyi? Yes, perhaps I will never beget any child of my own, but does one really need a family to be remembered? I will have my own legacy, regardless of whether I leave a bloodline or not. My legacy is defined by my actions and deeds, the people I help, the ports I visit, and the friendships I build. Unlike you. You will only be known as a criminal, remembered by the families of the people you've killed. So no, Zuyi — we are not that similar — perhaps in what we do, but not how we are remembered."

Abruptly, a hood is wrapped around my head, obscuring my vision... *So this is how it ends...*

Thank You

Dulwich College Beijing, Rhyu, Suah - 12

The same hot, sunny days onboard.

The same life.

The same day after day—looting, dividing money, you and the others sneaking back home, waking up early the next morning on repeat. That was your life.

You hated it.

Every time some poor, defenseless stranger fell for your antics, you would feel the same jolt of guilt. He had *earned* this money. He deserved it. Did you really want to cause others pain for yourself?

The answer was, *yes*. Not just because of selfishness.

Even though you couldn't stand stealing, you couldn't afford *not* to. You needed to take care of your *meimei* and your mother. No other family member was capable enough. It was down to you—if you couldn't, you would all starve. To death.

You preferred living, thank you.

Groaning, you rubbed your eyes tiredly as you scanned the sky outside the window. The clouds were a brilliant tangerine-orange, tinted by the sun. The *xiannus* must have been feeling good.

Your fingers clumsily found your clothes, and you grimaced as you pulled your sleeping robe off. You only had two robes, which was common for poor households, and one was your sleeping robe, so it did get quite smelly.

Fumbling with the knots, you undid the scratchy tie and shrugged the clothes on easily, carelessly looping the knot. A hand stopped you.

“*Jiejie*...” Your little sister mumbled. “You're going out?”

“Yes.” A smile spread across your face, seeing her. “*Minghao*, sleep.”

“I'm hungry.” She whined. “And your knot is wrong, *jiejie*. Let me do it.”

You succumbed as she groggily sat up and started to knot.

“See.” She said sternly. “It goes into it like that. Then you wrap it around this one, see, so it's sturdier.”

Laughing, you embraced her. “I love you, *Minghao*.”

Her small, quick breaths louder in your ear, she sleepily murmured, “Love you too.”

Carefully setting her down, you saw that she had fallen asleep. Your lips brushed her forehead briefly and with one last glance, you stepped towards the door.

You lost track of time.

Pat, pat, pat.

You kept running.

The sooner I finish, the better. Squeezing your eyes shut, you let the cold *qiu* wind envelop you. The autumn wind was cold, especially against frail clothes. You didn't mind—you deserved it. Deserved all the misery in your life.

Approaching the rendezvous, you slowed down.

Breathing raggedly, you jogged towards the ship concealed behind willow trees. Woody brown and resembling a polished log, it was rather easy to camouflage. A trustful tool. One that helped sustain your family.

Also stolen.

As you walked up to your ship, *Zhihao* greeted you.

“How’s your sister?” He asked.

You remembered her small, slender hands working a knot. “Good.” A shrug.

“Better than usual, ever since we got that last shipment of wood and steel.”

“Shipment.” Your best friend laughed. “Do you know how rich you sound?”

“Very.” You sighed, running your fingers through your hair. “Most likely the rich are still in bed right now.”

“Of course.” *Zhihao* nodded. “Life’s unfair, after all.”

The “light comment” didn’t feel like one.

A heavy weight settled on your shoulders as you contemplated,

Why did it have to be?

A hundred answers.

Because we’re cursed by the gods.

Because I’m a bastard child.

Because I’m unlucky.

“*Minhao.*” *Zhihao* tugged your arm, jolting you out of your daze. “It’s time to set sail.”

In a trance, you followed.

You strode along the deck, frowning. No ships were spotted, and you thought about having to see your *meimei* empty-handed.

The slapping of feet. You turned to see a crew member rushing towards you, tripping over himself.

“Ship.” The member, *Zhixun*, reported.

Your eyes widened. “Ship?”

“Big one.” He confirmed. “Riches, gold, spices. Enough to earn money worth a lifetime.”

You pursed your lips.

“*Zhixun*, those are king’s ships.”

He grimaced, turned back. You could imagine cogs turning. His father deemed “shameful” and his mother a woman “infused by *guis*”, he longed for survival.

“*Minghao.*” He knew he had struck a nerve. Feeling a pang in your chest, you stared at your sandals, contemplating.

Zhixun had a way of saying little words with maximum impact. He’d skirted around everyone’s words, he knew words could hurt. He knew to deliver wounds for defense. The others? No better.

This was a ship full of broken people.

This was a ship full of ignored people, China’s lowest. This was a ship of unfortunate, unfairly treated people. This was the part of China the emperor hid, for fear of dirtying China. This was the struggling part of China.

You had to do this. Not just for your sister. For the others.

“Follow it.” You ordered *Zhixun*.

He nodded, hopeful.

Louder, you shouted, “Follow that ship! Cut it off from the channel, they’ll have to backtrack or face us, we’ll have the upper-hand. Go!”

Your ship increased speed, diving, as you commanded, right between the channel.

You uttered a prayer.

The ship drew nearer.

Your heartbeat increased.

It lurched, stopping. Men in silk robes cried out, alarmed.

Another sin, you thought. These men will be the ones visiting my dreams tonight.

Formed by years of practice, the crew vaulted over and landed on the other ship, drawing the men to corners before any reaction. Deciding to join, you leapt over, sighting *Zhixun* fastening the ships together.

“What’s this?” Your voice dropped. The scratchy cloth around your face suffocated you, but you didn’t unfasten it. Them telling the emperor of your identity meant certain death. A bad thought, not only because of death, but because your *meimei* and your *mama* would be left alone.

The men were in a semicircle, facing your crew. They varied in height and appearance, but all seemed like experienced sailors.

“The Captain?” A man gestured to you. Your eyes flitted over him. The leader.

“Yes.”

Behind you, *Zhihao* glared. “Identify yourself. Men from the *Huangdi*?”

“The emperor?” The man chuckled good-naturedly. “Yes. I am *Zhenghe* and this is my... second voyage. Now, it’s only fair if *you* identify yourselves.”

“We have the upper-hand.” Your smug tone was forced. *Now we’re even stealing from good-natured men. He seems nice enough.*

We have no choice if we want dinner tonight.

“I assume you are pirates?” *Zhenghe* straightened his sleeves.

Jaw clenched, you looked away, tugging at your own scruffy ones, knowing that you didn’t *want* to pirate.

Zhihao nodded for you, brushing his black hair back and glancing at you.

“That’s obvious, no?”

“You’re...” Captain *Zhenghe* gestured at the poorly dressed crew, at your ship, then finally at your gaunt frames. “...poor people.”

You lifted your chin. “Poor, but not without dignity.” Glaring. “Reveal my identity and my best man will stab you in your sleep.”

“Rich, but not without dignity.” The captain retaliated. “Understood.”

You untied the scarf and dropped it.

“There.”

Petrified.

“You...” the man seemed at a loss for words. “You’re a *haizi*. A... *xiaonuer*.”

“So?” Scowling.

“Why is one so young risking themselves?” Stunned, he guiltily compared his fancy attire to yours.

“I have no other option.”

“The emperor allows this?” He looked outraged. “You are children! You must be protected!”

“Cruel times.” You warily studied him—that had been an unexpected reaction.

“You do not have education? Better clothes? Luxury?”

You darkened. *Zhenghe* said of things nobody on the ship could afford, things he thought other people could afford but actually could not. “Not everyone can live luxuriously and wear silk. What I’m doing now is for survival. There is no *choice* upon the matter. Unlike you, who’s been offered everything on silver platters, I must do anything to support my family.”

Silence.

“Answering you, Captain, I cannot afford *luxury*. It’s a cruel world.”

Zhenghe’s eyebrows knit. “Take it.”

Astounded, you snapped towards him.

“Take it.” He repeated. “Take everything. I cannot stand to watch youth live agonizingly while I am resting at my home with unnecessary things. Take it.”

“I...” It was your turn for silence. Your mouth moved wordlessly like a *yu* out of water.

“Yes...” *Zhenghe* looked distressed. “Not enough...Please, I wish you luck with gifts.”

He walked forwards and pressed something into your hand—a jade hairpin, embroidered with gleaming gold. “This was for a friend’s wife, but I see you need it more.” He closed your fingers over it. “You carry wisdom, young one.”

“I...thank you.” You bowed. “I’m in your debt.”

“No.” He replied. “The country is in yours. I am in yours. Thank you for teaching me. Thank you for sharing your wisdom. Thank you for opening my eyes.”

“You flatter me.” You responded. “Until we meet again.”

“Until we cross paths.” He bowed. “*Tianfei* be with you.”

Then he retreated to his cabin.

“*Tianfei* be with you.” You responded, and turned, swinging over to your ship.

“*Zhihao*.”

“Yes?”

“No more stealing.” You said in realization.

He broke out grinning. “No more.”

And the two of you watched the sunset, the peace settling at last.

Doe Eyes

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Voelkner, Jaidan - 14

Chaos, it's utter chaos. It always is this time of day. The sun is sitting at his peak, glaring down at us; his searing breath sighing down our necks, slinking down our spine. Every once in a while, a rare, moist breeze blows in from the river, the shrivelled shrubs flapping pitifully in its course. In reality, the wind is minuscule. Weak. Lasting for around three seconds, if we're lucky. However, to a clump of agitated, sticky, hungry men, who just want it to be lunch break already, it's a sweet release from this stifling heat, a false sense of comfort teasing at our bones before dissipating back into the harsh scrutiny of this merciless summer. A shudder resonates within my body, a heavy drop of sweat rolling down my neck, formed by the thick sheen layering my limbs. The latest shipment of wood from the upper reaches of the Yangtze arrived about an hour ago. It's all a blur, a flurry of movement; scurrying bodies, colliding into each other, rushing to their stations, heaving wood over to others, hoisting it into position. It's an agonizing loop, an endless drill of work. A gruelling routine? Without a doubt. But it's all worth it for us, for me.

Another bead of sweat forms, rolling from my scalp down to the top of my eyebrow, threatening to drop. I lift my arm and wipe off the droplets using my sleeve. Curling over, hands on my knees, sharp breaths pulling out of my chapped lips, I gaze over. The tension retreats my body, muscles releasing, a sense of serenity comforting my soul. Another chill passes through my body, but this time it's one I would welcome with open arms. It's like a chain reaction, the warm waves swooping upward, tickling my toes, sweeping around my abdomen, pumping my heart, sending charged volts to my brain. The persistent grunts, groans and rushed clanging were more distant now, the thoughts that make my stomach ooze fading away. I look closer. It's relatively still today, the ripples sweeping forward and delicately lapping at the bank, then gently retreating back into the masses.

It's like I'm already there. I can feel the salty wind hitting my face, combing through my hair. Planted on the deck, I can feel the muscles in my feet work to keep balance on the swaying surface, hear the creaks of wood. I can feel my head underwater, the chilled water blanketing around me, my long locks floating, with no restraints. It's quiet, the noise above only far gurgles. Looking up at the surface, I can see the wrinkles of sunlight languidly manoeuvring between the waves. I bob up for air, my dripping tunic sticking to my slim waist, hugging my recently broadened chest. I'm meant to be out there, out on the se-

"Hoi! Li-Zhong! Get back to work! The more you waste time by staring at the river, the longer it will take us to actually get out there!"

The noise returned, the murmur and banging, streams of sweat rolling down my neck, the heat was back and it was suffocating.

Zhang-Fei, 17 years old, like me, but he acts like he's 5. He doesn't like me, never has. We grew up near each other, just outside Nanjing. Him and his minions always giving me a hard time. His bulky, burly body, thick shaggy hair, serpent eyes, the man practically radiates arrogance. And to think I thought I was escaping him by joining the voyages... I sigh, stalking back to my station. I look up at the structure which will soon be a 400 feet long boat with 9 masts, 12 sails, and 4 decks. A treasure ship. We are making good progress on it actually, it's coming together quicker and better than expected. My stomach bubbles with

excitement every time I think about it. I'm building a Treasure Ship, I'm going to sail on a Treasure Ship!

"Li-Zhong, in your own world slacking off again?" a voice next to me tuts.

I chuckle, already knowing who belongs to the voice. I turn to face him.

"Bai, you make up every excuse under the sun to get off work, you're the biggest slacker here," I sneer, smirking at him.

"Not true!" he squeals, face scrunching up, lips in a pout. He stomps ahead of me, grumbling about how much of a liar I am, probably. Wong Bai, 15 years old, the purest soul I'll ever know. We met our first day in the shipyard, around a month ago. Being on the younger and unathletic sides, we tended to see each other quite a lot, so naturally, we became quite close. He's still quite young, innocent, makes me wonder why he's here. He's a lanky kid with curly soft hair, his smile is blinding and he has these eyes... God, those eyes. He has these huge round doe eyes and when he smiles they curl into tiny crescent moons.

We begin to load up the planks of wood into piles for the others to use to construct the boat. Zhang-Fei is working on panelling, I believe. The majority are focusing on the sternpost rudder, China's very own invention, used for navigation. Next to me, I hear Bai giggle at something someone said. I sigh, the noise itself adding a year to my life, hauling a log of wood up and walking it over to the others.

Bai and I are walking to get dinner. It's now been 3 months since we met, the ship edging completion. The sun rests on the horizon now, a blanket of purples, oranges, pinks fanning around it. We walk in silence, not an awkward silence, but a warm, pleasant one. The crunching of the gravel under our feet, crickets chirping, I look over at him. The tinges of pink and purple glazing his face, glimmering eyes, his lustrous hair laid on his forehead, the chiller breeze blowing it slightly, I wonder. I came here because I belong out there, on the sea. I peer down at my hands, fingertips running over the various blisters and splinters littering them. It's not like I was leaving behind anything, I have no family to miss me and I was never great at making friends. But Bai? I return my gaze to him. I have no idea. Maybe I don't want to know.

My cheeks hurt from smiling so hard. Pride swirls in my chest, growing by the second. The weather is tamer, the sun has shown some mercy. The wind whistles, auburn leaves gliding off the trees. Bai and I are just two in a crowd of hundreds all roaring in celebration. It's been 4 months since I've arrived here. Four months of hard work and now we have a completed Treasure Ship. It's so worth it, all the struggle, physical strain, it's all so worth it. It was a group effort, it really was. And now all that's left is to load it up and then we are free. We can join Zheng He and the others, I'll be where I belong. I peer over at Bai, he's howling, jumping up and down, one of those blinding smiles plastered on his face, he's proud too.

The masses have scattered, all leaving to meet with family or friends before our departure next week. I see Zhang-Fei leaving the shipyard, laughing. I'm happy for him, he's found some good friends, people who have tamed his raging soul, subdued his petulant ways. He doesn't talk to me much these days.

"Li-Zhong let's go celebrate with the others! We deserve it! We can finally leave!" Bai cackles, clutching onto my arm, twinkling eyes blinking up at me.

"Let's go." I grin, striding forward.

The night is not silent. The sea is not still. The wind is not gentle. The Yongle Emperor is dead. The night is loud, the shrieks of dreams being burned ringing in our ears. The sea is violent, a vicious body of water we'll never see. The wind is a brutal chill thrashing at our already raw skin. The Hongxi Emperor has ordered the ending of the Treasure Voyages

meaning the destruction of the Treasure ships. I stare at the army of smoke blasting out of her, shooting towards the atmosphere. The hues of reds, oranges, yellows spreading, the deafening cracks of wood being burned. I can feel the clouds of heat radiating out of her, but I couldn't feel any colder. I stand next to Bai. The Bai with no tears left in his body, only a throbbing throat and an empty, hollow feeling buried in his soul. The flames illuminating his face, glittering in his eyes. He looks at me. I look into a pair of unfamiliar eyes, a pair of eyes belonging to a broken soul. My breath turns ragged, my lungs collapsing on themselves. I feel a body wrapping around mine, a head pressing into my neck, slim fingers tugging at my nape. I close my eyes, releasing a shaky exhale. I don't ask what will never be for him. Maybe I don't want to know. There is no point to grieve for a life we will never live, a door that will never be opened, a book that will never be read. Maybe I don't want to know what demons lie behind the doe eyes.

New Tales of the Ming Treasure Voayages

Harrow International School Shanghai, Li, Rianne - 13

After travelling at sea for months, we finally catch shore in our eyesight in the distance, but instead of Calicut or Siam, or any other place we visited, these unfamiliar waters are definitely out of this world. No, this land is more rural, more mystical, more natural.

As we were approaching the shore, we encountered some of this land's natural inhabitants – the half-fish-half-crocodile, with the two half constantly at war, the glowing blind fish, the shrimp that lives inside a whale. For that reason, we were not terribly surprised by what we saw when we arrived.

For starters, the land was filled with moss, grass, and plants, like the ground in a forest, which probably means this civilisation did not discover the sea yet, or the coast for that matter of fact, as there is no sign of human there for as far as the horizon. But having traveled at sea for months, our provisions were running low, which forced us to stop on this foreign land.

While we ventured on into the deep dark woods, for reasons of gathering provisions and to present our emperor's lavish good-will presents to any civilisation who manages to reside in this forest. But soon, we ventured straight into a problem. Near where we were, there was a hardly helpful sign, which translated into: 'Do not walk near the ghi or step on the xno. If you do, YOU'RE DEAD.'

We quickly figured out the 'trees', which look like colourful tunnels, made of wood, leading you down the rabbit hole, could move themselves, like they are individual living entities, and engulf any being within its proximity and manages to stay there. While the 'trees' are engulfing organisms, it screeches 'Ghi!Ghi!' to signal its victory in capturing prey. If you put a stone near a ghi, the stone will disappear quicker than you can say 'ghi', as the towering parasitic entity will have swallowed the stone. The ghi would even suck a ghi sapling from the ground, uprooting it from the earth below. However, there is one thing it does not eat — the dull coloured pebble on the ground, xno, and we soon find out why.

The uninteresting pebbles that littered the ground, proved to be lethal, because if pressure is applied to it, the xno instantly ignites. A single one of smooth small pebbles generate enough fire to turn 10 ghi into ash, who knows what will happen if we made a small lethal mistake.

We had brainstormed many ideas to help us pass, but none of them seemed able to work. As the only reasonable thing to do, we tried to find ways to go around our obstacle. Instead of finding another way through, we found resources, perhaps to aid us in getting past. We found: fallen ghi, a source of wood, branches and sticks; ashes of either ghi, xno or both. Unfortunately, apart from our opening, the other paths are guarded by a wall of ghi, or a floor of xno.

When we returned to the opening, a chimpanzee like creature, a bird with a rabbit's head, and a blue rabbit with no head awaited our arrival. They waited until everyone arrived, like they have something important to show us. First, the man-sized 'chimpanzee' leaped at great lengths, leaving a pile of xno instantly bursting into flames, then it grabbed onto the ghi branches, which are flexible like rope, durable as it could hold the 'chimpanzee's weight, and it did not break even after the 'chimpanzee' sprung off it. Afterwards, the 'rabbit' held a ghi

stick in its paws and started pushing the xno on the ground forward, providing safe passage for itself. Lastly, the ‘bird’ sprinkle some powder on a ghi and a different powder on some xno near the powdered ghi, and that triggered ghi to eat the xno, and the xno to burn instantly. In the end, there is a burnt ghi and a patch of ground near it.

Taking this as a hint, we quickly decided what to do. First we assembled the ghi branches and sticks, to form a poorly made broom, and swept away the xno, enough to form a path. Next we sprinkled the ashes we found on the ghi and the xno near it, to make sure we were not engulfed by the hollow husks of trees.

After we all made safe passage, I looked back at the forest, half of which is lit by flames we set, but we had no choice — we were desperate and low on provisions.

We walked on, into the forest, with many new acquaintances — we met the animals who helped us earlier, with their friends as well, the butterfly-frog, the human bird, the part dog, part cat, part mouse, a dause. The woods surrounding us also seemed to brighten — instead of lethal ghi on our sides and xno underneath us, the woods changed to actual trees, but not quite. Even though now there are animals, trees and grass, but if you look more carefully, you can still see the lethal factor in these creatures, — the trees are like furnaces, the bird-man has spikes it can use as a weapon, the butterfly-frog can eat just about anything, anywhere.

After our exhausting hike, we finally found something which hints that there is a civilisation present on this strange land, we found some buildings, and more signs. They translated into: ‘Welcome to Ysomr! Welcome to our small humble kingdom.’

In the kingdom of Ysomr, nothing is like our home back in China — the animals and Ysomrians co-exist together in harmony, the architecture are alive, and they have a whole ecosystem, where the Ysomrians and the animals, or should I say also Yosmrians benefit each other. However, they do have an emperor like us.

The Yosmrians we met lead us straight to their palace, where we met the emperor, who.

“Who are you and why are you here?” He asked while we bowed towards him.

“Your highness, my name is Zheng He and we are here in courtesy of the Yongle emperor from China, to deliver these gifts of good-will. We mean no harm.” I replied.

“No harm?” The emperor questioned, “No harm? You show up out of nowhere, murder half of my army, my defenders, there to keep evil beings such as yourself out, and now you leave us helpless from attacks, and you claim to mean no harm?”

“I’m so sorry your highness, please we didn’t know.” I pleaded, “We were running out of provisions and desperately needed a way in—”

“Say no more! All of you, please return back to where you came from. You will get your provisions, if you vow to never return here or inform others about the kingdom of Ysomr.” The emperor answered. “In fact, I’ll save you the trouble.” With a snap of his fingers, we all returned to our junks, which have already plotted course to return to China, with sufficient provisions next to us...

New Tales of the Ming Treasure Voyages

Harrow International School Shanghai, Moan, Finn - 10

Chapter 1

Emperor Yong Le

Bitter was the night. As the voyagers I had selected myself gathered, there was nothing but silence and darkness.

Allow me to introduce myself. I am Emperor Yong Le of China, the greatest, most powerful emperor of all time. I am about to send my people on a great voyage to sell treasure to other countries. These are the best voyagers in all of China. I know that these are the right people to represent China as the greatest and most powerful nation on the planet. They are courageous, bold, experienced and adventurous. They have hearts of gold and their souls are pure. They are prepared for anything.

They notified me of the route they were going to take and we discussed over time any possible dangers. We perfected the route so that it was fast and safe. The only dangers were rocky waters and shallow seas. The mythical legend of the sea monster near Thailand had been clarified as false by our explorers who had left only months before us on a scouting mission, and returned, but they were to steer clear of Thailand just in case.

I had selected the vessel myself. When I made the choice, I chose a ship that was strong, light, fast and medium in size. The captain, Zheng He, was a skilled swordsman, a master of bribery, negotiating and a great mariner. He was intelligent and coped well under pressure. He was renowned for once talking the king of Taiwan out of starting a war with China. However, his charm and tempting smile should never be mistaken – he is also a killer and one of the most dangerous people to have sailed any sea.

With the crew gathered and the sun rising higher above the horizon, the scene was set for their journey to begin. In front of me stood the future of the nation and the hopes of many.

One final check and the crew said their goodbyes to their families and friends. With any luck they would come back alive having made new friends from new countries and will have displayed China's greatness to all of our continent.

My voyagers boarded the boat. There were tears, yells, and crying children. All of my voyagers were waving except one. A face I did not recognise had shrank into the crowd of the ship. I was pondering the question 'Who is he?' when someone asked me the same thing. I told them my ideas. A stowaway? A crew member's family? A Korean spy? Whoever they are, they will either hijack the mission or lay low and do nothing and help the crew. I am guessing it is not the latter. I watched as my ship's captain inspected the crew one last time, then retired below deck to examine the workings of the ship itself.

They then set sail. Hopefully China will be greater when they return.

*Chapter 2**Young Stowaway*

I am Wang Luo, a simple farmer's son. I have stolen aboard this boat to get away from my father who beats me for not doing what he thinks I should be doing. I want to do what I want to do. His name is Chang Luo. I am a bit nervous because this is my first time away from home. After stealing aboard amongst the masses of crew, I found myself hiding deep within the belly of the boat. I thought I had been spotted but had not yet been caught. I was wishing that today would continue as a fairly normal one, but that thought was shattered by a dark, stormy cloud hovering above this endless sea.

The menacing cloud began to spread as far as the eye could see. From my hiding place in the food store, I could see from a nearby porthole that this cloud would be a threat. The thunder rumbled and lightning flashed fast and often whilst the crew could be heard preparing for the inevitable choppy seas and winds that would soon come. A brilliant fork of lightning struck the sea nearby the boat and the cloud became so vast that I could no longer see the horizon. The boat itself began to rock from side to side as food and supplies spilled from their containers around me, creating a disturbance which I thought would grab the attention of someone nearby. I had to get out of here. I had to find somewhere better to hide.

The swaying seas began to make me feel extremely sea-sick and I wanted to stay where I was, but raised voices close to me made me focus and think that there were better places to be for me.

I cautiously crept out the door and went deeper into the belly of the boat to an area that I doubt many crew had even been to. Amongst a number of boxes, maps and chests, I buried myself deep and securely in, hiding from anyone and everything. The boat began to swing and I felt that the chance of getting through this was slim. I shut my eyes tightly and tried to think of things that made me feel happy but the booms of thunder and the motion of the boat made that very hard to do. I squeezed my eyes even tighter and hoped for the best.

I awoke. I listened. The booming had stopped and the motion of the boat was smooth. But there was something. Something was tap, tap, tapping at my shoulder as I slowly became aware that I was no longer alone. Unaware of who he was at the time, the ship's captain towered above me and smirked as he realised I was not crew, or family, or meant to be here. "Just as I suspected," he said, calmly and with complete control. I stood up slowly with my head facing down and wondered what would happen next...

Circumambulation

Hong Kong Academy, Boberski, Will - 11

Hé sat on the deck breathing in the air, eating it like it was all that he needed, gulping it like a drowning man. In his opinion, launch was not a time to be spent preparing. Tonight, everyone was on deck, his orders. Captain's orders. His voice, Captain's voice. It was getting rather confusing. Which one was he - himself, or Captain? He was both in the eyes of the world. Hé glanced at the crew on the deck fidgeting. It was a fine evening. "Are you afraid of your complexions, men? Come, grasp the air." Hé expected the very best out of them, and therefore he took the very best out of them.

It was Smithy who noticed first, "There's banging downstairs."

Hé turned, "Alright, see what you can do. It'll be the child. She's old enough not to need mother's milk now." Smithy slipped through the hatch and descended the ladder. He unlocked the door, and Rei's hands jumped back from the edge. "Kid, what do you need?" asked the smithy.

"There's a child down here, sir. Is she supposed to be here?"

Smithy stuck his head through the door, glancing at Rei and Woah. "Two kids, eh? The little one is fine. You, come with me." He extended his arms and Rei ducked under them.

Rei had nothing to fear. He was safe on board, as was the porcelain shipment. If his pot came, he came. The pot was him. He was his pot, Lady. He was on the lists, alright.

The Green Eye's current porcelain shipment had come from a small village. In that small village there lived a boy, apprenticed under a master, Master Sun. The boy's first pot had been sent away in that very same porcelain shipment. Rei was that boy, and he was onboard with his pot.

Navigator had brought maps to the deck, but Hé ignored them. He didn't need the Emperor's edict to know where the Green Eye would go. It was the direction towards which he knelt every day. Anyway, it was too nice of an evening to study charts. The waves foamed at their tips lightly like dogs running too hard to keep up. They were fourteen nautical miles off Guangdong.

The Green Eye had four decks. One needed to navigate every one of them to get up from the Devil's Undergarments, the hold. Doors lay wide open and tightly closed and locked. The hold held a bosom of life, a cradle of color and senses. The smell of the ship's cargo already pervaded the Green Eye: aromatics, dried fish, damp skin, smoke, drying glaze and musk. Rei could also feel different scents: currents of sweat, perseverance, diversity and practice along with wood, making a savory, sensuous aroma quite unlike any other, even the smell of the workshops of Master Sun.

It was a mixture of cultures and smells, but the Green Eye was more than the sum of its parts, the sum of these pieces. Certainly, Rei thought, it was its parts, but it was also its parts and the combination of its parts combined.

The sky was rent a deep vermilion as if it had been split by a mighty blade. In the twilight, it looked as if the Green Eye was sailing through blood. Rei's first thought when he climbed to the top deck with Smithy was that the deck didn't fit. It overhung the rest of the ship, and the rest of the ship came up in unexpected places.

Glancing at Rei, Hé almost chuckled, for this boy had snuck on, disobeying a rule that no one disobeyed, yet he was clearly enjoying the evening, obeying one command everyone else had refused to acknowledge. Keep breathing, boy, Hé thought. Keep breathing.

Hé gave his verdict quickly. He was no judge, and only the feeble gestures of a moral compass needle inside him indicated a correct course. “Why are you looking at me?” Hé asked. “Look at the sunset. This boy is fine.”

As Hé retreated belowdecks, Rei sat on the deck, cross-legged. Light embraced dark in those few hours when they could be together, and the moon rose to moderate the interaction. If one didn’t watch carefully, Rei thought, one might almost confuse a full moon and the sun as being one and the same.

Enveloped in twilight, Rei wondered again about Woah. He thought of playful laughter on the docks and smiles so mutual they were one. She was so young, too young. So why was Woah there?

The cabin door opened, and Rei momentarily lost his balance. Hé emerged, a small bowl in his hand. He sat a distance from Rei, on the bow. Placing the bowl on the deck, Hé filled it with water from a hip flask and pulled a needle from his pocket. Whittling the needle on the bowl’s rim, a screeching sound echoed through the floorboards. The deck vibrated with the sound when he placed the needle in the water. It twisted slightly, before poking the horizon, where the sun had retreated to a realm of echoes beyond even the reach of the sea. To the left of this direction, Hé knelt, his back bending low, throwing his arms out before him so that the Buddha necklace around his neck almost touched the ground. As Hé’s words floated by, Rei’s ears grasped one word: Allah.

Rei’s voice broke the air, “May I go inside now, sir?”

Hé held the door for him.

Rei remembered Woah, and reached for the stairs. While he was walking, Rei thought about God. Master Sun was religious, but in a values sort of way. He never prayed or chanted, so Rei had never learned to prostrate himself towards the unknown, to trust in a God, or Allah. When he reached her, Woah was still sitting in the Devil’s Undergarments. Rei was tired. Twenty-one nautical miles off of Guangdong, he slept.

From the depths of an ethereal sky, the sun leaked light on the sea and sleep loosened its grip on Rei’s senses. The planks still held back a shimmering, new sea. The rudder still creaked in its corner. It was morning. There was something about the new day that couldn’t be diluted by water. It’s naivety and it’s youth, the glory of its arrival and the arrival of its glory. In the dark of a new day, Rei saw no Woah. The small, talkative child had disappeared. Rei sprinted onto the deck.

All of the crew was there. Hé was there and Woah was there, at the front. They stood at the bow of the ship. The sails were at a high luff. Woah was dressed in silk, her hair braided like noodle dough. Her feet were in tiny shoes.

Hé knew Rei was there. “We are lowering her. She will be the sea god’s new wife. The Dragon King will let us pass if he has a new concubine.” He sensed Rei’s words before they left his mouth. “Don’t say a word, boy.”

The smell of incense was overwhelming. Rei covered his ears on the splash. There wasn’t even any scream.

The crew had gone inside. “It’s Mazuism. Their religion. Mine too, a bit,” Hé said. Rei rubbed the pebble in his pocket like a lifeline.

“But you’re Muslim! You’re the captain!”

“I am many things, Rei. A captain is one of them. So is a Muslim eunuch. Yet if I tell people that I am a Muslim eunuch, they apply to me their notions about Muslims and eunuchs. Yes, I am a captain, but not a commander. The sacrifice was what Woah was brought aboard for, actually.”

“How can you justify it? Killing someone, I mean.”

Hé glanced over, “Rei, disprove their belief. Then, you can condemn it. Do not try to condemn a belief, Rei, for it is always valid to the believer. It is an easy, naive mistake.”

“So, you think that as long as someone genuinely believes something, it is right?”

“Yes,” Hé said. “Faith does not inhibit truth.”

Rei sat cross-legged on deck, his mind embroiled in thought. Traveling by sea was an altogether new experience for him. The Green Eye could affluently bob through seas of fortune as adeptly as a socially aware merchant might through a gaggle of courtiers, yet that was their full range of movement. Rei had to trust that the ship travelled. It was a bit like trusting a God. Rei looked at the water meandering beneath the ship. He tried not to see the water. In his mind’s eye, lines of shadow snaked across the bit of ocean. Nodes in the waves worth more than their sum. Pinpoints of light pushed from one place to another. Energy, constantly kinetic.

The water became a bath of movement.

A Sea Adventure

Island School, Ho, Abigail - 13

The sea has always been my paradise—the rippling, bubbling waves sloshing around the bay, full of life. I stand at the edge of the water, the ocean breeze rustling through my hair. In the distance, tiny sailboats glide along the water, sails flapping as calmly as a butterfly’s wings. My heart flutters, and the familiar longing sensation weaves its way back into my mind. Oh, how I long to be one of them! How I long to be a sailor, feeling the wind on my face, my small wooden boat gracefully gliding along the tranquil waters like a sheet of ice... It’s time to go. I take one last glance at the blue, blue sea, then turn around and head back.

I walk towards my bedroom, passing by my father’s work desk, when I notice something I’ve never seen before. Cautiously, I creep over. A sketch and planning of a large fleet of ships are drawn onto a piece of paper. I run my fingers across the lines of ink, heart leaping. *What is this? Is it possible? Is my father about to take a huge fleet of ships on journey out to the wide, wide ocean?*

The sea. The sea! The wondrous, shimmering blue stretches out in front of me. I clutch the handlebar and close my eyes, facing the strong east wind. I can’t believe my father has allowed me to go on this trip! I can’t believe it. I’m actually, physically *here!* On the leading ship with the admiral, my own father, Zheng He, about to set off on a voyage out onto the deep, deep blue. Behind me, the sailors haul big loads of rice and meat onto the lower deck of the big ship, and the wooden floorboards creak under its weight. Large barrels of water stand on one side of the ship, and scattered tools lay on the other. Long, heavy steel masts are piled on the bottom deck, next to the bunks. Although the sailors have to sleep on those shelf-looking bunks, at least I get a nice, small bedroom of my own!

The sailors pull up the sail, and once latched into place, my father runs over to the ship’s end and unties the rope that held it to the pier. All of a sudden, I feel a jerk, and the ship lurches forward, powered by the wind. It hasn’t been ten seconds, and we are already a hundred metres away from the shore! At last, we’re on our way— sailing out onto the bright blue waters, just as I have been dreaming since I first saw the ocean. I feel the wind on my face. The faint smell of salt and fish waver into my nose as I stare out into the vast ocean. First stop: Vietnam!

We’ve been on this ship for about a week now, and each day just gets more exciting. I love waking up each morning to the sounds of the gentle waves crashing onto the sides of our boat. *Swish, swash, swish, swash.* I love the spare time we have, when I always stand out on the upper deck and stare out into the vast, tranquil water, bathed in the glow of the glorious sunshine. On this particular day, I am on deck, as usual, squinting out into the distant ocean, when suddenly, I spot something unusual. Directly overhead, I see a large black mass. *What could it be?* Quickly, I run downstairs to the lower deck, where my father is eating his breakfast.

“*Ba ba!*” I shout, “Come and see!” My father follows me to the upper deck, and I show him the black mass looming up in front. Several other black dots have gathered up behind it. Father squints at the lump, and his face lights up. He runs downstairs calling “LAND AHOY! LAND AHOY!” We’ve arrived at last! Vietnam, here we come!

We have spent four days in this little country, and now we’re off, back to China. The king of Vietnam has offered us tons of goods! Noodles, spices, herbs... all these new delicious tastes! The countryside itself is beautiful, too. Dotted around everywhere are splendid blue

lakes, with small red boats sailing calmly along the smooth waters, sails fluttering. Small yet tall hills sit perched on top of the waters, like tiny islands floating in the lake. Waterfalls drop from the sheer edge of tall, rocky cliffs, and shimmer and sparkle in the beautiful sunlight.

It's been two days on this ship again, and on the third morning of our trip back to China, I wake up to the sound of people scurrying about, with nervous and anxious looks on their faces. What could be happening? I race up the stairs, and a chaos greets me up on deck. Some are busy carrying extra sails up onto the deck, some are bringing all our food and valuables downstairs to the large, hidden storage area. I fight my way through the crowd and glance out into the sea. It's rough, with big waves crashing and slamming against our ship. The water is grey and scary, as if it were a monster trying to swallow me whole. I look past miles of the raging sea, and my eyes land on a fleet of ships, almost twice the size of ours. About 15 sails are strung across the masts of each ship, catching as much wind as possible. They glide across the water as smoothly and quickly as a cheetah sprinting across land. Each extra ten seconds I stare, they are a couple hundred metres closer to our ship. *What could be going on? What are the sailors so afraid about? Why are...* suddenly, my tutor's voice rings in my head, clear as a bell. "The dangers of the sea..." *Pirates...? Uh-oh.*

Right at that moment, I feel a hand grasp my shoulder. I whirl around and find myself face-to-face with an angry sailor.

"What do YOU think you're doing here?!" He whisper-shouts in my ear.

"I-I'm sorry, I was j-just trying to s-see..."

He throws me back to my bedroom and locks the door behind him. I hastily scramble to my feet and lunge for the ship wall. I press my face against the glass of a small window, and from there, I can just barely make out what's happening outside. The big sails of the pirate ships are looming closer and closer. There are hundreds of men on the ships. One of them is tying a rope to a small boat. He lowers the boat down the side of the ship. It bobs up and down like a cork floating in water. A large man jumps from the deck and lands into the boat, followed by two men. Someone from the big ship tosses three oars down. They are jabbed into the water in sync. *Here they come.* Quick as lightning, they streak across the stormy, frothy water. A large man jumps on deck and grabs my father's collar. He is carrying a gleaming sword. A fight breaks out. Screaming. Shouting. I can't watch. I sink into my bed and bury my face in my hands. What would happen if they killed my father?

Suddenly, all goes quiet. I creep back to the window. The pirate is holding his hands up. *He surrendered?* He jumps back onto his boat and drifts off, back into the ocean. We haven't been harmed! I can't believe any pirate would just let go so easily! I slump back down into my bed, relieved. I am about to try pry open the door when something catches my eye. The small pirate boat is coming towards us again. My eyes widen. No way. It couldn't be a trick. I start banging on the door to alert the sailors, but it is too late. They're right next to us now. My father jumps back in surprise when he notices the pirates. The whole fleet is here. A determined look forms on his face. He picks up his sword, and the ship fills with chaos. Blood. Screaming. Stabbing. I watch as my father and the trained sailors fight the pirates, sinking ship after ship, and killing thousands.

The fight lasts for three days, and each day I am locked up inside my room. Many sailors are injured. Some are dead. Some valuables are stolen, but the Vietnamese goods were well protected. It isn't a very happy party that travels back to China. Even the sea looks upset, now. So lifeless and grey.

At last, the familiar surroundings alight in my eyes again. The bay, the temple, the sun.

I must say, the emperor was very impressed with our work and tactics. My father is planning another trip soon, maybe venture farther out this time. I may skip this journey, though. I feel the excitement is just too much for me to handle. I think I'll just stay home, stroll around the bay, stare out at the water, and continue to let my mind dream.

Another Way

Island School, Lau, Joseph - 13

“We need to expand our country’s military branch,” the Yongle Emperor quietly said to himself. He walked outside to the balcony and stared into the sea as he pondered of ways of improving the country’s military. Strong waves of ocean water attacked the rocky hill that the Emperor lived on. And then, as if a light bulb in his head turned on, he had an idea.

The next day, the Emperor met with the provincial governments of Fujian, Jianxi, Zhejiang, Huaguang, as well as other cities and sent them an order to construct a large fleet of ships.

Two years later, when the fleet was completed, the Emperor issued a preliminary order to Zheng He to command the fleet of 27,000 troops. On July 11, 1405, an order was sent regarding the first expedition, and was addressed to Zheng He.

On the night before the first voyage set off, the Yongle Emperor held a banquet for the crew. There were sacrifices and prayers as well as a lot of other events that were being held. People wished them safety and good fortune.

Then on the morning the fleet set off, and they headed off to Champa. During the journey, Zheng He thought about what the Emperor had said to him and his army. “This is a raid mission, we need the resources, and hopefully the people and the land as well. I don’t want to see you come back without resources from other places.” he had said to him.

When they arrived, Zheng He commanded the ship to fire its cannons and take down the city’s artillery systems, and then an army of troops rushed out of the ship with swords in their hands and began the raid. Frightened citizens ran around the landscape in panic, with swords swinging all around the city. Zheng He saw the chaos he had created and felt guilty. He wished there were another way. And then it hit him.

“What the Emperor wants is resources, and raiding cities may not be the only way to obtain that,” Zheng He thought to himself. “Stop!” Zheng He shouted with so much power and voice anyone could have heard it from a mile away.

Reluctantly, the soldiers obeyed his command, and stopped at once. “Who is the highest in command in your city?” Zheng He asked the terrified citizens. With his entire body shaking in fear, a man slowly stood up and raised his hand. In a trembling voice, he said, “I-I am.”

“I’ll make you a deal. Our emperor wants resources, so if you can provide some for us, we will leave at once.” Zheng He offered.

He was reluctant, and Zheng He could tell. “We’ll make alliances with you, we’ll help you rebuild and pay for the damage we have done. But you have to provide us with resources, because if not I’ll be forced to ask my troops to continue what they’re doing.” Zheng He said.

“R-r-really?” the leader said in his trembling voice.

“I don’t want to harm you or your people, but we do need resources. There is another way - how about we form an alliance?” Zheng He suggested.

Not as reluctant anymore, he agreed to the offer.

Thousands of eyes looked at him, half of them with gratitude, and the other half with anger.

They went back to the ship, with over a hundred men carrying boxes of resources back onto the ship. All of them looked at Zheng He with anger in their eyes.

“Is there a problem?” he asked sternly. “Well, what do you think? This was supposed to be a raid, we’re here to steal resources, not make friendships,” one of the soldiers shouted.

Another soldier next to him quickly covered his mouth before he continued to speak.

“The point of the mission was to gain resources for our country, not to terrorize citizens and make enemies. I figured we could use a different method of obtaining these resources, one that didn’t involve raiding.” Zheng He responded in a calm yet strong voice.

“You figured,” another soldier sneered.

Zheng He looked at him. “Trust me, by the end of this journey we will have ships filled with resources to bring back to our country.”

“Yeah, and what if that doesn’t happen?” yet another soldier muttered.

“Then we will go back to each and every one of the cities we have seen and travelled to and we will raid them until all of our ships are filled with nothing but resources.” Zheng He answered in a much stricter voice.

The resentment in the atmosphere seemed to relieve, and all the soldiers went back to their cabins. Zheng He sighed, and once again looked at the sea.

The next morning, they arrived to Java, and Zheng He walked up to the city’s leaders and asked for an alliance. They agreed, traded resources, and peacefully left the city.

Then, over the course of a few weeks, they travelled through the Indian Ocean and made alliances with the people of Malacca, Aru, Samudera, Lambri, Ceylon, Quillon and Calicut. During this process, many of the cities offered a multitude of resources to the crew, and by the end of it, a quarter of the crew had to sleep in tighter cabins due to the amount of resources their ships had to carry.

During their journey back home, Zheng He saw one of his soldiers sitting on the dock, his face completely pale. Zheng He went up to him and asked, “What’s the matter?”

With a shaky voice he answered, “I-I have been thinking. W-what will the Emperor do when he finds out we haven’t raided a single city.”

Zheng He thought about the issue for a second and answered, “Don’t worry. I will handle this matter personally.”

When they got back home, thousands of men marched out of the ships, carrying boxes upon boxes of loot and resources. Everyone in the city looked at them in awe, even the Emperor was impressed.

“May I talk to you, your Majesty?” Zheng He asked the Emperor.

The Emperor looked at him and smiled, “Of course,” he said.

They walked into a room and sat down. “Listen,” Zheng He said, “we haven’t raided a single city during this expedition.”

The Emperor frowned.

Before the Emperor could talk, Zheng He continued, “Instead of raiding, we befriended a multitude of people, and then traded resources. We also -”

The Emperor cut him off. “So you could have earned more resources. But instead decided to make some friends. You have disobeyed my order despite me granting you so many men and ships.”

“And I have shown you just how effective this method can be. We prevented casualties and injuries on both sides, obtained more than enough resources, and made alliances that could help us in the future. Not only will we acquire an abundant amount of resources, but we will also gain political power.” Zheng He said with confidence.

“Fine, I will give you a chance to prove what you said is correct. You will set off on

another expedition next month, with more ships and men. I will give you one month's time to obtain 500 ships worth of resources. If you return late or with insufficient resources, you and all of your crew will die." the Emperor said.

Zheng He looked at him dead in the eye and answered, "Sure."

One month passed, and they started their expedition. They went to another series of places and befriended other groups of people, as well as trading large amounts of resources. They obtained enough resources in three weeks time, and were ready to head back home.

BOOM! The ship shuddered, and a horde of people ran up to the dock to see what was happening. At first, they didn't see anything, but when the ship shuddered again, they saw it.

Chen Zuyi and his gang of pirates closed in and ran onto the ship. They hurried their way to the storage rooms and raided them as quick as possible. In a few minutes, they had carried over 50 boxes of resources onto their ship, and were about to escape. Zheng He grabbed Chen Zuyi by the arm and pulled him back onto his ship. He grabbed a knife and ordered Chen's people to return the boxes. Soon, they ran back to the ship to save their captain, and the battle began. Knives and swords slashed at one another, and every so often, a torch would be thrown across the ship. Arrows flew across the entire ship, and not a single inch of the dock was not covered by blood. After an hour long battle, all of Chen's men were either dead or kicked off the ship. They tied up Chen Zuyi and locked him in a prison cell in Chen's own private ship. They took the ship and left.

When they arrived home, the Emperor was once again impressed, and decided to reward Zheng He and keep supporting the expeditions of the ship.

New Tales of the Ming Treasure Voyages

Kellett School, Jaeger, Anna - 12

YU YAN

The waves come as loving rascals, sun-warmed and sweet, to wash upon the sands. Perhaps that is why the children love to play in them so very much – the spirit of the sea and the children coming together in something we grown-ups should have held on to. But I knew what was out there that others didn't.

Waves scatter the light, the hue of the water ever changing yet always familiar, always blue. How could I fail to love them as they dance inward to crash on the pebbles? How could I fail to appreciate the salty air or the cold caress of the breeze? I held my cloak close as I heard the distant Chinese New Year drums echoing off the cool cliffs and mountains that shelter my seaside town like a child in a playground. I knew this day would come. The day when my love could no longer stay in this quaint town. I always thought that this marriage would help him realise that the adventure is at home, not the sea, but with every moment he is away his heart breaks and the very essence that makes him who he is...fades. Just as I am fading without him to hold me. But I must. And I shall.

LI JIE

The ocean breeze whispered like a lover, placing salty kisses on my cheek and tousling my long black hair. I hung tightly onto a musty old rope, quickly wrapping it round and round a solid metal hook. One loop...two loops...three loops. I didn't care about the red blisters in my raw hands that stung with every minor movement I made, only the endless blue on the ocean that I longed to be near since I was young.

"If only young me could see me now..." I sighed as I took in a deep breath of the rich, warm air.

"You called?" a voice shouted from above.

"What?" I asked almost screaming over the water sloshing on deck "*oh, yeah*. Sorry, Yong Mi – different person."

"Same old Li Jie..." Yong Mi grumped as he wrapped his muscular legs around the mask to attach the third cloth to the sail.

I heard some distant mumbling from Yong Mi as he fixed the sails, I turned my back to the ship and out to the ocean. How can something so dangerous be so calm? It has been close to a year since I last saw my family waving me goodbye by the harbour and not a day goes by when I don't think about them. But my mind was mostly full of the adventures I'd had and also those that I had yet to experience. Swashbuckling pirates, peace treaties with foreign emperors, sea battles with nefarious armies were just some of the adventures I longed for back on land, everyday daydreaming in the small town I called home. The ship that I was a sailor on was called "Ming Yun" or "destiny" and I was recruited by the Chinese Emperor to give away the wonderful presents we had brought from the Emperor, forging new relationships

with a variety of countries. I was simply given my uniform, a pat on the back and then we journeyed far and wide to create our own adventures like the ones I read about in my school days. Yet so far, none of this had materialised.

CAPTAIN ZHANG WEI

The celebration went on into the night, everyone dancing like they'd forgotten how to stand still. Music rang across the ship with dancing sailors twirling round and round with beer mugs in their hands. The celebration was a riot of colour, everyone a little more hyped up than they should be. The red lanterns that hung above the ship illuminated the deck with a red, hot glow as their shadows danced on the ocean. Everyone wanted me there at the celebration, a smile painted on my face and a pint of beer in my hand. The only thing that kept me there was the reverie of my return. I could already imagine it... Zhang Wei the greatest captain in the known world! I snapped back to reality and could hear my crew screaming with joy and feel their feet disturbing the ground around me. Their bodies moved together as they celebrated, rhythmically breaking into shapes and colours that tickled my heart.

"All right, all right men" I shouted urging them to stop and look in my direction. "It's not that we expected plain sailing, or for winds to be kind, the waves to be gentle; it's that we trusted our ship to carry us to shore no matter the weather. They say it's only impossible until its done, that was our motto under all skies, upon all seas. We believed we could do anything at all... and so we did. This is why I wanted to thank you all for your dedication to China!"

A large cheer erupted from my crew as they threw themselves at each other, embracing one another after a year of sailing in solitude.

"We have successfully delivered all the gold to our neighbouring lands and no simple boys can do such things." I took a large swig of my beer. "It has of course taken lives and their memories will live on as a part of the Ming Treasure Fleets that took the first steps to discover the world. We have faced armies and pirates, sicknesses and storms. Thank you all for being my crew and tomorrow we set sail for China!"

"HIP HIP HURRA-"

LI JIE

Never have I wished so much for the land, to feel the sweet brown soils of home. For on this sea I feel the rage within as if the ocean is countless tears ready to pound at the feet of man. It is a gale that screams under dark and serious clouds. Yet the boat sails over these watery fists, perhaps with the intention of causing enough bruising for the sailors to remember her anger, enough for them to start a sweet serenade of sorrow and a promise of better care. The sailors had tried to prepare for sudden, violent storms that erupt and cease so quickly, but it is impossible. Not only the waves but the rain came without warning, pelting the crew like bullets. The worst had happened after the celebration; with no warning, total darkness prevailed as clouds thickened and the sky was stricken, blotting out the starlight. Sailors struggled and slipped on the soaked deck: panic had set in. The wind slammed the rain into our faces as if it were solid matter - my face was raw and the water had filled my eyes. Somehow, the ship had pressed on, bravely climbing up the waves, and then crashing down in a cascade of wood and water. It was during one of these heart-stopping plummets that a surge of water broke onto the deck, we held tightly onto the mast, onto the ropes, onto anything that might save us. The water drained back into the sea, retreating to its master, but the

damage had been done. I felt my fingers slip as I reached out for the captain in vain. The pull of the water was too strong. I took in a final breath and was whisked away to the deep. The current twisted my frozen body with the heart-wrenching cold of the ocean while I willed myself to swim upwards. Losing air rapidly I chose to close my eyes and felt the cold embrace of death strip my soul from my body. Yu Yan's sweet voice rung in my water-clogged ears and slowly soothed me to my everlasting sleep.

YU YAN

I knew as soon as the crew walked across the wooden harbour that something was wrong. I arrogantly searched for his face as the ship's crew looked at me with such emptiness in their eyes that I knew my life would never be the same. In that moment of loss my world collapsed – where there was light there became shadows, the pain coming and going like waves on frigid sand. Though my mind called out for his, the connection was gone... he was gone... and finally, I knew that my time to be alone had come. I can only pray that we will be reunited in the next, that God would see fit to give us more time. Li Jie's memory will live on and for that...I am grateful.

The Voyage of Bǎozàng Chuán

Kellett School, Kirpalani, Tanisha - 13

People scrambled, porters, shoved and hollered, merchants called, shopkeepers argued, women bargained. A typical afternoon in Shandong – to any outsider. To the locals, it was an important day. The air crackled with tension, voices were curt and fearful, villagers backs and necks strained as if listening for a hidden attack. Then the gong went off, signifying a new raft entering the docks. Suddenly, everything froze. No breeze, no waves, even the birds seemed to hover in one place. It was as if the little village was holding its breath. Then the spell snapped, and the whole village shrank back from the monstrous creation that towered over everything. They had known a boat of great importance was coming today. But this? It was beyond their wildest dreams.

The Bǎozàng chuán had come to Shandong and with it came sorrow.

...

Later that afternoon, Zheng Hi sat in the humble house of Gao Dou. The refreshments on the ancient oak table lay untouched. It appeared, to the crowd that stood outside the village headquarters, that the stranger and their beloved mayor were participating in an intensely heated argument. It was the first time the villagers had seen their calm, placid mayor get worked up in a rage. Only later would they know the reason.

The night of the villages' weekly meeting, Gao Dou took his place at the little podium ready to make the announcements for the following week. His buoyant face was unusually grave, just as it had been when he announced the start of the war with Li Zicheng, the Shun Dynasty emperor. Mayor Gao waited as the crowd fell silent before him. He said "Mr Zheng Hi, captain of the Bǎozàng chuán, which belongs to the Ming Treasure Fleet, has come to our humble society. We must bestow all our respect on him. Mr Zheng has requested us to present him with two children who accompany him on his next voyage." At that, a fearful gasp rose through the audience. Parents hugged their children closer and backed away in fear. Finally, after a long moment of silence, Feiyan Dou stepped forward. "Gao", she said in her honeyed voice "we have two strong ones, let them go if no-one else will send their children on such a prestigious journey." After a moment's hesitation, Gao reluctantly agreed. "Yes, I think that's what we will do," he replied. The next morning Buwei and Ji Dou left for their adventure. The villagers were sad to see the two adorable children leave but were grateful that none of their children were chosen to go on the voyage. As they boarded the ship a cloud of loss formed over Shandong. No one knew if they would ever see the two children again.

Seven-year-old Ji sat, lost in thought, on her four-poster bed in the enormous ship cabin. A knock on the door set her thoughts back in place. She straightened the creases of her flowing silk dress, courtesy of the ship, and stood by the bed as the door opened. It was a lowly sailor with a message from Captain Zheng, requesting Ji to go to the Captain's cabin.

She left the room immediately and hurried down the elegant carpeted hallway with the magnificent crystal chandelier. As she ran up the grand marble stairway, she sensed her older brother behind her and slowed down to let him catch up. Together they walked, eagerly awaiting the new task Captain Zheng had told them about the previous evening.

The Captain's jolly face awaited them as they entered his cabin. In his hand was a map. Nodding at them to sit down, he unrolled the ancient papyrus and set it on the table in front of them. In a flash, they understood what he would ask of them.

"As you may have inferred, I now ask you to guide the ship to the treasure. This can only be found by two children and their leader as the old prophecy states. But they must have a pure heart and good intentions. For days on end, we have scoured the seas for this treasure only to realise that we didn't have the two children to play the key part," He said with a serious expression. Buwei questioned hesitantly, "You said a pure heart and good intentions sir. What you are going to do with the treasure once we find it?"

"The treasure will be used to fund the army, to protect us from future wars. It will help with development across the villages of our country and aid the poor. So will you help?" he asked.

"Of course," they answered together. Ji eagerly snatched the map, nearly dropping it in surprise at what she saw next. The usual black gridlines glowed a hot gold and the gold face drawn on the map started to speak...

***"Seek, and you shall find,
If your heart is purer than your mind,
Beware of the time,
For once it runs out, you shall find,
The dreaded person in your mind.
To take you must give,
Something you cherish more than you live."***

As it stopped speaking, Captain Zheng spoke: "It's a warning children. Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Yes," said Ji, determination etched across all of her features.

After an hour of pondering, they concluded. Once they found the treasure its hiding time would have run out. They would then have an encounter with the Bò zàng chuán's worst enemy the Cai Qian pirates. The part they did not understand was the line "To take you must give, Something you cherish more than you live."

Suddenly, in the distance, they heard a loud BOOM. As they rushed out onto the deck, they noticed the ship was eerily quiet. Looking over the railing, to their amazement they saw a giant gold cross etched in the still black water. They had reached the treasure! But how? Rushing into the ship's bridge, they saw the helmsman lay fast asleep on the wheel. All the other sailors lay in a profound daze. The vessel had drifted to the spot all by itself.

On taking another look at the cross, they realised that a few words were scrawled around it. The words read...

*"To find what you seek;
you must insert a key.
The key is in your hand and
tells you where you stand."*

Suddenly Buwei spoke up. “Maybe they mean the map. And that is what we must give to get what we seek.”

With great effort, Captain Zheng nodded “Yes this will benefit the whole country” he said and slowly lowered the map into the water at the centre of the cross.

With a great flash and a big splash loads of treasure rose out of the water. Masses of gold and silver bars, coins, goblets, jewellery, gems, and other precious items, hovered in front of them and then gently set itself down on the ship passing through the flooring as if it were non-existent and filling the vessel’s already full vault.

They had found the treasure. Now the other seamen had woken up, from the spell cast on them, just in time to see the end. In all the excitement no one saw the Cai Qian pirate ship emerge from the dense fog.

Grey clouds formed overhead, and rain poured down heavily. The waves thrashed against the ship tossing it from one place to another. Lightning crackled, thunder rumbled, and Qian’s ship came closer and closer. A big BOOM started the battle; the cannons were opened and fired regularly, men fought on each vessel with spears and swords. For hours on end, the battle and storm raged on. Captain Zheng constantly battled five men at a time including the fiercest, meanest warrior of all time; Cai Qian. Then, just as the Bǎozàng chuán started to lose hope a bolt of lightning struck Cai Qian’s ship burning it to the sea-bed. But Qian and forty of his men were still alive and fighting on the Bǎozàng chuán. The children stood helplessly in the background as a copper dagger cluttered at their feet. Picking up the dagger, little Ji ran into the battle before her brother could stop her. Hurling the blade with all her strength, she let go and hit Cai Qian in the heart. Seeing their leader dead, the remaining pirates jumped overboard to avoid capture, leaving the Bǎozàng chuán peaceful again.

THE END

The Bǎozàng chuán distributed the treasure that helped various cities and towns develop and prosper. A large donation was made towards the upliftment of families of the sea men who gave up their lives.

Little Ji was the hero of the night by killing Cai Qian. The children were honoured with an enthusiastic reception. The hardworking little village of Shandong received a sizeable portion of the treasure for their active part in its search, and everyone lived comfortably ever after.

Canglong

King George V School, Zhao, Ran - 13

The *Canglong's* surgical cabinet holds two prosthetics: a metal femur and a metal heart.

I've lost limbs to accidents, organs to time and disease, and sometimes, necessity of environment. I don't know when I recognized inevitability and decided to print a copy of every body part I'd conceivably need to be replaced, and sure enough, 29th century state-of-the-art 3D printers failed to serve my cause—but hell if I hadn't tried to print another printer with it before it broke down.

I'm not the technological type, at least not according to the standards of my profession, but I'm happy to say I've managed to figure out not to print components taller than the *Canglong's* cabin ceiling. Of course, there's the dent in the roof to show. I guess it's a waiting game now. Waiting for my 3D printed heat shields to run out, waiting to see if it'll be my body or the *Canglong* that gives first, breaks in a way that can't be replaced.

Not the heart, though. Never the heart. A thousand artificial reinforcements keep it beating, but the only way I can face my silver rictus grin without turning my head away is in the knowledge that, beneath the putter of gears and grind of oft-neglected joints, my heart, at least, is still a human's heart—this heart that wrenched and stuttered at my first sight of space and soared at my first supernova and now longs for the days when I looked to the stars with yearning instead of bitter hate; this heart that, sentimental though it may be, marks me irreversibly as human.

Sometimes I'll blur my eyes and pretend that they're electric cities, press my palms to my eyes and watch the rather bloom of phosphenes. I'll tell myself that the jute strands of my lashes distort discolored neon signs instead of cold, chatoyant stars, that I'll blink and the world that comes into focus will be just that, a world and not a sterile isolation chamber. That it never happened, that fateful day when I radioed *Bi An* after a hundred-year cryosleep and it didn't answer back.

And sometimes I'll wonder why I didn't end it there, almost delirious with panic, frantically scanning message after message of *contact not established*, the acrid insinuation of *last human alive* hovering like a carrion vulture waiting for a man to die. Sometimes I wonder why I turned the *Canglong* around with its cargo of *Bi An* approved gifts and set its trajectory to the nearest star system.

So many decades, and it's the silence that gets to me, creeping into the passionless hum of machinery in the liminal spaces between tasks and threatening to erode the edges of my mind. It's in those instances, not yet spent in cryosleep, is when the memories threaten to overwhelm me.

Because you could fill encyclopedia upon encyclopedia with the things I've seen and never breach its depth, aboard this battered starship loaded with memories.

I've seen sentient gas clouds, spindly creatures as tall as mountains, creatures living in bioluminescent oceans with tentacles spanning continents. I'll orbit their planets, gleaning what information I can, and then I'll descend. They'll point their weapons at me, for they are no fools.

The *Caolong* is a nimble, catlike thing with four antennae outstretched watchfully and *Bi An's* slogan, *the modern treasure voyage*, spanning her width in twenty-four languages. Her exterior can retract to show shaded transparent walls that reveal our absence of weapons.

Sometimes they'll see it, and let me land. And if they don't, that's okay too. I'll put myself into cryosleep and set a new trajectory. Each journey takes a thousand years, but time has never been a limit.

Sometimes I arrive to barren desert cities, the elaborate structures projected to me from ancient light now nothing more than scaffolding and dust, standing with the impervious dignity of empty snail shells.

The wind will moan through the sand-blasted formations, fluting and morose, and I'll board my ship again.

And sometimes it will be a meteor-cracked world I wander through, sanguine skies and dried-up seas, the dull red embers of some long-abated conflagration still flickering at my feet.

But sometimes it's a civilization, a group of stargazers that greet me, flocking curiously as my ship sets down.

I show them planes and spaceships, the Hubble Telescope and the proof behind Hawking radiation. Perhaps I'll draw out Dante's *Inferno*, and it'll be well-worn, a copy I've treasured over innumerable millennia. My fingers will wander over the translucent coffee stain marring the cover, lingering over dog-eared pages crammed with spidering observations. But I'll hand it over. I want to. I must.

I ask little in return—a sachet of alien earth. A photo. A piece of technology, or perhaps a story.

I fill the *Canglong's* logbook with these stories, an ever-expanding tapestry, each one finding a home amid the rambling myriad of files and classifications.

And then I board my ship.

It's failing now. The *Canglong* is old and has been mended too many times, not enough resources to visit another planet without burning up. And my heart, too, has been broken and mended too many times. One day I'll have to replace it too.

But now I know, even as I bare my chest on the surgery table, maybe for the last time.

I'm not the last of the human race, am I?

I'm the first.

Because if there's one thing that we humans haven't failed at, it's hope.

Hope for knowledge. Hope for wealth. Hope of the here-be-dragons and undiscovered territory. Hope that, far beyond the horizon, whether it rests on uncharted seas or uncharted stars, we'll find a kindred spirit.

That's why we keep our ports open and our telescopes trained to the sky, isn't it? That's why Zheng He embarked on those journeys and *Bi An* took up the torch. Hope.

And if there's one thing I know for absolute certainty, it's that it's not the electrodes that govern my titanium limbs, nor the artificial crevasse left by my beating heart, that determines whether I'm human. It's not my skin or warped anatomical structure or breathing tank that converts any trace of water to oxygen.

And these aliens, with their gas-cloud bodies and nebulous eyes and fierce, ardent hope? They're human too.

I'll broadcast the *Canglong's* log.

With the her technology, I can do it.

She'll transmit them outwards, with her four slender antennae, as momentum catapults her through light years of space I'll never hope to see.

And maybe, just maybe, when even the *Canglong* is nothing more than a twisted hunk of metal and a handful of floating ashes, a voice will crackle over the static of a radio receiver pointed to the sky of a blue-green planet not so different from our own. It'll be transmuted and fractured and borderline unintelligible and following it, a white line lapsing into darkness like a lighthouse's rays, will be rows and rows of numbers.

And it won't be easy, but they'll manage, grasping for the whispered nuance written fervently into the lines of zeros and ones.

They'll manage, and a message will appear. The *Canglong's surgical cabinet holds two prosthetics*, it'll read. *A metal femur and a metal heart.*

So, let me tell you a story.

Not about me or a long-forgotten solar system, not about the Milky Way or even the tiny, failed species that is the human being, prideful and naïve and setting fire to a planet in their thirst for the stars.

No.

It's about you.

Because there's so much light you still can't see.

My Personal Diary – Zheng He

King George V School, Zhao, Rou - 11

The night before I set off.

Through the cracked, fog-clouded windows, I can see the waves roaring and spitting foam. A frothing, raging tide, blazing underneath the golden, silk-woven moon.

“Zheng He, are you crazy?” Calloused hands thump my back. “There are pirates out there. Have you not heard of Chen Ziyu?” I hear chairs scoot closer, and a hand gripping my face, pulling me closer to a hushed, husky voice. I turn to face my friend as his spittle grazes my ear. “Chen Ziyu is the most feared and respected pirate. He will be sure to hear about hundreds of ships carrying these treasures! He will surely come murder you!”

And if he doesn't get to you first, the waves will. They drown and they are greedy. They grasp countless men with blood-washed fingers and sink them to the remnants of shipwrecks and skeletons, not to mention the—

Their words are like a constant twittering of birds pecking me raw. *Be careful of this. You will die because of that. There are pirates out there. There are monsters out there.*

Their words have pierced me until I am black and blue, dripping with blood. I've read enough scrolls about Chen Ziyu, the murdering waves and the forsaken beasts wandering out the closeted home of China. I know enough. And with each impending second to the quarter moon I set off, a deep, dark stone rolls into my stomach.

Why am I doing this? They ask me. You are stupid. You are crazy.

No.

I am a man serving my country. Can't they understand? I'm doing this for them.

Yet still, they cluck and fuss.

“I'm leaving tomorrow. You can't convince me not to.” I say instead, pushing up from my chair.

In an instant, my friend is after me, leaping up to bar the door, with that stubborn jut of his chin. “You do not understand, Zheng He!”

“Yes, I do!” I shout back.

And for a moment, decades of friendship wipes away, and we are bristling.

Words surface on the tip of my tongue, and that coil of fiery anger lashes in my stomach as my friend curls his fists.

But instead of throwing himself upon me, he stoops down and tenderly scoops up my hand. There is a universe of pain in the deep brown well of his eyes as he stares up at me.

“Return to us, my friend. Come back home.”

There is nothing I can say.

“We'll all miss you, Zheng He. Just promise me you won't forget about us. That you'll try to come back. Please.”

“I-I will.”

Before I reach the door, I steal a glance behind my shoulder. My friend is still kneeling

forlornly on the cold, hard ground, eyes fixated on me, as if he couldn't bear to see me go.

I turned and slammed the door behind me, before they could all see the bright tears glinting in my eyes.

That couldn't be the last thing they remembered about me.

Day 10 of the Voyage

For the 6th day in a row, the sea heaves beneath me. I clutch my stomach, cowering in the corner of my den, as frigid waves slam into my ship, tossing us airborne

And then the drunken giants stop toying with us. They roar with fury and smash.

The ship groans, and terrible, discordant screams drown out the splinter of breaking wood.

Red-tinged water sloshes against my ankles, but the only noise I can hear is my prayer to Allah.

There is another *thunk*, and we careen into the air. Who's steering the ship?

Against the howl of the wind and lash of salt, I crawl across the deck, flat across the wood.

The steering wheel is unmanned.

With a roar, ripped away into the icy night, I leap for the wildly spinning wheel.

I cling on all night and morning, until our ship bursts free from its watery prison, and charges through the pale sunlight, battle-scarred, and red.

Day 70 of the Voyage

60 days have passed since the storm. 60 days. How many lives have been lost so far?

There's too many to count.

I stay positive for my crew. *We've stayed alive so far! The sky is so blue today, the sun so bright! We are very lucky men!*

The men laugh and pat me on the back. They don't remark on this dangerous game of chance we are playing. Instead, they say. This Zheng He is so cheerful!

How many of them are putting on a charade, too?

Suddenly, amid the aimless gossiping, the sound of a horn blasts through the air.

Men scurry everywhere, brawling for the telescope, peering into the distance.

What we see is indescribable.

Men and women in strips of clothing, move around, leading horses painted carefully black and white. We gasp over the tall, golden domes, and the twisting, curving trees.

We point at the bright clothing and the wooden brown skin.

What is this new world? We whisper.

At first, when the arcs of white streak through the air, we applaud and jump on the spot, little children. But when one of our men crumples to the floor, the atmosphere shifts.

Squeals turn into roars as I race to the fallen man, weaving between the furious crew.

They roll cannonballs across the ship, flexing sinewy muscles.

There is a sizzle, and a man prepares to light the cannon.

"Do not fire at them!" I yell as I wrap silken cloths around the groaning man. "We come in peace. We just want to trade. We need a messenger to go to the docks of this island!"

Everyone stares numbly at me.

"Um. Yeah, sure. I'll do it." I mutter. I'm not sure if it's a cold hand creeping up my spine, or just a trickle of sweat. But it's lingering there as I slide into the small rowboat.

Arrows target it, and I row furiously, ducking my head.

Once my boat knocks against wood, I stand up carefully and rest a foot on the wooden planks of land. My arms are raised. My back is straight. My skin is cold without warmth of

much clothing.

In a wave-like motion, the soldiers surge forwards, but a tiny soldier holds them back.

The soldiers hesitate and stare at the general as he jabs himself in the chest with a bony finger.

I face him silently. Is he telling his men to retreat?

But he yells a string of gibberish and dives himself.

There is only the sound of blood pounding in my ears. I'm not going to fight. I won't hurt him. I can't hurt him.

But when I open my eyes, it is just the rows of soldiers, frozen.

The small soldier is floundering in the waves. His fate is spelt out by the weight of his uniform, and the salt clambering up his chin.

But no one attempts to rescue him. What could they do?

In the silence, broken by splashes, I hear screams again. The thundering shatter of wood. Silk and porcelain lost in the howl of the wind.

I'm not quite sure what happened, until ice slams into my chest, and fists pound my back. Somehow, the soldier is on my back, and I am dragging him to the docks. Isn't he just a man with family as well?

No one dares to fire.

Day 296

Allah has bestowed upon us a gift from heaven. A graceful mammal, tall, long-necked and orange, with the tongue of a devil. We stroke it before we set sail. It is our good luck talisman.

Our ships are fuller than before, now, full of alien objects and animals. My room is stuffed too, with little presents I picked for myself. Souvenirs.

We've turned back, and I can already see the Great Wall of China, winding in the distance. There's so much more out there. So many things we can see if we just open our eyes.

I sigh.

A man joins me by the moonlit sea. "Will you come back on a voyage again?" He asks me.

I think, and instead of black flags with skulls fluttering towards us. Instead of bloody waves and broken bodies. Instead of fear, doubt, and only the hovering hope, I see the answer in the blazing stars.

A heartsick, ethereal melody.

My heart sings along.

Yes. Yes, I will come back.

"For the treasure out there?" the man whispers.

I glance at him, and at my cabin. My cluttered cabin piled with souvenirs.

His question takes me back in time, until there's only me, my heart and the wisdom and kindness I've learnt.

The beautiful unimaginable I saw.

The trials Allah threw at me. But I had leaped over them easily, hadn't I?

And it's there, and I suddenly understand now.

What use are these pretty objects, we collect, anyway?

No.

The fruit was the journey.

The journey for me.

For me and my heart.

The Thoughts of an Explorer

Sha Tin College, Wong, Nicole - 13

I was a young farmer in a small town in Northern China. Back then, we didn't have anything to do, we just tended to the fields and fed the animals; just like that, we made enough to live peacefully. This, however, all changed when an unknown man came to our town on a white mare, looking as though he came from a story, with exquisite silk robes and servants obeying his every command. A community meeting was soon called, with every person, big or small, gathering at the heart of the town.

There was a jumble of nervous speech, meant to ease the nervousness and confusion until the mysterious man opened his mouth.

“My name is Zheng He, and I am an explorer, who has gone to many distant lands and has found many different treasures,” the man explains, “The emperor has sent me on a voyage, to travel around the world, to claim what is rightfully ours. We need a task force, great as a dragon, so large that it can equal any man or beast that we may encounter on our journey.” he continues, taking a deep breath and staring intently towards my direction, his gaze boring through my soul and heart.

“We need ship captains, we need boatswains, we need people who can navigate our way through the darkness. However, don't worry! Everyone who wants to travel, can get a job. Who's in?”

I glanced at the people around me, including my parents, my friends, and my fellow villagers. I wanted a try at the rich life, wanted to see faraway lands, wanted to have a taste of being so far at home, but at the same time, I was unsure of my decision. I wouldn't see my family for a long time, and I would leave behind everything, and everyone I had ever known. It wasn't just me. Everyone looked wary of the stranger, afraid that he was telling lies, or uncertain if they wanted to enlist or not. The man, who was kind and friendly, answered every single question we threw at him – and more...it seemed like an obvious choice! You got a cabin all to yourself, easy job, all living necessities, and you got to see what was beyond the horizons of our country! If so, why was I not as enthusiastic as the situation called? I pushed those thoughts aside and stood up, and exclaimed: “I want to join your ranks.”

A sea of faces stared at me, eyes widened, then looked away. I felt embarrassed and self-conscious – why were they peering at me like I was an animal held captive? The kind explorer snapped me out of my trance, agreeing to my proposal. I was to leave in a weeks time, to the nearest city's large pier, where many ships and fellow officers would be waiting for me. Since I didn't have any valuable experience that could be used on the journey, I would be a cabin boy, until I learnt the ropes.

The last week of my time at my homeland passed in a blur. I worked, I spent time with my family, and I went to my favourite places, until it was time to leave. My family had specially told one of my relatives to accompany me on my journey, so at least I wouldn't be leaving alone, getting lost and doing who-knows-what. As I hugged my parents and my siblings goodbye, I was filled with a sense of regret. Everything here was so familiar: our wooden one-story house, our plots of vegetables and plants, everyone I knew and adored – I would miss them all. My mind wandered away from it's safe space and into the depths of uncertainty and negativity. Would I ever come back? Would this be the last time I was ever to

see this familiar scene? I quickly chastised myself for those thoughts and said a final goodbye, wishing with all my heart that I would return to see my hometown.

The journey passed by as I travelled across plains, muddy roads and deserts, but with each step I thought of my family going on with their lives as normal. My heart suddenly felt a pang of pain and guilt – I missed them a lot. However, I knew I had to go, for all my life I felt the urge to explore, the feeling of freedom whenever I was allowed to run across the plains and discover to my heart's content.

At last, I arrived at the pier. It was filled to the brim with people: mothers sending their children goodbye, excited people waiting to board a ship for the first time, regal-looking people wearing robes and jewelry. The ships stood there, proud and confident, white masts pushed back and forth by the roaring wind. I stood there, alone and unsure of where to go. Walking around, I spotted the face of that very same explorer that had come to recruit young sailors from the town courtyard. I went up and introduced myself, and I was escorted onto the ship that I would be staying on for the next few months, or even years.

The cabin was drab and plain, with dark brown wood interior, a small bed, and a desk-side table. Although not grand, it felt homey after a re-decoration of small ornaments I brought made from various plants and leaves I had at home. It was a long week, and as I slumped onto the bed, again thinking about home, I passed out.

I woke up, unsteady and startled, floating somewhere in the Pacific Ocean. Where was I? How did I get there? Walking around in the small, drab wooden cabin, I remembered about the job post I took, how could I ever forget?

Every day, the routines were the same. I would often be called by the Captain, who was no other than Zheng, or senior navigators to help them run errands, whether that be passing on a message or to get some refreshments from them. I dined throughout the day, eating some dried foods, none fresh or high in nutrition, as there weren't any plots to plant vegetables or fruit. Sometimes, I would take some herbs or medicine to the sick or injured, tending to their wounds, with the best materials that we could spare at the time.

The ship wandered aimlessly around the ocean, as there was often stormy and angry weather which made it extremely hard to navigate. We would often work for many hours at a time, taking care to not oversleep as every person was vital to that very operation.

More and more people got sick every day, showing signs of weakness and fatigue. They would often complain about their arms or legs hurting, how they were constantly hungry however didn't have an appetite at the same time. I was appalled at the thought of being that dependent on other people, fearing being as sick as them, however when many soldiers were getting that same illness, my hopes dropped.

One day, as I was going to fetch a cup of water for the captain, I tripped and fell. As hard as I tried, I couldn't get up. My throat scratchy, I grunted for help, but I was at one of the deserted quarters, taking a shortcut, no one could help me. Soon, I was spotted by one of my fellow castmates, and helped to my bed. Over time, some symptoms started to appear that was the same as my other crewmates. My skin started occasionally bleeding and peeling, my gums constantly hurt and sometimes bled, and I was weak to the point that I couldn't get up. While all that happened to me, one thing stayed constant – I still yearned for my parents to soothe my pain, yet I longed to tread on new lands. My heart felt like it was being split into three – one for the illness, one for exploration, and one for my homeland.

I couldn't sleep well, it felt like the demons were continuously stirring inside of me. I tried to focus, but — “Land! Land!” The shouts suddenly came, and propping myself on my bed, I stumbled out of the doorway, into the calm night sea. Indeed, there was land. Grass

plantations, palm trees, beaches, all that made a city beautiful and unique were present. The pain suddenly consumed me again.

I shut my eyes and prayed for the pain to end, gasping, I counted my shallow breaths, in, out, in, out. I thought of exotic creatures and new cultures, thought of being with my family, thought of being perfectly fine and healthy for the last time. I felt like I was transported to that distant land with perfect scenery and dazzling views.

All was still in my mind.

The Secret Life of Fiction

West Island School, Eyunni, Gayathri - 13

I was always searching.

Searching for something, but not knowing what it was, or why. I liked to call it a 'treasure'; an unknown treasure. I seemed to have a strange connection with treasure, as if I had found many before, even though I knew that to be false. I sometimes wondered if I had a past life, if I was reincarnated. But others begged to differ, it was a distant possibility that seemed true in my mind, but a mere fantasy in everyone else's...

It wasn't money.

My troops were ready. The mighty three-hundred-and-seventeen ships had already been lined up glamorously by the shore, as well as the sixty mammoth treasure ships, ready to receive and hold the world's wonders. I stood by the shore and looked up at my ship, where I would spend the coming months. To live on a boat, excited me in some ways. But as I pondered the purpose of this voyage, my excitement somewhat died. Did we really need this material wealth?

It wasn't jade.

My parents always said that we were 'losing our heritage'. I always thought they had magical powers, figuratively, of course. But one day, it seemed as though they were real sorcerers, evil ones, that too. I believed that they cursed my mind, so that I would only think of the past. The thoughts came one at a time, slowly, as if time itself was taking it's time. When I narrated these stories to my mother, she brushed them away like dirt. It went through one ear, came out the other. I knew that they were flashes, not just thoughts, because I had never learned about them before, but they seemed to be true. Every detail, as if I were truly present in the past...

It wasn't silver.

I went aboard the main ship, ready for the third voyage. I tried my best to stimulate excitement within my troops, but keeping my own spirits up was a challenge. I looked forward to a new adventure, but I wanted something more, anything more. I planned a life of adventure for myself, but it seemed as if I was confined to the rules and regulations of this community. We had forty-eight elephantine ships, majestic like a tusker, carrying thirty-thousand soldiers, all wearing the same uniform, mostly the same height, similar stature, yet their personalities were unique, each one different from anyone else, no two were the same. Just like our voyages, all for a similar purpose, but with a different outcome each time. I somehow wished that the purpose was different as well.

It wasn't gold.

The idea that I had a past life grew stronger in my mid. It had to be the truth. The voyages were real, anyone who believed otherwise was definitely wrong. They were stories written in stone. I wasn't sure of my identity, but every time another flash appeared, I felt a part of the story. I was there. But who was I? The question lingered deep below, like a devil that grew stronger in the darkness, waiting for the right moment to emerge into the light and scream...

It wasn't pride.

Plans to extend the scope of these voyages even further led to the fourth voyage.

I resolved to attempt to enjoy it, the new treasures, the searches, the atmosphere of the ship, the salty breeze that engulfed the deck every time a wave passed by us, the stale fish that strangely tasted wonderful when our stomachs growled like lions. But how could I? The kingdom, already the greatest in the world, did not need more of these extravagant adventures and treasures. It needed a different kind of wealth, but what?

It wasn't fame.

I had a psychological problem. My mother stood with a strange mix of anger, fear and relief. Anger for the rise of this 'problem', fear for the future, and relief that the cause for these 'episodes' was finally discovered. I attempted to assure her that I was fine. My small, supple hand was thrown away by her's, hard and wrinkled, from years of hard work and pain. Her life had been written down, destined, long before she was born, just like millions of others', who did what they did because they were forced to, expected to, against their will. Was my future written down as well? Was this the life I wanted for myself?

It wasn't any kind of material wealth.

"Zheng!", the Emperor called. Zheng? As soon as I remembered myself, I rushed to his aid. Strange, how I could forget my own name. I felt a little distant from my identify that day, I couldn't understand why. As if I wasn't really myself, but an imposter who resided in the same body, though fully aware of this the entire time. My peers called me 'disoriented' that day. I somewhat agreed, but was too busy pondering an important life-choice. What was my goal in life?

Maybe it was hope.

I sat at the top of the hill that faced the glistening sea. Shimmering waves danced around in the clear blue water like restless silver spangles. "Why is mama sending you to a psychologist?" my little brother Ma asked innocently. I shrugged. Much as I hated the idea, my mother would have her reasons. As I mustered up a better answer, something caught my eye. It was large, growing larger. Majestic, grand, compelling. "Ma.. can you see that? Over there, near the horizon. Do you see it?" Ma stood up but looked confused. "That.. that fleet of ships!", I cried, beckoning him to see. "I see nothing." Ma said. "You must really be mad..."

Maybe it was hard work.

I seemed eternally unsatisfied. It seemed as though material wealth and items were of no use to me. Then suddenly it clicked, the small light bulb that was my brain. The voyages, they meant something more. Something more than finding out who I was, or what my 'real' life was. The idea slowly grew on me, that this 'curse' as I had so blindly named it, was bestowed on me for a reason larger than my mind, than my life, and that it was the *raison d'être* of my existence. I had only just digested the inner meaning of the story, being so tangled in its outline. I wanted to go back, experience the stories again, when I realised that they were real, they were happening, to me...

Maybe it was love.

I sat by my window writing the events of our most recent voyage. Half of me was in the Persian Gulf, Red Sea, the coast of Africa, but the other half was somewhere else. I looked out of the window facing the sea, the moon casting its beams on the strong waves, strong but delicate at the same time. They could wash you away, or bring you back to the shore. I wished for a moment that I would be washed away, to a place where I could learn the truth about life.

I knew what it was.

I lay on my bed wondering. If only I had realised this before. I had finally found the truth about life, the secret I sought so desperately. If everyone knew this, they would live better and have a more fruitful life. The secret of life was...

We could find a thousand treasures, but not one would make us truly happier. It was like a jar filled with poison and nectar, poison being the sadness, anger, negativity, and nectar being happiness. It seemed as though giving a drop of your nectar to someone else, added a drop into yours. It seemed as though I was living in Zheng He's story, his own emotional journey, of finding the secret of life. The elixir of immortality. Now that the flashes had stopped, I imagined the Zheng had also discovered the secret.

The next day in court, the Yongle Emperor asked me 'the hardest question ever asked'. "What is the secret of life?" he asked, chuckling silently. "If you answer this, you will be named the treasure of my court."

I glanced around the court. There was a glow around my face, as I knew the answer. "Your Majesty," I began, courtiers eagerly awaiting the secret they had desired their whole lives, that would change their lives forever. I took a deep breath.

It was time for the final voyage. This time, it was not to trade spices from India, silver goods from Iran, Turkic slaves, Byzantine clothes or Afro-Arabian ceramics. Instead, it was to spread this new secret. This would be my final voyage, my mission. Finally, my spirits were high, my chin was up, a calm and content smile on my face, and one on every soldier who joined the voyage. My jar was filled with nectar.

"To share happiness", I told myself. "That is the treasure I have been searching for".

Fiction

Group 4



Ge Ming

Carmel School Association Elsa High School, Razon, Ori - 15

In the year of 1432, the Ming dynasty set out on its seventh and final voyage, and made their first international stop in Surabaya, Indonesia; residing there from the 7th of March until the 13th of July. The Yongle Emperor tasked Lu Changdong, a respected merchant and voyager, with leading the voyage. The following are excerpts from Lu Changdong's diary:

8/6/1432

Finally. Something positive is coming out of our dynasty. Although they stem from nonetheless nationalist motives, this set of voyages is hopefully the beginning of something very special. The Yongle Emperor has reignited by once exuberant faith in our dynasty and its values. Today, as we walked along the roads of Surabaya, I understood that there are some things that you can fulfil with money, but at the end of the day these are not the things that make you happy, and that it is the small things that make life worth living. As I walked from house to house, handing things that I took for granted as a child to families and people in need, the emotions of pure joy displayed on the faces of children and parents finally made me feel as though I was making a real difference, as if I was becoming part of something bigger than myself. The words of Buddha have guided me throughout my entire life, and once and for all, it seems as though we can finally put his lessons to practice, as a dynasty:

Just as treasures are uncovered from the earth, so virtue appears from good deeds, and wisdom appears from a pure and peaceful mind. To walk safely through the maze of human life, one needs the light of wisdom and the guidance of virtue.

May we all uncover the treasures of life, and discover the virtue and wisdom within us all.

Long Live the Ming Dynasty!

Throughout the following couple of years, the citizens of China had become witnesses to a chaotic civil conflict, and an eventual change in dynasty. Through means of violent revolution, Shunzhi revolted against the Yongle Emperor, and executed him publicly. Concerned over sustaining his new position as emperor, Shunzhi immediately canceled the treasure voyages, and implemented strategic massacre in order to eradicate all threats to the Qing dynasty. Considering that Indonesia was one of the main beneficiaries of the treasure voyages, Emperor Shunzhi's first course of action was to terminate all inhabitants of Indonesia - starting off with Surabaya, its capital at the time...

25/8/1437

I was the first to lay foot in Indonesia, and I couldn't help but notice that the neighbourhood seemed a bit over familiar for my liking. It seemed quiet. It seemed peaceful. I knew it was my duty to follow the emperor's orders, no matter how unjust, and yet, something inside me couldn't do it. Something inside couldn't destroy such peace. From the ships behind me came a peculiar, blood-chilling sound. It was like the low snarling of many voices, and it grew louder and louder until it became a sullen, muttering roar. Hundreds of Chinese soldiers, some of which I recognised, rained down on the neighbourhood. In the Qing dynasty, hesitation came with a price; and now convinced I had to execute such a task for my own wellbeing, I rushed into the nearest hut, armed and fearing for my life. But I recognized a familiar

face. A young face. I couldn't do it, and I froze. Unable to summon the courage to take action, my commander exploded into the hut in a sprint, blinded by his one goal in mind: to slaughter all inhabitants of Surabaya. The father stood his ground, defending his family with his life, but he was no match for commander Lee. As he penetrated into his innocent, soft flesh, guttural chokes mixed with an agonized roar erupted outward. Unnerved, Lee moved on to the mother, and she was of similar fate. He walked slowly toward the son, grinning, but our eyes locked and I couldn't let it happen. Principles of loyalty to our dynasty had been constantly projected to me as a child; and yet, I betrayed all that I had been taught, and slashed at the neck of my commander.

Silence.

The screaming had stopped so very suddenly. One slash of a blade and the commander, my commander, lay there, like a ghoulish mannequin. As I recollected my breath, the adrenaline faded from my system. I began feeling nauseous, and retched. My mind wanted me to think of a plan, I wanted to flee, to hide. But I stood there, frozen. The passage of the light slowed. Sounds muted, as if I were underwater. Aside from the beat of my heart, no muscle would move. And before I could digest all I was going through, the kid had fled without a trace. I didn't even get to know his name.

In these late hours, I begin to humanize the mangled face of my commander, and when I realize I've completely and utterly obliterated a human being from existence, it becomes absolute mental torture. But it was justified right? I saved the boy's life.

It doesn't matter. I can't let myself ponder upon the sentimental, although it is all that is on my mind. There's no space for it here, at such a time. It is too late for me to go back now. I'm a traitor. With or without that kid at my side.

26/8/1437

I hid out in the mountains that night, until the tension died down. I fortunately woke up on the morning of the 26th - overwhelmed, but hopeful. Surabaya had a cold and hostile air to it. As I observed the paths of the neighbourhood, the barbarity of the events of the 25th revealed itself. Indonesian corpses were piled on one another, in abhorrent fashion. Innocent men, women, and children. The fog had faded, and the only remains of civilisation were the ashes at the tips of our toes. Or so I thought.

After examining the paths of the neighbourhood, I recognised fellow soldiers from the Ming Dynasty. I wasn't alone. Thank God. I wasn't alone. I wasn't the only one who understood that something had to be done - that we couldn't be bystanders to massacre. They understood it too. With almost all hope lost for the Qing Dynasty, it seemed as though Emperor Shunzhi was going to annihilate all the virtue that we had spread overseas as a result of the voyages, together with everything that would come in his path. At this point, it was no longer about surviving ourselves. The only chance we would have as a nation to end this dynasty and rebuild one with values of righteousness and virtue was to cut off the root of the problem: Emperor Shunzhi himself. Once he would be killed, the entire dynasty would crumble down, together with him. Tonight, I embark on a voyage overseas, together with my fellow soldiers, with the hope that we can revive what the Chinese Dynasties were once known to be. The remains of the Ming Dynasty will not go down quietly.

Together, I have no doubt that we can do it.

26/9/1437

It's been a tedious journey over the course of the past thirty days. Every moment has been a struggle, a struggle for survival. It's needless to say that this journey has been taking its toll on all of us - both physically and mentally. But we have each other, and I guess that is all that matters.

One day, we have to fight for our lives in the depths of the ocean. On others, we have to stealthily

proul past masses of soldiers, with the risks increasing at every stop - whether it be water or land beneath our feet.

It is almost impossible to describe what goes through one's head in the constant fight for survival. These events leave an ingrained mark on a soldier, a stain which stays with that soldier throughout the rest of his life - if he will even have one:

All senses are tightened to their utmost awareness. There are no longer any arrows raining down on us or fading screams in the distance. Silence. But it is precisely when it is silent, when one must prepare for the storm which will follow. The rustling approach of the unknown sparks an inexpressible fear within each and every one of us. The combination of blood, sweat and tears below me results in a soft and muddy surface, making it even harder to go unnoticed. Every elbow I put forward feels as though it's being pushed against me by a thousand men. Every leg that follows ruptures into my wounded left hip, sending an agonizing pain which pulses through my entire body. But we must not grunt, pant or gasp - we cannot be detected. Our breaths come in short and faint spasms, like a broken machine. We spot a large group of soldiers from the Qing dynasty coming in our direction. We have to act quickly. I grasp on my bloody dagger with my trembling and sweaty hand. The opposing soldier closest to me, aware that he is not alone, takes the sheath off his sword, triggering a metal scrape which cuts straight through me. We approach opposing soldiers from behind, all at once, and all our pain begins to disappear as the adrenaline pounds through our bodies, reaching our every limb. They spot us and turn around, each at different times, but before they can do anything, they are silenced by the edge of our blades. We escape the restricted area and sprint up the tall and dark fields of the mountain. Drained, I collapse onto the ground. As I wipe my face, the blood which had once flowed in the veins of my enemies is now clasped in the deep calluses below my fingers. I uncontrollably gasp for air, desperately crawling for cover.

Luckily, we all managed to retreat to cover and survive that day. However, it was yesterday when I finally understood how easy it was to kill, to be killed, and how fast I could die. All it could take was a knife at the hands of a single soldier- one wiser, stronger, or more skillful than me, to put an end to my life and everything that I ever loved. But I can't let this fear take control of me. It is at this dark hour, where such courage must reside with me stronger than ever before. Only then, can we bring an end to Emperor Shunzhi and his corrupt dynasty.

13/11/1437

The palace. It was right before our eyes today. Everything that we had built up to over the years, came down to that very moment:

We approached the palace, silently. The dust was coming down on us, and without vision we were rendered powerless. We were all thrown into oblivion, but we knew we weren't alone. As the dense mist came down, we began to see shadowy figures charging at us with menace. The mere view of their horrific forms incited a dreadful fear that pulsed through our veins. In panic we retreated, but it was too late. Arrows rained down on us from all sides, breaking through the heavy silence and dark fog. As my friends and fellow soldiers fell dead before my eyes, a sense of helplessness struck me. I slashed hastily with the hope that I could somehow escape this living hell. I leapt over my dead comrades, filled with a sudden yet irrational courage. Fire, crouch, run, kill, dodge, stab, kick, repeat - those were the eight pillars of survival in such dark hours.

The smell of blood was so strong I could taste it. The gunfire so deafening it shattered my ears. And the screams of my fellow soldiers, that was the most painful of all. It was utter chaos. The soldiers of the Qing Dynasty continued running at me in waves through the thick mist; but somehow, somehow, I managed to survive. Second by second, I continued clawing for that last burst of courage and power within me. And suddenly, almost miraculously, I spotted a clear opening to the left of the dark fog. It seemed as though that path had been put there especially for me. I personally never really thought much about God,

but it was at times like this that his presence was hard to deny. Clear of all threats and hazards, I sprinted through without thinking twice. To my relief, two of my most trusted and skillful comrades followed. I was not alone. Hope was not lost.

19/11/1437

Today, the deed has been done, and with the support of the majority of the oppressed and tyrannized people of the Qing Dynasty, a new emperor will come to power, in light of a new hope. A hope for a righteous and just dynasty, once and for all. As I write these final words before the new emperor's accession, I cannot help but think of all th

يتللا ةوقلا تمهف ، يني عم امأ يدلاو حبذام دنع . ةطلسلا لىلع لوصحلل ةيلاعف قرطلا رثكأ يه ةنايخ لاو بعالتلا
ءيش لك لصيس مويلاو ، ةليوط ةدم لملاعلا نوي نصيل ب دقلا . اهل محت أن اعطت سأم لو ، هلصن ةفاح لىلع ءرملا اهل محي
نصيللا حبصتت سأم اروخف نوكتت سقلقت ال . نآلا دي ج ناكم يف تنأ . هتيه ان لىل .

Translated: Manipulation and betrayal are some of the most effective ways to gain power. When my father was slaughtered in front of my eyes, I understood the strength that one carried on the edge of his blade, and I could bear it no longer. The Chinese and their malevolent emperors have tortured the world for too long, and today it will all come to an end, once and for all. You are in a good place now. Do not worry, you will be proud of what China will become.

A Eulogy to Heroes

Chongqing Nankai Secondary School, Li, Weike - 16

“Zhu! Come back home now and pack your stuff! You only get a tiny space for your pack so don’t bring your silly books and loose pages of poetry! Quickly!” A yell from a grouchy woman pierced the street, so shrieking that it penetrated tier upon tier of onlookers.

“I’m COMING!” a boy retorted, disappointed and perhaps irritated.

The shriek began again, “Quickly now! Time’s ticking!”

“I AM COMMMING!” the boy roared. His disgruntled sound nearly froze the street, making the idle owner of the fruit stand jump out of his skin — the owner cast a cursory glance in the direction of the sound, then leisurely resumed laying out his fresh pears and oranges. Among the crowds a handsome-looking boy, though a bit chubby, dashed through stores and stalls, dodging in and out of the flow of human legs. A stack of yellowish pages were in his left hand — the old urchin Li, the only other weirdo in the little town of Yuan, gave them to him — one of which, Li had claimed exuberantly, had been passed down for centuries from the Tang Dynasty. “What a gorgeous era.” The old man constantly reminisced about centuries before, eyes gleaming, voice shaking, and words asserting so unswervingly that he was the true heir of the emperor Li Yuan. Yet the only proof he possessed was a roughly-made imperial decree, and, his very last name. The boy, on the other hand, was haunted by his name. Mocked by all his neighborhood, Zhu had the very same last name as the Ming’s emperors, but held nothing yet a very deep hatred towards the dynasty. “The most distant relatives of our emperors,” he remembered a girl had jeered at him. So he identified with Li. He visited Li now and then. He would read through Li’s piles of old books from those dusty shelves and drink unrefined oolong tea with him down by the old birch tree.

★★

I would never do this again, never, he thought, the Sixth Voyage down the South Seas, as he scowled and slammed the door behind him. How ignorant they were, those silly grown-ups, that they even bragged about it as “the Great Voyages!” And all his neighbors, giving up so relentlessly the company of their children and wives or husbands, rushed to the ships in exchange for gold and silver coins. Ostentatious fleets, gaudy treasures, and mighty smug captains in shining armor standing tall on the bows — nothing could be more humdrum than a scene like this. It was quite glorious, indeed, but even so, how could they possibly compare the scene to what those books had described of the Tang Dynasty, the infantry and cavalry marching down the prairies of Mongolia, flying spears and roaring horses along the Yangtze River, and dust and smoke that could darken the skies for weeks. And a knight would always charge in at the forefront, drawing his sword from its sheath and brandishing it proudly. He especially wanted to be that knight, as poets of the Tang Dynasty constantly portrayed, who guarded the western border of China against the raids and invasions of the Huns — but he couldn’t quite imagine himself properly. So heavy, he’d always be standing comically with sword and shield and armor. And poetry! The moonlight in the capital city of Changan would always shine on an artistic poet, chanting his gorgeous verses in time. What now? A pile of golden cargo or boxes stuffed with silver coins?

Zhu had stayed in his chamber and refused to come out for nearly all the journey the fifth time he had embarked on “the Great Voyage” two years before. He brought hundreds of pages in his pack — the full collection of the poetry of Li Bai — and dove into it at the very beginning, devouring every single character. So thrilled by these scenes, rivers surging ahead from where the skies originated and moonlight pouring down so expansively, he would nearly jump with glee. The sea, yet, was an entirely different story. The amazement that grown-ups had described in detail, he had seen none of on his way. All he ever saw was monotonously stretching water and unvaryingly spreading skies. And the flux of shining gold and the wicked grins from the shrewd merchants. The waves always raided the ship at night, and his chamber would be just one step from shattering.

“You have to find him, the former emperor, Zhu Yunwen. Rumors have been spreading around the streets.”

“Wait... What do you mean? I remember... a funeral for him. It was the grandest funeral. He died in that huge fire he himself lit, right?”

“No...” the official leaned forward and whispered, “that was only a coverup job. It wasn’t his body but his wife’s. He was... lost...the day the new emperor’s army occupied the capital”.

Zhu was passing by the vestibule, and accidentally caught a glimpse of his father sitting across to a golden-cloaked official whom he had never seen before. *Another grown-up conspiracy.* He stopped behind the door and began pondering.

“...So, uh, the voyages were not only about silver coins and expensive spices and all that stuff, they were also about...” Before Zhu’s father finished, the astute official interrupted him.

“Shhh! You got the idea. The lost emperor is a threat. He has to be eliminated.” He stood up and walked towards the front gate. “Just don’t forget. I’ve got businesses...”

Zhu suddenly recalled some ramblings from the old urchin Li: the young emperor who succeeded because of the early death of his father, the tough usurper who arose from the borderlands, and the mysterious underground channel which Zhu Yunwen utilized to flee to nowhere — yet no stories could be more tedious than one like this, one with nothing but cruel politics and inexorable backstabbing. Where have those faithful love stories been? Where have those electrifying legends gone? What were left after all those centuries, he concluded, were only boring spirits and shrewd souls. Vicious ones too, of course.

The date was near. The fleet was scheduled to embark on the first day of October. The whole town of Yuan, relying fully on the shipping industry, began to regain some of its vitality. People from foreign lands gathered around the town, saturating all the motels and accommodations. The prices of local handicrafts surged, yet the intricacy and craftsmanship of the products were still barely satisfactory. It was the best season for the town, but the worst time for Zhu. With a thousand romantic hearts inside him, he still possessed the remaining rationality to remind him that he had to obey his family’s will and go on the voyage. “Who would look after you during the voyage if you don’t come?” his father claimed. “By the way, it will be fun. You don’t want to spend another of your winters in the shabby house of that weirdo Li, right?” Even if he did, there would be no way to convince his headstrong father.

So he locked himself up in his room, burying his head in the pages and counting the

remaining days. He didn't want a moment away from his beloved books, not to mention a horrendous farewell. *What a stinking century*, he thought. *The times are bad*. Businesses, wealth, and blind lust for power — no times could be more unmemorable than the one he was in. Year after year he longed to be a warrior, yearned for becoming a hero, and dreamt of a knight. *A stinking century, without legends or heroes*. He had made his mind up on the century and, as also a spark of light came across his mind, also for himself.

The sky still hadn't turned bright in the east. A dull white gleam was gradually spreading across the heaven. But the town had been awake for a long time, as had the boy Zhu. It was a big morning for him, and for the whole town.

The harbor was in a hullabaloo. A seething mass of folks wandered about the dock. People shouted as the drums and cymbals crashed incessantly. Everyone could hear the banging of gongs and the blare of trumpets from the shore. All the residents from the town, except for old urchin Li, flooded to the harbor — either they had been lucky enough to secure a lucrative job onboard, or they had laborious work in the harbor. The ships were within striking distance. For their sheer scale and grandeur, everyone would be mesmerized. Nine erect masts shot into the clouds; twelve white sails billowed with the breeze they caught. An anchor weighing tonnes shone in dazzling bronze, requiring more than two hundred strong men to set sail. As for the ships, they waited, thousands of folks to hold and four floors to fill, the vastness of the South Sea to explore and the strength of the Kingdom to demonstrate. Dragon as the prow, lion as the stern, with the hull covered in auspicious patterns, gleaming and shimmering. And along came the emperor in stunningly golden finery, with four people lifting the palanquin and eight brave men by his side.

“Where is he?” Zhu's father asked.

“Maybe... he went back home to grab some more books. You know, books from the weirdo. He's fallen for them.” His mother was quite confident. “Just wait for a few more minutes. He should be here.”

He was there already, standing at the bow of one of the ships and looking over the vast expanse of the harbor. A sudden burst of pride had swept through his body, like an electric current flowing through him, when he thought of his gorgeous plan. He had been so tired of reading legends from centuries before, always accompanying the heroes, but never becoming one — *Now I'm the hero! I'm about to write the legends! I will be the first in the century to add a touch of romance to this lifeless era!*

As the emperor went aboard, Zhu suddenly emerged from the crowd. He raised his hand over heart, and shouted out with all his might: “The former emperor, Zhu Yunwen, escaped from the grand fire in the capital! And he, is the rightful ruler!”

The emperor stood in shock, eyes glaring at him.

The masses were engulfed in an uproar. Chaos spread.

Troops of men surged towards the boy whose hands gripped tightly the pages from old urchin Li and whose face held a hearty smile, bringing him furiously to the ground.

Salt Water

Good Hope School, Cheung, Jocelyn Rachel - 16

“I’m saying you should’ve at least acted a bit more grateful-”

“Don’t worry, I am.”

Without a second word, he slammed the door to his cabin shut. To be fair, it was not his cabin, as it was shared between quite a few groups of crew members, but most of them were outside right now, and he had relatively more privacy. That being said, it wasn’t a lot. As he exhaled into his hands, he felt the odd stares of the others on his back. In all honesty, he didn’t think the situation was all that bad, it was just the circumstances that were. He had just wanted to go fishing, that was all, and go back to his little rundown shed of a home with his mother, and live good and well. However, this one grand voyage that the Yongle Emperor himself had commissioned had apparently required another crew member, and he had been tricked by that utter bastard Zhouli into helping out. With his luck, he probably wouldn’t be home for half a decade. He should’ve known something was off way earlier on, but by the time he had realized, Zhouli was waving an official order for his recruitment aboard the treasure ship in his face, giddy delight in his too-blue eyes.

What a fool.

He sighed, glancing up just to meet bright sunlight filtering through the crack in the door. Time passed quicker whenever you were dreading it. He blinked harshly as he straightened himself, smoothing out his clothes and offering a death glare to the people behind him. Before he could sweep out of the cabin to his post however, a hand caught on his shoulder, forcing him to stop. He turned to see a young man looking back at him, a faint grin on his face. He’s probably younger than me, he thought with an internal groan, letting his dark eyes fall shut for a moment before meeting the stranger’s amber gaze, which was – could you believe – twinkling with amusement. How dare he? He had just opened his mouth to speak when said stranger started first, interrupting his train of thought.

“Lize, right? I’ve heard things about you.”

He bristled, feeling a spark of defiance before he shut it down. He liked being known, but how this man worded it made the attention sound negative. He painted his face a picture of calmness – or rather, emotionlessness – before inclining his head as nonchalantly as possible, though the motion still seemed rather stiff.

“That’s me. I’m afraid I don’t know who you are.”

The stranger’s smile did not vanish, but instead widened.

“I’m Xuqiyue. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

How it was even a pleasure at all, Lize could not imagine. Even in his hometown, Lize was generally regarded as the stoic one: a nicer way of saying he was too blunt, too straightforward, but that was the way he was. He didn’t mind and his mother also didn’t mind too much, his books didn’t either, so who cares? He simply just nodded again at Xuqiyue, wondering what he was expected to say. The pleasure is all mine? That would be a lie. He didn’t enjoy lying. As the sunlight blossomed into speckles across the wooden floorboards underfoot, he wondered offhandedly how late he was. Maybe he could make it up later to whoever would be overseeing his job. He had many more days and months to do so, after all – with all the time in the world, it seemed to him. It took a few more moments before he

had the compulsion to pull his mind back into his current situation with this... rather curious man, who was now squinting at him rather obviously: observing him, of all things.

“Can I help you?” Lize asked, crossing his arms at Xuqiyue, who was just a few centimetres shorter than him, but not enough that he could leer over him.

“Not today,” Xuqiyue shook his head. “Just wanted to say hi. Let’s be friends, yeah?”

Lize did not reply, instead seeming to freeze at the proposition. Friends... The closest thing he had to a friend on this stupid ship was Zhouli, and they were on a hiatus right now. Frankly, Lize wouldn’t mind having friends too much, especially since he was keenly aware that this journey was going to be incredibly long, excruciatingly long, if he didn’t have any distractions. So he bit his lip, nodded at Xuqiyue, and left.

“Ehh, so it’s like that?” Xuqiyue mused, glancing ahead past the ship’s mast instead of at Lize next to him. Standing by each other they created almost a perfect contrast: Lize stood straight out of habit, his dark eyes vigilant as he took in their surroundings, the breaking waves casting a reflection in his pupils. One of his hands held onto the railing while the other pushed his hair out of his eyes, intent on navigating. Xuqiyue on the other hand lounged carelessly by Lize, playing with his own fingers and sniffing at the salty tang of ocean air. Like a dog, Lize thought in the back of his head, though the accusation was fond, almost. He resisted the urge to ruffle the man’s hair: he was only three years younger than him, for God’s sake, even though sometimes he acted like a child. They were just so different. But being friends with Xuqiyue had led Lize to many other people: Zhongtian, Guanjiarong, Baiyun and more, all of whom had their own quirks, but found it easy to bond over talk of how the weather would be like and how the ship would fare, what pirates they’d have to fight off today, the best techniques to catch fish, and such seemingly simple-minded topics related to their voyage. Xuqiyue was much more sociable than Lize was, but with his presence, Lize found it possible to engage. People even said “you’re the guy who Xuqiyue always sticks to, aren’t you?” to him. It had admittedly been easy becoming closer to the man, after all.

“Yes,” Lize replied with a resigned toss of his head as he rolled out the map they had been given. Or rather, the blank scroll. They were entering uncharted waters now. “Now you know why I was so...prickly back then, for lack of a better word.” They were discussing how exactly Lize had ended up on board the treasure ship. It had been a full four months since the voyage had begun, and Lize still wasn’t sure he was enjoying the whole ordeal, notwithstanding the decent acquaintances – or friends – that he had made. The daily work was harsh, and he couldn’t help but think about how his mother was doing. He hadn’t even gotten to properly say goodbye, not with the intention of leaving for years. To look on the bright side, he wasn’t getting seasick every other day, which was an improvement if he said so himself. In hindsight, he was infinitely glad that Xuqiyue hadn’t approached him earlier, when his pale skin had appeared constantly sallow and green from the ship’s inconsistent swaying.

“Don’t get me wrong, I forgave that incompetent Zhouli a long time ago,” Lize exhaled, running his fingers up the bridge of his sharp nose. “But I can’t help it, you know. Can’t help but be frustrated.”

When Xuqiyue didn’t respond, he looked up to find the younger man smiling at him with a tilted head, completely disregarding their task at hand. Lize rolled his eyes before he continued, painstakingly etching down the shape of a nearby island. When he finished, Xuqiyue caught his hand before he could start on the shoreline of a peninsula that was approaching on the horizon.

“What is it?” Lize’s voice was as cool as always, but his undertone was more exasperated than aggravated.

“Tell me about your mother, Lize.”

“Now why would I ever?”

“I’m curious!”

“...Right.”

“Please? I’ll give you some of my dinner, alright?”

“Fine,” Lize relented, moving his attention back onto the teal and the blue of the ocean roaring around them. “I’ll tell you about her when our shift ends here, alright? This requires my focus, and yours, if you want to hear about my mother.” Lize cracked the tiniest bit, the side of his mouth quirking up when Xuqiyue let out a loud and accusing yowl, complaining about his unfairness and sportsmanship. Yeah, right... What an idiot. Lize was just being smart, which Xuqiyue seemed incapable of doing at times. Lize laughed mentally at the thought, subconsciously reaching over to fix Xuqiyue’s sleeve. Oh well. He didn’t really mind sharing about his mother. She wasn’t dead or anything, nor gone, and she was a wonderful woman. She was quick-witted, grounded, big on manners and strict, but she loved nothing more than her own children and her late husband. She always wanted the best for them, he thought, suddenly feeling a wave of guilt before he squashed it down. Haa... he missed her. Much more than he’d like to admit to anyone, even himself. He was a grown man now.

“Now, Lize, your mother wouldn’t want you to sulk, would she?”

“S-sulk? When have I ever?” Lize retorted, glaring at Xuqiyue. Even though the man had never shied away from Lize’s stink eyes, he had the horrifying feeling that they were doing the opposite of their intended effect.

“All the time! Whenever I leave you for a while, you have such a lonely-” Xuqiyue broke off into an undignified squawk as Lize swatted at him, impatient. “Seriously,” he muttered under his breath as he stepped back, turning to begin to work on cleaning the starboard, only for Xuqiyue to accidentally knock over a set of brooms in his hurry to get to Lize. “I’m serious this time,” Xuqiyue coaxed soothingly as he was determined to break into Lize’s personal space, headfast. “Get on with it,” Lize responded, cocking his head as if daring Xuqiyue to speak.

“You look like you don’t want to be here sometimes,” Xuqiyue started, his voice steady without any hint of a taunt. For once, he seemed to be a little nervous: he wrung his hands together, though his eyes were still. “You always tell us it’s nothing at all, but you really want to go home, don’t you?” he paused for a moment, trying to find the words to put together of what he wanted to say. “But you know, your mom, she seems much more adaptable than you are,” he joked, ducking when Lize swung at him. “Just kidding, Lize. I just meant... I think your mother would want you to enjoy this.” Xuqiyue spread his arm, as if to indicate at everything around them: the sea foam swallowing up the hull of their ship, the masses of crew members in throngs, the strong mast flipping in the wind, and more than anything, the open sea. “It’s really not an opportunity you get every day, getting to go on such an important voyage for the emperor himself,” he laughed, a high, clear sound, his hands coming to clutch at the jade pendant around his chest which Lize knew belonged to the man’s late grandmother.

Lize couldn’t help but blink, surprised that Xuqiyue had become so incredibly perceptive...but maybe he always had been. Maybe that’s why he even approached Lize in the first place, even though it entailed the most awkward greeting in history. And now that Lize thought about it...he was right, too: upon hearing Xuqiyue’s words, his mother’s face drifted out of the haze of his thoughts and jabbed a stick at him. “Get yourself together, young man,” she chastised him in the recesses of his head, and he stifled a self-deprecating laugh in favor of looking up at the cloudless evening sky. How pointless it had been for him to give away

all of the precious moments and joy just to worry about something he couldn't control at all. Looking at Xuqiyue now, he wondered if that was why he seemed so carefree: that he knew how to push away things that were weighing him down and to live entirely in the moment. Lize regarded himself: they were such different people, so different that he forgot he could learn so much from the other.

“Don't say anything,” Xuqiyue broke out, shaking his head. “Your blunt approach will definitely ruin the atmosphere.” Lize opened his mouth to snap back an indignant remark, but right at that moment Xuqiyue's sharp eyes caught on the spire of a distant building. Lize whipped around as soon as Xuqiyue pointed, his earnestness almost – almost infectious. “No way...a coastal town? We're approaching civilization?!” Before Lize could protest, Xuqiyue was pulling him along to the front of the ship, tripping and stumbling over ropes and ledges. As they watched the land growing closer, Xuqiyue whispered in bated breath.

“Imagine...maybe that's our promised land where we'll find our own treasure.”

Lize only smiled, nodding. Perhaps he had found *his* treasure of knowledge already.

The Missing Emperor

Good Hope School, Fu, Karina - 15

‘Are these all?’

The old man shook his head and pointed the burnt end of the stick to the side, where a stack of documents were waiting to be burnt.

‘Augh! It isn’t enough that the whole ridiculous journey emptied the country’s vaults, it’s causing me burdens now! ‘The boy mumbled while the other quietly threw a few more books into the flame.

‘Hey, you! Were you on that fleet as well?’ The boy asked. The man did not answer, but the silence spoke for itself. Nowadays, those voyages are no longer a national pride, but instead a sheer waste of energy that exploited the people.

‘Aha! So you were! Then tell me, what could those barbaric lands possibly have that bewitched the former Emperor to ruin his own country?’ The boy sneered, but again, there was no answer. The silent air was filled by the soft, drowsing crackling of the fire, which sometimes flared up when new books were tossed into it. It was only when the boy finally started to doze off, did the old man speak for the first time to him.

‘None of us had thought it would last this long. No, not at the beginning...Our goal was simple - to find *the* missing Emperor and bring him back.....’

‘Your majesty, I express my deepest gratitude for your hospitality during the past two months. As much as we would hate to leave your wonderful country, I am afraid the time of our departure is drawing near.’ Zheng He said in his most sincere tone, he sounded almost apologetic; a tone the translator by his side failed to copy, but the king seemed too worried to care.

‘Sir Zheng...’ before the king could finish his sentence, he was interrupted by one of Zheng He’s men, who rushed into the chamber with two of the king’s own guards at his heels. The King frowned at the intruders.

‘My deepest apologies, your majesty. But I have brought urgent news for Sir Zheng.’ The man said, still panting as he kneeled on one knee.

The king waited for a translation before looking towards Zheng He for a reasonable excuse of his man breaking into the palace.

‘Your majesty, this is my most trusted subordinate — Wong Jing-hong. He does not mean to offend you, but important news must have come to us.’

Despite his annoyance, the king still smoothened his expression and waved an approving hand at them.

Then Wong Jing-hong immediately ran to Zheng He, who has already stood up at this point, and whispered in his ear. By the time the messenger had finished, Zheng He’s expression was dead serious. He stood up and bowed to the King again, ‘Your majesty, I do not mean to be rude but we must set off immediately.’

‘May I ask why?’

‘On our way here, we sent a team to persuade the pirate Chen Zu-yi to surrender. That team had just returned and brought back the news that he accepted our offer.’ Zheng He paused for a moment before continuing, ‘They said that he knows where our missing Emperor is.’

The Sumatran King sighed. ‘I have no intention to rain on your parade, but that news is most likely to be false. He is a cunning and ruthless pirate who has attacked and tricked our neighboring countries many times before. We have tried to pay our tribute to your Emperor before,’ Here he gave a nod to Zheng He as a gesture of respect, ‘but our ships were all robbed by him. This is the worry I was about to tell you before your messenger arrived.’

‘I am aware of your concerns. But your majesty needn’t worry, as we will capture him and bring him back to our capital for trial and execution.’ Zheng He answered.

‘I will await for your good news then.’ Despite saying so, the worry and doubt was still apparent in the king’s eyes. Zheng He understood that, because Chen Zuyi had been rampant for years without being defeated. Somethings need to be proven by actions, not words.

‘How do you know so many details?’ The boy interrupted.

‘I was the Captain’s right-hand man.’

‘Oh! I remember your name now; it is Wong-something-Hong, right?’

The man ignored him (much to the boy’s dismay), but instead continued, ‘It didn’t take us long to arrive at Jiougang, where he was waiting for us. The moment our fleet approached him, he lashed out at us.....’

‘Attack!’ Chen Zuyi yelled at the top of his lungs as the Ming dynasty’s fleet approached his. His sonorous voice travelled far and fast on the sea, and was soon echoed by his troops who seemed to appear out of nowhere. The nineteen larger pirate ships encircled the Ming fleet and are gradually closed in, blocking all their escapes to the open seas. The smaller battleships sailed straight for the outermost ring of ships in the Ming fleet, each loaded with pirates.

‘Sir! At this rate, they will force us into the shallow waters! Permission to...’ Wong Jing-hong started but was broken off.

‘Not yet.’ Despite being just as anxious and worried as everyone else, Zheng He’ looked as calm as he could ever be. This is their first real fight, and the responsibility of defending the Ming dynasty’ honor lied heavily on their shoulders. It was a fight they can’t afford to lose.

Zheng He’s stern look seemed to have a calming effect on everyone else, the sailors exchanged glances and quickly scattered back to their places.

Most of the pirate battleships had already reached the outermost Ming ships. The pirates had their eyes on the ships that seemed to have a deeper draft, as they are more likely to carry more resources like food or treasures. No loss for the pirates either way. On each battleship, several pirates threw their grappling hooks to the side of the Ming ships and pulled them close, while the others leaped onto the other’s deck.

To their surprise, the deck was empty.

The pirates howled in laughter, reckoning that the cowardly Ming soldiers were hiding from them. As soon as they found the locked door leading down to the cabin, they started slashing and banging at it, already looking forward to their first blood.

At the sight of this, Zheng He finally nodded to the soldier at his side, who immediately lifted a horn to his mouth and blew it with all his might.

The blare of the horn changed the battle instantly.

The deck of the smaller Ming ships suddenly split from the middle and opened up, throwing the unguarded pirates down to the bottom of the ship, where sharp blades and nails awaited. They hardly made any sound before they died.

‘Bang!’ The first cannons were fired from the Ming ships as iron balls flew across the air towards the pirate ships, destroying everything in their way, Chen Zuyi’s eyes widened. The

pirate, in his long years of raging on the ocean being unchecked on, seemed to have forgotten that there was always someone better than him out there, and that his ships were no longer the strongest nor had the farthest attack range.

As the ships from both sides sailed closer to one another, the battle intensified. The sea was filled with the sounds of cannons firing; the whipping of the grappling hooks flew across the air; the small thuds of arrows rained onto the decks; the cries of men were heard as they charged onto their enemies' ships.

Zheng He leaped onto Chen Zuyi's ship and challenged the pirate himself. Their swords clashed together and for a while, they were neck-to-neck. Both men seemed equally strong in technique and strength. But as time passed, Chen Zuyi's attacks slowed down and could only just defend himself as his strength failed to keep up with his technique. Obviously the man had grown too proud of himself and left out his trainings, so it didn't take long before Zheng He knocked the pirate to his knees and had a sword on his neck.

'Where is he?'

'wh-who?'

'The missing emperor! *Where is he?*'

'I lied! I lied! It was a trick!'

The sword dug into his neck, a line of blood trickled down from the shallow wound.

'I don't know! I really don't know! Please don't kill me!'

Zheng He would have done more if Wong Jing-hong had not ran to his side and held him back.

'Captain! Didn't you say we need to bring him back to our Emperor? We need him *alive!*'

Much to the pirate's relief, Zheng He backed down. He wiped the blade on the pirate's clothes and put it back to its sheath.

'Thankfully he speaks Chinese, otherwise I suspect you will drag a translator off the boat.' Wong Jing-hong joked as he tied up the pirate in ropes. The joke may be a bad one, but it appeared to calm Zheng He down by a little.

'Watch over him.' Zheng He said as he charged into battle.

With the leader captured, it wouldn't take long to clear out the remaining pirates.

'Ever since that battle, the Captain became close friends with -'

'That's all? I thought the man who troubled our dynasty for years would be better than that!' The boy complained.

'Power and wealth can corrupt a person.'

The boy didn't seem satisfied but didn't disagree either. 'What about that time in Java? I heard almost two hundred of you died there. And the Emperor didn't even-'

The pained expression on the older man's face stopped him, he realized he shouldn't rub his nose in others sore point.

'I'm-I'm sorry, I didn't mean to...' He mumbled an apology. 'So what happened to the missing Emperor then? Did you find him?' Although he knew the answer as the missing Emperor never returned, he was too desperate to change the subject.

But to his great surprise, the man nodded slowly.

'It was on our third voyage. He was hiding in Kollam in India. No one knows how he got there.....'

As soon as Zheng He marched off the ship with his troops behind him, they were greeted by the warm, welcoming cheers of the locals. But something felt odd to him. He dismissed

that feeling and kept a straight face as he walked towards the ambassador sent by the King of Kollam at the end of the dock.

‘Greetings, Sir Zheng. It is an honor to meet you. His majesty is waiting for your arrival in the palace.’ The man said in fluent Chinese, which surprised Zheng He as Kollam is incredibly far from China. But there was no time to wonder where he had learnt it as he ordered most of his troops to collect resources to refill the fleet, leaving only a handful of the best soldiers and translator by his side. Just in case.

As they walked into the stone-built city, the ambassador began introducing the local history and specialties. There was no denying that he was a good tour guide and a diplomat, showing the glorious side of their country while inconspicuously praising China, but Zheng He wasn’t listening to him. Instead, he was focused on the familiar chanting that became louder as they walked on. This was what struck him as odd at the dock: the enthusiastic cheer from the locals mixed with the calm chanting of monks.

‘May I ask what are the monks doing?’ Zheng He finally asked as they were walking by a line of those who were chanting in unison. Although Zheng He had the same religion as them, Buddhism, he could not understand the language.

‘A wealthy family in this neighborhood had recently lost a son, and they were hiring to chant a spell called *Amitabha Pure Land Rebirth Mantra* in Buddhism. It is said to help the dead clear their karma and move on to where they belong. They need to walk around this neighborhood for forty-nine times to complete the ritual.’

Zheng He nodded in acknowledgement, when suddenly; he spotted a familiar face in the line, a face that belonged to Emperor Jianwen.

‘Excuse me.’ Zheng He hastily said before running towards the monks, leaving the ambassador and his own troops behind. The suspicious monk seemed to realize Zheng He was on to him, as he ran out of the line and dashed into a small alley.

‘Hey, you! Stop right there!’ Zheng He yelled as he chased the monk down the twisty alleys and streets, but the monk didn’t even look back once, he just kept running.

The monk was obviously not up to such a strong exercise, so there were many times when he was almost within arm’s reach of Zheng He, but he was all too familiar with the city that he could easily gain distance between them again with a simple turn. There were times when Zheng He feared he would lose sight of the monk in this maze-like city. Thankfully, the monk seemed to have tripped on an uneven stone step and fell on the ground. This gave Zheng He enough time to catch up with him to pin him to the ground.

At this point, Wong Jing-hong, who had been at their heels the entire time, finally caught up with him? Still panting, he asked, ‘What’s wrong?’

‘This is him, Emperor Jianwen.’

‘What? Could you have been mistaken?’

‘No! I have spent enough time around Ming Chengzu and his family to know how each and every one of them look like! There is no mistake!’

‘Alright, alright. But at least give me something to prove so I can believe you.’

‘Take off his left shoe! There should be a black birthmark shaped like an orchid at the bottom of his left foot.’

Wong Jing-hong hesitated before saying, ‘I am sorry.’ He took off the monk’s left shoe and sock, and there it was, an orchid-like black spot the size of a coin. He was too stunned to talk.

‘Then I guess we should, em, bring him back onto the ship? And maybe inform the King?’ Wong Jing-hong muttered, trying not to look at the found Emperor’s face that was filled with despair.

‘So what happened to him then?’ The boy asked.

‘We brought him back here, to his uncle, the Emperor at the time.’

‘But we never heard the news.’

‘Remember the time when the last Emperor suddenly called a lot of monks into the palace?’

‘Yes, but what about it?’

‘What better place to hide a leaf than in a forest?’

The boy raised an eyebrow.

‘But if you have found him, why did the voyages continue?’

‘.....the former Emperor thought it could stabilize the imperial court and promote trade,’

The boy smirked at this as even the man himself seemed to have difficulty in believing that, but the man continued, ‘...and there is a chance for those who know will die on the seas, so he wouldn’t have to get his hands dirty and raise suspicion.’

‘But if you knew he wanted to get rid of you, why did you agree to go on the voyages?’

‘Part of it was due to my own selfishness. Once you got used to the adventures at sea, it is hard to settle down on solid ground again’

‘Oh, whatever! It all sound too story-like, you must be faking me.’ The boy yawned. ‘I’ve had enough of story time, I just really need some sleep. Would you please finish the rest for me?’

The man nodded.

‘Thank you, eh...seriously, what is your real name?’

Silence filled the air again. It was only when the boy was already half asleep, did he seemed to hear the man’s reply.

‘My family used to call me Ma He.’

Zheng He was wandering around Java with his friend, Wong Jing-hong, trying to carve every single view into his memory as this may very well be the last time they visit this place.

‘Zheng He, I need to tell you something.’ Wong Jing-hong suddenly called his name.

‘What’s wrong?’

‘I won’t be leaving with you this time, I am staying here.’

Zheng He was dumbfounded.

‘I am getting old, Zheng He, we both are.’ His friend carried on, ‘We don’t have much time left to live for ourselves instead of the Emperor.’

Zheng He turned towards his old friend, he wanted to deny but the glistening white streaks in his friend’s hair made him speechless.

‘You of all should know that they will *silence* us at all cost if we go back. Starting a real family is all I ever wanted, but I will never get to if I return.’ Wong Jing-hong continued ‘Being free is all *you* ever wanted, but you will never get to be if you return, especially as Zheng He.’

‘Hold up, are you saying that.....’

‘The old Emperor is gone, and the new one never looks you in the face.’

And there, Zheng He could see a sparkle of mischief in his friend’s eyes; it was a rare sight even in their younger days. And Zheng He couldn’t think of a reason to refuse.

Perhaps this will be a brand new adventure.

The Miles in Between

Good Hope School, Yim, Sunniva - 16

His regret took root on the fourth week.

His arm muscles were sore from the endless scrubbing that even he was not to be bothered with as a farmer's son, and he developed a newfound appreciation for his mother who had a knack for keeping the interior of their hut immaculate. Ploughing and harvesting he could do, but he was unaccustomed to the foreign sensation of his knees constantly against the hard floorboards. His knees were sore from the burden of his body, and his calves ached from disuse – that was another downside to being confined to a ship. There were only so many places you could go, especially when you weren't summoned for.

The first day, still overfilled with the anticipation for the journey ahead and eager for any recognition from these mysterious men that had visited his humble shores, he had gladly taken on any task they had thrown him. He was handed a bucket with wet rags draped on the sides and asking what he was to do with them had only earned him a pointed look from the deck master. He quickly learned the simple rule – to know your place and not speak up unless being asked a question.

Though now he couldn't fathom how, that day, and in the few that had followed, he had truly enjoyed the process of staying low and busy, for it enabled him to explore every little nook and crook of the ship, and allowed him to eavesdrop on casual conversations of passers-by without feeling uninvited.

For days he remained invisible and unimportant, the eagerness in him dimming with every repeated swipe of his arm. He was tired of this endless cycle of cleaning and craved some semblance of excitement, though one could argue that this life was not so different from the one of early risings and gruesome farming he had left behind.

He had a purpose back then, though. He knew that his effort would pay in the form of food for his family, and it was he, the eldest son of a widowed family, who must work as diligently as he could. Each day he had worked, and there were always the little things he could look forward to. Like getting glimpses of Wong's girl who would pass by with a basket of food from the market every noon, consistent as clockwork. Or, bragging to his baby sister in hushed tones about how he had fended off starved beasts targeting their fields. Sometimes, if it was a long day, he could ask his little brother what he had learned at school, and would reassure himself that it was only made possible through him giving up his own chance at studying to take up their father's mantle, when he was called away to defend the honour of His Imperial Majesty. Back then, it was a sense of purpose that drove him on to tolerate the regularities and stomach the constantly nagging feeling that he was deprived of choices, trapped in this life by obligations and expectations like a bird in the mouth of a canary.

He saw his mother's pleading eyes when she handed him a bag of rice cakes. Refreshments for the trip, she had called them, as if he would only be gone for a few days. The night before, she had tried to reason against his leaving, but a quick sharpening of his tone had silenced her. *Don't keep me from a better life*, he had refrained himself from saying. He was considered a young man now, it often startled him to realise. It empowered him, if not just to give him the autonomy to choose to leave.

Leave. It was a spited word, reserved for cowards who abandon their families in hardship.

No, he had to remind himself. He left an honourable man, for the captain had paid his full wages for a decade in advancement, before they departed. They paid in intricately carved gold adornments and finely woven silk, and who could say no to such a lucrative offer, except for the weak-minded and oversentimental bunch? He loved his family, but he needed to feed them more, with most able-bodied men conscripted and gone.

A rare chance, they had called this, when they called for young men to join them. They did not recruit often, for the last time was well over a decade, but now they needed to fill the decks of a few new vessels. Ships gifted by His Imperial Majesty, due to their success in shaping foreign relations. It was *mìngyùn*, he had recognised, a chance perhaps crafted by *Guanyin*, who had heard his faithful, albeit silent, prayers to be rid of his confinements and took pity on him. What little men left of his dingy village who had not yet been of age two years ago during the conscription had all left to join this magnificent army on their adventures.

Adventures, they were promised. These visitors had stayed for two weeks at the most lavish taverns there was within ten miles, visiting the market each day and paying for any purchase in gold or silver. They had claimed they were restocking on refreshments, and it was a blessing to their village who mostly traded in items of need. Each night they would attract a crowd at the respective taverns, and the usually frugal innkeepers would bring out ale after ale for everyone, for the bill was cleared and paid for every morning. The most eloquent of these guests would be at the centre of all attention, telling the tales of all the extraordinary things they have seen, with the occasional exaggerated or inappropriate comment by a drunken sailor or captain.

Tales of faraway lands with strange people and peculiar beasts, and of strategically laid out battles and unexpected fights. There were people that particularly adored putting spices into their food, so much that they themselves reek of their spices, who rode on steady beasts that drank from their noses instead of their mouths. *Xiàng*, as they were called, had elongated canines that were always shown bare to ward them and their riders from troubles. Then there were the battles that small nations would have lost if not for the assistance of the fleet, and the spectacular festivals the royalties would hold in thanks.

Night after night he drunk on these tales, thankful for the reprieve they provided for they distracted him from the soreness of his muscle from the day of work, and occupied his mind lest he start dreading the day ahead. They spun out tales as smoothly as a spider would with her silk, and he'd spend hours merely listening, entranced by the images that filled his head. Then, when he would trudge down the small trek back home, his feet always felt lighter than they had been the night before.

When they had announced they were to leave, a mixture of unwillingness and yearning bloomed through his heart so unexpectedly that he jumped at its fierceness. Between one heartbeat and the next, he was ready to leave this place he had called home for all the years he had been.

But now, he could not help but wonder if it were all alcohol-induced fantasises, for in the past weeks he has seen nothing but the endless stretch of sky and sea, and all he would hear were the gentle splashing of waves and idle chatter of mundanities among the clatter of deck boys and serving girls he dared mingle with.

That was another thing he discovered, aside from the utter unimportance of his presence. Those who had basked in the admiration and luxuries provided by the villagers were only a handful among the throng of men and women this fleet was armed with. The decks and hallways were more often crowded with servants and to-be sailors such as he, than any of the faces he has come to recognise from nights of intent gazing from across the room that had seared their features to his memories.

The day he had left, a ship carried them to the fleet that merely appeared as a speck from the harbour, and he had gawked at the sheer size of the armada from up close. When he looked back, the clatter of shacks from his village had blurred into a patch of brown amidst the green of their hunting grounds. He saw his hometown from a view he hadn't before, for his family did not deal with waterstuff, and it was his first time at sea. From the distance, its miniature form seemed inconsequential, forgettable. It was only then had he realised why no more than a dozen of these ships had come to their village, for their shallow bay could fit no more.

Afterwards, he and a few others from his village were assigned to respective ships, and gone was the last of any linkage he had to home, his mother's cakes already devoured during short trip there. He was transferred to a moderate-sized ship in the middle of the fleet, its beat-up hull telling enough of its age.

He had wondered then why the men had come. They certainly didn't lack supplies, not any that could be provided by his village, nor by the many even smaller ones they later stopped by. It was first among the many other questions he would have of the inner-workings of this fleet, which remained unresolved as he saw a few ships deviate from the fleet now and then with trunks of treasures and return with heaps of mediocre garments that they certainly didn't bother using. (It wasn't until much later that he finally learned that the fleet was tasked with handing out portions of the riches they carried to famine-stricken villages, on behest of His Imperial Highness. Then, he'd finally discovered that the war had ended a year after the conscription, and why no men ever returned to his village.)

Sometimes, when left to his own devices, he would wonder if the easiness of giving and unwavering charm back at his distant village were all a ploy, to amass spiritually and literally hungry youths to join their fleet. But the moment the thought appears he'd scoff at its silliness – what use were he and a few others of, to a fully self-sufficient fleet filled to the brim with royal treasures?

What was he here for?

Days, weeks, and perhaps months dragged on, though it would be probable that it was just his impatient mind warping his perception of time. He had no idea where the fleet was travelling to, for he had never heard of places that required the long months of travelling they were going through to reach. Chattering with his usual crowd yielded nothing, for nobody ever told deck boys and servants anything beyond their duty.

He ceased to care if he were not delivered the exciting exploits he thought was promised and resolved that this was a pretty good life. He had provided for his family, who would be better off with the money than starving with him, he told his traitorous heart that missed the gentle caresses of his mother and the chime-like laugh of his sister. How fares his brother, who has now taken his place as the man of the house and must shoulder the burden that comes with? The very responsibilities he had loathed for years, thinking he would be glad to be rid of, but has now left a gnawing pit in his heart that craves expectations. They were lacking in this life, for all he was expected to do were to keep the decks shiny.

Occasionally, he would be tempted to stop bothering with the decks. Mere moments after he has cleaned it the deck would be trampled on and his efforts gone instantly. But what were he to do, if not finish the one thing he was tasked with?

~

One morning, before the crack of dawn, restlessness overtook him and he ventured up from his quarters to the decks, tiptoeing so he won't wake his fellow deck boys. He did this often now, enjoying the rare silence and stillness of his surroundings, listening to the wind brush against the flaps of the ship. The quietness contrasted against the business that overtook

the ship during the day, and served as a reminder for him that getting to be part of the hustle should not be taken for granted.

This time though, he found a lone figure already by the railings as he climbed up, the silhouette of a plump man stretched out by the faint illumination of the lanterns.

“What’s your name, boy?”

“Zhang.”

The man didn’t bother introducing himself, for what fool on a ship would not know his captain?

His was a familiar figure on the decks, though finding him not amid his usual crowd of shipmates was rather unsettling.

“Deck boy, hm? I like my decks shiny.”

He hadn’t thought he was noticed by anyone, and the revelation elated him more than he would admit in the face of another man.

He wasn’t sure what he was to say, if anything at all, so he let silence befall between them. His captain was a flushed man who always seemed to be under the influence of one wine or another, and he hadn’t had much dealings with such men for his father were a pious and reserved men who despised drinking.

He averted his gaze downwards, unknowingly. He was about to return to his quarters, when his captain boomed a loud laugh. Gazing up, he discovered a piece of land on the very edge of the horizon.

“This never gets old,” he announced, somewhat mischievously, as he signalled the nightwatch who scuttled to ring the bell that called everyone to the decks. Slowly but steadily, people flocked around and behind him, but his focus remained on the land that grew larger and larger.

What a strange piece of land it was! He has never seen trees quite like that, with a trunk so huge it looked as if the trees grew so closely that they had no choice but to merge. The leaves branched outwards horizontally, as if they were crawling away from the centre. As their fleet neared shore, he caught sight of people with skin as dark as the midnight sky.

The sight of all these things that existed beyond his imagination had sent his heart racing and howling, and he knew for a fact that he wouldn’t mind the repeating days ever again, and would gladly trade in years of tedious work without bargain, if it meant he could experience the rush of adrenaline brought upon by unprecedented discovery.

Anna

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Ho, Sophie - 15

It was in Grandmama’s little attic where she first found them hidden beneath all their glory: a pot of decent gold, some letters, and a roll of soft silk the colour of vintage pearls.

The girl didn’t want to clean up the attic in the first place. It was dark, dirty, and infested with spiders and termites and mice and the nastiest creatures ever known to man. Why would Mom force her to clear the attic instead of anyone else? Though, she had to admit that a part of her wasn’t even surprised. Mom had been acting ten times freakier than she usually was after Grandmama died from some kind of cancer some time ago. Honestly, what was the point? She died already. The girl knew there was no use worrying and mourning someone who would never walk on the face of the earth again. That was the cold, hard truth, and Mom needed to know it whether she liked it or not.

Plus, she didn’t want to mourn for another hundred days. For God’s sake, the funeral was done and over with. She didn’t want to wear a piece of dull cloth that was basically like screaming in people’s face, “Oh, look, my family member died, give me pity!” It was so embarrassing, especially at school where all her American friends would ask her what it was for. Of course, she wouldn’t tell them it was a weird Chinese tradition that signified mourning. So, she did what any other sane being would do: she hid the cloth in her bag before school started, and put it on again before she went home.

It was *such* a smart idea. It was just too bad that Mom had to spoil it once again by catching her on the street without wearing a so-called “important” piece of cloth. Not only did she have to wear a white rag that didn’t match her expensive, photo-worthy outfit, she now had to clean - to clean! - an attic that was a million years old. It made her absolutely furious.

Thankfully, those items that she found were a bit more interesting than the dust around her, so she decided to stick her nose around. Naturally, the girl grabbed the pot of gold first. She got over her initial disappointment at its lack of glamorous grandeur. After all, it would come in useful when she needed some cash. She then unrolled the roll of silk, but found it incredibly boring. She kicked it away, too lazy to roll it back. And all there was left, unfortunately, was the dull stack of letters.

It was trivial, she knew. Who would want to read some ancient scraps of garbage? But bear with her - there was literally nothing else to do up there. She had to find something to do. Thus, after screaming at a pile of cobwebs above her head, she settled in a corner and began to read.

Dear Kaiser (kai ze),

I cannot bear it any longer! I am meant to be sewing a dress for a customer, but the sun is peeking out behind the cloud, persuading me to write to you instead. It’s only been ten days since you’ve left for the palace to fulfil your dreams of being promoted as an official, but to me it’s been an eternity.

I’m afraid my curiosity has got the better of me, as I have never been out of the village before. What does the palace look like? How are the people treating you? Is it true that for the

emperor gets a hundred dishes each meal just for himself?

And to be honest, you've made me quite jealous. You get to travel all around China and experience things I've never even heard of before – just because you're male. I'm sorry, but don't you think that's just terribly unfair? It may be my culture, but that's not the kind of culture I want to believe in.

Please reply. The whole village has quietened down from the buzz and chatter to a drone of serenity. I'm rather lonely. Lonely, that's all. Oh well, I'll see you soon. Goodbye!

From Anna (an na)
July 1, 1405

From: The Grand Secretaries
To: Admiral Zheng He, Deputy Wang Jinghong

- 1. In accordance to the reference, you will proceed and report to the Ministry of War to receive further assignment.*
- 2. Your assignment consists of taking command of 27,000 troops to the Western Ocean on an expedition.*
- 3. Your duties include preparing for the voyage and leading the fleet. Refer to the documents in the next package.*

July 11, 1405

From: Admiral Zheng He
To: Official Kaiser

Kaiser, hurry up. Hurry up and finish the documents for the voyage preparation and the crew recruit.

August 15, 1405

Dearest Anna,

Please do accept my apologies for not writing back. It has been absolute chaos at the palace – not that I've been spending much time there. I have been assigned by Admiral Zheng He to accompany him on an expedition. But Anna, it's no ordinary expedition! It's at sea, and we're sailing on the most magnificent treasure fleet I've ever laid my eyes on. Luckily for me, I get to test out the ship before we truly set sail.

Breathtaking. It's breathtaking. It's a hundred thousand tonnes of ancient oak, fashioned into a body of warm wood and might, with masts that reach the heavens, lifting maroon sails in the air, holding everything together. I get to sit by the bow each day, watching the sun wake up and fall asleep to a soundless lullaby. I get to count the stars as my bedtime story and watch the bow stroke the waves with a regal dignity unlike anything I've seen before.

Anna, I know you're fuming right now. I'm sorry you cannot be here and experience

everything with me, but as you know, society is one strange thing. Why women are perceived as pretty, polite girls whose sole purpose in life is to get married is beyond my understanding. That's why I love you. You keep me on my toes and remind me every day to go against what is wrong, even though everyone thinks it's right.

Also, you will not believe what I managed to do! There is a space in the fleet crew that requires a good cook, and I know someone (I mean you, Anna.) who would be perfect for the job. I do hope it will make you quite happy. See you in a while.

Sincerely,
Kaiser

From: On Behalf of the Yongle Emperor
To: Crew, Officers, and Admirals of the Fleet

You have been invited to a ceremonial banquet to celebrate the fleet's maiden voyage tomorrow at the Grand Hall. On behalf of our country, China wishes you the best and we pray for a journey full of successes and a safe passage.

Autumn of 1405

From: Official Kaiser
To: Admiral Zheng He

Sir, the ship is ready for departure.

To: Fleet Registration

Anna Zhang and Kaiser Li:
Registered on Ship 1 - 7:17 am, October 26th, 1405.

Dear Kaiser,

Thank you, thank you, thank you! I cannot thank you enough for recruiting me as a cook on the ship. The ship is so incredibly exciting, from the bustle of the sailors up on deck to the cheeky gossip down in the common crew. I spend my rest times just sitting by the railing, staring out into the horizon, wondering and dreaming and thinking about everything and nothing. I listen. I listen to the whispers of the wind, telling me that this is what I'm meant to do, who I'm meant to be.

Can you believe how many places we've been to in the past seven months? According to one of the maps, we've sailed to Champa, Java, Malacca, Aru, Semudera, Lambri, Ceylon, Quilon and now Calicut. I feel like I'm invincible, that I can conquer every problem that stands before me. I feel free. It's unlike anything I've ever felt before.

I'm afraid, though. What happens after this voyage? Do I need to return home just to sew and sew until my fingers are sewn together in frustration? Do I need to give my freedom back

and be controlled by society again?

I don't want to go back. I want to stay here, Kaiser, with you, with the sea, and with the freedom that comes with it. Even if the storms strike us down and the dark clouds cover our view, I want this anyway.

Okay. That's enough. Let's meet by the boiler room at 8 o'clock.

Anna

From: Admiral Zheng He

To: Officials and Officers

At Cape Comorin, we will change direction and begin the return journey to China. Alert the captain and crew immediately.

May 1405

From: Admiral Zheng He

To: Kaiser

Kaiser, I've been sent to Palembang to negotiate the pacification of Chen Zuyi. As you know, he happens to be the most vicious Chinese pirate dominating the Malaccan Strait. I have heard that he has plotted for attack. Prepare for battle.

September 1405

Dear Kaiser,

I think I am truly in love with you. Please tell me we can get married after we return –

EMERGENCY... EMERGENCY... EMERGENCY ...

PIRATES SPOTTED NORTHEAST OF SHIP. PREPARE WEAPONS AND SECURE THE DECK. CALLING ALL SAILORS, SOLDIERS AND OFFICERS.

Dearest Anna,

There is going to be a war. By the time you receive this letter, I will be fighting with the other soldiers, and you will be safe and sound, as the rescue ship will come for the crew. I know this is very sudden, but bear with me – you need to understand. And I need to tell you now, just in case I don't make it.

This voyage had a purpose. To all you young, naive souls out there, it was not just to explore what was beyond our home. It was to display power to the kingdoms and trade ports

nestled in the Indian Ocean. It was to show Chinese might to their world. And for me, and all the other officials, it was to take pride in our country.

I know you find our cultural identity is confusing. It has faults that anger you and force you to reject it, just like every other culture. Who wants to be proud of a culture that shuts down women yet raise up men? But Anna, I'm telling you, to just accept your identity. You are who you are, and no one can change that. You are born Chinese, and you will always be one, a child of the powerful nation that sailed the Indian Ocean.

I have snuck two items from the gift room for you to keep as a reminder of your first travels outside of the village. Use the gold as a light in the darkness, and to never dull your flame. Use the silk as a shield of protection and strength, and to never be afraid even when times are rough. And use the notes and letters I've collected just so you can share your story with our child, their children, and the next generation.

Remember, my dear. Remember that you have the power to inspire and to change not just yourself but the unjust things you see in your life. Use your heart, soul and mind to do what you love and love what you do. And I pray, I pray so hard, that you will find a heart that will open up to yours and adore you for who you are, and arms that hold you with love so deep it reaches infinity. I pray that you will find a mind that will help you dodge the obstacles in life, and eyes full of warmth and the feeling that you belong. But most of all, I pray for you, that you will be happy forever and ever, for you are your own person, and the most incredible person at that.

I love you, Anna.

With all the love that possibly exists in our universe,
Kaiser
September 17, 1405

The girl closed the letter as a tear rolled down her cheek. She couldn't help but wonder what happened afterward. Did Kaiser survive the war? Did he reunite with Anna to raise the child that would begin their generation? Did they live the happy ending that they yearned so much for?

She took a deep breath.

Kaiser's wish had come true. The story was shared indeed, and it was shared with her. But could she really call herself the next generation of great-great-great-something-grandmother and grandfather when she didn't even accept her ethnicity, her identity?

She couldn't.

The girl reached into the pocket of her pants and tightened her fingers around the cloth inside. Gently, she pulled the white fabric out. It was just a cloth, after all. But its meaning was an entire different story. A story that she had to tell, starting with herself. And with a small smile, Anna tied it to her arm.

The Admiral's Last Voyage

Heep Yunn School, Cho, Shu Nga Keziah - 14

He was going to die.

That was all he knew as he lay limply on the bed, his eyes glazed over, gazing at nothing in particular. Scarcely minutes ago every inch of his body had been ablaze with pain, and panic had consumed him as he fought frantically against the illness burning him alive.

Now he felt nothing but a sort of serene resignation. He was going to die, and he might as well die at peace.

The Xuande Emperor's voice rang in his ears. *One last voyage, San Bao. This will be an expedition no one in the world has ever seen the like of.*

The corners of San Bao's--or Zheng He's--pale lips turned up slightly in a faint smile. An expedition no one had ever seen the like of. The past few years had been just that, had they not?

For some people the world consisted of a worn-out village, a dusty hut, and a wife who could cook and sew. For some it consisted of sparkling mansions, glamorous young women in flowing robes, endless music and dancing. His was a boundless world of blue, of sun-dappled waves dancing beneath him, of myriads of stars that guided him and his crew through the palpable darkness of the night. His was a world of trunks overflowing with fragrant tea and lustrous silk, translucent porcelain and rich brocades woven with the finest gold thread in all of the Empire; things he and his crew would give to the rest of the world. It was a world of exotic, far-off lands, populated by dark-skinned men who gifted them in return with smooth ivory, vibrant feathers in every hue imaginable, gemstones that sparkled and shone in the sunlight, and a *qilin*.

Amidst excruciating spasms of pain, Zheng He laughed inwardly. What a queer animal they had been given by the envoys of Malindi once; a *qilin*. How he and his crew had stared in awe when that giant, towering beast had come into sight! He could almost see it now, the gracefully slender creature with a neck that stretched higher than the treetops, its elegant frame covered in a silky, spotted coat of fur the colour of golden hay.

His sailors and the court officials had marvelled over the quaint horns on the creature's head, as well. "They have brought us the legendary *qilin*, San Bao," one of the court officials in the palace had told him, excitement in his voice. "Its horns, its body—they are exactly as the early scholars described it. A good omen, sir; a good omen."

That was before the Yongle Emperor passed away. The Yongle Emperor, who had treated him as a friend, who had held him in high esteem as if he was a prized jewel.

He had always wondered where the Emperor had gone after death, the man who had trusted him so. Now he was about to find out.

As the Emperor passed away, so had this grand world of Zheng He's. He had watched, helpless, as the new Hongxi Emperor closed the empire's doors to the world. He had not seen the burning of the fleet, but he could see it in his mind's eye—the ships which had roamed a thousand miles on water, now utterly submerged in a sea of fire, the orange flames licking higher, higher.

Had he been devastated, then, since such glorious voyages had been brought to a halt? No, not exactly devastated; he was becoming too old for those trips anyway. It was only that during those five years in which he did not once set sail, in his dreams, he sometimes

found himself and his crew roaming the seas again, striking awe into the hearts of nations. In his dreams, he sometimes heard the name *The Great Ming Empire* whispered in admiration throughout remote places, and he would glow inwardly knowing that it was because of him.

As it was the Hongxi Emperor had died, and he had been given one last mission to complete. One last chance to rule the waves.

One last voyage, the new Xuande Emperor had said to him, his resonant voice echoing through every corner of the hall. And although Zheng He's once-bright eyes had dimmed and his hair had turned a silvery grey and his great towering frame was not nearly as strong as it used to be, he soon found himself aboard the ship once more, the wind tousling his hair, the sailors at his command, the constellations his guide to the great unknown.

And, oh, what a journey it had been—three more years of sailing, of extending the glowing name of the Empire to faraway countries and barbarian regions, in much the same way as the sun extends its rays to even the murkiest of places. His fleet of one hundred ships had taken them further and further away from the Empire, sailing to the edge of the world, trunks of golden baubles and glittering jewels glinting in the warm sunlight all the way. They had visited flurries of distant lands, city after city swirling about them like seawater—Qui Nohn, Surabaya, Hormuz, Mogadishu. And now they were returning home.

Perhaps he had known death was approaching all along, during this particular trip. He had felt it in the mellow breeze that had suddenly become cold and biting, and in the way the soft sunlight seared his skin. He had felt it in every faltering step he took, in the strain of his failing limbs, in every frantic pulse of his heart, in the voice inside him imploring him to slow down, slow down. He had never heeded the voice, had never slowed down. He had moved like lightning, day and night. Perhaps that was his mistake, he thought, a trifle ruefully.

Could he possibly leave this world behind? To slip away quietly, to abandon the sea and the ship and his friends—all that he knew? The more imminent it became, the more inconceivable it was. He could feel the footsteps of his fate approaching, closer and closer. Zheng He's bloodshot eyes searched for the sky to no avail, meeting the blank ceiling instead. What was this queer ache deep inside of him?

He felt them all beginning to fade from his memory, the countless escapades he and his crew had shared. What persisted in reverberating through the vast hall of his mind were fragments; a wisp of a salty breeze across his cheeks, a brief blinding flash of gold as a piece of jewelry caught the light, the fleeting satisfaction glinting in the Emperor's eyes as he caught sight of the sparkling trinkets given to him as tribute.

“San Bao?”

Hundreds and thousands of days, all hazy through a misty veil of sea spray. Perhaps that was enough, after all, for him to hold on to as he embarked on his last journey—hopefully—into *Jannah*. Into paradise, where greater adventures awaited.

“San Bao. We have arrived at the port of Kozhikide.” The sailor's voice rang out, clear and crisp. Through his blurred vision he saw the silhouette of a young man standing against the rosy sunset glow spilling in from the doorway. *“We shall soon be home again.”*

Zheng He closed his eyes. To the young sailor, perhaps, they were on a return trip. But not for him. He felt as if he was floating on water, drifting, further and further away. For the first time in his life he did not know where he was headed towards, but he knew, somehow, that all was well.

He chuckled at the ceiling, too feeble to turn his head in the sailor's direction. *“Home?”* he murmured. *“I have miles yet to travel on my own.”*

The admiral was making his last voyage on smooth waters.

Where the Desert Meets the Sea

St. Joseph's College, Wong, Sean - 16

*“The moon illuminates the seas,
To reveal your future;
The dark clouds shall leave.
No evil will come.”
The Oracle of Mat-Su, Fortune 16 of 60.*

The monsoon descended.

Silver bolts hurtled downwards from the blackened sky to strike the sea. Electrified waves roared in fury, gales whipping claw-like peaks that reached skywards.

Between the sky and sea lay a majestic vessel, a junk far from home. However grand it must have seemed to the mortals inhabiting it, it was puny before nature – as the forces of the sea crushed the ship, hundreds tried to claw their way to safety, but most soon sank beneath the waves, their souls consumed by the emotionless void.

The mortals dragged to the depths with them their failed Goddess. Centuries after her last worshippers were consumed by time, the Goddess lay dormant and still.

2018, Kenya

“Ngendo! Ngendo!”

Grandma was calling. Ngendo pretended not to hear. She didn't quite remember why she was running away: was it some quarrel? Was it some sort of playful breakout? It didn't matter. Ngendo's bare soles danced across the soft, warm sand of the beach to leave imprints the shape of palm leaves. She felt the grains of sand between her toes and the oceanic breeze's saline scent against her face. All across the beach, the turquoise sea dissolved against the golden sand with clockwork regularity.

“Ngendo!”

The voice was growing closer. The girl sped up and sprinted ever quicker, adrenaline coursing through her body. Her neatly braided dreadlocks, which were tangled up in an immodest mess of knots, kept falling over her eyes, but Ngendo did not mind, nor did she care; she only wanted to burrow her way into the small, isolated cove at the end of the beach and disappear from sight.

The cove was her private corner. When Mother was still around, she regaled her with stories about the past, all with one recurring motif: how adventurers came to Kenya in search of liberty. These adventurers brought with them stories and traditions—one of them being the tale of Aladdin, a Chinese prince who found a cave of treasures in Arabia. Ngendo didn't have a cave, but she did have a cove. Therein lay her treasures: shards of emerald green coke bottles, bracelets without jewels, yolkish seashells. Each of the treasures had washed up on the cove's wet sand to meet their new owner.

Something new had arrived in the cove. Moving closer, Ngendo saw a chunk of grey,

dull rock covered in a sad mess of seaweed and salt. Ngendo submerged the rock in seawater to rub off the grime and dirt, revealing a distinct humanoid outline. More scrubbing unveiled a pair of cherry lips. As Ngendo caressed the lips, a soft glow emanated from the statuette. A gust of wind thundered through the cove, and a fork of white flame crashed into the sea. Ngendo's reflexes kicked in—she raised her hands to protect her face, her skin turned chalky white and her nails dug into her palms, turning a wounded blood red.

A soft ray of warm light shone upon the cowering child. Soft hands touched Ngendo's thin arms to calm the blood racing through her veins. In the chaos of the moment, Ngendo hadn't realized that she was crying, but that didn't matter – drops of tears were delicately brushed off her eyes like raindrops sliding off umbrellas. Ngendo opened her eyes and focused on the face before her. Anxiously, she coughed out three timid words, "Wh...who are you?"

"Fear not my child," said the tall figure standing before Ngendo. A motherly smile, a flowing jade-hued robe and a torch in her hand. "Child, I am the silent one, I am the Heavenly mother, I am Mat-Su. I have been summoned to the mortal world."

"Who?"

A few awkward seconds passed. The figure bit her lip and frowned. "Mat-Su." she motioned towards the sea, "Protector of sailors, fishermen, and merchants across the world's oceans. The guardian of your people – the subject of your childhood stories."

"Doesn't ring a bell."

Mat-Su was in disbelief, though why that was Ngendo could not tell. Her frown faded like a receding tide, replaced by a tsunami of emotions. Doubt, anger, fear and finally dread.

Mat-Su contemplated her words. "Where's the fleet?"; she demanded, a stern demeanor clouding her visage. She stared the child dead in the eye. "What year is this? What do you call this barbarian realm of yours?" Thunder rumbled in the distance, the clouds circling the cove like crows and the tumultuous waves braying eagerly, like warriors sharpening their axes in anticipation of conflict.

"I...I swear I don't know!" Ngendo cried, dried tears bursting out like a flood from a dam as Mat-Su grew ever more livid. Suddenly, Mat-su's vision began to fade...

1430, the Swahili Coast

The monsoon descended.

The crew of the treasure junk Qinghe had journeyed long and far. For decades, the crew had been part of Admiral Zheng He's armada, hopping port to port from China to Arabia, where kings and sultans would gift them with a multitude of treasures and murals for the Celestial Emperor's purview which were all stored within the Qinghe's vaults. However, the further west they sailed, the more alien the localities got and the less their maps could help them. Eventually, the Qinghe lost sight of Admiral Zheng's fleet and drifted away in one of the Indian Ocean's nasty fits.

The tributes to the Emperor still glowed like earthborn stars, but the ship's crew had grown dull and gray. The hairpins that tied together the sailor's buns grew loose as another strand of hair fell off. So much time had passed that home was now a distant memory. When another friend passed, the surviving crew grew acutely aware of their own mortality. Now the myriad forces of nature had finally gathered for a knock-out blow.

The Qinghe's interior had been a prideful show of China's wealth. Now, the junk's

lavishness mocked her crew, who had been so obnoxious as to think they could traverse the seas with impertinence. A gale tore through the sails as if they were paper, the ripping of cloth painfully audible. Brackish, pungent seawater poured in, straining the floorboards, which creaked with pain. The might of the sea proved to be too much a match for the ornate colossus as the Qinghe began to fall apart.

The captain of this ancient vessel was just as aged as his ship. His eyes sank into his sockets, the skin upon his fingers hung loose like a candy wrapper while arthritis plagued his joints. But the captain had a will of iron. Unsheathing his sword, he lodged his blade in the planks and knelt in reverence to a statuette--a stone-crafted lady with a flowing gown of a jade and a flame that danced upon her palm.

“Save us, Mat-Su,” croaked the captain. He pressed his head to the floor in a pious kowtow, “save us from heaven’s wra-”

The Qinghe let out a great moan. The wind sliced away at the decks and plucked sailors into the grey sky as if ragdolls. Even as the junk was disassembled plank by plank, the captain quietly whispered to the Heavenly Mother.

Another wave came, knocking down the statuette. With haunting clarity, the captain realized the Goddess had abandoned him. He spared a thought for his wife and his children, whom he had abandoned for an exciting life at sea. He spared a thought for his crew and his ship – the nation’s pride. He spared a thought for home. Then he left the final seconds of his life for Mat-Su, cursing her: the uncaring, incompetent Goddess Mat-Su, indifferent to his plight and predicament.

With that, the Qinghe gave a final roar of defiance as it dived into the roaring currents, the hull finally cracking under the force of the impact. The broken body of the vessel sank beneath the waves, and with it, the failed Goddess plunged into the seabed, the centerpiece of the graveyard housing her devout followers.

Mat-Su snapped out of her trance. She stumbled to the edge of the cove, steadying herself with a hand to the wall. Her chest hurt, and her hair was drenched in seawater. A putrid scent emanated from her body. Her throat valiantly held back the surge of warm fluids from her abdomen, which left her mouth anyway in the form of slimy green bile. A coughing fit later, she reoriented herself and staggered forwards. Surprisingly enough, the young girl – “Ngendo”? – was still too petrified to move a muscle. Perhaps she should force some information from the girl? *No*, she reminded herself: *I am a benevolent Goddess.*

Another cough wracked Mat-Su exhausted body. “My apologies for the outburst, child.”

It took some convincing to show that Mat-Su wasn’t a threat, and quite a bit more to get Ngendo talking. The girl didn’t know of any “Ming Empire” or her grand “Treasure Junks”, but that could be chalked down to her ignorance. Mat-Su was far away from home in the realm of Kenya, a distant land that the treasure junks Admiral Zheng He had ordered to be surveyed and charted. The Admiral had said that it was a tribal land populated by savages, but the truth was rather different: the natives dwelt in small mud huts, tending to their fields much like the Chinese peasantry. The only thing that alerted her to her displacement from home was the dark-skinned, large-eyed features of the natives.

“Do I scare you?” Mat-Su asked.

Ngendo nodded hesitantly. Wordlessly, Mat-Su smiled warmly and caressed the young girl’s hair. A sense of fumbling awkwardness pervaded between the two, but Ngendo

composed herself and looked up at the kind stranger.

“Tell me,” continued Mat-Su, “have you ever seen people like me? Foreigners, Chinese?”

“Some. They look like you but dress differently. I saw them gathered around a huge ship, as if... fixing it. When Mother was still alive, we sold them fruits. They called the ship a ‘treasure junk’...”

Mat-Su’s eyes lit up at once. “Ngendo, I need to meet these people—they are my countrymen and they need me. They prayed for me to save them in their darkest hour.”

Cajoling and urging paid dividends for Mat-Su. “They’re to the North, a two hours’ trek from here. We follow the vultures along the seashore. The ship is where the desert meets the sea.”

The duo made their way across the Kenyan coast. When the vultures circled above, they followed. When the vultures left, they stumbled forward through simple intuition. After an endless march, they finally arrived where desert met the sea, where the sun’s harsh rays bounced off the glittering sand for miles. The desolate coastline had but one feature: a treasure junk lodged in the Kenyan shore.

Surrounding the ship was a crowd of archaeologists and guards, who circled the vessel like bees to honey. Mat-Su gasped – *home*. She saw the majestic sails of the Qinghe. The faded carvings. The pagoda-like captain’s quarters. Home, where her pious countrymen lay waiting for her, industrious sailors tending to their treasures. The stroll downhill became a jog, and the jog became a sprint. Ngendo struggled to catch up as Mat-Su jumped from rock to rock until she landed before the junk. Her eyes became increasingly blurred by emotions with each step she took.

A pair of baton-wielding blue berets stepped in to stop the intrusion as a crowd of dirt-stained workers began to gather around her. The pious had come to worship, Mat-Su figured. Ngendo was right – they were dressed oddly. She didn’t expect dockworkers to be clad with any sophistication, but the sartorial gaucherie on display was alien and visually irritating. As Ngendo reached Mat-Su’s side, the Goddess noticed that the guards had abandoned ornate armor for simple pieces of cloth, and that there was neither a robe nor a sword in sight.

“This is an archeological site under the jurisdiction of the People’s Republic of China. What are you doing here?” Mat-Su turned to see a red-faced worker in rugged overalls. Did this mortal not recognize his Goddess? His protector from the storms? She who brought them to this far-off land?

“My countrymen – do you not recognize me?” she cried, “I am the silent one, I am the Heavenly mother, I am Mat-su, patron of sailors. You have summoned me to the mortal realm, and I shall hear your prayers!”

The dumbfounded crowd fell silent. Panic dawned on the Goddess. *These are not my followers! They are slave traders! My followers must be in the junk!* Enraged, Mat-Su’s motherly appearance was no more. The sky darkened; she roared as she let loose winds and storms to strike the blasphemers. Bright streaks of lightning struck the ground, flinging workers and guards around the beach like ragdolls. Mat-Su hoisted Ngendo, paralysed with fear, into her arms and raced towards the junk’s interior to rescue her people.

The junk was eerily quiet. In bygone days, there would’ve been incessant, raucous chattering. Now, the only lights were specks of sunlight that peered in through holes in the wooden deck.

Ngendo, recovering from the shock, broke the silence. “The... cabin looks... empty...”
That much was clear to Mat-su.

A grand vault lay just below the deck. In the heyday of the treasure voyages, Mat-Su would see hundreds of coolies in the cramped spaces, gardeners tending to flora and fauna, artisans cleaning sculptures with great care. She would have breathed in a thousand mixing spices from the ports of India and Arabia, heard a hundred dialects and tongues from across the great seas and seen books of history and science.

Mat-Su summoned a flame to dance upon her palm and illuminate the room. Ngendo heard a sharp intake of breath from Mat-Su. This was no treasure junk—it was a graveyard. Skeletons of animals and men lay scattered across the confines of the junk, their flesh long since rotten away, consumed by the corroding strengths of nature. Death clung to these walls. These sailors who venerated Mat-su, who once prayed to her daily for their safety, were now bones, collateral of the much more archaeologically-valued ship. Mat-Su felt Ngendo tug her robe. The girl had buried her head in Mat-Su’s robes to avoid looking at the centuries-old corpses. Mat-Su covered the young girl’s eyes as they made their way through the junk.

Mat-Su picked up a bone: a sailor’s finger, dry and coarse. Grains of granite-like powder flaked off upon contact, until the bone disintegrated into a pile of simple dust, slipping through her fingers like sand through an hourglass.

It made sense now. Her worshippers were no more, as they had been for centuries. The Ming Empire was no more—it had perished as all empires do. The Ming treasure voyages were ages past. Left behind, the lonely Goddess no longer had anyone to protect.

Mat-Su fell to her knees. Her already shaky willpower finally went out for good. She let the flame in her palm fall to the wooden surface. It came into contact and combusted the powder-like remains of the skeletal finger, imbuing it with life. The finger began to reassemble.

“What –” Ngendo, who noticed the flame first, was wholly unprepared for this morbid spectacle. Mat-Su turned to look. She summoned her powers, to use all her arcane knowledge –

Time stopped and began to reverse.

The treasure junk’s broken floorboards were restored to fine oaken planks. Torches lined the walls again, illuminating delicate ornaments, their amber hue passing through stained glass to create a rainbow of hues throughout the junk.

“This was how the Qinghe looked like when Admiral Zheng first gave her to me.”

Mat-Su turned to see an aged man stroking his snow-white beard. He was clad in silken robes and a mandarin’s cap, while a bejeweled sword hung to his waist. Clenching that sword was a skeletal hand.

“Are you...” the goddess began.

“Were you’ would certainly be more accurate. But yes. I was.”

Mat-Su hung her head. She let out a shaky sigh – the tears were returning. “I failed you, captain, and the entire crew of the Qinghe. The faith you had in me to bring you home was misplaced...”

“Be that as it may –”, the captain placed his skeletal hand upon Mat-Su’s shoulder, “–I’ve long since made my way home myself: heaven, to meet my ancestors. Admiral Zheng asked me to greet you when you make your way back someday. I don’t blame you anymore, Mat-Su – it was but a small mistake. The Admiral invites you to join the rest of the fleet in the other world. The crew, their families, the Emperor himself--they’re all there on the other side.” The captain, smiling, motioned to a small statuette, “and you can be too.”

The statuette was elegantly constructed. It was a young lady in flowing robes, her lips illuminated by red coral, her robes a soothing jade, her fair hair braided with a string of black pearls. Mat-Su drew close to touch the statuette. She knew what this was – forgiveness.

“No”, Mat-Su whispered.

“What?”

“No. I don’t want forgiveness. I want redemption. I have failed in my duty to bring my people home. I will join you only when I’ve done my part.”

“I – we understand,” The captain withdrew his skeletal hand. “I’ll see you in due course.”

The torches faded, and with them the splendor and the captain, his skeletal hand crumbling into grains of fine, ground bone.

“Mat-Su, I want to go home.”

Mat-Su turned to find Ngendo by her side. She knelt down to embrace the child. With a snap of her fingers, Mat-Su’s flowing hair was knit into dreadlocks, her jade robe became a dazzling Kenyan dress and a beaded necklace wrapped around her neck. *She looks like Mother*, Ngendo mused.

“I’ll get you home. I promise. I’ll get you all home.”

The Final Voyage

St. Paul's Co-educational College, Lam, Justin - 15

The Xuande Emperor reclined in his gilded throne. He scanned the report in his hand before signing it. He paused, putting down his writing brush and taking a sip of tea.

The calm was broken by the the palace doors swinging open. A tall, broad-shouldered man stormed in, his black robes whipping around his imposing form. Admiral Zheng He. He was something of a legend in the palace, renowned for the six voyages he'd embarked upon many years ago. That, and the formidable military prowess he'd displayed during the Siege of Nanjing.

Right now, though, the Emperor was not inclined to appreciate those achievements.

"What is the meaning of this?" he asked angrily. "I *specifically* gave instructions not to let anyone in."

The guard bowed frantically. "Your Majesty, we tried to stop Admiral Zheng from entering, but he insisted on seeing you."

Admiral Zheng bowed as well. "Your Majesty, I would like to discuss a matter of great importance with you."

The Emperor sighed, rubbing his temples. He took a moment to compose himself. "Very well. You may stand. What do you want?"

The admiral drew himself to his full height, fixing the Emperor with steely eyes. "I heard you were going to cancel all further expeditions to the Western Seas?"

The Emperor didn't say anything, merely nodded. He'd expected the admiral to argue with him over his decision. He would be more surprised if Zheng He *hadn't* spoken to him about it. The man was as much a creature of the sea as one of land.

"Your Majesty, with all due respect, this is the wrong course of action!" Zheng He said. "The voyages have opened our eyes to wonders beyond our imagination. Each time, we have discovered radical new things about the world. If we lock ourselves away, our progress will stagnate."

"The voyages violate the principles laid down by our dynasty's founding emperor," Xuande explained, knowing that it wouldn't placate him. "Every day, I receive complaints that the expeditions violate Confucian principles. What would you have me do?"

Admiral Zheng looked up at him, his mouth set in a determined line. "Allow me to go on a seventh voyage. If I succeed, continue these explorations. If I fail, end them. This is all I beg of you."

The Emperor exhaled. He'd been expecting heavier demands. He considered the options he had. He could refuse Zheng He's request, of course, but that would make the ongoing conflict between the scholars and the eunuchs even worse. No. Better to allow him to go on his journey and decide what to do later.

The Emperor finally spoke. "I will grant you permission. Do not fail."

~

The ship's prow cut through the waters, its flag flying proudly on its mast. A stinging spray of sea-foam splattered the deck. Zheng He breathed in the smell of brine, gazing at the miles and miles of open sea. He'd finally returned to the ocean.

"Sir," His third-in-command Lieutenant Tang Guan said, trying to catch his attention.

Zheng He turned towards him, eyebrows raised in a question.

“A dozen more sailors have fallen ill,” Tang Guan said, his forehead creased in concern.

“Again?” Zheng He asked in surprise. “That’s the second time in three days!”

He suspected there was something going on behind the scenes. His sailors were handpicked from the Royal Navy. They were the elite of the elite. They didn’t just fall ill without warning. Tang Guan evidently agreed.

“Sir, I suspect foul play here,” he whispered, lowering his voice so no one nearby could hear, “I think someone poisoned them.”

Zheng He nodded meditatively, hiding a surge of panic that rose up in him. If someone was sabotaging the expedition, it would be nigh-impossible to stop. Out at sea, there was no way to escape if anything happened. But why? Why would anyone try to sabotage the voyage?

The answer came to him in a flash. If the scholar-bureaucrat faction really wanted to stop further voyages from happening, the best way to go about it was to make sure this one ended in disaster. He gritted his teeth.

Not if I have anything to say about it.

“I want you to take a dozen of your most trusted soldiers,” he said to Tang Guan. “Tell them to guard our food and water supply on a strict rota and let no one in. If you capture anyone, bring them to me.”

Tang Guan nodded and retreated. Zheng He turned back towards the sea, trying to calm himself down. It didn’t quite work. His emotions were still in turmoil. It was very clear how much was at stake here. If everyone on board was poisoned, it wouldn’t just spell the end of further maritime expeditions. It would also mean their death.

~

Zheng He rushed into Tang Guan’s room. The lieutenant was currently lying in bed, his face pasty-white.

“How is he?” Zheng He asked.

The doctor frowned. “He’s not doing very well. The illness has symptoms I’ve never seen before. I can only lessen his pain with medicine and let him recover on his own.”

Zheng He gestured for the doctor to leave, watching him walk out of the door. He waited for a few more moments before leaning in close to Tang Guan.

“Do you know how you got poisoned?” he asked with his voice lowered.

When the lieutenant spoke, his voice was weak. “I think it must have been in the food or water. Whoever did this was targeting me specifically.”

Zheng He nodded, but inwardly he was going over the possibilities. The food storage room was under heavy guard. No one should have been able to enter. Whoever was responsible for the poisonings must have been a high-ranking official, to be capable of entering the room without being stopped. It couldn’t have been Tang Guan or himself. And that left...

“The executive officer entered the food supply room yesterday. He said he wanted to check how many days of food and water we still had left,” Tang said, confirming his suspicions.

Wang Jinghong. One of his most trusted officers and the second-in-command of the ship. Could he really have been the one behind the incidents? Zheng He couldn’t imagine why he’d want to do that.

He turned to Tang Guan. “I want you to keep this quiet,” Zheng He murmured. “We need to tread carefully if we are to stop this. I can’t confront him without direct evidence.”

The lieutenant nodded feebly. “I will.”

With that said, Zheng He turned and strode out of the room. He had things to plan ahead for. He went up the stairs and up to the deck. The wooden boards creaked beneath his feet as he went over to the helmsman, who was at the ship's wheel, guiding its progress through the seas.

"Set course for the nearest land," he said, "If anyone asks, tell them we're stopping to get additional food and water supplies."

The helmsman nodded and turned back to the wheel. Zheng He returned to his cabin, deep in thought. What would Wang Jinghong do next? How could he be caught in the act?

~

A figure slipped through the door, head craning around, as if searching for something. Spotting an urn filled with water, he headed for it, and -

Zheng He caught his wrist, stepping out from behind the door. "Looking for something?" he asked, menacingly. Soldiers walked out from their hiding places, their spears pointed at the man.

Wang Jinghong looked around in confusion. "How... Why..."

"It's simple, really," the admiral said, glaring at his second-in-command. "I knew you'd try to sneak in and try to poison someone else again, so I set a trap for you, and you fell right for it. What do you have to say for yourself?"

A mix of emotions flashed across Wang Jinghong's face, before they were replaced by calm. "Who told you that I was going to poison someone?" he asked.

Zheng He shook his head, exasperated. "Does it really matter? If you want to know, it was Tang Guan who told me you'd entered the storage room yesterday. Other soldiers confirmed this."

The executive officer didn't seem to be perturbed. "Yes, I went here yesterday. But that was to investigate the cause of the sailors falling sick! I was trying to find out if our supplies were contaminated by disease!"

"Stop trying to talk your way out of this," Zheng He sighed. "You aren't convincing anyone."

"But it's true!" Wang Jinghong exclaimed. A shadow passed over his face as he looked down at the floor. There was a long moment of silence, after which he abruptly lifted his head. "I... I received an anonymous tip-off today."

Zheng He's eyebrows drew together. Wang Jinghong didn't seem to be lying. He knew the man well, and he wasn't a very good actor. If so, what was this all about?

"Someone wrote me a note, telling me to come to the storage room. They said they had overheard a few soldiers conspiring to poison our water. That's why I came here." The executive officer's eyes were wide with shock and anger. "Someone set me up."

Zheng He growled in frustration, pacing around the room. He desperately wanted to believe his second-in-command, wanted to believe that his friend hadn't betrayed him. But he couldn't be certain of anything.

There is a way to ascertain Wang Jinghong's story, he realized. He turned back to the man.

"Where is the note?" he asked. "Can you show me?"

Wang Jinghong pulled out a scrap of paper. Zheng He took it and read it quickly.

"Have overheard soldiers plotting to poison water. I cannot stop them. Please hurry."

It appeared to be authentic, at least as far as Zheng He could tell. The handwriting wasn't Wang Jinghong's, and even if he were to try to disguise his penmanship, Zheng He would have seen through it. He knew him too well to not know.

Who wrote this letter? It must have been someone high-ranking as well. He doubted

normal soldiers would have access to ink and paper, let alone this kind of high-quality mulberry paper.

He recalled something. His fists clenched, almost imperceptibly. “Executive Officer Wang,” he said, forcing himself to remain calm, “What did you tell the guards when you entered the storage room yesterday?”

Wang Jinghong looked perplexed, but he answered readily. “I told them the truth, that I was there to see if the food and water was contaminated. Why?”

Zheng He’s nails dug into his skin, causing blood to well up around his nails. He’d been played for a fool. He still remembered what Lieutenant Tang had said, that Wang Jinghong had wanted to check how many days of food and water were left.

He knew why the lieutenant had said that, of course. The act of checking was patently unnecessary, as the ship had clear records of its food consumption. The excuse was obviously a lie, and Tang Guan *knew* that it would be obvious to him. All the better to make Zheng He believe that Wang Jinghong was trying to hide something from the rest of the crew.

He headed up the stairs to the cabins, gesturing for the soldiers to follow him as he rushed frantically to Tang Guan’s room. The man had no reason to suspect that Zheng He had found out. He would still be there in bed.

Zheng He barged into the room with a bang, standing aside and allowing the soldiers to file into the room. The lamps were already lit. Tang Guan had evidently been waiting for him. A trace of a smile hung on the lieutenant’s face as he stood in the center of the room. He didn’t seem to be bothered by the spears pointed at him.

“It seems you’ve discovered my ploy,” Tang Guan said, his tone mocking. “A pity. I was hoping you’d execute Wang Jinghong before you found out. Perhaps I underestimated you.”

He isn’t even denying what he’s done, Zheng He noted with fury as he stood before the despicable scumbag.

“It’s over, Tang Guan,” Zheng He said. “My soldiers have surrounded the room. There will be no escape.”

“Who said anything about escaping?” Tang Guan asked, a crafty glint in his eyes.

He’s trying to pull something, Zheng He realized.

But what was it? There was no way the lieutenant could fight his way out of the situation, especially against a squadron of well-trained warriors. Unless...

Zheng He whirled around, bolting for the door. He was stopped by a spear levelled directly at his face. All around him, the other soldiers did likewise. Zheng He had been outmaneuvered.

Tang Guan made a tsking noise in the back of his throat. “You’re too overconfident, Admiral. That always has been your greatest flaw, you know. Did you *really* think it’d be that easy?”

Zheng He gritted his teeth and said nothing. He simply fixed the traitorous lieutenant with a furious glower. If glares could burn people, Tang Guan would have been dust drifting on the wind by now.

“How did you secure their loyalty?” Zheng He asked. “Threats? Blackmail?”

“Nothing so crass,” Tang Guan replied, amusement showing in his voice. “I simply offered to make them rich beyond their dreams if they cooperated.”

“So you bribed them,” Zheng He summed up.

“Let’s not be so uncivilized, shall we?” Tang Guan smiled. “I dislike the word *bribe*. It’s so... lacking in nuance.”

“He won’t pay you!” Zheng He said, desperately. “Once he doesn’t need your services, he’ll dispose of you! Don’t help him!”

The soldiers didn't move or say anything.

"You're no great judge of character, Admiral," Tang Guan said, shaking his head. "I'll follow through on my promises, if only because it'll be inconvenient for any soldiers to slip through the net and report me to the Emperor. Besides, they'll be helpful in the future."

"Whatever he paid you, I'll pay double!" Zheng He said. He was grasping at straws here. "The Emperor will pardon you if you help me!"

"You *can't* pay double," Tang Guan said. "You see, you don't have the money."

"You're a monster," Zheng He spat.

Tang Guan ignored him. "Take him to the deck," he ordered. "Let's arrange for a little accident."

Zheng He was shoved roughly up to the deck. A few moments later, other soldiers arrived, carrying a beaten and bloody Wang Jinghong with them. A wave crashed over the deck, drenching the two prisoners and a few soldiers. Zheng He shook the water out of his face.

"Why did you betray us?" Zheng He asked. "Why bend to the will of the scholar-bureaucrat faction?"

"Did you forget?" Tang Guan hissed, his features uncharacteristically contorted by rage. "My father was executed by the Yongle Emperor because he opposed the maritime voyages. All because of people like *you*."

Zheng He sighed and bowed his head. Once upon a time he'd been a rash fool, eager to fight against his political enemies by all means. He'd leveraged the Yongle Emperor's favor to persecute them.

How the times have changed. The sins of the past always catch up with us.

"I'm sorry for what I've done," he said. "But your quarrel is with me. Let Wang Jinghong go."

"And what? Let him blab to the Emperor about what happened today?" Tang Guan asked. "I can't let that happen."

Without warning, Wang Jinghong began laughing. Zheng He was suddenly aware that he'd been silent the whole time. Both men looked at him, bewildered.

Zheng He realized that while the two of them had been speaking, reinforcements had arrived. Soldiers were marching onto the deck, surrounding the group of traitors.

"You didn't bribe all the men on board," Wang Jinghong said, still laughing. "Some were too loyal to be turned like this. I managed to contact them before I got caught." The officer grinned, showing bloodstained teeth. "Your move."

The two sides began clashing, the reinforcements pushing in and trying to reach Zheng He and Wang Jinghong. Screams punctuated the night as men from both sides fell in pools of blood.

Tang Guan wheeled around, staring at the scene, his right hand clenched around his sword. He seemed to be considering his course of action. Then he turned back to the two prisoners.

"There is another way to stop further voyages from happening," he said, "And another way to exact my revenge."

The lieutenant drew his sword, the metal reflecting the faint, flickering lights from the lamps.

"If the great Admiral Zheng He dies on the voyage, no matter the circumstances, the Emperor will cancel all further trips to the Western seas, for a very good reason," Tang Guan said, a cruel gleam in his eyes. "No one else is actually up to the task."

Wang Jinghong's eyes widened in shock as he understood Tang Guan's meaning.

"So, you see, I think my previous plan was too overcomplicated," Tang Guan said, a smile growing on his face. "I think Zheng He's death will suffice."

He charged. Zheng He tried to dodge, but his movement was hampered by the soldier that held him by his shoulders. He moved too late, allowing Tang Guan to strike a glancing

blow on his left shoulder. A spatter of blood smeared the deck.

Zheng He stumbled backwards, clutching his injured shoulder. Tang Guan lunged again, and this time, he was too slow to get out of the way. The blade impaled him through his chest, and he collapsed.

When Tang Guan withdrew his sword, Zheng He clamped his arms around the man's legs. Tang Guan struggled to free himself from the iron grip, but Zheng He could feel his strength waning. With a final leap, he launched himself off the deck, carrying Tang Guan with him.

As the two men hit the frigid water, a crimson cloud billowing around them, Zheng He's thoughts were on his failed promise to the Emperor.

Fiction

Group 5



A Welcome Change of Sights

Korean International School, Srivastava, Aryan - 16

The sun's warm rays were dancing past the light clouds onto the welcoming Ming Court on that fateful morning. The Yongle Emperor was receiving foreign emissaries whom Admiral Zheng had brought along with him from his most recent voyage. His globetrotting ventures had made Zheng He a local legend, and people across the country sang praises of his courage and zealous nature. As boys will always be boys, my friends and I would make toy boats out of reeds, then fight over which one of us was going to be Zheng He on our imaginary voyages. We would fight terrifying ogres and slay sea monsters as we waded past their guts into the awaiting sunset. Zheng He was no mere man in anyone's eyes. He was made from the fabric of legend, and everybody aspired to be spoken of in the same breath as Zheng He.

My mind drifted off as the emperor announced that Zheng He was about to set off on a new adventure. This was to be Zheng's fifth voyage and I could not wait to hear about his escapades. There was no way my name was to be left out of the stories this voyage would bring with it. The destination the crew was headed to flew past my wandering thoughts, and it could have been the moon for all who cared to listen. All I could think of, were the clever ways through which I could sneak into Zheng's ship undetected.

After the ship's lawful boarders had received their instructions from the emperor, they set about the city to take care of any unfinished business they had. I was now in the business of getting onboard the ship undetected, and that was easier than I expected because all the attention was on the revered explorers. One by one, they came on board as the sun was setting, and I was eagerly waiting for the ship to set sail as I hid in the cargo bay. "This is it." I told myself, "This time, I won't have to hear the story from anyone else." I wondered what my friends would think of me once I returned. What if I did not return? A cold shiver accompanied the thought, and the bright moon told the cold night winds which parts of my body awaited its sharp kisses. I drifted off and had a wonderful dream of cheers from everybody awaiting us as Zheng and I got carried in the air by the excited crowd.

The crowd suddenly got violent, and their grips tightened as their cheers turned into scolding. "What do we have here?" they shouted. I was suddenly brought out of dreamland into the chilly night by a thunderous voice. "Answer me boy. Who are you?" I was dangling in the air as the strong man shook my body like a damp cloth in the wind. "My-my-my name is..." I was so scared, I had forgotten my name. "Are you a thief? A spy?" the huge man demanded, as the rest of the crew quickly circled us. I could feel dozens of eyes scanning my body as the man's hot breath made the air warmer.

"This is it." I thought. "They will throw me overboard and forget me as soon as I hit the waters." "Let the boy go." A strong calm voice hit my ears as my feet touched the wooden floor. There was a silence I could now perceive, as the steady and well thought out footsteps approached me. His silhouette was all I could see when I looked up, but even that was unmistakable. Admiral Zheng He was now standing next to me. Looking at me. Seeing me. It then hit me that what would happen when I got discovered had never crossed my mind before now. What did I expect? A warm welcome? Certainly, standing next to Zheng He was not a possibility I had in mind when I set off.

"Get back to work, all of you." Zhen softly commanded, as the huge men scrambled off.

It was now just me and him. His eyes examined me from head to toe, and a distant look came across his gaze. It was as if only his body was there with me, his mind far off into a time only he knew. Zheng He had a kind and study face. His beard waved in the wind as he seemed to come back to the present. "I do not approve how you got into my ship, but I admire your courage. You remind me of a younger me, and you have a lot to learn." An air of relief hit my lungs as he said that, and I knew that I was not going to be thrown off the ship. "You are probably looking for adventure, but I cannot guarantee you will find it, or whether you will ever see you home again." I swallowed hard. "You are now part of my crew, and my crew has a job to do. Head to the kitchen and make sure you find something to do there."

"Thank you admiral." I said, as I waddled around the ship looking for the kitchen.

The cook scoffed at my presence in his personal space, but burst out into a thunderous laughter as I flinched at his rebuke. "It's okay little boy." He said. "By the time we're back home, you will have grown into a man." I was relieved at his optimism. He seemed to have the notion of going back home affixed in his plans. "Can you cook?" he asked. "Y-y-yes." I replied uneasily. "We shall soon find out." He boomed, as he burst into another air of hysterical laughter.

As the days raced past, the cook and I became accustomed to each other, and my duties were now mainly doing the dishes and serving the food since he found my cooking wanting. I had many lucky breaks, as the cook would tell me to leave the kitchen and claim that he did not need my help. I took advantage of this time by going above and taking in the salty sea breeze. I got to know most of the crew this way, and my zeal for adventure was now in full thrust. I got to hear familiar stories again, but with an original take as they were told by the men who had been there. I once walked into the cook doing the dishes, and realized that he would tell me to leave even when there was work, because he wanted me to see what the sea and the other adventurers had to offer.

It was during one of these breaks one day, that one of the crew members excitedly announced that he could see land ahead. The ship shook as everyone rushed to the top to see for themselves. It was a magical scene to behold. There were people on the endless beach going about their daily activities, and as we approached, I realized they were unlike anyone I had ever met before. They had dark and strong looking skin, and their teeth were brilliant white, in contrast to their bodies. As we docked on this mysterious place, the exotic looking people came to greet us with a warmth I thought I'd never feel again. The ladies sang beautifully as children came and inspected these strangers who came from the sea. We were led away from the beach into a beautifully green country, with wonders in every direction I looked. My eyes ached for more, the more I saw. I had never thought my eyes would ever want to be that wide open.

There were animals I had never seen or heard of before in my life. Some had stripes and others had spots. Some had manes, and others had beautiful horns. There were some tall animals, which I later came to know were called twiga, the local name for giraffe. We got into the king's compound with the crowd escorting us, as some zebra and gazelles scattered out of our way. Everything seemed like a magical dream.

The generous king had ordered a feast for us, and there was the familiar smell of roasting meat, accompanied by strange, sweet smelling spices that made my stomach ache to be fed. The food tasted even sweeter than it smelled, and the soft meat could not get into my mouth fast enough. We went to sleep that night with our minds going haywire over the sights of all we had seen that day. As I lay on the ground looking up at the beautiful stars, Zheng He walked over to me and asked, 'How do you find this place?' "It is amazing." I replied. "Where are we?" I asked, "Malindi." Zheng replied. "Welcome to Africa."

The Sea and the Treasure

St. Mary's Canossian College, Kot, Erica - 17

The dangers in the seas lie aplenty,
The foremost the demons in the deep.
If you get a stone to your forehead,
Your soul goes along with them!

'Let the ships sail!'

The people on the shore gave us some fanfare with their large drums, and off we went, to the deep blue.

Even the mere sight of our fleet was impressive. More than a dozen of ships, the largest anyone has seen in living memory, started to move as their colorful sails caught the wind. For me, it was even more impressive. Glowing spirits floated everywhere as they patrolled the ship, to protect it from any malevolent force attacking the ships. Yes, spirits. How else do you think that the ship can survive through all these voyages? Blind luck? No, of course not. There are important people on board. SO Instead, the government bribed the spirits; not with money, though, but with burnt offerings on their altars. What use are gold taels for the dead?

How did I know? Good question. And there's a simple answer to that good question: I can see the spirits. It's a special gift of mine. Some people can walk on hot sand without getting a single burn; some can summon tigers with fancy paintings; I can see spirits, whether I want to or not. I had nightmares as a child because of this. But this ability was the thing that helped me earn my ticket on board. When I told the guy that I could see spirits, he immediately pulled me aside, made me swear an oath that I wasn't lying, and I was on board.

My real title is the Marshal of Spirits. Cool, right? Except that reality can be harsh. So my official title is something more like General Horse Caretaker. I know. Laugh if you want to. But at least, I would have a few men to help me out, I thought, as our ships pulled away from the harbor.

Things couldn't be worse. With that happy thought, I set off for my duties a horse-keeper with the rest of my crew.

There stood Chan, a serious person with a temper as easily flared up as a dried pile of firewood. Really, he was serious about everything. He even keeps his clothes as tidy as possible when sowing hay, which is simply impressive. Then there's Leung, who is a slow riser, but in general, he's a nice fellow. And there's Ming, a wad of muscle. He eats a lot, and has a fiery temper, but he's the only one who can lift 3 bags of feed at the same time, which is pretty amazing as I can barely lift one. And of course, there's also Liang, the chef. He's on this trip mainly because he wanted enough money to start a nice little business. He would spend hours talking about how he wanted a small restaurant, and then he could marry the girl he liked. Man, at this point, I can probably draw a full picture of his girl, with him giving me so much detail.

SO here's the daily routine: We (except for Leung) would wake at sunrise, and then we'd wake Leung up with a large pair of cymbals. Then after we wash, we give offerings to the spirit protecting our ship. His name was Wong, who apparently died in the Battle of the the Red Cliffs, and had a wound on his stomach to prove it. After that, a hasty breakfast, then chores. The work includes feeding horses, brushing them, and avoid being kicked. The part

of avoid-being-kicked is important. The horses are cooped up – they’re skittish, and they pack a good heavy kick. And then lunch, then more horse-caring and maybe swabbing the deck, then we get supplies from one of those supply ships. Usually this means Hui’s supply ship. He’d toss us rice and other commodities, and maybe a pint of alcohol if he was feeling particularly good. Most of the time, though, he’s in a filthy mood and gods help the person who was foolish enough to ask for more supplies. For he was quite the drunkard, and because he was the captain of the supply ship, he had plenty to drink.

About ten days into sailing, something happened. Ming really wanted to drink.

‘I really miss the liquor, y’know? Just a little sip of some liquor, and yeah... I’d be in heaven in no time.’

‘You really miss *jiu* that much?’

‘Yeah, well, you know. What’s life all about? I’m no smartie. Life is wine and women. I’m gonna get Hui to toss us the wine.’

And soon came the evening, and boy, Hui was a storm cloud ready to discharge. Like, his face was all red — a sign of him drinking since lunch. After we got our supply sacks, Ming asked, “Yo, Hui, toss us some booze!”

Then Hui exploded. Long story short, Hui vowed we would not be getting supplies tomorrow as he pulled away from us. I wasn’t too sure of the details myself, but I was pretty sure I swore. Hui might be a horrible person, but he wasn’t the type to bluff. Sure enough, the next day, the supplies didn’t come. So for dinner that day, it was just congee from some leftover grain Liang saved up. All in all, no one was happy.

‘Okay, it’s your fault, right? Ming? C’mon! You ever heard of not provoking someone?’ yelled Chan, pacing around the dinner table. Granted, everyone only had half a bowl of congee with a small fish that Leung had the luck to pull up, and that fish had to be shared, so everyone only had a few flakes of fish and half a bowl of congee to be exact. Usually, everyone hollered for seconds, so... yes. It was kind of lacking.

But while I was thinking about food, Ming had decided to let his fists do the honors. He punched Chan in the gut and yelled.

‘It’s not my fault, dammit! Hui was drunk as a hound, ya ...’ He said something I probably shouldn’t write down. Then his fists decided to do the rest of the talking and smashed into Chan’s stomach and pretty soon, it turned into a fight. I wasn’t going to let it turn into a full out brawl, so I pulled Chan away from Ling.

‘I’m not gonna end this here!’ said Ling, seeing that most of the crew had formed a meat shield around Chan. He spat, then left.

After that, the atmosphere around the Big Horse (as we have started calling it) was pretty tense, although we didn’t miss any more meals. Still...

And on the fifteenth day of sailing, we finally spotted land. Everyone was excited that the tension broke. And when the gangplank was lowered, everyone cheered like children getting free candies. Our little crew had nothing to do, so instead of sitting around, we decided to go and walk around, because when you’d been cooped up on a ship for so long, you started missing walking on solid ground.

We started exploring around. During the three days that the fleet got supplies off the island and made diplomatic relations and whatnot, our crew struck treasure. Not the type you think, like a full box of gold, but a full box of spices. Fragrant, exotic spices could sell as well as hot cakes on the Lantern Festival. And from what Liang’s seen, the spices were top-grade. ‘I say!’ he’d exclaim, looking at a dried leaf. ‘Look at this brilliant color! And the heavenly smell! This is truly fine!’

Me? I don't really know. I'm no food expert. Nor do I devote my time to studying dried leaves. But I guess everyone has their own interests. As for me, I'm content with studying words, so as to flip over my prospects, but also, because 'he' was full to bursting with interesting stories, since 'he' had been haunting there for quite a while.

Well, with a crew this diverse and having so little space for this diverse crew, disaster was bound to strike.

And strike it did.

One morning, as we all ate our morning meal, Leung noticed something. 'Where's Ming?' I looked around, and didn't see Ming, nor hear him, which was weird, because usually one can hear him from a mile away, and he *is* enormous.

'He's not awake yet?' said Chan, with his mouth full of grub.

'It's possible. But usually, doesn't he wake up the earliest?'

'Right...'

'Let's fetch him,' I decided, swallowing my bite and getting up from my chair. 'I'm not lifting those bags without him.'

The others muttered in agreement.

Still half asleep, we shuffled towards Ming's room, which was the closest to the living area.

'Ming!' Chan hollered. 'Get up already!'

No answer.

'Ming!' Chan yelled louder. 'I'm knocking your door down!'

Yet no answer.

'Let's just break it down! Get something, quick!'

In a jiffy, with a metal pole, the handiest we could grab, the door was burst open and in we stormed. But just after we charged in, we saw something that stopped us. Ming was lying face-first to the floor, very still and quite dead.

'Who did it?'

I asked for the tenth time as I paced around the deck, trying to calm myself down and failing so.

'I don't know, boss. But, why ain't he wounded or anything? And there's no blood anywhere too...,' said Leung, apparently just as distressed.

'And the rock beside him. What could that mean?' asked Liang, who was a bit more weak-willed and so, was sitting on a stool shaking. 'It reminds me of that one poem... no it can't be...'

'What poem?' Chan flared up. 'Spill if you know anything.'

'You know, the poem on vengeful water spirits mothers tell their kids so they don't go swimming in seas?'

'Oh... that poem,' said Leung. 'Wait, what? So now...'

'I think supernatural forces claimed him,' said Liang, still slightly trembling.

'Well... It would make sense,' said Chan. 'Not that we know who did it.'

Really, who was I to argue? But then, I saw Tang's head shake, and I knew the thing was much more complicated than just 'a spirit killed him'. Back in my room (because a little killing can really hold anyone off their jobs, and it's not like the bigwigs can ride in the middle of the ocean), 'he' floated in and started to talk.

'No way it could've been a supernatural kill,' said Wong.

'Why are you so sure?' I mean, this is far-fetched. Someone just floats in and tells you something important, real casual. You'd think it's a practical joke.

'You guys have a guardian spirit, me, right? ... w ho's been on patrol, saying no invaders.'
'Oh yeah... ' I've almost forgotten about Wong, even though I give him oranges every day. I guess I should give him more. 'So, who did it? Judging from it ...'

'I tell you, its strangling'

'Why?'

'I've seen that before.'

'Oh.'

So that's 'death by a spirit'. The question of WHO remained. Just then, there was a knock, and Leung came in.

'Who were you talking to, man?'

'Er, no one in particular. What?'

'Well... I just wanted to talk.'

'Erm, sure,' I pulled him a chair and poured him some tea. I could understand why he wanted to chat. Sea voyages were long, and entertainment was all but common.

'The murder was unsettling, right?'

'Yeah...'

'Listen, do you know why I am here?'

'No ...' The sudden change of topic surprised me, as well as the eagerness in his tone. Speaking of which, I'd always wondered why Leung was here. I was here because I wanted adventures, Chan was probably here to fuss on everything like a mother hen, and Liang had those big dreams. So why did Leung come on board?

'So why did you come on board?'

'So... well, when I was younger, see... I wasn't well liked,'

'Okay?' This was getting kind of boring. "Um... so? Does that have anything to do with you being here?'

'No, just listen. Ming was one of the biggest bullies. Like... I came here because I kind of wanted to tell him that. But see...'

'Hey, you gotta tell me what. Preferably faster. Stop hesitating your words!' I said, starting to get annoyed.

'Okay. I'm good. See, Ming's family had financial problems since he was five. Apparently his father died, and his mother was weak. So he turned to robbery. Then this year, he somehow suddenly decided to pick up being a trader.'

'A trader? Him?'

'Yeah. But he never had great business because he couldn't get high-quality stuff. So-'

'The spices!' I exclaimed, jumping up and nearly knocking over the stool I was sitting on. 'Those things can make anyone rich.'

'Yeah, but listen, Chan is suspicious too. He is one of the more affluent traders in Ming's area, and I heard before he came here, Ming was getting his customers.'

'Huh.' I was never into trading, but I guess that was bad for a trader.

'So, yes anything else?'

'No, not really...'

So everyone has a motive.

I'm not sure who did it, but it makes me uneasy to sleep.

Everyone. Has. A. Motive.

Seriously, what is with Ming? He's dead, and apparently, everyone on this ship (except me), kinda hates him. And the spices are trouble too. I'm not sure what charm you can find in a

bunch of nice-smelling dead plants, but three people want it, and one of them is dead. Could Chan or Liang have killed him? I mean, neither of them liked him very much anyways. Come to think of it, if we have a popularity poll, Ming would probably be last. All that thinking made me hungry. I went out to the kitchen to look for any spare food, although it seemed chance was slim. Hungry sailors simply don't leave much food behind.

Apparently, someone had the same idea as I did, because Liang was in the kitchen, and on the table in front of him, there was a small fish. 'Um, hello?' I said quietly. It would do the neither of us any good if we woke anyone. Food for two is more food per share than food for five. Simple calculation.

'Why aren't you asleep?'

'That's my line. What are *you* doing here?'

'Preparing for tomorrow, duh,' he said this as he rubbed more salt into the fish.

'So... y'ou're not here to get food, or you can't sleep?'

'... how did you know that?'

'Well, a murder did take place just this morning...'

'I mean, it's unsettling all right. Unsettling enough to get me out of bed and start salting fish.'

'Who do you think killed him?'

'Wasn't he killed by spirits or something?'

'What if he wasn't?'

'Well, I'm not going to point fingers here, but Chan looks suspicious. I mean, they fought once, right?'

'Yeah...'

'Anyways. I didn't do it. I have a bright future, and a beautiful girl, all right in front of me. Not going to ruin it by killing that jerk.'

'You sound like you don't like him.'

'Well, it's not like he has a winning personality, so... yes. Plus, he, well... I don't think it'll hurt if I tell you this. My parents also had a restaurant, see. Ever heard of Osthams Tower?'

'The restaurant burned down five years ago?'

'Yeeah, that. Anyways. The main reason why, was because Ming and his buddies went there once, and they pounded most of the furniture and the stock liqueur into mush,' He sighed. 'Anyways, back to bed you go. You need sleep, man.'

'I... guess. Good night.'

The conversation just made the thing more confusing. The next morning, everyone else seemed shaken. Liang had these huge eyebags under... you guessed it, his eyes. But Chan was really faring bad. He had eyebags, his hand was shaky, and even his usual slightly cocky tone was replaced by something much shakier, like everything was built on top of a chopstick.

'H...hey, you all. Why the sullen looks?' he said, looking very sullen himself and nearly knocking the pitcher of water over as he reached for the salt.

'That...that business yesterday. Bad, right? I mean...'

Then he trailed off. If he thought that talking would steady him, it clearly did not work.

This put my little side investigation a bit back. Nobody looked like they killed anyone. Could it be?

Could it be?

I went into Ming's room, which was now very easy to enter because no one locked the door. Inside, there was the body, which remained untouched. Dead bodies were kinda taboo for most people, and unless they were kith and kin, not many even dare to touch a corpse.

I looked through the drawers, every drawer, until I found it.
A suicide letter.

So, was a bunch of dead leaves worth the trouble? I thought as I stared at the dark horizons...
The stars were brighter than any jewel. I thought back on the letter, written by Ming,
stating his fear and regrets and his decision to die, to let the others take the herbs and as
repentance.

Was it?

I tipped the box to the roaring waves below and watched it drift away.

Santa Maria

St. Mary's Canossian College, Tam, Celine - 16

Midnight.

A lone figure sat in the middle of the barely-illuminated library, as a single candle burned its life away in front of him. The sound of dripping wax was almost in sync with the sound of tears rolling off of the man's cheeks, as the flickering flame illuminated his face, tear-streaks gleaming.

Even after years of pursuing financial support, the Court had eventually overruled his numerous requests, leaving his reputation at stake. Clinging onto the last sliver of hope he had, he had desperately scoured the shelves of the library for any sort of supporting document that could aid him in his voyages. Despite his eagerness, he knew deep down that any related papers, documenting the famous Oriental maritime voyages 60 years ago, had already been destroyed. At least, those were the accounts of the events that had happened officially; however, he dared not consider any other alternative. After all, giving himself hope was one thing, allowing himself false hope was another.

Until he came across the slim, leather-bound booklet.

A memoir. He had commissioned those who were fluent in the language to translate the contents for him—that was how desperate he had been, for anything that could possibly lend him a helping hand. As he sat down at the library, he started to flip through the pages, scouring for any stray piece of information that would be useful.

FIRST VOYAGE

11th July, 1405

One year ago, 16-year-old me was standing in front of the docks, staring at a notice that read “BOATMEN NEEDED”, while clutching onto the scraps of a stale mantou someone had thrown out the night before.

Having turning 17 just a few nights ago, I was standing in front of the exact same docks, watching as workers loaded crates and sacks of supplies onto the fleet of ships, lined up neatly across the docks. From my vantage point, I noticed that a horde of men were loading red, heavy-looking chests onto the more extravagant ships, along with countless rolls of what seemed to be silk, and bucket loads of something that shone and twinkled under the sunlight. It took me a while to realize that they were loading pure gold onto the ships.

I had been instructed to report to the supervisor for my assigned ship, standing by one of the docks. He happened to be reading off from a list, while a crowd of men, mostly teenagers, surrounded him. After silently thanking my rather short stature, I slipped into the crowd, careful not to knock anyone over.

“...As I was saying, do note that...” By the time I had gotten close enough to hear what the supervisor was saying, the briefing had ended. That was when the pale-looking young boy next to me stuck his hand in the air, and waved it about. All he did was ask for food.

At that instant, the calm-looking supervisor's face flushed red with fury, and he flew into a rage, spittle flying from his mouth as he yelled at the boy. “Who do you think you are, boy? There are more than 27 thousand men on this voyage. Do you reckon that we have time to serve every single one of you, what with everyone busy preparing the 255 ships

for the upcoming voyage?” He frantically put his hand down. I dug out a mantou from my pocket, split it in half, and quickly shoved it into the boy’s hand. He flashed me a brief smile of gratitude, fingers closing around the scrap of mantou, before dodging the supervisor’s glare and slipping into another part of the crowd.

Truth be told, I did not anticipate life on deck, not to mention my horrible sea-legs. But still, there was no point in turning back now. From the promotion materials at the recruitment docks, the government had paid any boatmen 2 years’ worth of salary in advance. With this lump sum, I could ensure that I would not be left with hunger for quite a while. Yet, for people as poor I am, choices were way too luxurious. We are nothing but disposable pawns on the giant chessboard of life, always replaceable. The best chance for us is to keep our head low, and fight for survival whenever we could.

20th July, 1407

Writing supplies on the boat were scarce, and considering how life on the boat was usually mind-numbingly dull, I hadn’t considered keeping an entry. Day in, day out, we followed the same routine. Tending to the ship’s sails, loading supplies each time we neared a port, and when the day was over I went to my bunk. Every now and then we passed by some cities, where the treasure ships would unload some of the Ming Dynasty’s treasured goods. We might’ve passed by Ceylon, Calicut, or maybe Malacca, but I insisted on keeping my head low, as a lowly boatman.

But today—two years after the boat had set sail—everything took a turn for the worse. On our voyage back to Nanjing, in the seas of Southeast Asia, something the whole fleet had always dreaded happened.

A pirate raid.

Despite having only been a boatman for 2 years, the pirate’s name was enough to send shivers down my spine when I realized who the leader was.

Chen Zuyi. Together with his 5000 men and having 10 ships under his command, he was the most feared pirate in history. From overhearing snippets of conversation, I learnt the fleet had a reason to be afraid of Chen—he had full command of a nearby city, Palembang, and was able to supply himself and his fleet, should resources be depleted.

But the same snippets of conversation had supplied me with the fact that the Grand Director of this fleet, his name being either Zheng He or Ma He, had already demanded the surrender of Chen Zuyi by the end of the day. If not, the fleet would open fire instead, which had me worrying in no time. It was very likely that, instead of choosing to surrender, the pirate would fight back with all he had, armed to the teeth, resulting in a bloody mess. Would I be part of the casualties? Would I not return home in one piece?

I knew that no matter what, I have to survive—I needed the salary, the lump sum to keep on living. Death has never been an option.

16th November, 1407

Glad I can make this entry. I could’ve lost my life back then, 4 months ago, rather than returning to Nanjing in one piece.

My intuition had been wrong that day. In fact, nobody had expected Chen to signal agreement towards the surrender. Fully believing that the pirate was handing his head over on a platter, a lot of boatmen decided to relax for the day. The tension during the day, which had been so thick you could cut through it with a knife, had mostly diminished by the time night rolled around. Some of my fellow boatmen were even drinking and singing sea shanties.

And just when they were singing the chorus for goodness-knows-how-many-times in a row, the blade of a cutlass shone under the moonlight and cleanly lopped off the arm of the boatman standing right in front of me.

Frozen stiff with fear, I felt my legs lock themselves into place. I cursed my luck, as the pirate turned to me, grinning from ear to ear. Behind me, I heard the characteristic sound of a sword being taken out of its scabbard, as footsteps resounded around me, as two pirates sought to take me down. Cold sweat erupted across my forehead and I began to tremble, watching that gleaming cutlass swing down at me—I closed my eyes and prepared to face my end—

And then I heard a bloodcurdling scream, right when a sharp pain blossomed down my leg, and I felt myself sink towards the deck, my weight crumbling beneath me.

I gingerly pried my eyes open, before noticing that there was something warm and sticky on my face. Lifting a finger to my face, I hesitantly wiped off some of the liquid, when a metallic smell hit my nostrils and my split-second thinking concluded that it had been blood. My first instinct was to run for my life and so I tried to move my legs, before the sharp pain came back, soon blossoming across my whole leg. Incapacitated, I stared at the body in front of me, the source of the screaming, only to be greeted with the sight of the pale boy from two years ago, who I had never imagined could look even paler. Yet now he did, with a cutlass sticking out of his lower abdomen, his eyes tightly shut, as blood pooled on his shirt; and I realized that if it weren't for his timely appearance, the person lying on the floor could've been me instead. But what had struck me as odd was this decision of his: the fleet was a pirate attack, after all. The most logical thing one would do was to preserve their own life, and run for safety. Then why would this pale boy risk his life for me? Was there anything else he viewed as important, besides from his very safety?

The pirate raised his cutlass again, the victorious grin on his face growing wider by the second. As he prepared to strike one more time, the sound of deafening cannons cut his actions short. We all stayed there, frozen, as the sound repeated itself again and again. Eventually, I lost count—but at the end of the day, it were the Ming soldiers who emerged victorious, after destroying the pirate fleet, killing 5,000 of its men, and most important of them all, capturing Chen Zuyi. Only later on did I find out that the Grand Director, Zheng He, had secretly sent out an informant on the day they demanded surrender. That was why he knew about the pirates' plan, and devised a counterattack on them.

On July 19, the whole treasure fleet reached Nanjing, where the Emperor himself had appeared to welcome the fleet. After all, this maritime project had been a great success.

Just last month, Chen was publicly executed in the town center. My broken leg prevented me from attending, and so did Ah Jun, the pale boy who had saved me, and has been living under my roof upon our arrival in Nanjing. He had only gotten out of the coma a few days ago, but was still bedridden.

“Why save me?” was the first thing I had asked him when he woke. Indeed, I still hadn't figured out his actions that day, even if I had plenty of time to look back on the incident. He simply smiled and asked me in return, “Remember the mantou you gave me on the first day?” The unspoken words were as clear as day; Ah Jun believed that risking his life that day was the only way he could repay me. I was in no way related to this boy in blood, yet he was willing to die for someone completely unrelated to him?

Ah Jun might have noticed my confusion, as he soon reminded me, “Is there not an old saying that goes ‘A drop of water given in need shall be returned with a burst of spring’? It is only natural that I repay you with more than a mantou.” Who would have thought he

had joined the voyage other than the same reason I had in mind initially: to survive? Ah Jun taught me that there were more things to life than mindlessly struggling for one's own existence, that there were people out there who cared for my own wellbeing, that even in a world like this, there was eventually somewhere out there where I could truly belong. It was mind-blowing, for an orphan like me.

Yesterday was a crucial day for boatmen like me, as we had to attend a ceremony, which congratulated those who had played a part in fighting against Chen Zuyi and his fleet. While standing on the stage and receiving the small lump sum of money, a feeling in my gut told me I had earned this through rightful means, through doing what was right. This new achievement indicated that I am valued, and through that, I have gained respect from the state. Perhaps, this odd sense of accomplishment is what they call "self-esteem": even if I am simply an uneducated orphan, I still have my own part to play on this world, and that I still have my own worth as a person.

23 February, 1427

Twenty years have passed, but not until yesterday had I decided to pick up this journal and start writing again—life in these twenty years had simply been ordinary, except for what had happened very recently.

Ah Jun passed away last week, after being bed-bound for 20 years, as I kept watch over his bedside, caring for his needs. If anyone were to ask me if I regret taking care of someone whom I'm not related to by blood, I would reply that it is one of my greatest achievements in life, to have a brother like Ah Jun. Despite having wanted to join the voyages again right after the ceremony, I felt that taking care of Ah Jun was my obligation and a priority. And so I opened a mantou shop for twenty years, to maintain a stable income, while stashing my sailing urges into the back of my mind.

And here I eagerly await the day the treasure fleet leaves the docks of Nanjing, with me onboard.

SEVENTH VOYAGE

3 July, 1433

Finally the day had come! The new king, Xuande Emperor, had issued the orders for the seventh voyage three years ago on June 29. Soon enough, the fleet departed from Nanjing once again in the winter of 1431, while I found myself on the main ship this time round. It was not a coincidence: the emperor himself had assigned me onto the main treasure ship due to my past experiences with the treasure fleet. It was an honour that I finally had a chance to serve next to the man who was in charge of it all. Zheng He himself.

Sadly, times like these wouldn't last long. Just 4 months ago, Captain Zheng contracted an incurable illness from India, and soon developed severe symptoms. Bedridden for the rest of the voyage, he was clearly too weak to take charge of the fleets, and so he asked me to act as his deputy. I couldn't help but question his judgement initially, for there were people on the ship who were far more qualified than I was. But still, I had a more meaning-searching query that demanded to be resolved.

And so, I found myself standing next to Captain Zheng's sickbed.

"Why is it that you had launched this voyage, despite your age?"

The reply I received was very much detailed. "At 62, I should very much be enjoying my retirement. But despite my old age, I have chosen to serve my country; as you recall, the new king has just ascended the throne, making stable foreign relationships extremely important at

this very moment. After all, he wished to reinvigorate the tributary relations promoted a great many years ago.”

The captain paused to cough, and I realized that he was far too sick to even make it back to the port at Nanjing. “Through the past six voyages, you have demonstrated to the country your capacity and your worthiness. You don’t need one more on your belt to prove it. Then why are you still risking your life for this voyage?” He was visibly straining himself, and I hoped that he would keep his answers brief.

And brief they were, as Captain Zheng stated, “As a matter of fact, I know deep down that this may be my very last voyage. But sometimes, the good of mankind is greater than your own good—one small step for me, yet a giant leap for the entirety of our nation.”

This is a lesson that I would never forget for the rest of my life; that, to fully actualize oneself, one should serve the greater good.

Hours and hours flew past, as the lone figure sat at the desk drinking in every single word the journal had to offer, learning about the voyages documented in the journal, the adventures experienced, until the first rays of sunlight began to trickle into the room, at the edges of the windows. Soon, the library was awash with the light of dawn. He blinked at the light, for his eyes had started to water a little, and he stood up and stretched, a small but confident smile adorning his face.

From this memoir, he noticed that the anonymous sailor had started off with searching for basic needs like food and survival, then to building up a brotherhood, to cultivating self-worth, and eventually reckoning the importance of achieving the greater good. He understood that forfeiting his narrow-mindedness is a must by overlooking his current difficulties, and most of all, actualize the dream of mankind. Gone was the weary and hopeless man from midnight; in his place was a man clearly inspired by the unnamed man’s journal clutched tightly in his hands, eyes gleaming with enlightenment and brain abuzz with ideas.

With a spring in his step, the man swept out of the library of the University of Madrid, determined to seek for funding from the Spanish Court, and to make his dreams of navigation a reality.

He had only expected to reach East Asia; yet, he had discovered a world entirely new—one could almost say that without the Ming Treasure Voyages, the one to discover America would not be Christopher Columbus himself.

Reliving a Legend

St. Mary's Canossian College, Tang, Ally - 16

A crowd gathered in the middle of the mall, with occasional screams from excited females. Passers-by stared at the crowd, wondering what was going on. A famous movie star? No one was sure.

“Girls, there’s no need to push...” A raven haired male smirked slightly, towering over everyone else. Helping another girl who ‘accidentally’ fell down, he winked slightly at her. “You shouldn’t ‘fall’ for my love,” he chuckled. The girl blushed slightly, then roughly slapped her friend next to her, clearly ecstatic to have received the attention she had craved for.

Still trying to push through the crowd, the male hoped that the headache the screaming girls had given him and the gathering crowd would disappear as quickly as possible.

“Just let me out,” He mumbled angrily. He knew clearly that he couldn’t solve this with violence as this would result in a lot of trouble and an earful from his manager. Never losing his smile and still bending down to take pictures, he yelled, “Alright girls, one last picture and I’ll have to leave!” Awws and Nooos immediately spread like wildfire among the group. None wanted their idol to leave them this soon.

He was more than relieved when he saw his manager’s car running towards him. He jumped into the vehicle, never taking a glance behind his back. “Hit the brake!” He yelled at the driver as he fastened his seatbelt.

“Five minutes late!” a monotone voice said to him on his left. “Yeah, yeah. You think I don’t know that?” He rolled his eyes. “You should’ve known better, He. You know Director Zhao hates people being late, even though you’re an Oscar nominee.” His manager looked at him disapprovingly. Ma He shrugged.

When they arrived at the studio, all members were there waiting for the fashionably late actor. Director Zhao rushed out of his office, grabbed He, and yelled at him for a while before he was pushed into the dressing room to prepare for filming. The team was now making a series of historical movies on Chinese history. Coincidentally, he had the same name as the famous hero in the Ming Dynasty, Zhang He. The team reached him immediately to see if he would be interested in this character, and of course told him that the pay would be satisfactory. He immediately accepted the job, since he had always been interested in the marine history of China, and today was the first day of work. Ma He put on his armor and headed out to the scene.

“1...2...3...Action!” Director Zhao called out immediately after everything was settled, and Ma He started reciting his lines. “What a good day out at sea! My fellow crew members, today we’ll reach Korea! There, we’ll sell our goods to earn money and exchange gifts with officials for the sake of our great country!” Ma He yelled as he took out his sword and raised it above his head as encouragement to his crew. “Soon, we’ll be able to go home and reunite with our family! Gentlemen, stay focused and work efficiently. The day of return is near!” Ma He yelled once more.

He suddenly felt a slight shake beneath his feet, and then a swing. He did not pay attention to it at first, thinking that it was only his imagination. Then the swinging feeling became worse. Ma He began to panic. He felt the ground swinging back and forth, and it was not long before he could hear the roaring of the wind and feel the water splashing around

him. He couldn't hear anything else, not even the shouting of other crew members.

He was surprised when he felt the cold water dampen his clothes. Shivering, he found himself tied up too. "This is not funny" He groaned as he tried to get up. "Director Zhao? Manager Chen?" He shouted.

"Shut it before I feed you to the fish!" a rough voice yelled as he was kicked in the stomach. Ma He curled his feet in pain, but tried not to yell. He was still confused.

"What...what is this? Are we in Act 2 now?" Ma He looked around, frowning his eyebrows. "Woah, this ship looks too real. Way too real," He laughed nervously.

Something wasn't right. He turned to look at the huffy male who kicked him. "Hey, I've never seen you around in the studio before. Who are you?" He stared at the male.

Unfortunately, the male didn't understand him. "What do you mean by who are you? I'm your master now! Your king!" The male grinned. Ma He tried to contain his laughter.

"Yeah, yeah, and I'm the President," He replied.

The male didn't share his humor, only kicking him again. "I'm not joking around with you! Call me Master! Now!" the male barked.

Ma He couldn't stand people ordering him. "Yeah? And who do you think you are? Do you pay my bills? Take care of me? Or did you give birth to me? Why do I have to listen to you? Do you know who I am?" He yelled back, only to find other ships facing them already. They were ready with canons and all sorts of weapons. He reckoned they were enemies. "Hey! Over here! We're over here!" He yelled at the other ships.

"Captain Zhang! Is that you?" an exciting voice yelled as the cabin crew suddenly grew even more excited.

"Uh, hmm...yeah! Yeah it's me!" Ma He shouted back, only to receive another punch from the sailor. "Shout one more time, and I'll kill you before they reach!" the sailor barked.

Ma He suddenly realized he wasn't in the studio anymore. Had he travelled back in time?

The sound of cannons confirmed his thoughts.

One second, he was still tied up on the ship. Then, he was grabbed, and thrown into another ship.

"Captain Zhang!" A servant rushed out. "Are you feeling alright? Did they hurt you? I'll get you a doctor immediately!" Ma He grabbed the servant. "Who am I?" He asked. The servant widened his eyes in horror. "How badly did they treat you? Have you forgotten your identity, captain? You are the great traveler Zhang He!"

Ma He nearly fell to the ground due to horror. He was...the character he was playing. He laughed at the coincidence and let the servant take him to his room.

When he woke up, he found that the ship was already at a dock. He went out, only to find people hustling and bustling around him. A sailor with a scar on his face gave Ma He a hard pat on the back when he came out.

"A good sleep, cap'n? We'll have to go onshore and trade today," the sailor looked excited. "I wonder what we'll see here in India!"

Ma He's first thought was curry, but of course he couldn't say that. He wasn't sure if they knew what 'curry' was at that time.

Ma He stepped off the ship after reassuring the sailor he would be making fair deals and earning great amounts of money. He looked around and smiled. Fortunately, no one would be better at selling things than him, gaining more than enough experience by taking advertisements while he was still an actor. To everyone's surprise, Ma He sat at the booth, and began to yell.

"The best perfume you'll ever find on the planet! Come take a look! The first 100 buyers

will get discounts! Buy three get one free...”And so he began to yell, attracting nearly everyone around him. His fellow crew members were so shocked that they forgot to do their work once there were customers.

“Is there anything wrong?” Ma He stared back at them.

“I would like three!” the seller opposite him yelled, clearly attracted to his products. Ma He took a look at the products his competitor was selling. Ivory products! He nearly wanted to call the police. “Oh right,” he muttered, “it’s not illegal here.” He examined the delicate sculptures which were the best he had ever seen. Sculptures like castles, people or animals could be seen. Ma He was amazed by the fact that all the sculptures were well crafted. “They should have given me one with my face on it instead of the Oscar’s award,” Ma He said when eyeing the products.

His attention was then caught by something shimmering in the sunlight to his right. A sword ...and...“Wow, so many weapons!” Ma He looked at the weapons greedily.

“Would you like an exchange of products?” the owner used his own special accent and spoke to Ma He. “You have very nice perfume. My wife would love it.”

Ma He nodded immediately. The owner took the dagger hanging on the wall, and gave it to Ma He while Ma He handed him a bottle of perfume. “Have a nice day!” The owner grinned in satisfaction.

The crew found that Captain Zhang had turned quite strange after being kidnapped by the pirates. Perhaps he suffered from memory loss after the incident. With that thought, the crew looked at him in a pitiful way and shook their heads, leaving Ma He alone to yell and exchange products that they did not need. “Should anyone tell captain that we have all those on the ship already?” A crew member nudged the one next to him. “Just...just let him be...” the other sighed.

The products sold out very soon, and everyone was even more shocked. “See? I told you it would work!” Ma He grinned proudly. “Should we go back to the ship?” Ma He walked back towards the ship, only to be stopped by some guards.

“Captain Zhang? Our Emperor would like to meet you,” the guard captain bowed slightly and said. Ma He had heard about Zhang He meeting emperors and exchanging gifts before, so he wasn’t too surprised. Taking a little box of perfume with him, he nodded to the guard and said, “Lead the way.”

Although Ma He had seen Indian palaces before when he went travelling, nothing he had seen could describe the magnificence of the palace before his eyes. It shimmered with gold everywhere, making him squint as if he was standing in the sunlight. Marble floors, extraordinary paintings...everything was noble and majestic.

“Welcome, my dear friends from China!” a voice boomed out from the room they entered.

Ma He and his servants bowed to the king sitting in the middle of the room. The king smiled to them and asked them to rise.

“My friends, you are well-mannered. I am in need of your help, but first, make yourselves at home. Do you need anything? Tea? Cakes?” The king looked nice, but of course his acting skill couldn’t be compared to the Oscar nominee’s.

Ma He controlled himself so that he wouldn’t roll his eyes at the king, and with the most polite voice, he replied, “We are honored, your Majesty, to be of your help. Please tell us what we can do for you.”

The king’s eyes twitched a little. “Well, there have been quite the number of criminals in India lately, and I wonder if you would have anything for me so that I could...lower the crime rate by warning the citizens of the punishment for committing a crime.”

Ma He understood the king's meaning. He shivered slightly due to horror. He was silent for a second so that he could find the right way to reject the king.

“Well your Majesty, I'm afraid we don't...”

“You don't?” the king frowned.

“We are only a trade ship, you see...we don't have items that help people to...punish others,” Ma He bit his lip.

“Then you're of no use to me! Guards! Arrest them!” The king roared suddenly, even shattering the glass he was holding.

“And then what happened?” a little girl looked excitedly at her father.

“And then... the king put the captain to sleep...” The father tucked the girl inside her blanket. “Just like what I'm doing now... and so you should go to sleep, just like the captain!” The father kissed the giggling girl's forehead and turned off the lights.

“Goodnight, sweetheart.”

“Night, daddy!” The girl closed her eyes.

The father closed the door to the room. His eyes glinted with mischief.

“Ma He! How many times have I told you *not* to tell Audrey stories like this? She'll have nightmares!” a female voice whispered angrily to him.

“And just how many times have I told *YOU*, my name is Zhang He, the great traveler of the sea?” Zhang He stared angrily at his ‘wife’.

“I know you love your job, but can't you stop acting at home?” his wife said annoyingly, turned around and turned off the lights.

It had been going on ever since her husband fainted in the studio. He claimed that he was Zhang He from the Ming Dynasty, but she just thought he was joking. No one, except for Zhang, knew that the real Ma He had already been ‘put to sleep’ by the Indian king, just like what Zhang He told the little girl.

And not just to sleep, but to eternal sleep.

Zhang He whispered a prayer to Ma He to apologize for making him the scapegoat.

“Don't worry,” he whispered, “I'll take *good* care of your family for you.”

Fiction

Group 6



Ming Treasure Voyages

Harrow International School Shanghai, Bai, Belinda - 9

Zheng He was a great navigator in the history of China and a pioneer in the communication of world civilization. He was known to all the people in the world as a great spirit and a great hero. He travelled seven times to Western Oceans over twenty eight years to more than thirty countries and regions. He reached as far as the coastal area of Africa. It is the world's most ancient maritime history and the widest scope of action for ocean sailing during that time. Zheng He gave the Chinese nation a good traditional virtue, advanced agricultural science and technology. It's far-reaching influence made the relations with foreign countries wide. The Ming Dynasty developed a sea trade that was a historic breakthrough on the diplomatic history for China. There still remains the imprint of the Chinese nation. This is the only time in the world without invasions from the sea. It is much better than Columbus's voyage.

Zheng He is proud of the sea, he struggled in the sea, he succeeded in the sea, and finally he died in the sea.

Ming Treasure Voyage

Harrow International School Shanghai, Hu, Henry - 9

Hi, everyone. Welcome to the TV show. I am Henry. Today, let's talk about the Ming Treasure Voyage.

In the Ming Treasure Voyage, there was a very important person - Zheng He. Zheng He had nine boats, nine huge boats. There were 3200 people on each boat that followed him. During that time, he had the strongest boats in the world, even better than Columbus. During that time, the king of China was Zhu Li. He is very kind. He agreed for Zheng He to go to the other country and give them money and seeds, gold, silver and china. He was the kindest person in the world. Chinese do not kill people and they just give them treasure.

On the first voyage people thought the Chinese people were bad because they did not know better. Then the Chinese people gave them treasure. The second time, the Chinese people came again and gave them lovely things again. In the other countries people thought Chinese people were kind and also thought they were rich, richer than their own country. So, some of them moved to China and lived there.

During that time, there were black men and white men in China. Chinese people knew lots of things about different countries. And they knew lots of things about China too! During that time, you can see Chinese people eat a lot of food from the other countries. Such as sushi, cheese, pizza and milk-tea. Also, you can see black men and white men eat Chinese food such as baozi, zongzi, porridge and bun. They even can use chopsticks. They love China!

Thank you for watching. See you tomorrow! Zai Jian. Bye Bye!

The Ming Treasure Voyages

Harrow International School Shanghai, Zhang, Evan - 11

The Ming Treasure Voyages is the most remarkable event of the 15th century. The Ming Treasure Voyages were the fleet of Chinese ships that explored the sea. It spanned twenty-eight years, from 1405 to 1433, which was over 100 years earlier than the Age of Discovery. The chief captain was Zheng He, who was an aid to the Chinese Emperor. The Chinese Emperor trusted Zheng He. The fleet consisted of 1403 ships and traveled six times visiting over 30 countries. The voyages started from Nanjing and reached as far as the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea.

The fleet had to face many challenges during the voyage: living through natural disasters, preserving cargo, and fighting pirates. Firstly, they encountered many natural disasters that were very dangerous. Secondly, the food and the cargo had to stay in good condition. Moreover, they not only had to protect the goods, but also to defend themselves, because there were pirates at sea. Zheng He and his crew had to be on their alert at all times to be prepared to fight pirates. There were some countries that were hostile to them and would take any possible opportunities to attack the fleet. Fortunately, they did not, and the Chinese sailors stayed on the sea for four years during each voyage!

The Ming Treasure Voyages proved a miracle at the time.

Zheng He's Voyages'

Harrow International School Shanghai, Zhang, Evan R. - 11

Many years ago, in 1405 there were many ships in China. There was a man called Zheng He. He was the leader of seven voyage. He was very strong and when they sailed to many countries (10 in total), he took a lot of gold and silver. When China returned from these countries Zheng He was the greatest man. He made everything good and he also skillfully fought against those threatening China. The ships had many useful tools and instruments! They used compasses to see their way in the night. They had to see stars so that they could find their way.

New tales of the Ming Voyages

Korean International School Springboard, De Groot, Leonardo - 14

One day a captain in the ocean told me a tale about 616 years ago in the dynasty of Ming. He told me that China had lots of men that had traveled all across the great ocean. In China, there was a large fleet that carried lots of treasure to trade for other resources that they didn't have. They traded for a giraffe, crocodile and all the animals that they did not have. The captain told me that this is what they would get... Now this is where the real story starts. One day when Ming the king was still in power he asked some men to make a fleet of boats to sail all over the ocean and the main reason the ships set off was so they could make friends with other countries and trade different things. They did sometimes take out their weapons to conquer lands, but they were mostly friendly. One day as they sailed on the sea they saw land not far away. They sailed to it and it took weeks to arrive at the shore. After they asked could they trade some of the things that they didn't have? But the people said "Yesterday, a man arrived at our village and then we traded our goods, and treasure. We traded for hours, I even traded my boat for a box of chips".

Later when they were on the sea, they saw land. On that land, they saw no one so they went on shore and started to find treasure. Then they arrived at a mountainside and saw something shiny. They took out their mining tools and started mining until they got all the shiny things and loaded them onto the ships. Then they sailed to another island to gather loot and treasure and traded with some men. The captain sailed across the sea to yet another island and began to trade with some men. They traded an elephant for some food, herbs, medicine, gold, rubies, and some diamonds. The elephant was too big for the boat and as they set off for the next island the boat sank and all the people drowned. The elephant was ok though, because elephants are good swimmers.

The Treasure on the Spaceship

Korean International School Springboard, Lee, Hae Chan - 13

One day in the space center headquarters the Captain launched his space craft to trade treasure with other planets. Onboard the spacecraft was the Captain and an army of soldiers to fight any invaders. They traveled north to search for treasure using a telescope. Their plan was to dig silver and diamonds in space. After they had dug enough silver and diamonds they went further into space. When they arrived on a planet the captain used his sword to point at one of the space center enemies who were on the planet. They said, “No way! You will never ever rob our treasures.” The Captain said, “Don’t feel scared. We are not here to threaten you. We want to trade treasure. We don’t want to invade you, trust us.” The enemy said, “Ok you are free to go for the rest of the day. Then at the end of today you must go back to digging silver and diamonds in space.” All of the captain’s soldiers said “Ok” but when the enemies went away they took the treasure off their enemies and ran back to their ship and went back to travel to their space center. When they got back to their headquarters they looked at all the treasures they had stolen. There was shiny gold coins and jewels. All of the soldiers really loved it. It was the best treasure anyone had ever seen. The captain didn’t want the treasure because he didn’t like stolen things he wanted to trade with the enemies. Actually the Captain thought the other planet enemies looked like robbers and criminals but he was an honest man. The Captain also had a good mind towards the poor. He wanted to trade. The Captain was a famous leader in space. He was the leader of the space center for about 50 years.

New tales of the Ming Voyages

Korean International School Springboard, Lin, Adrian - 13

A long time ago in Shanghai, there was a 13 year old girl named Mei Mei who lived with her parents Ama and Apa. One day, she met Zheng He the famous Admiral for the emperor. When she met Zheng He, she asked him to take her to Thailand to explore.

When they arrived in Thailand, they went to a pirate ship to explore. She saw a lot of golden coins in the treasure chests! She then stole the coins so that she could give them to the poor people. But, the pirates stopped Mei Mei because she was stealing the coins. Mei Mei gave back the coins and she felt sorry, and explained to the pirates that she was trying to give coins to the poor people. After Mei Mei gave the money back, she travelled back to China with Zheng He.

When Mei Mei travelled back to China, she told her parents about what happened in Thailand. Her parents said “You can’t steal money! You need to work hard to make money for yourself!” Mei Mei then studied hard to become an Admiral. After she became an Admiral, she made money for herself so that she could give it to the poor people. She felt very happy to give money to the poor people. She was also excited to become an Admiral so she could explore different countries. She went to Japan, Korea, Singapore, India and Africa to learn about their cultures.

New Stories of the Ming Treasure Voyages

Korean International School Springboard, Lowther, Jessica - 12

Once upon a time, there was a young man named Zheng He. He was clever, brave, strong and tall. He wanted to go on a journey and explore new places. He travelled to the South to find the treasures with his big ship. He made a big ship made out of wood and inside it had a kitchen for food. There was also a toilet, bedroom, nurse's room and some treasure. He started taking the boat to the south. It was a long journey. He took two months to sail south. He stopped at an island. He saw a lot of people. A lot of people looked at him because he was tall and had a very big ship. The people kept looking at him. The island was beautiful. There were flowers, trees and a mountain.

He kept on walking for four hours and he found some treasure. The treasure was diamond rings, gold, diamond necklaces and money. Suddenly, he saw a bad guy called Cotton Chicken. He stole the treasure away. Zheng He was not afraid of Cotton Chicken because he thought that he didn't had any power. Then Zheng He found out that he DID have a lot of power so he was very scared, but he chose to be brave. Then Zheng He started to try to get the treasure away from him. Zheng He had a magic guitar that could blow people away, so he used his blowing guitar and blew Cotton Chicken away. He was proud of himself and he walked back down for four hours and he was still not tired. Then he went to the boat and went back to China for two months. The people were proud of him and they celebrated Zheng He because he found the special and hard to find treasure.

New tales of the Ming Treasure Voyages

Korean International School Springboard, So, Kristy - 13

Once upon a time, there was a boy named Jung Kook, he saw a big boat outside sitting on the ocean. So he went inside the boat and stole many lots of gold, jewels and diamonds. Jungkook used the big boat to travel. He was happy and went to a forest to find a small house to live. One day he went back to the big boat and found out that all the gold, jewels and diamonds were lost already. He was clueless, who had taken everything away from the boat?

In the afternoon of that day, Jung Kook went to find the gold, jewels and diamonds. He found a monkey in his boat. The monkey wanted to help him to find the gold, jewels and diamonds. So they set off to look for their treasure.

Next day, they continued to find the gold, jewels and diamonds. The monkey found a very big bag of gold in a different boat. He found it in the boat of a bad guy named Chris. Chris had stolen so many Jewels and gold. The next day, Jungkook was still sleeping but the monkey came back to the ship. The monkey said “wake up I have found the treasure on a ship. It has so many jewels, gold and diamonds. There is a problem though, there is a bad bad guy called Chris, on the boat”.

Jung kook said “where is his boat? Can you take me?”

In the morning the monkey brought Jung Kook to the boat. Suddenly, Jung Kook and the monkey saw Chris on the boat. Jungkook said “Hey Monkey, how do I get onto the boat?” The monkey said “you can find a door”. The door was locked. Then Jung Kook told Monkey to jump up and take the key. Monkey jumped up on the tree. He just got the key without anyone seeing him. Jung Kook took the key and opened the door, then they took the jewels, gold and diamonds and went back to their boat and sailed to the forest, and went back to their small house. The Bad guy Chris found out who stole his gold and followed a map and went to the small house, but when he found the small house he thought that there was no way all of the gold could be in there. But it was. Chris jumped back into his boat and never returned. The monkey went back to a tree and Jungkook went back to living in his small house. They used the boat and went travelling whenever they felt like it.

The Great Treasure of Beijing and the Battle of the Terracotta Warriors vs the Guangzhou Soldiers

Korean International School Springboard, Wai, Kaden - 12

Long ago, on September 9th 1623 there was a 14 year old called Ming Kashong who lived in a place called Guangdong City. He had two friends called Thomas Longgong and Zheng Xiamen who were also 14 years old. They also lived in Guangdong City. A city in the South of China.

They met in February 1613. The three friends' parents died when they were just four years old. Emperor Chao Ting Lhasa. The Emperor of Guangdong City found them when they just young boys. And when the three friends showed talent, the Emperor Chao Ting Lhasa trained them until their bones cracked for 10 years. The emperor became the greatest kung fu teacher in all of China. Five years later when they were 19 years old, they were the chosen ones to be the leaders of the Guangzhou Soldiers to fight at the great city of Beijing led by Emperor Chao Ting Lhasa.

Over the years, they fought every kingdom in all of China.

They fought every dynasty that came along throughout the years. They fought the Yan dynasty, The Chu dynasty, the Wei dynasty, the Jin kingdom, the Qin dynasty , the Han dynasty, the Zhao dynasty, and the Qi dynasty.

A big reason the Warriors of Guangzhou army kept winning every single kingdom, was because the soldiers wanted to join the kingdom and because the warriors of Guangzhou trained so much longer than every other soldier in every dynasty and they had the latest weapons that anyone had ever created.

One day, when they were fighting the Shang dynasty, all of the Guangzhou soldiers ran for their lives. Now Zheng, Ming and Thomas were surrounded by 60,000 of terracotta soldiers carrying poison darts by another Emperor called Emperor Qin Shi Huangdi. "Well well well. Did you really think you can defeat my kingdom nine months ago?" said Qin

Thomas said "Emperor Qin? How are you still alive?"

"Well" said the emperor "back four years ago I ran out of sight thinking that I was dead. But it turns out, I'm still alive! Then I heard an army down a well when I was walking around the forest and I climbed down and saw a million Terracotta Warriors in the well preparing for there war, so I came down, killed the emperor who was leading them, called Emperor Shu and I secretly killed him with my sword and said, My name is Emperor Qin! I am your emperor from now on! Kneel before me! and they protected me from any kingdom we have ever faced and I'm finally gonna get revenge of what you did to my dynasty with the treasure of Beijing!"

"Huh that's it?" said Thomas. Emperor Qin said,

"No no! That treasure is actually real and there are gods inside that can teach the secret formulas so we can live forever. Once we live forever, we will take over every King and queen in the world, then I will rule the world and become the most powerful man IN THE WORLD!! Wuahahaha!"

Qin then said, “We have been fighting for 19 years more than you. But Ming said “Not true” “Yeah” said Zheng

Thomas said “We’ve been fighting for 23 years, this our 24th year”

“Oooohh” said Ming and Zheng.

Thomas then said, “Listen you can’t blame us for what happened to your dynasty. Every single dynasty fought each other like the Jin and the Zhao dynasty.”

Ming then said, “The Zhao dynasty was so strong they almost blew us up to splinters.”

“Grrrrrrrr” said Qin. Then he said “I don’t care if I have fought less years than you, I am blaming you. I only care about taking over the treasure of Beijing. Not only are there gods inside. There is gold, jewels, diamonds, emeralds, rubies, gems and cash and when I take them, I’ll become the richest person in all of the world, and will take over every single kingdom in every dynasty and kill every king and queen in all of the world, then nothing will ever stop me! Wuaahahahahahaha”

The soldiers laughed too. Then he said, “AMBUSH THEM!” “Wait! Stop! No No NOOOO!!” said our three heroes.

One year later, Thomas, Ming and Zheng woke up. They opened the box where Qin had put them when they got poisoned. “What did Qin do to us?” said Thomas.

Ming said, “he shot us with poisonous darts and placed us in a box!”

“CURSE YOU EMPEROR STUPID QIN!” screamed Thomas “Besides, where are we?” said Ming.

Zheng said, “Hmmm I think we arrived at the city of Old Shanghai”

12 seconds later, they got out of the box and started walking around the city and they remembered what Qin said.

“This is crazy! He’s gonna kill us!” said Thomas.

Ming replied “What were they talking about the treasure of Beijing?”

“Who cares?” said Zheng.

Thomas then said “Look all we have to do is go back to Guangdong City, stop Qin then everything goes back to normal!”

“Tell me you’re joking, right?” said Ming.

Thomas then said “Just think about it. They have weapons like crossbows, guns, cannons, TNT, bombs and catapults. We could be dead if we battled him now!”

“Ohhh” said Zheng.

Ming said, “Well if we’re gonna stop Qin from stealing that treasure, we’re gonna need help!”

They asked the King of The Gobi Desert called Jackson Shengfong for help. Just then, a ray of sunlight brought down a monkey called Sun Wukong with his staff and a man named Erlang with his golden armor to come and help them also. The friends were shocked “Are-Are you Sun Wukong and Erlang!?”

“Yes” he replied.

Jackson said “Oh my gosh it is you!”

Ming fainted with Joy and said

“THIS IS THE BEST DAY OF MY LIFE!!”

Sun then said “My gods asked me to come and help you, what seems to be the trouble?”

Thomas said “We got ambushed by Emperor Qin, he’s captured all of our soldiers and destroyed our village. Then Jackson said “And now he’s going to find the Beijing treasure voyages where the gods inside the chest can teach him how to live forever and take over the world!”

Sun was shocked to hear that “Then we must stop him!” he said angrily. So their journey began. Along the way they told other people who said they would join them in battle. They

told the king of the Yangtze River called Owen Chang. He said Yes

They told the Queen of the Pearl River Delta called Shi Shi. She said yes. Then they told the Queen of the Great Wall of China called Dung Shi Fong. She said Yes. They even told the queen of the South China Sea, Called Jessie Sangzhong. She said Yes.

And last but not least, they told the queen of the Silk Road called Xia Yuenchang. She said yes.

It took one year until they finally arrived at the village where Emperor Qin had just destroyed the Xinjiang Village 2 months before. Meanwhile, Emperor Qin was preparing for destroying the Guangdong dynasty where. They made cannons, guns, crossbows, TNT. Then, one of the soldiers said, “Sir, the cannons, the guns, the crossbows, the catapults and the TNT are almost done.

“Place them near the Pearl River Delta ”said Qin” and we must set sail and destroy every village in China.

First we get the treasure and then every country in the world is my reward!!
Wuahahahahahahah!”

Meanwhile, one of the soldiers came to the throne room and said, “Sir the 3 warriors are still alive!”

“What!?” said Qin. Then he said, “This is the number one disaster! I don’t want these idiots to capture me and try to kill me with their weapons! GO! Find these warriors and bring them to me.” “Yes sir” said one of the soldiers. Meanwhile, they came to the emperor’s castle. It was very quiet. Shi Shi said “Where is Qin?”

Erlang said “I think he must be creating weapons for destroying China and the entire world now.”. Then they found Qin’s castle and they looked around the castle and saw every Emperor he killed and executed in China. Xia couldn’t believe what she saw. Everyone was shocked. But just then, they heard some laughing in the basement. They walked down to see what was going on. They saw a large group of soldiers and Emperor Qin was about to go on his throne filled with diamond swords. He said, “Start all peperations! We will take down the world by FORCE! Wuahahahahahahahaha!!!”

The soldiers cheered and screamed with joy.

“This is bad, this is so very bad” said Xia.

“So the plan was to get the treasure of Beijing, then they will kill every king and queen in the world” said Jackson.

Zheng then said, “I know, what if we can free the Guangzhou Soldiers and destroy the emperor and every other soldier he has?”

Then Sun said, “But we need the key to unlock every soldier. And besides, it’s gonna take a long time to find them.”

But Shi Shi remembered she saw the key for the jail cells.

“I can get it!” said Dung Shi Fong. I’m a master of disguise. Almost one hour later, she finally got the key. And unlocked every soldier out of the jail cell.

Sun said “Out this way quietly! We can get past them!”

They started to head for Beijing to find the treasure until they finally found it in a deep dark cave near The Pearl River Delta but first they had to prepare for war just in case Qin came over to attack “I thought my mother said it was just a myth” said Xia. But when Zheng went inside to take it, he heard a rumbling noise. It was the earth shaking. “Hurry, put it back!” said Zheng. But it was to late. The Terracotta warriors came running across the forest “Uh Zheng? We got company!” said Sun.

They looked back, the soldiers carried all the weapons they created for war. “Is that the

best you could do?!” Emperor Qin said “This is the best I could do. I have cannons, guns and TNT. How can you possibly stand up to me?”

Jackson said, “Listen we don’t want any trouble OK? Just leave the treasure alone then the war is over you thief! If you don’t put back the treasure in two hours, the whole world will be destroyed!”

“How do you know?” said Dung Shi then said,

“I think he must have a book about the treasure of Beijing.” Said Thomas.

“Hahahahahahaha” said the soldiers

Qin angrily said “I don’t care! that treasure is supposed to be ours so we can rule the world!”

Shi Shi said “Boy, this guy is really intense”

“Last chance Qin, GO HOME OR DEATH!” said Sun

“I am home!” said Qin. “ATTACK!”

“Raaaaaaaaaaa!” said the soldiers.

Xia, Shi Shi Owen, Dung and Sun had powers of their own. Owen had the power of speed, Dung had the power of strength, Shi Shi had the power of sound, and Jackson had the power of fire and Sun had the power of breathing under water, invisibility, his body as hard as a diamond, a magical staff that can grow big and small the power of Lightning, flight, he can shoot laser from his eyes and best of all, he can create land serpents to fight the terracotta warriors. Together, they fought and tried to back off Qin’s soldiers from getting the treasure. Their battle shook the earth, until all of Qin’s soldiers were dead leaving their blood spilling everywhere.

“Hooray!” said everyone. But they didn’t know that Qin had already stole the treasure and 20 Guangzhou soldiers still survived. “Grrrrrrr” said Qin “Call in the dinosaurs!”

Zheng heard something rumbling down the forest “What is that noise?” said Jackson. There were 10 dinosaurs. The Pentaceratops, the Triceratops, the Baryonyx, the Deinonychus, the Herrerasaurus, the Stegosaurus, the Tyrannosaurus Rex, the Therizinosaurus, the Spinosaurus and the Diplodocus. They had to fight every single dinosaur from the Triassic, Jurassic, Early Cretaceous, and the Late Cretaceous periods. “I thought they were all extinct 65 million years ago” said Jessie.

Erlang said, “Maybe he must have secretly kept some dinosaur eggs?”

Almost 45 minutes later they defeated every dinosaur Qin launched. They ran after Qin when he was carrying a long stick that was on fire. Everyone tried to stop him but it was too late. He set the forest on fire. The fire spread around very fast. “Wuahahahahaha” said Qin

“Why are you doing this?” said Shi Shi.

Emperor Qin said, “Because you ruined my plan, and I also have magic powers the evil gods gave me inside the treasure palace and I can change into any monster I want!

“NO!” screamed Erlang

“YES!!” said Qin.” “And now is the time I turn into a fire breathing monster and the greatest power of HELL!!! Wuahahahaha!!!! Wuahahahahahaha!!!!”

He transformed into a fire breathing King Kong Gorilla with the biggest legs and the biggest arms the world has ever seen. His fire was blazing red hot, like lava. He grew bigger and was at least as tall as the Abraj Al Bait Towers. Now they had to get rid of the tallest beast they had ever faced in the entire universe. Everyone was shocked and surprised. The rock they were standing on grew taller and at least 2110 feet tall started to form into a flat surface “This has to end now!” said Sun. His magic staff grew at least 10 cm taller than him.

Qin roared and he grabbed the staff, and threw it around and around until Sun became dizzy and let go of his magical staff. Owen caught him.

“Sun, are you OK?” said Thomas.

“Oh I’ve been better” said Sun. Ming started to fight him and poked his left eye and Qin let go of Sun’s staff and Ming caught it and asked Shi Shi to hold it. Sun got up grabbed his staff from Shi Shi’s hand and fought him for the 2nd time. “I’ll be stronger than him, I’ll be faster than him. I know I can.” said Sun. Qin and Sun had the fight of their lives. The soldiers decided to fight Qin too and so did the four queens, the two kings and the three friends, Thomas, Zheng and Ming. Sun was very tired, so Thomas, Zheng and Ming decided to help him. Qin tried to step on them, but Thomas, Ming, and Zheng dodged it and Qin almost fell into the fire but managed to grab onto a rock. When Thomas, Zheng and Ming came closer they said, “Game over Qin,” But Qin broke the rock they were standing on and they fell into the fire but luckily managed to grab on. The rock Qin was holding onto cracked and snapped and he fell into the hot blazing fire. He roared and slammed to the ground. He was covered in fire because of his fur. He ran around in circles six times until he went down on his knees and fell flat on his face and died. Thomas, Ming and Zheng managed to make it back to the rock platform to safety. But then, the world was crumbling and tearing apart. Jackson said, “Come on, we don’t have much time! Place the treasure back before it’s too late! Zheng ran to the cave where they found the treasure and placed it just in time before the world was destroyed. The forest fire was gone and every dynasty Thomas, Ming and Zheng fought came back. The people who died had came back to life. “We did it!” said Shi Shi “I thought we were going to die! said Jessie. Everyone and every villager in every dynasty came to the heroes and threw them up in the air saying, “You rock! ,you’re our hero! you guys rule!” Emperor Chao came and said, “Well done you three. You have proven to everyone you’re great heroes. Ming said, “I think that treasure is for keeping the world alive.” “True” said Thomas. Emperor Chao said, let’s all head back to the village in Guangdong City and rebuild it. Two weeks later, they all had a celebration and the two kings and the four queens of China came too

“Everyone” said Emperor Chao

“Let’s give the three friends Thomas, Zheng and Ming a big round of applause!”

Everyone clapped and smiled. Emperor Chao gave them three diamond staffs and on top of it was the Yin and Yang sign. “That was the best battle yet!” said Thomas. Ming said, “defeating Qin was my favourite part”. Two minutes later, everyone saw the fireworks Shi Shi made and they were launched into the sky. The sky filled with many colors and shapes. And that’s how Thomas, Zheng and Ming became the greatest fighters of all China.